Community as Commodity:
The Iranian Diaspora and Social Media

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2017

Abstract

In this autoethnography, I analyse my experience living in the Iranian Diaspora as a first generation Canadian and the impact of participatory culture, user generated content, and immaterial labour. With the development of new technologies and social media platforms, I was able to explore emerging methods of community and how they become commodified by cultural industries. I offer this autoethnography as an account of my life assimilated into western culture mediated by technology and as a reference to the early years of YouTube.

Keywords

autoethnography, social media, Iranian diaspora, participatory culture, user generated content, immaterial labour, youtube

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In this paper I explain why I am researching the role of community in social media, how I intend to conduct my research by defining theories and terms, and then apply these theories to my personal experience through autoethnography. The paper is divided into four major sections. The first being the impetus for my investigation of online communities surrounding notions of exploitation with a brief overview of my life narrative and concomitant tech history. The second section introduces the methodology and framework used in my research where I define participatory culture, user generated content, immaterial labour, and how it is an integral part of culture industries. The third section is an autoethnographic account of my life divided into subsections highlighting my personal experience and issues with participatory culture, user generated content, and immaterial labour. Finally, the conclusion is a commentary of my research.

Investigating the Role of Community in Social Media

The impetus for this investigation is to understand why I, as a content creator, felt exploitation upon the commodification of YouTube and what lead me to end my role as an active user and producer of an online community. This is achieved by applying my experiences with the emergence and advancement of social technologies to a close study of the cyclical and overlapping nature of Participatory Culture, User Generated Content, and Immaterial Labour.

At an early age, I had a firm understanding of the concept of exploitation. I grew up watching my parents being exploited. My understanding was my mother and father escaped their homeland because a strict religious regime had taken power and they were being persecuted for not assimilating. Along with a set of twin girls, my family moved from Iran to Canada seeking a life free of religious discrimination. However, my father would always complain that people took advantage of him because he was an

immigrant. He felt everyone treated him poorly for being Persian at the time of the 1979 Revolution and the media's coverage of the Iran hostage crisis. This ranged from being duped into buying lemon cars, experiencing racism from coworkers, and having his labour rights violated at the workplace. I also witnessed my mother working long hours for free or little pay on my uncle's farm out of a strange mix of familial and religious obligations. She would also tell me stories of being forced into demeaning labour situation as a child because of her learning disability. As outsiders, my parents instilled a profound distrust and xenophobia in me which was reinforced by my experiences with racism at school and work. In retrospect, I understand how my parents may have been misguided in their attempt to shelter me from what they experienced. When I entered the workforce, I was fully aware of exploitation growing up in poverty. I never trusted supervisors and detested dealing with salespeople. This hyper sensitivity and phobia of exploitation lead to deep anxiety surrounding any social interaction. I vividly recall having nightmares during my teenage years of being in a large body of water full of people who were pushing each other down to the bottom in order to stay afloat.   I envisioned a world where anyone outside your nuclear family was out to use you and I did not want to participate.

Naively, I thought that pursuing a career in the arts was the only way out from the alienation experienced from traditional work. Influenced by the independent artists' movements during the early 2000s, I was lead to believe that the only way around being exploited by corporations was to be self sufficient. I was inspired by DIY music artists which lead to my participation in mixtape culture and producing my own comedic hip hop music. In high school, I produced and sold popular CDs through the early adoption of low cost music recording software and authoring software. Not only was it a fulfilling form of entrepreneurship but it was also a way of self expression which helped me cope with my frustrations feeling as an outsider. My focus in music then shifted towards performing comedy with the

goal of producing film and television. I saw comedians as the great advocates of social justice who were the mainstream voice for the disenfranchised. As I understood more about Hollywood, the news media and cultural industry, I realized that they were all institutions deeply rooted in exploitation.

However, during this period of time I was able to reconnect with my father using early online technology such as email, instant messaging, and blogging. Privileged in the early 90s with BBS (bulletin board system) access through a community dial-up server (the Hamilton-Wentworth Freenet) I understood the potential of the World Wide Web and became an early proponent of social technologies. Instead of dreams of being a star through the Hollywood system which I felt I had no access to, I was seduced by the techno-utopian vision of an online world that provided an alternative to traditional systems of power and where my radical dreams of a world free of exploitation could come true. In 2006, Time Magazine announced the person of the year "You", referring to the Web 2.0 user as one of "the many wresting power from the few and helping one another for nothing and how that will not only change the world, but also change the way the world changes" (Time Magazine, 16 December 2006). Like many, I saw the Internet as a collective force that was leading to the redistribution of power and money from the twentieth-century industrial producers of information, culture, and communications.

The technological decentralization of power through this new system of information production and its implications are best described in an analogy found in the foreword written in <u>Collective Intelligence: Creating a Prosperous World at Peace</u> (Yochai Benkler, 2008). In it he describes three storytelling societies of people: the Reds, the Blues, and the Greens. Each society follows a set of customs on how they live and tell stories. The Reds and the Blues are busy working all day, picking apples, except for the evening when they gather in front of a designated storyteller who sits in front of the audience and tells stories. It does not mean that no one in these two societies are allowed to tell

stories elsewhere but due to the time constraints of work, no one could afford to stop to listen to a story except for the evening. Amongst the Reds, the designated storyteller would be a hereditary position. He or she alone had the final say on which story is told. The Blues would have their storyteller elected every night by a majority vote. Every member of the Blue society would be eligible to be the night's storyteller and every member would be eligible to vote. The Green society is a little different. The Greens tell stories everywhere at all times of the day even while they are picking apples. Everyone in the society is a storyteller. Greens stop and listen to others in their society if they wish in small groups of two or three or in very large crowds. The stories told in each of these societies play a major role in how the people understand their world. These stories are how the people describe their world and how they imagine how the world might be as they work out what is good or bad. Essentially the stories dictate and form their perception.

Now take into consideration the perception of an individual member of each society respectively. An individual from the Reds would perceive the universe of options open to him or her and the judgement of these options largely dictated by the hereditary storyteller. The Red individual could try to persuade the hereditary storyteller to tell different stories, but ultimately the storyteller determines the stories told which describes and defines the options one has living in the Red society. A current day example of Red society is the British Royal Family who hold in power and influence foreign policy and culture through blood line alone. Although, they do not officially hold any political power within the government system, Queen Elizabeth II is still an iconic figure and symbol on Canadian currency. Another example is the Weston family who dominated the food and clothing industry in Canada since the early 20th century.

Unlike the Reds, the member of the Blue society's autonomy is not dictated by the storyteller but by the majority of voters amongst the Blues. The voting Blues select the storyteller who determines the access to stories told in the Blue Society.   If the majority of the vote goes to a small group of entertaining, popular, wealthy, and politically powerful storytellers then the world view of a member of the Blues will only be slightly wider than one of the Reds, if at all. The power that dictates what the Blue society can or cannot do has shifted from hereditary to majority. An example of this would be government elected officials such as former Prime Minister Stephen Harper or a combination of elected and bloodline like our current Prime Minister Justin Trudeau.

Now the situation of a member of the Green society is drastic change from the Reds and Blues. A Green individual can tell a story whenever he or she wants which is subject to whether other Greens are around to listen. A Green is free to become an active producer, only constrained by the autonomy of other Greens. Secondly, the Green individual has a choice of listening to any story offered by other Greens as storytelling is not bound to one person or majority. No one can unilaterally control which stories a Green member listens to or tells which puts no limit on the diversity of stories available to an individual living in the Green society.   For example, the current U.S. President Donald Trump used social media to tweet about his campaign on Twitter therefore playing a large role during the 2016 election to gain power and reach the masses or the Green society. My personal experience of gaining listeners through producing mixtapes, blogging, and posting videos on YouTube is similar to Trump gaining power through storytelling in a Green society. The shift in information production played a key role in my personal development, help mend my relationship with my family, and build a community for others.

In 2008 I uploaded a video I produced with my father which lead to the connection of a small community of Iranian youth living in diaspora. With its world wide spread I naively believed YouTube was a way to circumvent exploitation and disrupt the traditional media industry. With accessible social technology I had the power to be a storyteller without a filter or gatekeeper. However, after only a few years of producing content on YouTube and experiencing its monetization, I began to realize the radical free world I sought online became the same exploitative mechanism I was trying to escape in the real world. It had been as if the bullies I had been running from finally caught up and conquered this new digital space in which I found sanctuary. I began to question my role as a co-creator of culture and whether I truly had power through this new form of communication. The complexities of the subject and my inability to articulate my thoughts and emotion led me to seek education at a local university. I made the decision to study the film and popular culture to better understand the source of pleasure and agony from participating in information production. Combing insights from academia with my personal experience with social technologies I can articulate and synthesis the overlapping nature of Participatory Culture, User Generated Content, and Immaterial Labour. I present this auto-ethnographical study as a historical reference of the shift from the industrial information economy to the networked information economy that we are living in today.

Participatory Culture, User Generated Content and Immaterial Labour

Participatory Culture (PC), User Generated Content (UGC) and Immaterial Labour (IM) are related phenomena, but are not synonymous with one another. PC and UGC are often used to describe Web 2.0 or Social Media as they overlap and conflict but are rarely differentiated. IM is a term

describing labour that produces the informational, cultural, and affective content of a commodity. The source of a Web 2.0 platform's success as a profitable business is the IM it generates through UGC. Users of platforms willingly or unwillingly participate in unwaged IM due to the affective emotional response created through these mediated social exchanges. The autoethnographical form of research will be implemented to illustrate these concepts to the reader, with an emphasis on affect, and allow the autoethnographer to understand their positive and negative responses to IM.

Participatory Culture marks the point of convergence between old and new media where consumers have the means to contribute to the production of culture. It is the antithesis to consumer culture. This phenomenon often manifests itself as a type of publishable media usually accredited to a technological advancement in its form of production. Defined by Henry Jenkins, Participatory Culture is, "a culture with relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing some type of informal mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is past along to novices. A participatory culture is also one in which members believe their contributions matter, and feel some degree of social connection with one another (at least they care what other people think about what they have created)" (2006, 7). As hardware and software used in media production quickly became affordable and easily distributed, the emergence of the prosumer, a hybrid of a producer and consumer, arose. Peter Lewis noticed these developments in 1978, stating: "[as] the technology became available – cheap, lightweight, and easy to use – an ever-growing number of people learned how to make audio or video recordings (perhaps becoming involved just for fun at first) ... They began to see through the professional mystique, realize the inadequacies of what was officially on offer, and explore new uses for media themselves" (p. 134). When mixtapes (known at the time as 'party tapes') were first created in the 1970s, authors were able to curate collections of music and to easily disseminate these

assemblages through social circles. At hip-hop's inception, there were no radio stations, print magazines, or record companies that featured hip-hop music. The sharing of mixtapes provided DJs with an avenue for exposure and a means by which they could make money. According to Mitchell (2007), mixtapes became a full-fledged business for DJs in the 1990s, allowing them to establish a legitimate fan base, to establish a brand, and to highlight each DJ's idiosyncratic style and technique with exclusive releases of new music (p. 11). This technological advance gave groups the opportunity to advance their own development and form community. In addition, PC can be activities that fans produce surrounding cultural artefacts such as popular culture based cosplay, themed parties, and fan fictions. According to Jenkins (1992), "…recipients of cultural content – whether fiction, music, film or television – have always engaged in activities, such as bands playing cover versions of songs or fan clubs stimulating the recreation of content" (p. 285). PC is an active engagement with mainstream publications often resulting in the production of counter culture. This active engagement creates a voice for those who feel unhappy and unrepresented in mainstream media.

PC also establishes a community by connecting people with similar views and interests, a phenomenon which is easily accelerated by the World Wide Web. Jenkins cited by van Dijck applauded "the technological opportunities seized by grassroots movements and individuals to express their creativity and provide a diverse palette of voices" (2009, p. 43). He believed audiences were empowered by these new developments in online communication which became a point of convergence between old and new media, demanding the consumer a right to participate within the culture. Jenkins was convinced, "that networked technologies offer users sufficient leverage to renegotiate their relationships with media companies [because] …users have better access to networked media, enabling them to 'talk back' in the same multimodal language that frames cultural products formerly made exclusively in

studios" (p. 43). Jenkins vision of PC on the Internet can be observed in the early 2000s with the emergence of peer-to-peer audio file sharing. As consumer based microprocessors became more powerful and affordable, compression algorithms became a method of easily encoding and decoding media into manageable file sizes that were better able to pass through early low-bandwidth networks. Users were able to digitize their music collections and share them freely with other audio enthusiasts on newsgroups and IRC channels. This movement was rather niche-based in its early stages because it required a fairly high level of technical competence. Later, the simplified graphical interfaces and semi-automated software controls of peer-to-peer applications like Napster and Kazaa brought music file sharing to the masses.

The MP3 audio file format and decentralized modes of file sharing lead to a shift in the way audiences shared and discovered music. This shift disrupted the music industry causing them to rethink their relationship with consumers because it appeared to cause a large decline in music label profits. As compression algorithms advanced and the access to affordable high speed Internet networks emerged, tech companies like Apple and Spotify were able to bridge the relationship between the music industry and audiences with digital purchases and subscription based music streaming platforms. One of the key components of these services is the ability for users to do such things as curate and share playlists, provide ratings for songs, artists and albums, and interact with other users within the various platforms. This valuable form of consumer interaction on an Internet based service is User Generated Content. According to van Dijck, "with the emergence of Web 2.0, applications, most prominently UGC platforms, the qualifications of 'user' gradually entered the common parlance of media theorists. Users are generally referred to as active Internet contributors, who put in a 'certain amount of creative effort' which is 'created outside of professional routines and platforms" (p. 41). Similar to PC, UGC is content

generated by non-professionals using web based platforms that enable them to have their voices heard outside of the traditionally exclusive media landscape of professional print, radio, and television. The entry level of UGC is much lower than PC as web platforms are accessible on a wide array of relatively low-cost devices and little technical knowledge to operate. Van Dijck also notes that according to an American survey conducted by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) that categorizes user's behaviour into six levels of participation:

Of all online users of UGC sites, 13 percent are 'active creators' – people actually producing and uploading content such as web blogs, videos or photos. Just under 19 percent qualify as 'critics', which means they provide ratings or evaluations. Furthermore, 15 percent of all users are 'collectors', a term referring to those who save URLs on social bookmarking service which can be shared with other users; another 19 percent count as 'joiners' – people who join social networking sites such as MySpace or Facebook, without necessarily contributing content. The majority of users consist of 'passive spectators' (33%) and 'inactives' (52%); while the former category perform activists such as reading blogs or watching peer-generated video, the latter category does not engage in any of these activities (p. 44).

The numbers in the survey indicate that active participation on a UGC based website is less than 80 percent and that 'participation' has a broader meaning in UGC than PC. A large component of PC is sharing knowledge and culture in communities. However, the term "community" covers a range of meanings in UGC in comparison to PC. As the term "community" strongly refers to users wanting to belong to a real-life group of people involved in a common cause, whereas UGC's sense of community, "relates to groups of online users with a communal preference in music, movies or books (a so-called 'taste community'); building taste is an activity that necessarily ties individuals with social groups

(Hennion, 2007. p.45). UGC is the online sharing of media tastes which form brand communities. These brand communities often resemble grassroots PC movements. However in contrast to UGC, PC is small communities resisting mainstream media and consumer culture. One of the main purposes of UGC is to construct and categorize large groups of online consumers. The collected UGC data is valued by an algorithm using socio-economical statistics and then is sold to the highest bidding advertiser. PC's focus is more on production than consumption, whereas UGC on digital platforms is a hybrid with the ultimate focus on consumption with the co-production from its user base adding value to their products. The commodification of UGC from these brand communities created on web platforms is a form of Immaterial Labour.

The exponential popularity of Web 2.0 based services marked the shift in users becoming active producers of a multitude of content free of any wage. Just as the popularity of email disrupted traditional letter mail services, a 2010 Canadian study indicates that UGC on Web 2.0 services have superseded email (Moretti 2010). According to the study, "in the 13-17 and 18-24 age groups, a total of 77% and 82%, respectively, are now using Facebook more than email" (p. 488). This shows us that most digital communication is done through UGC on web platforms and users are willing to actively perform unwaged labour for the owners of these platforms who are then able to generate large profits from platform-based advertising.

The concept of immaterial labour was created by Mauricio Lazzarato (1996) and later expanded upon by Hardt and Negri (2000). Lazzarato created the term in reference to changes in labour that were taking place at the turn of the twenty-first century. Lazzarato argues that IM is split into two distinct but closely related forms the industrial mode of production. He describes these two forms of labour as the labour that produces the informational content of a commodity and the labour that produces the cultural

content of the commodity (Brown, Quan-Haase, 2012, p. 492). Neither of these two types of labour produce a physical or tangible end product, but rather create the language, symbols, images, and ideas that adhere to commodities (Lazzarato, 1996). An example of informational labour would be instructional booklets or video tutorial links that are included with a new product or the troubleshooting service received from a technical support hotline. Lazzarato describes the other form of IM that makes up for the cultural content of a commodity as "the kinds of activities involved in defining and fixing cultural and artistic standards, fashions, tastes, consumer norms, and, more strategically, public opinion" (1996, p. 133). Examples of cultural labour would be all of the workers involved in the marketing of a commodity such as copywriters, actors, photographers, filmmakers, advertisers, and most institutions of the mass media. In Hardt and Negri's Empire (2000), they expand on Lazzarato's theory of IM by adding "a third type of immaterial labour [that] involves the production and manipulation of affect and requires (virtual or actual) human contact, labour in the bodily mode" (p. 293) This form of labour produces the positive or negative emotions tied to a commodity created through (virtual or actual) human interaction. An example of this would be a restaurant employee greeting people at the door with a friendly smile or a quirky brand's twitter account interacting with its fans and critics.

IM produces the informational, cultural, and affective content that builds value to a commodity. In most cases, the producers of IM are waged labourers such as a customer service representative, a web developer, and/or a community brand manager. A company exploits the workers by offering them a disproportionally low wage in exchange for their labour power and time to help maximize the sale of their product or service. Web 2.0 platforms expand and intensify by providing a space for digital forms of PC to occur known as UGC. Unlike PC, UGC is not created by a prosumer but what Bruns (2008) refers to as a 'Prod-User,'

> Produsers engage not in a traditional form of content production, but are instead involved in *produsage* – the collaborative and continuous building and extending of existing content in pursuit of further improvement. Participants in such activities are not producers in a conventional, industrial sense, as that term implies a distinction between producers and consumers which no longer exists; the artefacts of their work are not products existing as discrete, complete packages ..; and their activities are not a form of production because they proceed based on a set of preconditions and principles that are markedly at odds with the conventional industrial model. (Bruns 2008, 21)

These virtual spaces of social exchange and artefact production are sold to advertisers for profit, thus making a successful web platform an active generator of unwaged IM and a potentially massive advertising revenue stream. Produsers on these platforms are exploited insofar as they do not receive a wage for the IM they generate. According to Brown and Quan-Haase (2012):

> profitable Web 2.0 sites and services operate via recourse to a similar logic [to capitalist enterprises]. They too are heavily reliant on a workforce to produse the artefacts (including content and site development) that draw a mass audience to the site and, in turn, make a profit. However, these individuals are not offered a wage in return for their labour power and time. This business model depends on selling advertising space to advertisers that are purchasing the ability to ply their wares to a consistent and quantifiable number of eyeballs. (p. 493)

In the case of Web 2.0, UGC from produsers is free IM to build advertisement value for platforms. As a platform gains more active engagement from high value users, particularly youth with disposable incomes, the platform owners are able to profit from reselling their data to advertisers. In many cases, owners of successful Web 2.0 services will sell their entire platform to a large conglomerate who later implements advertisement. Therefore, the produser is the commodity being bought and sold for advertisement. Although this process may seem premeditated and insidious, the conflicting relationship between PC, UGC, and IM can be defined and further explored using Classical Marist theory.

Power Cycling – If You Build IT They Will Come

Mapping out the relationship between PC, UGC, and IM better illustrates the power conflict between production, consumption, and the appropriation of resistance. Consumer culture is a dominant force and PC is often a form of resistance to this form of culture. According to Marx, "the class which has the means of material production at its disposal has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it" (Marx & Engels: The German Ideology, cited in Curran et al. 1982: 22). Classical Marxist theory posits that the political economic structure of capitalist society is divided between a material base composed of the means of production and the labour relations, and an ideological superstructure that maintains the power relations that allow the base to function. PC that resists consumer culture is a reaction of people feeling under-represented in the mainstream cultural industries of society's superstructure by way of using their own means, access, and agency in order to produce their own cultural artefacts. Out of this struggle between Consumer culture and resistant PC, a hybrid form is negotiated that results in the emergence of produsers and UGC. UGC is appropriated by the dominant forces through easy to produse web platforms. This produsage of UGC becomes a source for IM that is commodified by the platform owner into ad revenue. Web 2.0 platforms now become the dominant consumer culture which shapes what society buys and produces (see fig. 1).
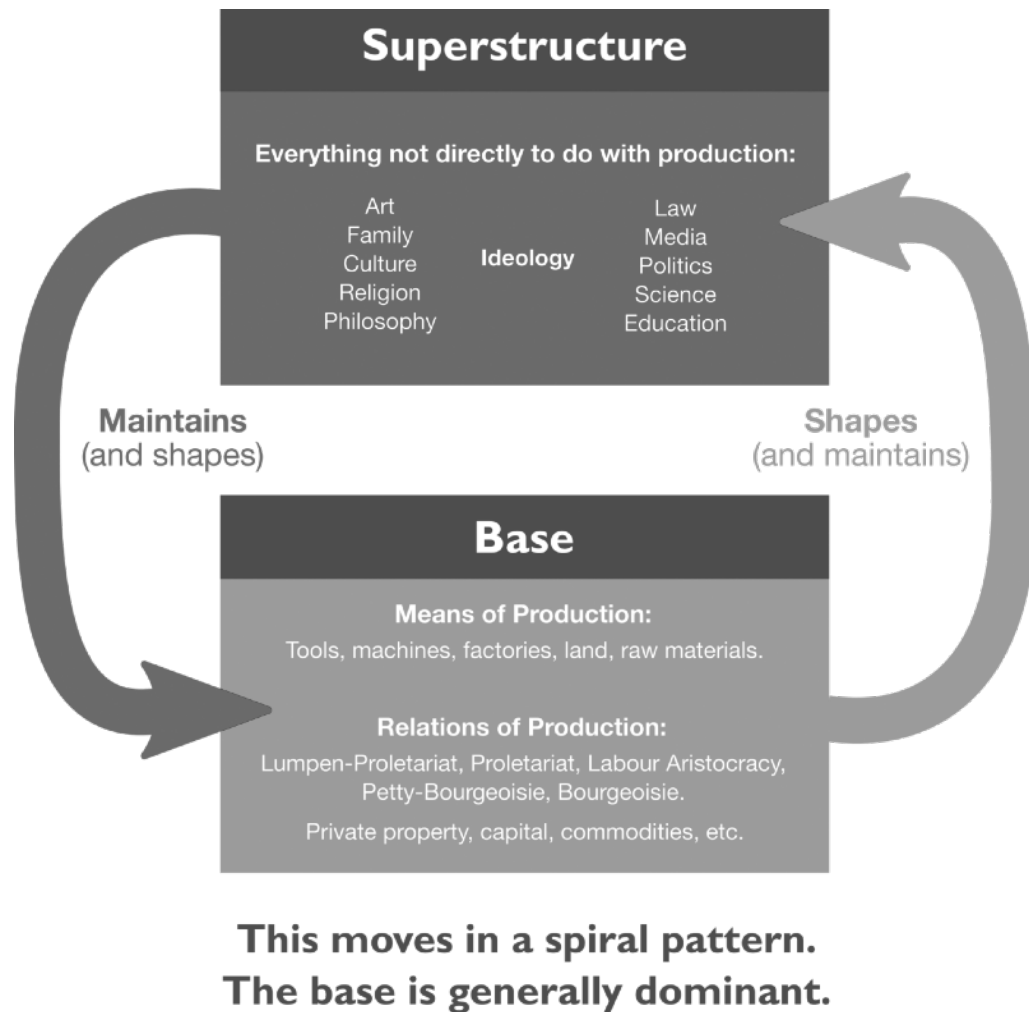
Figure 1. Diagram explaining the relationship between the base and the superstructure in Marxist theory *(https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Base_and_superstructure#/media/File:Base-superstructure_Dialectic.png, Alyxr, CC BY-SA 4.0).*

Dominant ideology is where power exists and its resistance is appropriated into an informational, cultural, and affective language shaping society's relation to production which, in turn, forms the new dominant ideology. This feedback loop is how ideology is formed to maintain hegemonic power and protect the economic base (see fig. 2 & 3).
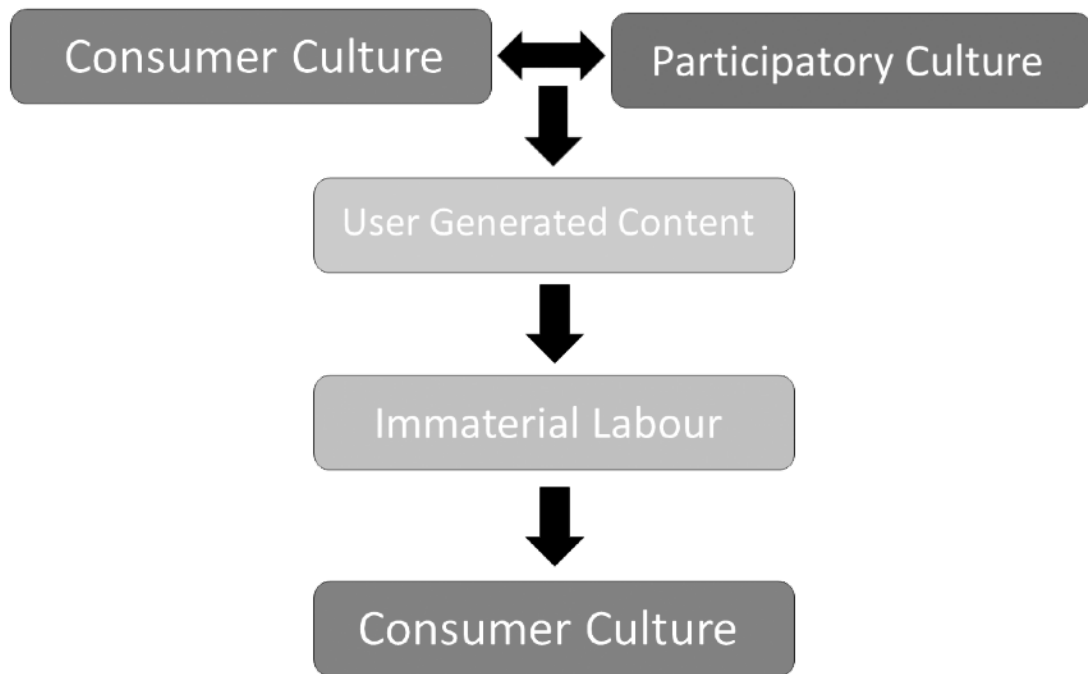
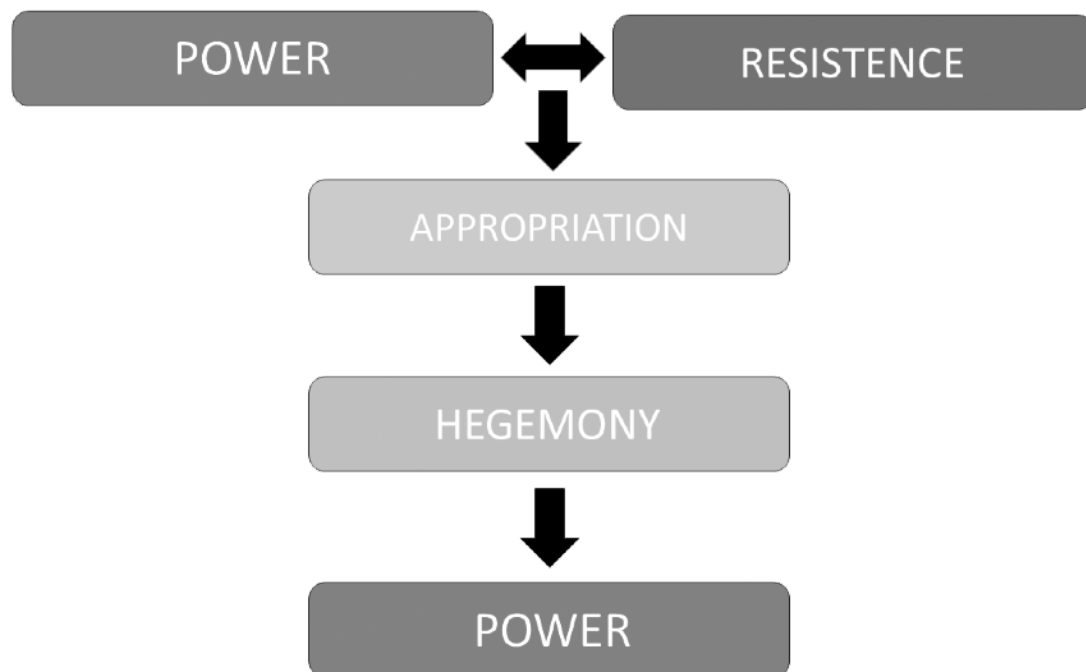*Figure 2.* Diagram illustrating the production of consumer culture or dominant ideology.

Figure 3. Diagram illustrating the process in which power is secured and maintained through resistance.

According to this, consumer culture or the mass media function to produce ideology which in fundamentalist Marxism is 'false consciousness' in the working-classes. The mass media disseminate the dominant ideology: the values of the class which owns and controls the media which conceal the economic basis of class struggle; 'ideology becomes the route through which struggle is obliterated rather than the site of struggle' (Curran et al. 1982: 26).

An example of this can be found in print publications. A pulp periodical is formed by the superstructure spreading consumer culture and dominant ideas to sell printed paper and advertised products. Readers who feel under-represented by the publication may start writing in letters of criticism to the editor. As the editor receives more and more angry letters, the periodical begins to publish them in the periodical. Whether the editor's response to the published letters are positive or negative, this act gives the underrepresented readers a voice which increases readership and is a source of unwaged labour for the publication. As the voices and opinions of the opposition become stronger and more frequent, they may form their own publications outside of the press such as a mailing list or creating a zine. Once the numbers of readers for this new opposing journal are large enough, the publishers will want to publish this new periodical. The platform of print has not changed but the ideology that forms the production and consumption maintains its power.

Another example using shifts in technology is letter mail and email. Emerging technologies that disrupt the economic base are quickly appropriated to maintain power. The postal service found resistance as email became a more viable method of communication. Email was a new technology. It was faster than letter mail, cost much less, and you received less deceptive advertisements. Letter mail was being exploited by companies and bombarded by advertisements using the purchase funnel marketing model which illustrates the theoretical customer journey towards the purchase of a product or

service. Once letter receivers became used to "junk mail" the form of advertisement became ineffective. Also, with innovations in technology old forms of advertisement did not work because the attention of the consumer was fragmented. With the Internet, everyone can broadcast and the flow of informational was not privileged to the traditional media such as print, radio, and television. The popularity of community based email lists, Internet relay chat channels, and newsgroups lead to the creation of social media networks. A platform that mixed all forms of digital communication into an easy to use centralized format. As the user base of Web 2.0 platforms expanded, with early adopting email users and people who still used letter mail until technology was made more accessible, the social networks became part of the superstructure which forms the ideology that maintains power. Similar to the problem with letter mail, social networks are now rife with insidious advertisements generated from the user's activity and personal information. Purchase funnels making use of data collected from free-to-use communication platforms such as *Google Gmail* and *Facebook Messenger* reappear in the form of digital sales funnels. Digital sales funnels, such as *Leadpages* and *Clickfunnels*, are now offered as easy to use services for online business that have no marketing experience. Advertisers realized community engagement is what builds trust and creates sales. Most modern marketing is based off the AIDA (Awareness, Interest, Desire, Action), a hierarchy of effects model created by American, E. St Elmo Lewis, in the late 19th century (Strong, 1925). Using this model, business interest has shifted away from consuming activities and gravitated towards producing activities, giving users more power over content because they add business value. According to van Dijck, "labour critics and neo-Marxist scholars noticed early on how the glamorization of the digital domain was a convenient pretence for the mobilization of 'immaterial labour' – befitting the familiar logic of capitalist exploitation" (2009, p. 50). The IM generated from a platform's produsers is what builds value to commodities through a brand

relationship. Produsers create the awareness, interest, and desire for commodities in the creation of their cultural artefacts which leads to a few taking action in further IM. In turn, this leads to a trickle effect of consumption of commodities. The voluntary activity of IM has been incorporated into the commodification process as large companies and advertising agencies systematically exploit their users.

The key concept that fuels the agency to create IM is affect. The biological portion of emotion is exploited to create IM through the social exchange of positive or negative feedback. Hardt and Negri (2004) consider immaterial labour as affective labour, involving both body and mind, that produces or manipulates affects such as a feeling of ease, well-being, satisfaction, excitement, or passion (p. 108-111). When a user makes a post on a social network, they are essentially producing a cultural artefact as a gift to the community. The producer of the artefact experiences a sense of reciprocity from the positive or negative feedback received from other users. Users hitting the "Like" button on a social media post gives an immediate response to complete the joint action of gift exchange. Producing IM on social media generates gratitude from other users in the form of 'likes, comments, subscribes' which produces the internal reward of pride in the producer (Lawler, 2001, 338). Lawler's affect theory of exchange shows the conditions of reciprocity which foster expressive relations and groups through an emotional/affective process. Emotions are involuntary, internal responses and the attribution processes they trigger transform relations, networks, or groups into expressive objects which is the source of value in IM. According to Lawler, "emotional/affective processes essentially move actors from the first (nonrational) point to the second (nonrational) point, but do so through a rational process" (p. 349). The goal of the produser is to reproduce pleasant emotions and avoid unpleasant ones which motivates the linking of these nonrational states. In other words, the affect theory of social exchange illustrates the fundamental way the rational (wanting to feel good) and nonrational (working free for advertisers) are

intertwined in social networks. People enjoy using social networks because they feel emotions such as pride and/or shame when they receive feedback from other users as well as a sense of community, thus creating the positive feedback loop which fuels online communities and commerce.

I can attest to these emotions of pride and/or shame being the driving force for my involvement with online communities; specifically with YouTube and its comment, rate, and subscribe systems. The feedback provided by users gave me the agency to produce more content for the platform. In the following section I provide my personal experiences with social technologies to further explore how affect is an important component in the production of PC, UGC, and IM.

Autoethnography – An Affective Agency

I am offering my personal experience with my technologically mediated, interpersonal development narrating the path of PC through UGC to IM to help analyse and synthesis these concepts to the reader as well as myself. Similar to the concept of IM, I am produsing this autoethnography to better understand my positive and negative emotions surrounding social media and to help illustrate these concepts to others by capturing the zeitgeist precipitating Web 2.0. Ellis, Adams and Bochner state,

> Authoethnography is an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze (graphy) personal experience (auto) in order to understand cultural experience (ethno) (Ellis, 2004; Holman Jones, 2005). This approach challenges canonical ways of doing research and representing others (Spry, 2001) and treats research as a political, socially-just and socially-conscious act (Adams & Holman Jones, 2008). A researcher uses tenets of autobiography and ethnography to do and write autoethnography. Thus, as a method, autoethnography is both process and product. (2010)

My goal is not to provide an objective account of what happened but rather to allow the reader to understand social media from my perspective as an early YouTube content creator and what lead me to

stop. I hope this research is not read as merely an attempt to show off or "humblebrag" my achievements. In all honesty, despite what I accomplished with technology in the social aspects of building my identity, mending my relationship with my family, and creating a small international community of diasporic Iranian youth—I still have my doubts. I spent a lot of my life chasing a procedurally generated dream instead of honing my skills as an actor, writer, brother, son, friend, and partner offline. The bonds I created amongst people for the most part were virtual and despite my fans/ subscribers telling me my videos deeply affected them in a positive way, I still feel exploited into aiding Google to harvest metadata for advertisers. What makes things worse is I feel I sold my culture out and exploited my father as free labour for close to zero monetary gain. I hope this autoethnography provides a voice to the participants of social media like me who feel seduced and abandoned by the promises of tech culture as most stories in the mass media glorify the few successes in it.

The Iranian diaspora frames affective community and plays a role in the produsage of PC, UGC, and IM and is formed through media and social technology. Therefore, my autoethnagraphy begins during the revolution.

The 1979 Iranian Revolution caused the displacement of many religious and ethnic minorities who were fleeing the strict Islamic regime that overthrew the Iranian monarchy. According to Moghissi (2009), "Generally, the main reason for emigration of Iranians has been dissatisfaction with the social-cultural transformation of the country after the 1979 revolution, and in some cases, political or religious persecution and repression following the formation of an Islamic state in the country. This has been also the main reason for the arrival of the majority of Iranians in Canada" (p. 110). In an interview with my mother, Tabandeh Hooshmandi (T. Hooshmandi, personal communication, November 15, 2015), the Islamic fundamentalists were placing pressure on my family to leave their ancestral home in Yazd.

Muslim radicals would threaten them with attempts to burn down their orchard due to their Zoroastrian heritage and their participation in the Baha'i faith. McCauliffe (2008) explains:

> The Baha'i faith, a religion that grew out of Islam in Persia in the nineteenth century, has dominated migrant and refugee flows out of Iran. The Baha'is, currently estimated at a population of around 300,000 in Iran, are considered an official apostasy by the Iranian regime, and have been subject to systematic persecution ranging from the confiscation of property and barring from tertiary education, through to imprisonment and execution. As a result, Baha'i migrants from Iran rival the stocks of Muslim Iranians in the cities of the diaspora. (p. 66)

Afraid for their lives, my family left all their possessions and immigrated to Canada with my twin sisters (who were one year old at the time). My father decided on Canada because he liked the idea of socialism. He did not want to raise his children in a country where religious law would restrict freedoms nor a country that valued profits over the wellbeing of its people. In Iran during the 1950s-60s he experienced religious persecution and historical censorship. Moghissi's (2009) study shows in his sample of:

> 450 male and female Iranians in Toronto and Montreal, for example, 42.86 per cent of Iranian men and 26.63 per cent of Iranian females noted political persecution as the main reason they had left their country of origin. Even 'finding a better future for children' as the main reason for emigration that was mentioned by a larger percentage of Iranians (46.75 per cent of men and 60.87 per cent of women) was closely linked to the political situation in the country. (p. 110)

While my family was living in Iran, my father, who was fluent in many languages, was a manager at the Sheraton Continental Hotel in Tehran and my mother was the head of quality control at the Bayer Aspirin factory in Tehran Pars. They believed their transition from farming to living a cosmopolitan lifestyle in the larger cities would ease their transition to the Western world. When they immigrated to Canada they moved to the rural town of Grimsby, Ontario so they could be close to my aunt and uncle who purchased farmland in attempt to continue their agricultural trade. My father could only find substantial work in the industrial parts of Hamilton, a larger neighboring city to Grimsby and my mother

stayed at home to take care of my sisters. Once I was born my father secured permanent placement on

the assembly line at Firestone Tires in Hamilton working graveyard shift (see fig. 4). This afforded my

parents a house in Grimsby that still remains the family homestead. Growing up in my household, my

family kept strong in their Baha'i religion and Zoroastrian heritage, continued their Persian culture, and

stayed proud of their ancestry. My uncle taught me to speak, read, and write in Persian to a third-grade

level and I remember being surrounded by adored Persian carpets and wall paintings. There was deep

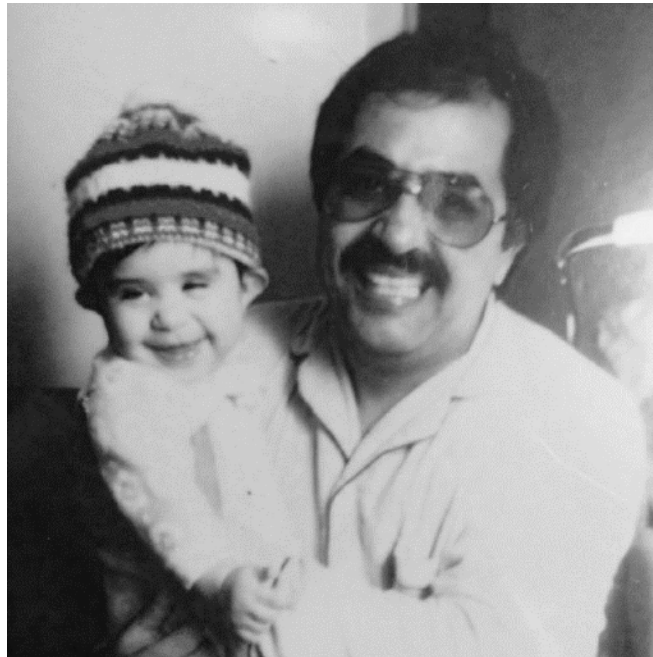sense of pride and expectation to preserve our family's cultural identity.

Figure 4. Photograph of my father, Firooz Hooshmandi, and I in 1985.

Due to Canada's social complexity my family was treated as lower class and only able to rise in

the social stratum through assimilation. As Ngan (2013) states:

> in the age of globalization, immigration and its effects on the hanging urban social landscape
> have intensified the social distinction between 'outsiders' and 'insiders', affecting the order of
> social divisions in host societies. Such distinction is one of differences and similarities based on
> an awareness of social acceptance and exclusion involving a social process of othering.
> Insiderness and outsiderness is a social experience that is not just confined to ethnic groups as it
> "exists in all communities and societies, between those who belong, who are part of 'us', and

those who may be experienced as foreign or alien" (Billington et al., in Crow, Allan, & Summers, 2001, p. 30). (p. 317)

However, as newcomers, both international and internal migrants are particularly subject to being classified as outsiders since their social status is often attached to criteria such as length of local residence, ethnicity, place of birth and shared history" (Ngan, 2013, p. 317). According to Firooz Hooshmandi (F. Hooshmandi, personal communication, November 13, 2015), the combination of working nights and living outside the city, my father was cut off from Iranian diaspora communities and this led to his sense of isolation and depression. The 1981 Iranian hostage crisis led to discrimination at work and my father's isolation and deep depression. In attempts to fit in he would join his fellow coworkers at the pub leading to the beginning of his battle with alcoholism. I saw less and less of my father and whenever I did he was angry and abusive towards our family. At an early age I could feel his resentment toward leaving his home in Iran to face discrimination in Canada and have the burden of working his life away from us to support us. His depression and alcoholism was amplified when he was laid off at Firestone. He was able to secure another job closer to home at a family run chicken hatchery in Beamsville.

The family who owned and operated the chicken hatchery were members of the Church of Christ and that held land in the area since the mid-1800s. During Christmas they began to pressure my father and us to convert to Christianity and join their congregation. Carrying the trauma of having to leave his homeland due to religious persecution for not converting to Islam, he had a breaking point where in a drunken stooper he vandalized his boss's church. He was immediately thrown into jail but upon hearing his story the judge acquitted the charges and recommended my father seek council to pursue legal action against the owner of the chicken hatchery. The owner offered to settle outside of court for $10,000. Out

of pride my father refused. He did not press charges but did receive severance pay and decided to use it to fly back to Iran for a few weeks because he was homesick. During this time my mother filed for a divorce because she could not bear the shame my father had brought upon the family through his arrest and the alcohol consumption that was forbidden in the Baha'i religion. After returning from Iran, when my father came back to the house in Grimsby he found that my mother changed the locks. He attempted to break into the house when the police were called. I witnessed him taken away. After that incident, my father lived in his car for years and I was forbidden to see him. I only saw him a few times here and there when he would drive by my elementary school to give me pocket money, packs of chewing gum, and tell me he loved me.

Growing up being the only visible minority in a small rural town had its challenges. I did not have a sense of belonging despite being the only one from our family born Canadian. McAuliffe (2008) states, "there is a qualitative difference between the experiences of the migrants who set out from 'the homeland' to make a new life in another country, and their children, whose lives are lived interstitially between the homeland and their parents' adopted nation. The second generation live as a product of both nations, as well as being potentially judged from without as a product of neither" (p. 64-65). My earliest memories of the first grade was walking to school with my mother and witnessing older boys make fun of us and pelt us with stones. I was constantly beaten up by the older kids at recess so my mother would have to wait with me before the morning bell rang so I was safe from the barrage of name calling and angry fists. I was relentlessly told to "pack it up, paki" and to "go back where I can from." At an early age I had to wrap my mind around understanding the concept of racism, a parallel to the discrimination my father was enduring at the factory. I did not understand why children who were born in the same hospital as me and had the same joys of eating sugary cereals while watching Saturday morning cartoons

would refer to me as a foreigner calling me "paki" and "nigger." I had to ask my mother what these terms meant and she did not know how to answer me as she did not understand herself. Despite my Aryan ancestry, I began to develop a deep sense of self-hatred, which was also fuelled by watching TV shows and movies where the protagonists were always portrayed as white Christian males such as *Saved by the Bell* and *Home Alone*. I felt because of my ethnicity I could never be accepted or successful in society. During the first grade, I never spoke in class because I was petrified and confused by the discrimination I was experiencing. Students and a confused teacher would shove me out in the hall with the Jehovah Witness girl because "we didn't believe in Santa." My teacher was certain I had a learning disability because I wasn't talking and placed me in the special education program. Upon a few tests the special needs educator realized that I did not have a learning disability and was then placed back in regular class. I did remember enjoying the special education program, as it was my first exposure to a computer. It was a Commodore 64, which ran *Sesame Street* educational software.

The elementary school I was attending had a program where once a week during the winter months they would bus us to the ice rink at the community centre to practice skating. Parents were expected to show up to lace their children's skates. Skating and hockey was a national pastime and symbol of Canadian cultural identity. My father was always there to tie up my skates and encourage me to learn skating in hopes that I would assimilate and not face the alienation he was experiencing. However, after my parents' divorce, my father was no longer around to tie up my skates and my mother was unable to assist because she couldn't drive or speak English. In this case, I had to stay back at the school during skating days in an empty classroom while I awaited my classmates' return. I was used to the isolation and loneliness but did enjoy having unfettered access to the various computers at the school during this time. I would explore the library computer; it had an external CDROM drive with a copy of

Microsoft Encarta. I would look up pictures and information about anything I desired to learn such as the flag for the Islamic Republic of Iran and cute pictures of Koalas, my favorite animal. The joy I had perusing digital encyclopedias were analogous to my childhood pastime of flipping through volumes of Britannica which my father acquired for the family at a local yard sale. As years went by, I always looked forward to being alone in the school with computers during skating days especially when the school setup a computer lab which had an IBM Aptiva computer with dial-up Internet access. Computers quickly became my escape from a world that I did not fit in. I became obsessed with Japanese video games at home and would look forward to trips to a family friend's home that owned the latest personal computer. This family friend was a network administrator, who noticed my interest in computing. She would give me back issues of computer magazines she had subscriptions to through her work. Periodicals were also a proto-Internet to me. I would look forward to trips to the supermarket to flip through gaming, computer and Mad magazine while brazenly ignoring the "no loitering" signs. I learned everything I could from magazines until my family finally saved up to buy our first home computer that I became inseparable with.

During my time at Grand Avenue Public School, there were two teachers that made an impact on my life. Ms. Fawn my grade 4 teacher and Mr. Greenfield who taught me through grade 7 and 8. Ms. Fawn was primarily an art teacher. She encouraged me to write and draw comics and understood my cynical humour. Ms. Fawn also read the class stories about Harriet Tubman and the Underground Railroad which deeply affected me. It also created an incongruence in my mind learning that Canada, specifically Niagara, was the "Promised Land" of freedom for African-American slaves. If this was true and is now curriculum in schools, why was my family experiencing racism over 100 years later. Mr. Greenfield was my homeroom teacher for the final two years of elementary school. He seemed to be a

very troubled man and would openly criticize the school to the class. Parents reported him to the principal for smoking cigarettes in his car on school property. I vividly remember that he refused to eat lunch in the staff room with the rest of the teachers and would eat his lunch in the homeroom with the students. Through both years, Mr. Greenfield read to the class S.E. Hinton's novel *The Outsiders* (1967), a book that dealt with class conflict, family dynamics, appearance vs. reality, honour and sacrifice. He also introduced the class to daily journals where we were encouraged to write each morning about what was going on in our lives. It was an exercise to make us better writers. Mr. Greenfield would check our journals to make sure we wrote in them. I would use the journals as an outlet to express my frustration growing up in the area facing racism and my parents going through divorce. After a few weeks of journaling, Mr. Greenfield decided to separate my desk from the rest of the class and turn it facing the window. He would give me a piece of paper with all the assignments due at the end of the week which I would complete Monday night. I was permitted to write, draw, or read whatever I wanted during the rest of the days. The new vice principal would also have me assist her with learning computer software such as Microsoft Publisher to create school calendars and flyers. It was my choice whether or not I wanted to participate in class. On Fridays, Mr. Greenfield would set aside 15 minutes for me to present to the class my creative work, such as stories, drawings, or summaries of articles on technology I read in magazines. At my grade 8 graduation I was awarded valedictorian. During the ceremony, Mr. Greenfield introduced me as the future Prime Minister of Canada before I delivered my valedictory. Mr. Greenfield understood my feeling of alienation and nurtured my creativity by allowing me freedoms that I could only imagine of during previous years at Grand Avenue Public School. I regret not keeping in touch with him as I learned a few years later that he had succumb to stomach cancer. I wish I could thank him for what he did.

Entering high school, I would see less of my father as he had finally settled in a small apartment in Port Hope, Ontario, a four-hour drive away. He had joined a twelve-step program and reached sobriety. I witnessed friends I had won over during my final years at Grand Avenue Public School had lost interest in me and had joined the emerging youth cultures presented to them by students coming from the uptown elementary schools. Sports and expensive pastimes I did not have access to such as snowboarding and paintball distanced me from my friends. I witnessed the cafeteria split into tribes of youth cultures gated by monetary entry to the group. Students would huddle in corners reading magazines that looked like shopping catalogues and fetishizing over products I could not afford. Their lifestyle of going on expensive ski trips or firing off rounds of paint using disposable air canisters alienated me. I continued to face racism in high school as I remember going to my locker on the first week of classes and seeing it smashed in with the word "paki" etched into it. After that incident, I never returned to my locker and would carry all my books with me at all times in a large backpack. Despite all this, I was excited to get a new computer at home with steady dial-up access through my sisters' university. Spending my days exploring the USENET, Internet Relay Chat, and various web message boards I was able to escape into an anonymous globalized community without borderers or skin colour. Alinejad (2013) explains, "children of Iranian immigrants engage with Internet media in processes of identity formation. It conceptually centralizes places of home in order to bring together literatures of diaspora and digital media in order to understand the case of the second-generation immigrant home. It argues that this partially mediated home is both connected/mobile and emplaced/embodied" (p. 95). My knowledge of computers was slowly recognized by the outcast "geeks" and "nerds" in my high school where we would exchange instant messenger contact info and communicate with each other over ICQ and MSN from our sheltered environments at home. Later on, I would have a chance to spend more time

with my father, as he would visit my sisters' university housing in Hamilton, and he quickly learned of my Internet addiction. My sisters' apartment had broadband Internet access so I would frequently visit them to download the latest pirated software, video games, and music onto my portable hard drive. My father realized I was more excited to spend time on my sisters' computer than with him.

Figure 5. My father working at the Pizzeria.

My father worked for his nephew-in-law's Pizza shop in Port Hope until a tragic incident and the store would shut down (see fig. 5). My father spent his days at the public library and community help centre looking for jobs and reading books. He said he was feeling very isolated and alone at the time and wanted to contact me. My father decided to sign up for a computer literacy class which taught him basic computing skills and a volunteer helped him open a Hotmail email account. My father's experience of isolation from his homeland, Persian culture, and family is similar to Moghissi's (2009) account of his elderly Iranian mother:

> how could the entry into a realm of cultural and social isolation, loneliness, lack of companionship of one's age or at least the possibility of having basic communication with other people in the larger society, and being at the mercy of busy, tired and impatient children, not

affect a parent's physical and mental health? I have wondered if the love of one's children and the desire to live closer to them would compensate for all that is lost when one leaves behind one's birthplace, independence, the precious emotional and psychological security that a person feels from simply living in a known and familiar habitat in the company of those who know her and her history and speak her language, literally and culturally - something that one is not conscious of until it is lost. Which would be more depression and disorienting: separation from the loved ones or living with the sense of loss, isolation, dependence, and resignation that comes with being relocated to a new country as an older adult? Or should we begin with a more general question: are the emotional and psychological impacts of aging universal, or do race, ethnicity, gender and socio-economic status have an impact on how people age? (p. 108)

My aging father sent his first email to me which later led to an avalanche of lewd chain mail forwarded by him from his global network of Persian friends. Through email my father would stay in touch with me throughout the years, frequently emailing to ask me about school and my life. Not only was he reconnected with me, he was also able to contact his family and friends in Toronto, the Untied States, and Iran. During my angst-ridden teenage years I stopped replying to my father's emails because I blamed him for the socio-economic situation in which I found myself. I saw my peers wearing the latest trendy clothing at school and being made fun of for my attire. Also on the rare occasion I would visit other Persian homes of Baha'i community members I would see they had the latest electronics, films, and video games and that made me jealous, increasing my resentment toward my father. As Moghissi (2009) states, "in a society in which material wealth plays such a huge role in one's standing within the society and is used as a measurement for success, having no or minimal financial resources and being dependent on others for basic needs negatively impact on one's sense of confidence and self-worth and, seemingly, the way one is treated by children and grandchildren." (p. 111) I began to keep an online diary on LiveJournal, an early blogging platform, which was analogous to the journals I would write in Mr. Greenfield's class. Similarly to those grade school journals, I would use the blog as an outlet for my frustrations but this time my father had access to it. He would print my latest blog posts at the library to

take home and read in a way to better understand me. Soon Microsoft would release MSN Messenger, which allowed my father to reach me through instant messaging. I was surprised by his ability to learn new technology and it began to give me a sense of pride because my friends were surprised to know that my father could use computers better than them. I would begin to see my father more as he was able to coordinate visits and, with his newfound computer savvy, I was more eager to spend time with him. He would also give me periodicals and books about hacker culture. The most impactful book he gave me was, *The Fugitive Game* (Littman, 1996), a biography on the infamous hacker Kevin Mitnick who compromised American telecommunication companies and had wiretapped the FBI agents who were attempting to capture him. The book also introduced me to the concept of social engineering which the U.S. military describes as, "the art of manipulating people into performing actions or divulging confidential information, rather than by breaking in or using technical cracking techniques" (The Wire, Issue 42, Volume 12, p.3). Technology had brought my father and I closer together. For my 17th birthday my father purchased a digital camera for me. He was always fond of photography in his youth, as his father gave him a Pentax 35mm SLR, and he wanted to pass down the tradition. I would post digital photos of my life on my LiveJournal blog and DeviantArt account, which my father would continue to read in order to stay involved with my life from afar (see fig. 6).
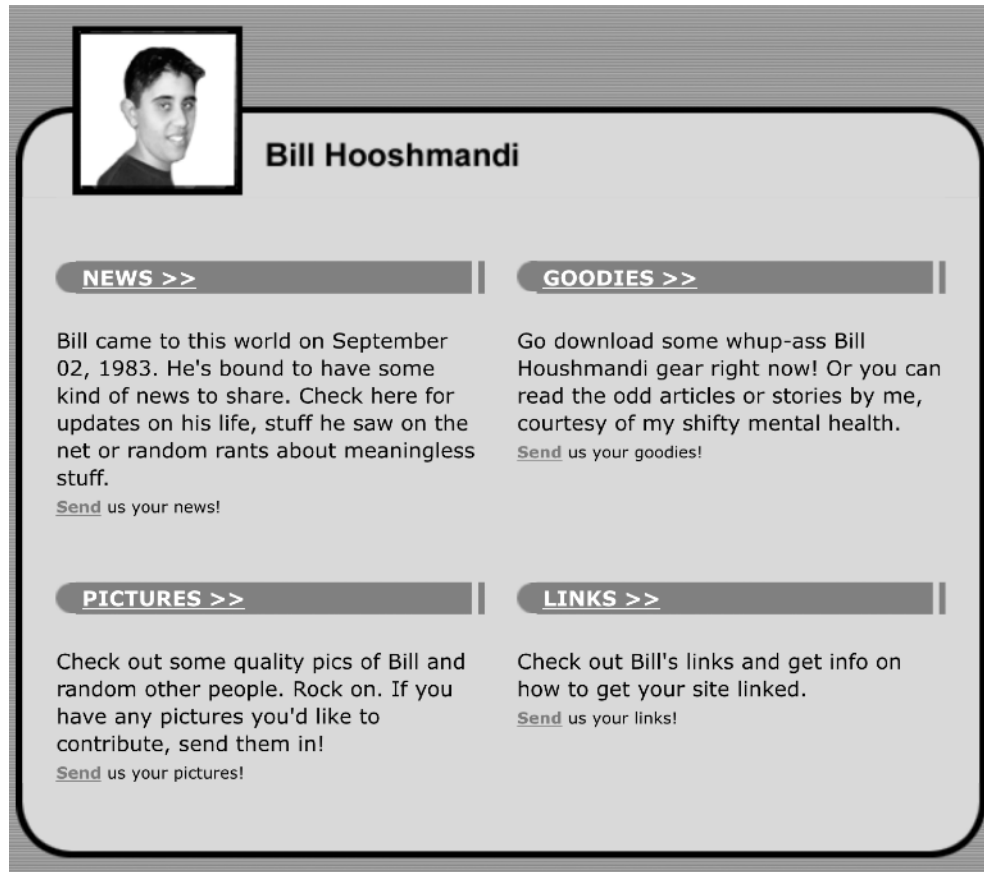
Figure 6. Screenshot of HTML webpage made in 1999. An example of pre-Facebook Internet homepages.

Participatory Culture – Underground Independent Artist Revolution

It was the dawn of the new millennium and I was slowly regaining a sense of self-esteem through my participation in the high school dramatic arts program and my embracement of hip-hop culture. My high school drama teacher introduced me to improvisational theatre and nurtured my dark sense of humour by exposing me to films such as *Léolo* (Lauzon, 1992) and novels such as *Angela's Ashes* (McCourt, 1996). Drama and English classes were where the teachers encouraged me to communicate my frustration and anger through creative work. My perception of art and culture was the sharing of stories and experiences in hopes that one would be able to relate to the work and no longer feel alienated by society. Discovering hip-hop music and being able to identify with the plight of the

African-American made me feel less alone and more empowered. Hearing stories of discrimination similar to mine being expressed through angry and violent lyrics really affected me. I began creating my own music reflecting my anger towards the racist environment I grew up in. Through hip-hop I learned of anti-establishment discourse and the importance of being an independent artist. I was listening to musicians from independent labels such as Wu-Tang Clan, No Limit, Ruff Ryders and Definitive Jux, which exposed me to the participatory mixtape culture.
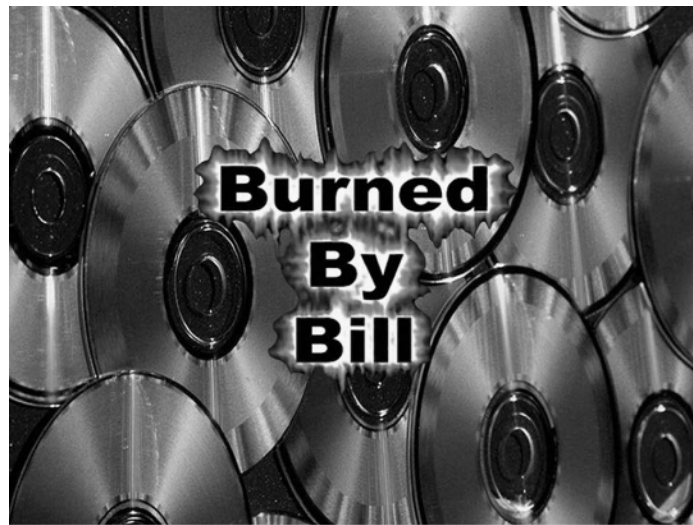
Figure 7. Artwork for my high school CD bootlegging service.

Determined to follow in the path of self-made hip-hop artists I admired, I borrowed money from my aunt to purchase my first CD recorder to install in our family computer. It was a 2x Matsushita CD-R drive that took all of 37 minutes to produce a single 74-minute audio disc. I was able to quickly repay her by selling bootleg copies of music and computer software to classmates and teachers. I learned that the cost of blank CDs bought in bulk spindles were low enough to turn quick profits (see fig. 7). I began selling mix CDs of my favourite rap songs that I discovered and obtained in underground hip-hop Internet Relay Chat channels through XDCC. This became popular amongst the predominately white suburban youth that went to my high school as I was exposing them to music outside of top 40 radio and

MuchMusic video airplay. With each disc I included a simple printed cover with the track listings, a logo for the recording company I made up (Beachside Records) and my Hotmail email address. As the popularity and circulation of the mix CDs rose, I began to add my voice to the mixes introducing the tracks under the moniker DJ Hoosh. This slowly led to me including my own original songs on top of instrumental music I would remix using multitrack computer software. Each mix CD had songs where I would build hype for my self-released album, *The Krackah Killah LP*. The album contained songs that highlighted my dark sense of humour, my anger towards racism and the sexual frustration of going through puberty at an early age (see fig. 8). It was a complete success throughout my high school and even popular with the seniors at their house parties. Mixtapes explicitly fit within participatory culture as creators of a mixtape curate its content and share their creation with others who value their contribution. By creating a mixtape that includes the work of their favourite artists, curators are explicitly participating in the fan culture surrounding particular artists and genres. The relatively low barriers to this form of artistic expression is due to the democratizing power of home recording and digital editing technology. Sharing taste in music via mixtapes, participants feel a degree of social connection with others.
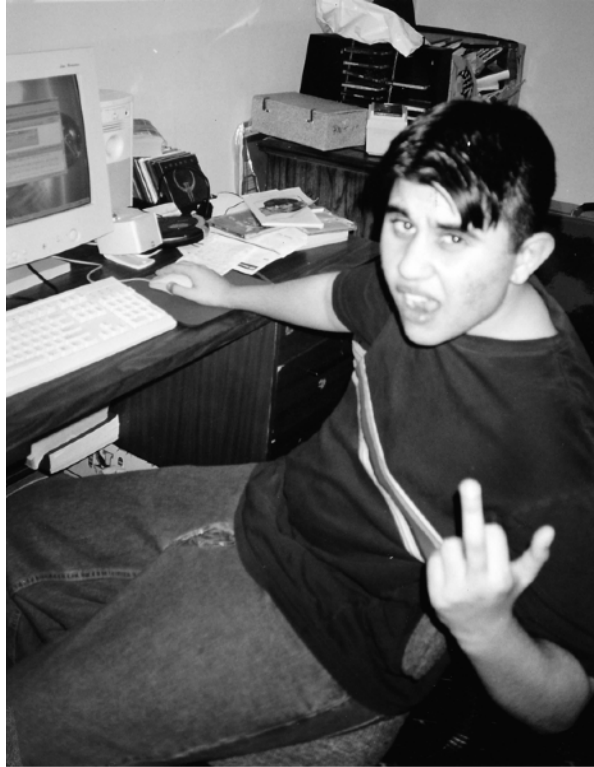
Figure 8. Participatory cultures accessible through technology were an outlet for my teenage angst.

The popularity of my mix CDs and my fascination with social engineering inspired me to run for student council president in my final year of high school. Despite never being involved with student government or even going to school dances, I considered it to be a cynical social experiment to prove to my close friends that student council was a popularity contest for children of affluent parents that can be easily manipulated. During my later years of high school, I was working part-time at an independently run video rental store and had unfettered access to a photocopier. With the owner's permission, I used the photocopier to print out a flurry of simple campaign posters with various catchy, humorously non-sequitur slogans under the title, "Vote for Hoosh." My campaign was solely to win the election by harnessing the popularity of my mixtape DJ name and use my access to a photocopier in order to rapidly create various humorous lines of text to post around the high school. I also constructed my image by manipulating my appearance using funds acquired through my part-time job at the video store while

continuing to sell mixtapes. During the early days of online shopping, I would purchase unique t-shirt prints from New York City artists through online retailers and eBay using a PayPal account. I also asked my doctor for advice on clearing my acne. Without providing any other option he prescribed me Accutane, an expensive pharmaceutical drug used to treat severe nodular acne, which was not covered by Canadian health care. My social engineering experiment in impression management worked and I won the student council presidency by a landslide. The thrill from the victory was short lived after the bragging rights faded and I was left with unwanted responsibility of governing the student body during the academically critical final year of high school.

Mixtapes introduced me to PC and the influence one gains from the ability to produce and distribute media. It also gave me a profound perspective on the role popular culture plays upon electoral systems. Unfortunately, I paid a price for this social experiment with my own well-being. Gaming the student council electoral system fed into my cynical outlook on life by confirming my notions that everything was a sham. The election process distanced me from my real friends and I was now amongst the popular cliques that I was once outcast to. The start of my final high school year coincided with the events of September 11th, 2001. The world had changed overnight which left me, and those around me, with a sense of uncertainty. This was amplified by the adverse side effects of the acne medication I was on which gave me anxiety and depression. My family doctor prescribed me Paxil, an antidepressant of the selective serotonin reuptake inhibitor (SSRI) class, in hopes that it would counter balance the damage done by Accutane. Similar to Accutane, it was not covered by Canadian Health Care. My doctor first started by giving me free samples of the drug until I was dependent and required a prescription which I paid out of pocket for. At 17, it was quite a financially burden as I was paying $90 per month to fill the prescription. Instead of making me feel better the drug amplified my anxiety and gave me

insomnia. I would stay up all night and feel too sick to attend classes during my fifth year of high school. Due to poor attendance, I failed two courses to the determent of my final average preventing me admission to the university program I had applied for. I had applied for the fledgling electronic commerce program at McMaster University's DeGroote School of Business which required an eighty percent average which I fell three points short of despite being an honour student in the gifted program throughout my secondary school career. I was completely devastated and ashamed of myself. High school ended and all my friends went away to college and university while I was left at home with no vision of the future except for the fear the world was going to war.

User Generated Content – Take the Blue Pill or the Red Pill

2002 was literally the darkest year of my life. I cut myself off from the outside world by continuing to sleep during the day and being awake throughout the night. I wanted to be isolated from friends and family because I could not bear to answer questions about my life. I felt that I had destroyed my future for a chance to be popular and now I wanted to be no one. I was contemplating suicide. I spent my nights anonymously posting on message board communities and reading what I could about people in similar situations. I found solace that I was not alone. A lot of people were prescribed Paxil and experiencing the same difficulties. I eventually found a message board community, PaxilProgress.org, which acted as a support group for people dealing with side effects of the drug as well as withdrawal symptoms. The community was a wealth of information and answered all the questions my family doctor failed to. I read many posts from adolescents experiencing adverse effects and even a mother claiming her son committed suicide after 2 years on the drug. I decided to get myself off of Paxil without notifying my doctor. I read many accounts of people suffering from withdrawal symptoms and

followed successful measures taken to properly ween myself off of the drug. Without the aid of the Paxilprogress.org community I am not sure if I would be alive to write this. Tens years after my ordeal with Paxil the United States Department of Justice charged GlaxoKlineSmith, the makers of the drug, with fraud. The pharmaceutical company was accused of publishing misleading clinical tests in medical journals which demonstrated efficacy in the treatment of depression in patients under 18 (https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/glaxosmithkline-plead-guilty-and-pay-3-billion-resolve-fraud-allegations-and-failure-report). On December 17, 2014, Paxilprogress.org abruptly shut down permanently taking 14 years of people's experiences with SSRIs with it (see fig. 9). I often think back to the time I was an impressionable 17-year-old being given sample drugs by my family doctor, a figure I was taught to trust, without a parental guardian present. I truly believe therapy or counselling would have been more appropriate in my situation. I become frustrated and angry when I think of the countless youth who have been placed in similar situations. This ultimately increased my sense of contempt and distrust towards society and I knew I needed a creative outlet to pacify my hatred.
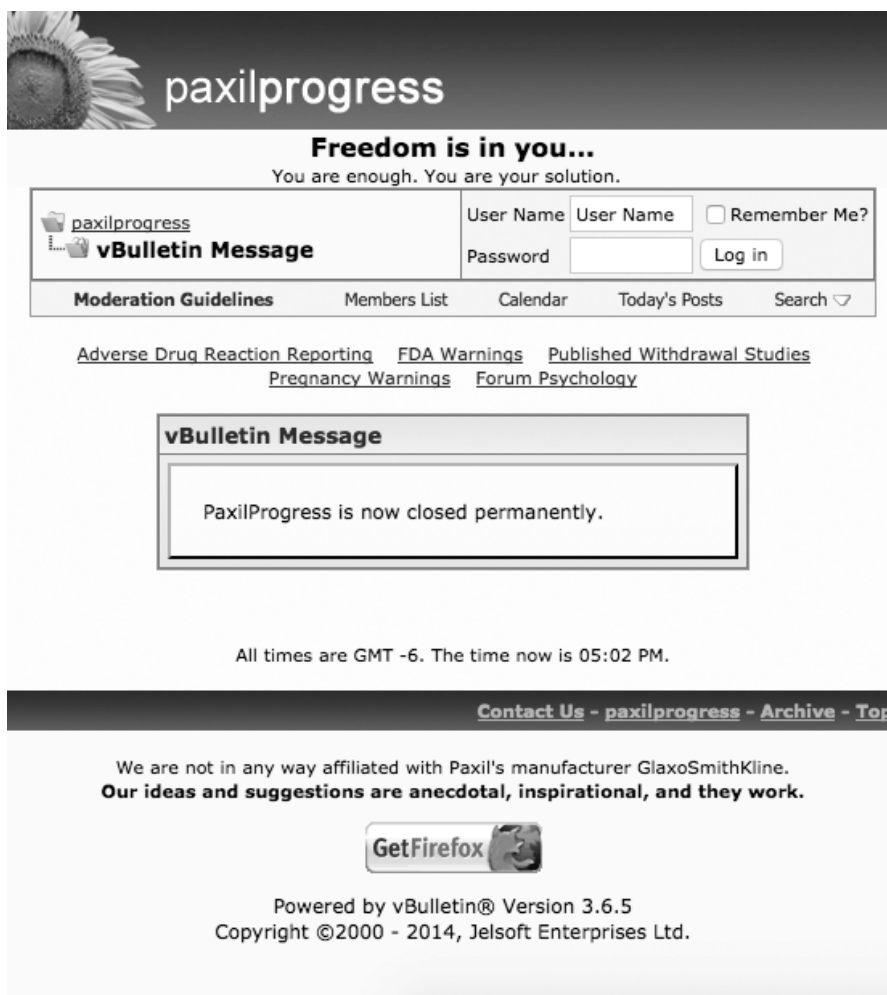
Figure 9. Screenshot of PaxilProgress's closure.

Months had passed and through the support of online community and marijuana I was able to get off of Paxil. I was also able to take care of my acne situation using a simple low cost regime of over-the-counter products such as benzoyl peroxide and non-comedogenic moisturizer. I learned this method of skin care from acne.org, a non-profit online community started in 1996 to help people suffering from serve acne. Being able to rescue myself using the Internet made me feel empowered. I began to set new goals. I started to take the bus to Toronto twice a week to study improv at Second City and had also auditioned for and was accepted to the Comedy Writing and Performance program at Humber College. My experiences with writing, hip-hop, dramatic arts, and electioneering lead me to pursue a career in the

popular culture industry. Specifically, I sought out the path of a stand-up comedy with the ultimate goal of producing television. Influenced by stories of comedians who overcame race, gender, and socio-economic obstacles such as Richard Pryor, Bill Cosby, Jim Carrey, and Roseanne Barr, I wanted to use the media to change the public's perception of middle eastern men in a post-911 world. I also wanted to perform advocacy and raise awareness against greedy doctors and corrupt pharmaceutical companies which wronged me and many others. I knew popular culture was the only effective way to change the hearts and minds of people. As Stuart Hall (1981) states:

> Popular culture is one of the sites where the struggle for and against a culture of the powerful is engaged: it is also the stake to be won or lost in that struggle. It is the arena of consent and resistance. It is partly where hegemony arises, and where it is secured. It is not a sphere where socialism, a socialist culture – already full formed – might be simply 'expressed'. But it is one of the places where socialism might be constituted. That is why 'popular culture' matters. Otherwise, to tell you the truth, I don't give a damn about it. (p. 239)

I was a very angry individual at this time and working on my goals at a feverous pitch. I quickly excelled and stood out in the program as my previous experience with Second City improv put me at an advantage. It was a chance to express my dark, cynical, nihilistic humour which the faculty took notice of. For the most part, I was encouraged by the instructors to continue my warpath and was successful at open mic nights at Yuk Yuks in downtown Toronto. However, the prestigious acting teacher that Humber had commissioned for the program had a negative effect on me. As I excelled at acting, dramatic roles in particular, the instructor would belittle me. He would have me act out serious scenes but then stop to place a classmate's baseball cap upon my head sideways and encourage me to act more "ghetto." I felt deeply insulted as it triggered insecurities from past trauma. The most discouraging moment I had with the acting teacher was after I successfully performed a dramatic monologue which was our examination. The teacher told me that it makes no difference in the industry how much of a skilled actor I was and in

reality the best I could ever wish for is to play as a terrorist that gets shot by Jack Bauer on FOX's *24*. This had a profound effect on me as this was coming from Toronto's top acting instructor who trained Keanu Reeves, Hayden Christensen, Malcom McDowell, and Stacy Keach. Despite being top of my class and earning a spot to do 15 minutes of stand up at the end of the year industry show, I let the acting teacher's words get to me. Fuelled by pirated episodes of Chappelle's Show, I burned every bridge by telling off my teacher and the Canadian film/television industry for being discriminatory during my entire stand up set. I was not approached by a single talent agent afterwards, told I was blacklisted by my teachers, and even barred from the after party.

I remained in Toronto for a few more months upon my graduation at Humber. I worked at a Chapters bookstore on Steeles and Yonge, maintaining the periodicals section, while auditioning for non-union acting roles. Unfortunately, it was during the 2003-2004 Toronto SARS outbreak and all film and TV production in Canada had come to a halt. I was given an opportunity by one of my older sisters, who was teaching English as a second language in Japan, to stay with her for a few months in Hamamatsu, Shizuoka. She also needed family support since she was pregnant with her first child. What I had planned as a 3-month working holiday in Japan ended up being 3 years. I had secured work as an English teacher for a Brazilian-Japanese company that was able to sponsor my visa. I was enraptured with Japanese culture and their sense of pride and respect that felt more aligned with my Persian upbringing. The society was more focused on family values and did not centre around the individual despite the hyper materialistic image of Tokyo that is always presented to the West. I was surprised that most Japanese people were more impressed by my Iranian heritage than my Canadian nationality. The Japanese citizens I interacted with on a daily basis knew more about my family's culture than I did which shifted my perception of the world and specially of the West (see fig. 10). I was also

enamoured by Japan's advanced technology. At the time mobile phones, known as *keitai*, were far more advanced than the pre-Blackberry, Nokia, Motorola and Samsung cellular phones in Canada. Japanese mobile phones in the early 2000s were capable of taking high resolution photos and video clips, streaming live television broadcasts, and browsing the Internet using Wireless Application Protocol (WAP). It was clear to me that this was where the future was headed and was reinforced when the Apple iPhone was announced in the West a few years later.

Figure 10. Partying with my English students in Japan.

In 2006, my sister gave birth to a boy and I was finally able to purchase my first Macintosh computer. I was making a decent wage in Japan and Apple had switched to x86 Intel processors which made their computers more affordable to the mass market. During college in Toronto, I was able to hang out with friends who were studying digital media at Ryerson and I had a chance to watch them edit videos on their school loaned PowerBooks. This made me desire an Apple computer because it seemed to be the tool of choice for creative professionals and I finally reached a point in my life I could afford one. A year had passed and I was finally tasked with babysitting my nephew for the first time. He began to cry hysterically when his mother. In an act of desperation, I opened up my MacBook and turned on

Photo Booth, a simple video camera application, in hopes that it would pacify him. To my surprise, he immediately stopped crying and was mesmerized. I decided to start recording the experience to show my sister that my frivolous computer purchase was warranted. She was impressed and we wanted to send the video to our family in Canada but the file was too large to attach to an email. I searched on the Internet for a solution and had discovered a free video streaming service called YouTube that would host my file (see fig. 11).

Figure 11. One of the first videos I uploaded to YouTube. Example of YouTube's beginnings as a video file hosting service.

YouTube was founded by Chad Hurley, Steve Chen, and Jawed Karim, former employees of online commerce website PayPal. It was officially launched in June 2005 and one of numerous competing services aiming to remove technical barriers to the sharing of video online. In these early years, YouTube carried the byline 'Your Digital Video Repository,' which later shifted to 'Broadcast Yourself' after the October of 2006 $1.65 billion dollar Google acquisition. According to Jawed Karim

in *YouTube: Online Video and Participatory Culture* (2009), who left the business in November 2005 to return to college:

> The success of the site is due to the implementation of four key features – video recommendations via the 'related videos' list, an email link to enable video sharing, comments (and other social networking functionality), and an embeddable video player. These features were implemented as part of a redesign after the failure of previous attempts to popularize the website, attempts that included offering $100 to attractive girls who posted ten or more videos. According to Karim, the founders reportedly didn't receive a single reply to this offer, which they posted on Craigslist. (Burgess, Green, p. 2)

The four key features Karim attributes to YouTube's success can be defined as 'spreadability'. According to Jenkins, Ford, and Green, "spreadability refers to the potential—both technical and cultural—for audiences to share content for their own purposes sometimes with the permission of the rights holders, sometimes against their wishes" (p.1). This is opposed to 'sticky media' which is a term used during the beginnings of Web 2.0 culture. Sticky media suggests content is engaging for end users and that it can generate profits for companies by funnelling users to a centralized space such as a website. An example of this is early viral marketing campaigns of which I was a part while I was in Japan. One of my friends who was a digital media student at Sheridan was commissioned to create a viral video for a Canadian toy company's line of micro RC helicopters long before the popularity of drones. He mailed me a prototype of the toy which I was instructed to have someone film me flying in public places in Japan such as malls and parks in hopes of recording crowd reactions. Unfortunately, the prototype was barely functional and broke down after its second flight. The campaign was scrapped but it was an attempt to post a video on the manufacture's website in hopes that the link to the site would spread where end users could also purchase the product. At the time, I remember being relieved the plan failed as I felt the methods to be slightly insidious and dishonest.

Immaterial Labour – Enter the Matrix

I returned to Canada in 2008 and as a present for my father's 58th birthday, I purchased a digital camera for him that I brought back with me from Japan. As it happened, the camera that I gave him had a very advanced video recording function for the time. I decided to give digital film making a try using footage captured from my father's camera. One summer, I asked my father to prepare and perform something so I could film it in order to practice editing. He decided to use a crass comedic poem in Persian about the difficulties of aging. He had acquired this poem through an email that was being passed amongst his Iranian friends. Using my cousin's backyard, we filmed the poem in sections at various angles implementing the composition styles I had picked up from a high school photography club. I edited the sections together using a rudimentary non-linear editing program called iMovie on my MacBook. I was eager to share the end result with my father who had returned to Port Hope. Knowing the video file would be too large to send as an email attachment I uploaded it to YouTube and sent the link to my father's Hotmail address. On June 15th, 2008, I uploaded the video to YouTube and emailed the link to my father. He was very pleased by the clip that he could not wait to forward it to his mailing list of Iranian friends. Soon the video would spread amongst the Iranian community in a manner that would later be known as "going viral." As days went by, I would observe the video's view count go up by the thousands as people would watch, rate, and leave comments in Persian that I could barely understand.

Figure 12. Humorous Persian poem on aging starring my father surpasses 250,000 views on YouTube.

At the time, YouTube was a very new (3 years old) social media platform and there was not much original Iranian-hosted content. Because the video that I had created was one of the first Iranian representations on an English speaking video streaming platform, a lot of Iranians were upset by its crudeness. Despite it being a cathartic view on the difficulties of aging they saw the gallows humour as being a shameful representation of Iranians being projected to the world. The comments section of the

video was extremely polarizing as it made its way around the Internet. The video quickly reached 250,000 views, as it would link on high profile Persian blogs such as Iranian.com (see fig. 12). Seeing the effect the video had, and the immediate response from people around the world, I decided to further my practice of video editing and comedy writing by creating a web series of minute-long sketches starring my father and I. The series was called *Pedar va Pesar* which translates from Persian into "father and son". The sketches were non-sequitur humour highlighting the non-traditional relationship of my father and I. It broke Iranian taboos because we would often swear and disrespect each other which directly culture-jammed Persian ideals. As Moghissi (2009) explains, "seeking advice and blessing from older persons, behaving in a respectful manner in their presence, or simply providing them with the best or most comfortable seats at family gatherings are norms in Middle-Eastern cultures. Respecting and assisting the elderly are moral and religious obligations and are taught to children at an early age (filial piety)" (p. 107). In contrast to that, our first video was a sketch of a father and son trash talking over table tennis, which degenerated into the foulest language we could possibly think of in an effort to outdo one another (billyhoush, 2008). The viewership of the videos grew as we continued to produce provocative weekly content consisting of "East meets West" cultural lessons from a father to his son with a dark comedic twist. Keeping up with the spirit of mixtape culture, I would produce videos at a feverous pitch despite them being rough around the edges. I felt the low production value of our videos fit the aesthetic of gorilla cinema and added to the charm which attracted me to the hip-hop mixtapes I was listening to at the time for inspiration. Videos included a two-part series of my father teaching me the Persian alphabet using obscene examples such as binge drinking, cross dressing, and defecating (Hooshmandi, 2008). The fury of our conservative commentators made us want to push boundaries as much as we could by producing the most depraved videos imaginable. For Persian New Year in the

spring of 2009, we produced a video of my father explaining the importance of the traditional celebration where he would dress up as "Haji Firooz" a Persian festive Santa Claus figure in black face and I would ask him to explain and expose uncomfortable truths about the culture (Hooshmandi, 2009). The videos continued to go viral and the negative commentary shifted into praise. After two years of producing weekly content, I had decided to self-publish and produce a DVD collection of the series in uncut form as YouTube rejected a few episodes for obscenity. The DVD also contained a few bonus videos and a commentary audio track by my father and I. Despite the DVD essentially containing the same video content which was available online free of charge, I had sold 600 copies internationally to fans in less than a year (see fig. 13).

Figure 13. The DVD I sold through my YouTube channel before my videos were approved for advertisement revenue.

My mother was happy to see me passionate about my endeavour and would allow my father to stay at the house when we were filming sketches. I witnessed their relationship becoming a little better

as my mother would see my father sober and making an effort to spend time with me. I avoided showing my mother the videos we were producing because I knew it would offend her conservative ideals. The main opposition from the Iranian community was that the videos made Iranians seem of a lower class and this was considered to be shameful and "trashy". McAuliffe's (2008) study shows that:

> class is certainly used by both Muslims and Baha'is as a means to differentiate between different groups from Iranian background. However, it is also a discussion of how the lens of class intersects with other ways of belonging in diaspora relations, and how these intersections interplay with both the network of transnational connections that tie people to homeland and the local relations that connect people to their everyday. (p.76)

It was not until after my mother insisted on seeing the videos that we were producing that I played her the DVD, which she found embarrassing to the family. However, she remained curious about the popularity of the videos, as she was always surprised to see all the packages that I was mailing around the world. Due to the reception and amount of global sales I was doing she regained pride and could look past the content, as it must be appealing to many. I would also have my mother translate the Persian emails and comments of praise that fans would send me when my father was not around which would also make her feel proud of our accomplishments (see fig. 14).

■ HUMOUR: Hooshmandis use Port Hope as backdrop for their skits

Father-son comedy duo releases DVD of sketches

TED AMSDEN

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PORT HOPE – Former local pizza store owner and Port Hope resident Firooz Hooshmandi, 62, and his son William Hooshmandi, 26, of Grimsby have been recording comedy sketches during the past two years using Port Hope as a backdrop.

Posted on YouTube, the sketches feature the older of the two men as a dysfunctional eccentric Iranian father and the younger as a his clueless Canadian son.

One of the early posts, featuring the elder reciting poetry in Farsi and mysteriously appearing occasionally with the arms of a woman has been viewed more than 130,000 times.

Other posts have been viewed in the tens of thousands.

The most recent post involves Firooz serving food to his son and William's subsequent reaction.

While William attended Humber College where he took a degree in comedy writing and performance, the two men claim the idea to do the sketches came to them when it was discovered a camera William gave his dad for Father's Day could record video with fairly good quality. They made a short video of themselves playing ping pong rather aggressively.

Since then 26 sketches have been recorded.

William comes to Port Hope to visit his father regularly. They record a sketch based on a loose initial idea and then William takes the video back to Grimsby, where he lives with his mother, and works on it in his basement studio. He then posts it to YouTube.

Recently the men have compiled a DVD of their work — an uncensored version with some offensive language and jokes. The work on YouTube which is in Farsi but can be viewed with subtitles has some censoring gates in front of a few sketches put there by the YouTube community.

Both men bring varied histories to their present-day situation.

William is Canadian-born and taught English in Japan for several years. Firooz lived in Iran until the age of 20, leaving before the Iranian Revolution. He then travelled the world, including a stay in India where he studied yoga. Firooz is an "Iranian hippie," William says. They get along well, he says, because his father has always seemed more like a "really good friend" than a person who is older and concerned about his welfare.

He hopes the sketches will "humanize" the way North Americans view Iranians who, he claims, are seen as a fairly stiff, conservative group.

TED AMSDEN Sun Media

Firooz Hooshmandi, 62, and his son William Hooshmandi, 26 show a DVD that the younger man has produced containing their short comedic sketches.

■ DVD

Pair hope sketches will 'humanize' the way North Americans view Iranians

For example, one sketch that opens with a knife slashing a shower curtain while the music from *Psycho* plays delves into the question of why William is hairier than his father.

In another video, they wax each other's back.

Another, called Port Hopeless - Baba's Exile, is an affectionate small documentary of the people Firooz encounters during his day.

"My dad is connected with the crazy underground of Port Hope," William says.

Local reaction to this video has been good, the two men say.

They were rewarded with handshakes by local members of the police force for their efforts on the Port Hopeless video.

They had good luck during the Jazz Festival, selling about 50 videos.

The DVD, which sells for $10, contains what Firooz and William call two seasons of work: 26 sketches plus background material and behind the scenes.

A company called Indieflix in the United States is selling the DVD south of the border.

Both men are enthusiastic about the project and are working on their next sketch.

To view the videos go to youtube.com/billyhoush.

SEND US YOUR STORY

www.northumberlandtoday.com

Figure 14. News article in Northumberland Today about YouTube channel accomplishments.

Seeing my mother and father not fight and coming together over videos I was producing for an online community of people made me want to produce more. As Facebook became a dominating social media platform, a lot of my YouTube channel subscribers began to contact me directly. They all shared personal stories about their estranged relationships with their fathers due to displacement or death. The videos of my father and I reminded them of their relationships with their parents or an idyllic image of what they wish had been. The videos also voiced the ideological conflicts between Iranian culture with the Western host cultures they now live in. Alinejad (2013) states, "through a combination of intimate communications, public self-representations, and convergences with other media uses, the second generation's relationship to the first generation is characterized by a mixture of continuity and rupture as these young people come of age using internet media" (p. 113). I was happy to meet hundreds of people who shared the same experiences that I thought only I had. These people were spread all across the world such as the United States, Germany, Sweden, Netherlands, India, and the Philippines to name a few. Hearing their stories made me happy that through my videos I was able to unite my, as well as other people's, kin through a global online community.

In the summer of 2009, the world witnessed political protests from inside Iran through social media technologies. These protests were in reaction to the results of the country's presidential election. Diasporic Iranians witnessed images, through their devices, reminiscent of the 1979 Revolution that affected them all. The world was traumatized by a barrage of hyperrealism only attainable through amateur cellphone footage of a young woman being shot during the protests and bleeding out in the street (FEELTHELIGHT, 2009). The mainstream media was celebrating the political uses of online communication platforms such as Twitter as these images were repeatedly shown through every media outlet. Everyone online was abuzz posting images of political dissent and emoting strongly. During this

time, my inbox was flooded with messages from YouTube subscribers imploring I post a new video

acknowledging and capitalizing on the mass media's coverage of the situation in Iran. I knew time was

of the essence because I needed to create something that would capture and best represent the emotions

the diasporic Iranian online community were all experiencing. Naghibi (2011) wrote:

> Social networking sites have been seen as central to publicizing and circulating, for a global audience, the political crisis that unfolded in Iran that summer. At the height of the Iranian protests—and the height of the Western coverage of those protests, which dominated North American media from June 13 until the death of Michael Jackson on June 25th—the mood online and in the media appeared to be exultant, rejoicing in the power of new social media to facilitate global solidarity in a heretofore unprecedented way. (p. 56)

On July 7th 2009, I uploaded episode 24 of Pedar va Pesar entitled *River Love* (billyhoush, 2009). The

idea for the episode was dreamt up one night and the shot list was the first thing I scribbled down in the

morning. A writing technique I had learned in college studying comedy. The two-minute video sketch

began with a scene of Pesar mortified while watching YouTube footage of an Iranian woman dying on

camera. At this moment, Pedar walks in asking to borrow money from Pesar (who is easily compliant

due to his state of shock). Upon further fleecing, it is revealed Pedar is using the money to bid on an

eBay auction for a glove belonging to the recently deceased Michael Jackson. Pedar repeatedly borrows

money from a melancholy Pesar until in the final scene we see Pesar, away from his computer, doing

physical labour in the form of yard work. At this point, Pesar's detachment turns into anger where he

finally tells Pedar to stop. (see fig 15) Despite not being as popular as my other videos, this episode

struck a cord with several people who contacted me through Facebook. From the feedback, the

consensus was it captured an emotion we were all experiencing yet unable to articulate.

Figure 15. Screenshots from *Pedar va Pesar – River Love* illustrating affect and exploitation.

Of all the stories from admirers of my videos, the one that left the biggest impression on me was

from Milad, an Iranian student living away from his family in Stockholm, Sweden. He would watch my

videos as a way to cope with his isolation. McAullife (2008) explains,

the children of Iranian migrants experience life as an intersection of multiple social fields, including, but not limited to, attachment to national homeland, class categories, religious communities, generational cohort and migrant cohort based on the time of arrival. The manifold relationship that the children of Iranian migrants find themselves negotiating on a daily basis reflect the real and imagined ties with the place in which they live and the place from where they have one. This is the conceptual value of a transnational frame of reference; one where fluidity of connections between places, real and imagined, can be viewed through a variety of lenses, all of which are constitutive of an individual's life world (p. 77). Once Milad moved to Gothenburg, he met two other friends whom he introduced to my videos. It had become an inside joke between them and they bonded through reciting quotes and reenacting scenes from my videos. Milad's friends even threw him a surprise birthday party featuring printed photographs of my father and I, as wall decorations (see fig. 16, 17, & 18).

Conversation started November 4, 2013

Milad ▓▓▓▓▓   11/4, 3:13am
What's up, Billy?
Big time fan of the "Pedar va pesar"-sketches, been
watching you guys for years and you always tear me up
and spread joy to me and my friends here in Stockholm,
Sweden.

Anyway, I was watching the poem "Esghe Iran" by Baba
on your yoututube-channel and it's bad ass, haha. Would
you mind giving me the name of poem? Would really like
to listen to the full version.

Take care, buddy!

/Milad

─────────────── November 10, 2013 ───────────────

William Hooshmandi   11/10, 7:07am
Hi Milad,

Thanks for the kind words. I will ask Baba for info on the
poem and let you know.

Take it easy,
Billy

─────────────── November 12, 2013 ───────────────

Milad ▓▓▓▓▓   11/12, 7:07pm
Thanks, buddy, I really appreciate it!

Give Baba a kiss from me as well and take care of
yourselves and just so you know, we're craving for more
"Pedar and Pesar"-sketches, we have them going strong
24/7. Hell, even my Swedish friends are using your
punchlines towards baba on me.

Anyway, keep it real and never let any lame ass iranians
judge you with their "pride" nonsense.

Figure 16. Milad's initial contact with me through Facebook explaining his relationship to my videos.

Figure 17. Milad's story of the surprise birthday party.

Figure 18. Photo of Milad's surprise birthday party featuring images of my father and I posted on the wall.

The power of video and online communities not only saved my life and brought my family back together but also helped build a community across the globe for Persians living in diaspora. Social technology enables people to rebuild connections that were once lost or broken due to political, religious, or socioeconomic conflicts as it surpasses all borders whether they be physical, ideological or both. It saved me from isolation, reestablished my kin and cultural identity while uniting globally displaced Iranians. However, as time passed, the motivation to create and upload videos began to dwindle until it all came to a grinding halt.

Conclusion – The Black Mirror

It's the present day and I am awakened by a pounding vibration which seems to be coming from inside my head. I reach for the smartphone acting as an alarm clock underneath my pillow. It's not my alarm because it's 4 hours before I need to get up. It's one of my many YouTube followers I naively accepted to be my Facebook friend. "When are you going to post the next video, you cocksucker?" I

reply, "Never. Fuck off." "You and your dad are gay. Go suck each other off." I let my phone drop between the mattress and the headboard and fall back asleep. A few hours later I get out of bed and make my way towards the kitchen to make some coffee. I see my nephews sitting on opposite ends of the living room, both faces glued to their iPads. Thick Swedish accents screaming profanities emanate from their devices. I say, "Good morning" to my nephews in hopes that they break focus from their daily regime of Minecraft YouTube videos. I fail miserably as they make no hint of acknowledging my existence. I walk to the kitchen to see my father cooking an omelet while listening to what I presume is his favorite Persian language podcast. He has earbuds in and hasn't noticed my presence. I tap on his shoulder in hopes that he moves out of the way so I can get to the French press. Startled, he loudly proclaims, "I am listening to my program. Do not disturb me." An hour passes by and I am on the QEW highway driving to the university I attend as a mature student. The decision to return to education came after realizing YouTube was not paying the bills and, if anything, was the direct reason I could not find work. Before I applied to the undergraduate film program, I was on the cusp of being hired at a regional telecommunications company. I had a referral from a friend and I had passed both interviews with flying colours. The final part of the process was being screened by the company's outsourced background checking service. According to my friend who referred me, the background check viewed my online presence and found my YouTube videos. They reported their findings to the human resources employee that was in the process of hiring me. My friend asked HR what the problem was and they stated that based on my online profile my character was not the right fit to represent their company, a company that distributes violent and pornographic material through their cable service.

I spot a car in my periphery veer into my lane almost causing a collision. I lay on the horn and turn my head to give them a mean look. I see a person with a vacant smile on their face looking down at

their smartphone while taking quick glances at the road. I think to myself, "What hell is this? Where did it all go wrong?"

According to Guo and Lee (2013):

> YouTube videographers' personal agency becomes further "polluted" when they opt in to YouTube's Partner Program, a program that pays participants, uploading original content, dividends of advertisement revenues generated from their videos among other perks and benefits…In order to remain a partner, participants must follow certain criteria, and as a result, they must negotiate their own personal agency with YouTube's intuitional agency. After all, for both partners and non-partners, in order to exert some influence in the YouTube sphere, one must first follow YouTube's rules of survival. (p. 396)

The beginnings of YouTube meant a user-led revolution to me and many others but now that notion has become part of Web 2.0 rhetoric. The utopian hyperbole of the democratization of cultural production is just as much a myth as YouTube being a way to 'broadcast yourself' into fame and fortune. According to Burgess and Green (2009), "for YouTube, participatory culture is not a gimmick or sideshow, it is absolutely core business" (p. 20). When I was selling mixtapes in high school for $5 apiece, I felt I owned the means to production and was acting as an independent artist. I misguidedly had a similar feeling when I started uploading videos to YouTube in 2006 because I was not directly paying to have my content hosted. The harsh reality I learned was that YouTube is no longer the Internet's repository it started off to be but is in the market reach business as is any other social media platform like Facebook, Snapchat, or Instagram. The online community that was born from the videos I produced with my father became advertising data to sell my subscribers Doritos, memory foam mattresses, and online dating services. According to van Dijck (2009):

> Besides uploading content, users also willingly and unknowingly provide important information about their profile and behaviour to site owners and metadata aggregators. Before users can actually contribute uploads or comments to a site, they usually have to register with their name, email address and sometimes add more personal details such as gender, age, nationality or income. Their subsequent media behaviour can be minutely traced by means of databots. More

importantly, all users of UGC sites unwittingly provide information because IP addresses – can be mined and used without limit by platform owners. Permission to use metadata towards specific purposes are commonly regulated by a site's service agreement (Terms of Use), which users are required to sign. Metadata can be mined for various purposes, from targeted advertising to interface optimization, but the bottom line is that users have no power over data distribution. (p. 47)

The hidden cost of autonomy was self-exploitation and I, the social engineer, got hacked, and was unknowingly affecting my peers. As Henderson states:

> For youth, who would seem to make up a large percentage of YouTube's users, control over one's own representation is significant. *Youth* has normally been a group that is unable to control their own cultural representations. As numerous commentators have stressed, since the end of the Second World War, youth has represented a major economic category, particularly in Western culture. As a group they have had a sizeable disposable income, and as a result, a multitude of cultural products, including music, film and television shows, and other related media have been offered to youth. (Henderson, 2010, 158)

 Even though I practically volunteered at a 70 billion-dollar corporation, I do believe the social connections made through these experiences were priceless. The themes of these contemporary moral panics of participatory Internet culture I have experienced do not appear to be new and mirror occurrences of the mass popularization of new media technologies. The very same dialectic of participatory culture verses consumer culture can be seen in print, radio broadcasting, film, and now video game production. In Steve Jobs' authorized autobiography, Isaacson describes Jobs' influential relationship with one of his university friends Robert Friedland. Jobs would work on Friedland's uncle's apple farm where, according to Friedman, "We were in the organic cider business. Steve's job was to lead a crew of freaks to prune the orchard and whip it back into shape" (2011, p. 42). Jobs left the farm as he had issue with Friedland's communal economic practices:

> Perhaps he [Jobs] saw a little bit too much of Robert in himself," said Kotke. Although the commune was supposed to be a refuge from materialism, Friedland began operating it more as a business; his followers were told to chop and sell firewood, make apple presses and wood stoves, and engage in other commercial endeavors for which they were not paid. One night Jobs slept

under the table in the kitchen and was amused to notice that people kept coming in and stealing each other's food from refrigerator. Communal economics were not for him. "It started to get very materialistic," Jobs recalled. "Everybody got the idea they were working very hard for Robert's farm, and one by one they started to leave. I got pretty sick of it. (p. 23)

I may have experienced the same distain for YouTube as Jobs had for Friedland's apple farm when the "freaks" felt their moral economy was being violated. The onus is on the participant to see through the rhetoric of negotiating power and find their own personal balance between consumer and participatory culture. I hope this document of my experience of community and personal development mediated through technological practices helps clarify the machinations of social media platforms.

Whether it were a journal written to a paternal figure, music made for my peers, or videos produced for people around the world, content creation was an effective form of coping with a life incongruous to society. Immaterial labour was beneficial to me at its early stages but became a burden once the platform became a commodified form of user generated content. Making YouTube videos with my father began as a way of rebuilding our relationship and allowing me to forge an identity for myself and ended with my disenchantment. Our immaterial labour helped others in similar situations make connections with like minded people living in diaspora. Social Media has its many benefits and pitfalls but it is for certain that it successfully fills the gaps in community created by globalization.

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