Introduction to the Special Issue

Digital Narratives in Transnational Circulation

Power, Vulnerability, and Creative Possibility

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Abstract

This special issue examines how digital platforms reshape cultural production in contemporary digital capitalism through case studies of creative communities across Asia and their transnational connections. We introduce *productive constraint*—conditions where convergent control systems (state, corporate, religious, cultural, and economic) simultaneously limit expression while generating creative possibilities. These systems operate through three key mechanisms: legitimation cascades (where enforcement by one authority triggers preemptive action across others), distributed enforcement (diffusing accountability across sectors), and resistance fragmentation (requiring uncoordinated responses across multiple fronts). Drawing on cases from Chinese fan fiction, American youth's consumption of Boys' Love, Korean entertainment, Indonesian queer aesthetics, and Vietnamese transgender filmmaking, we trace how creators and consumers develop tactical responses across three scales: individual platform literacies, community-based "vulnerable solidarity" through shared risk, and transnational connections that circumvent national frameworks while creating new exposures. These studies thereby reveal authenticity as collaborative achievement, community as affective infrastructure for mutual protection, and disappearance as tactical preservation. Moving beyond binaries of compliance versus resistance, we demonstrate how creativity operates through rather than despite constraint, with platform restrictions proving generative precisely through their oppressive character.

Keywords: digital platforms, convergent control, transnational circulation, productive constraints, collaborative authenticity

In June 2025, police in Lanzhou, China, arrested dozens of young women—many of them college students—for writing *danmei* (or Boys' Love), a genre of homoerotic fiction created primarily by and for women. Their crime? "Producing and distributing obscene materials for profit," even when their earnings amounted to mere pocket change.[1] This crackdown highlights a central paradox of the digital age, pointing to the precarious terrain that digital creators navigate daily: platforms that promise unprecedented connection and creative expression also expose users to surveillance, censorship, and economic exploitation. Yet within these constraints, unexpected possibilities arise: new forms of storytelling, community-building, and cultural production that transform conditions of precarity into resources for meaning-making and belonging.

This special issue of *Global Storytelling* examines a profound shift in the dynamics of cultural production within the context of contemporary digital capitalism. Through detailed studies of creative communities across Asia and their transnational connections, we trace how digital platforms are reshaping not just the tools of cultural expression but the very conditions under which culture is produced, circulated, and experienced. Specifically, this special issue brings together articles that range from Chinese fan fiction to American youths' consumption of Boys' Love, from the Korean entertainment industry to Indonesian queer aesthetics and Vietnamese transgender films on YouTube. Collectively, they reveal emerging patterns that call for new theoretical frameworks for understanding digital narratives.

We propose that digital platforms create what we call *productive constraints*: conditions where multiple forms of power converge to limit expression while simultaneously generating creative possibilities. This is not the familiar story of resistance versus domination or authenticity versus

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1. Li Yuan, "Police Detain Dozens of 'Boys' Love' Writers," *New York Times*, June 28, 2025.

commercialization. Instead, these cases demonstrate how digital creators navigate and repurpose a platform's barriers to build new forms of community, experiment with innovative aesthetic practices, and circulate meanings that transcend any singular system of control. These productive constraints recur across our case studies, as creators navigate precarious conditions that paradoxically enable new forms of authenticity, not as revelations of stable selves but as collaborative achievement alongside vulnerable solidarity.

Take Indonesian queer youth, who, as Amirah Fadhlina's ethnographic study in this special issue reveals, craft aesthetic practices that neither directly confront religious authorities nor fully conform to heteronormative norms. Instead, they create alternative spaces for identity exploration that exceed both categories. Or consider Chinese fan-fiction writers who develop techniques like *tielian* that create emotional truth through deliberate narrative construction rather than factual representation, as Siyun Pan's analysis shows. These practices complicate our understanding of authenticity itself, suggesting it may emerge not through individual revelation but through collaborative negotiation under constraint.

Meanwhile, when aesthetic codes and narrative techniques cross national or regional boundaries, familiar patterns can invert. American Midwest youth find safer spaces for queer identity exploration in geographically distant Asian Boys' Love content than in their immediate communities, as Ka Wong and Ying Zhou document, while Korean fan practices flow in the opposite direction as locally developed communities become integrated into transnational entertainment labor systems, according to Wee Yang Gelles-Soh and So Yoon Lee's industry ethnography. Linh Ngoc Bui's analysis of Vietnamese transgender filmmaking on YouTube reveals yet another tactical response: using the platform's global reach to create content designed for disappearance, moving beyond preservation logics to develop what Bui calls "ephemera beyond evidence," where technical "failure" and potential erasure become deliberate storytelling strategies that resist surveillance capture. Varied approaches thus reveal how creators develop multiple, simultaneous responses to convergent control systems—seeking safety through

distance, transforming local practices into global labor, embracing deliberate ephemerality—often combining strategies that might appear contradictory but prove effective in practice.

Convergent Control Systems and Varied Manifestations

Contemporary digital creators navigate an unprecedented landscape in which multiple systems of control—state, corporate, religious, cultural, and economic—converge upon their work simultaneously. Unlike earlier periods, when mechanisms of regulation operated through more discrete channels, digital platforms at present have become sites where diverse forms of power intersect, overlap, and amplify one another. A single creative work might trigger state investigation, platform suspension, payment processing blocks, religious denunciation, and community ostracism—each system reinforcing and legitimizing the others rather than acting in isolation.

The convergence of control systems creates effects far exceeding what any single system could achieve. When Chinese authorities target danmei content, they do not merely invoke obscenity laws but pressure platforms to demonetize creators, enable mass reporting campaigns, and facilitate industry blacklisting. This exemplifies what Rebecca MacKinnon terms "networked authoritarianism": Rather than exercising direct censorship, the Chinese state compels platforms to enforce content restrictions through the threat of lost market access, creating corporate proxies for government control.[2] The state's political concerns about "spiritual pollution" merge seamlessly with platforms' commercial interests in maintaining government approval and advertisers' desires to avoid controversial content.

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2. Rebecca MacKinnon, *Consent of the Networked: The Worldwide Struggle for Internet Freedom* (Basic Books, 2012), 32–34.

To understand how convergent control operates, we identify three key mechanisms. First, control systems legitimize each other through cascading effects: When Chinese authorities arrest danmei writers on charges of "obscenity," platforms respond by preemptively banning similar content, payment processors freeze creators' accounts citing legal risk, and families invoke these actions to justify the ostracization of queer children. Second, enforcement becomes distributed across multiple sectors, diffusing accountability. When Instagram's algorithms flag Indonesian queer content, creators are left with no clear authority to challenge. The platform cites "community guidelines," mass reporters invoke religious duty, and government officials defer to notions of "public morality"—together forming a cycle of deflected responsibility in which no single actor can be held accountable. Third, each system demands a distinct mode of contestation that cannot be easily coordinated: Hiring lawyers cannot remedy algorithmic suppression, VPNs cannot unfreeze bank accounts, and community petitions cannot overturn religious condemnation. This fragmentation forces creators to fight on multiple fronts at once, draining their energy and resources.

Control mechanisms operate across different sociopolitical and cultural contexts, though manifesting through distinct configurations of power. In China, state censorship operates through ambiguous legal categories such as "obscenity" and "subversion," which enable authorities to criminalize content selectively, as demonstrated by the arrests of danmei writers. Vague legal categories enable what we have identified earlier as legitimation cascades—that is, ripple effects where the threat of prosecution triggers preemptive enforcement across platforms, institutions, and social networks. The state doesn't need to intervene in every case when legal uncertainty alone activates multiple other control mechanisms. The resulting complexity forces creators into nearly impossible navigational tasks. Pan's analysis of Chinese fan fiction reveals how writers must navigate state censorship laws, platform content policies, fan community expectations, and economic risks from monetization, with each system's constraints reinforcing the others. Further, each threat requires different responses that cannot be easily

coordinated, demonstrating fragmentation of resistance: When platforms flag content to avoid government scrutiny, they validate state censorship; when payment processors block transactions, they enable economic coercion; when communities flag content of concern, they activate algorithmic suppression.

In Indonesia, religious authority creates different but equally systematic forms of convergence, particularly through distributed enforcement. As Fadhlina shows, queer youth face surveillance networks that blend religious monitoring with platform algorithms, creating distinct but equally constraining conditions where no single authority can be held accountable for censorship effects. South Korean cultural contexts reveal legitimation cascades operating through industry hierarchies: Gelles-Soh and Lee's study of K-pop *hagwons* exposes how state legal frameworks permit exploitative contracts, platforms amplify industry narratives about "inappropriate" behavior, and entrenched social hierarchies legitimize industry authority. Here, creative possibilities are curtailed through the convergence of legal, economic, and cultural pressures. Entertainment companies exercise cultural control through exclusive contracts and industry blacklisting that can destroy careers for violating unwritten behavioral codes.[3] Cultural control masquerades as meritocracy while operating through systematic exclusion.

Despite these constraints, creators develop what Michel de Certeau calls "tactical resistance": responses that work within dominant systems while subtly altering their effects.[4] Platform capitalism commodifies resistance, extracting profit while preserving the appearance of support for marginalized communities. Indeed, when user creativity becomes raw material for platform profit, the very acts of community-building and self-expression that arise from marginalization become sources of value extraction. The

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3. Sarah Lee, "The Dark Side of K-Pop: 'Slave Contracts,' Exploitation, and the Precarious Labor of Idols" (honors thesis, Brigham Young University, 2023).
4. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (University of California Press, 1984), 29–42.

K-pop industry, as analyzed by Gelles-Soh and Lee, exemplifies this process: Fan communities' collective labor—promoting content, defending artists, sharing expertise—becomes business infrastructure that capitalizes on and exploits the very passion that sustains it.

Creative Responses Across Scales

The creative responses documented in our special issue unfold across three interconnected scales, each illuminating distinct dimensions of how digital culture functions under conditions of convergent control. At the individual level, creators develop sophisticated literacies to navigate platform systems. At the community level, collectives form new solidarity and mutual support. At the transnational level, unforeseen connections take shape, circumventing the constraints of national regulatory frameworks. Across all three scales, platformization[5] binds these dynamics together—not simply through the adoption of platform technologies but through the fundamental restructuring of social and cultural practices around platform-driven business models.

Individual creators thereby become bricoleurs of platform affordances, constantly experimenting with what might succeed even as the systems they navigate remain opaque and ever-changing. Pan's analysis of tielian reveals how Chinese fan-fiction writers encode emotional truth through deliberate narrative techniques, creating authenticity that algorithms cannot detect as "sensitive content." Indonesian queer youth, as studied by Fadhlina, master visual double speak, curating aesthetics that broadcast queer identity through fashion codes while evading both algorithmic flagging and religious surveillance. The Vietnamese transgender filmmaker featured in Bui's study exploits the gap between platforms, using YouTube's transnational reach to

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5. Thomas Poell, David Nieborg, and José van Dijck, "Platformisation," *Internet Policy Review* 8, no. 4 (2019): 1–13.

host transgender narratives that local platforms would censor while risking exposure to state monitoring. Each practice arises from fundamental information asymmetry—while platforms possess comprehensive data about user behavior and algorithmic operations, creators are left to experiment blindly, often learning of policy violations only after account suspension or more severe consequences.

Individual innovations do not remain isolated but circulate through networks that constitute what Zizi Papacharissi calls "affective publics," communities organized around shared feelings rather than geographical proximity.[6] However, platform architectures systematically fragment these communities. Features like "people you may know" and cross-platform data sharing exemplify a "context collapse," the flattening of distinct social contexts that exposes closed communities to family members, employers, or state surveillance.[7] Such exposure transforms solidarity itself: Rather than bonds based on stable identity or shared location, communities develop what we term *vulnerable solidarity*, emphasizing connections forged through mutual risk. Those who practice tielian, according to Pan, collectively develop evasion techniques, understanding that the risk to one poses a risk to all. The youth featured in Fadhlina's study create aesthetic education networks that function as early warning systems, where teaching style becomes teaching survival. The translation communities examined by Wong and Zhou embed safety protocols within fan content, making cultural context inseparable from risk assessment. This caring labor operates as unpaid "digital housework," sustaining communities through practices of mutual protection that platforms depend upon but never acknowledge.[8]

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

7. danah boyd, "Social Network Sites as Networked Publics: Affordances, Dynamics, and Implications," in *A Networked Self: Identity, Community, and Culture on Social Network Sites*, ed. Zizi Papacharissi (Routledge, 2010), 39–58.

8. Kylie Jarrett, *Feminism, Labour and Digital Media: The Digital Housewife* (Routledge, 2016).

At the transnational scale, platform capitalism creates paradoxical effects. Platforms promise borderless connection while operating under competing governance frameworks that fragment the internet even as they maintain surveillance across jurisdictions.[9] These contradictions generate both unprecedented cultural flow and new vulnerabilities. Bui's analysis of *Sister* demonstrates how YouTube's US jurisdiction provides a degree of refuge from Vietnamese censorship while simultaneously exposing creators through data trails that traverse national borders. Wong and Zhou reveal that American youth find in Asian Boys' Love not merely the entertainment but alternative frameworks for desire—where geographic distance enables emotional proximity otherwise denied by their local contexts. In parallel, Chinese danmei writers navigate regulatory loopholes by publishing on platforms like AO3 or Wattpad to evade domestic censorship while cultivating global audiences. Yet platform data-sharing agreements transform these havens into hunting grounds when Chinese authorities leverage evidence from overseas servers to prosecute writers.

This regulatory patchwork produces cultural flows that defy simple categorization. Distance becomes a resource: American youth discover safety in the cultural unfamiliarity of Asian romance narratives, finding models for queer possibility precisely because these stories exist outside Western gender scripts. Yet distance also multiplies risk: Writers in Pan's analysis face prosecution for content they believed beyond state reach while Indonesian youth in Fadhlina's study find their carefully crafted Instagram aesthetics screenshot and circulated through WhatsApp surveillance networks they cannot control. The transnational doesn't transcend the local; it creates new configurations where protection and exposure, connection and vulnerability, become inextricably linked.

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9. Julie E. Cohen, *Between Truth and Power: The Legal Constructions of Informational Capitalism* (Oxford University Press, 2019).

Rethinking Authenticity Through the Lens of Productive Constraints

The transnational flows and vulnerable solidarities traced throughout this special issue point toward broader theoretical implications. These practices challenge fundamental assumptions about authenticity, community, and cultural production. Rather than uncovering preexisting authentic selves, platform environments generate forms of authenticity through collective practice. Rather than simply connecting preformed communities, they forge new modes of solidarity through shared vulnerability. Rather than merely circulating cultural products, they transform the conditions of cultural production itself.

Traditional conceptions of authenticity locate truth in the revelation of a stable, private self that exists independently of social mediation. Platform environments shatter this model by creating conditions in which self-expression necessarily entails algorithmic processing, data extraction, and surveillance by multiple adversarial actors. Across our cases, authenticity becomes collaborative achievement, with its meaning collectively negotiated, which exceeds individual control while requiring individual vulnerability.

This collaboration operates through distinct mechanisms across scales. Authenticity in Pan's analysis arises through emotional resonance verified by shared interpretive frameworks as writers and readers negotiate what counts as "authentic" through ongoing dialogue grounded in collective media memories. For Gelles-Soh and Lee, K-pop fans construct artist personas through interpretive labor that corporations then monetize. Wong and Zhou reveal how American youth validate Boys' Love narratives through emotional recognition rather than cultural accuracy.

Aesthetic mastery constitutes another route. According to Fadhlina, Indonesian youth craft visual codes requiring community literacy, achieving authenticity through shared languages rather than transparent self-disclosure. Filmmaking in Bui's analysis creates transgender representation

through cinematic techniques that sidestep documentary literalism for affective resonance. Authenticity functions not as individual revelation but as skilled performance recognized by knowing audiences. Sustaining these practices requires the vulnerable solidarity communities develop through sophisticated infrastructures: warning systems, coded languages, backup channels. Yet these very networks become susceptible to exploitation when platforms and industries transform collective care into unpaid labor.

Perhaps more radically, communities render their culture temporary, creating content meant to vanish as a tactical response to surveillance. Writers perfect preemptive deletion; youth systematically purge histories; fans fragment across disposable accounts. These practices challenge both liberal assumptions that democracy requires information accumulation as well as archival logics that insist on cultural preservation. Under pervasive surveillance, forgetting becomes an act of care and disappearance transforms into solidarity—not abandonment of cultural preservation but an acknowledgment that both persistence and disappearance can serve community protection.

These practices demonstrate a productive compromise, neither resistance nor capitulation but ongoing negotiation. Content warnings function as interpretive frames; commercial aesthetics encode resistant identities; algorithms get reverse engineered for alternative circulation. This exemplifies Lauren Berlant's concept of "cruel optimism": attachment to possibilities that may harm us.[10] Platform promises of empowerment extract value; state promises of stability criminalize difference; religious promises of belonging police identity. Communities inhabit these contradictions rather than resolving them.

Creativity operates through rather than despite constraints. Platform restrictions prove generative through their oppressive character, fostering innovations that might not emerge under more permissive conditions.

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10. Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Duke University Press, 2011).

Productive constraints recognize that limitation and possibility are not opposites but generative partners. By attending to how creators navigate these environments—through compromise and creativity, vulnerability and solidarity, persistence and disappearance—we see digital culture not as a battleground between freedom and control but as a space where human expression transforms constraint into the very foundation for ingenious cultural production.