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# Imaginaries of platform entrepreneurship in the creative industries: techno-optimism and subversion in Ghanaian filmmaking

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## ABSTRACT

This article examines imaginaries of platform entrepreneurship in film industries in Ghana. To understand how these imaginaries are spatially shaped and locally defined, we carried out in-depth qualitative research with fifty filmmakers in four regions of Ghana. Digital and platform technologies have long been optimistically celebrated as a way for marginalized creative entrepreneurs, particularly in Africa, to break into global markets and reach unprecedented levels of business success. However, far from being universally adopted by African creative entrepreneurs, these global techno-optimistic imaginaries are continually reworked, contested and subverted in practice. In this article, we show how Ghanaian filmmakers mobilized, deployed and resisted imaginaries of platform entrepreneurship in their efforts to make sense of their situated entrepreneurial practices and to imagine the future of their creative businesses. We found that rather than naïvely adhering to techno-optimist imaginaries, through their practices, Ghanaian filmmaking entrepreneurs challenged the power geometry of the current platform ecosystem dominated by major Silicon Valley players. We contribute empirically rich data on how filmmaking entrepreneurs use and imagine platform technologies, as is necessary when African digital entrepreneurs are surrounded by hype but inadequate data. We also contribute to the literature about how individual platforms and platform types have unique affordances and how these affordances are shaped by the location and socio-economic position of the entrepreneur.

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## 1. Introduction

The potential of digital technologies to democratize and facilitate access to and success in the creative industries has been greeted with star-struck optimism and buoyant confidence (Duffy, 2017; Hesmondhalgh, 2010). Similarly, creative platforms, notably self-publishing and video-sharing platforms, have long been hailed as an antidote to the exclusionary nature of creative industries (Gillespie, 2010; Hesmondhalgh, 2010;

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Hracs, 2012; Iordanova, 2012). Rather than ‘distributors’ or ‘online content-hosting intermediaries,’ media companies such as Netflix define themselves as platforms and thus exploit the imaginary of entrepreneurial openness carried semantically by the term ‘platform’ – with its suggestion of ‘a progressive and egalitarian arrangement, promising to support those who stand upon it’ (Gillespie, 2010, p. 350). Digital media platforms purport to offer creative workers an entrepreneurial space where ‘with enough hard work, *anyone* can make a living from her passion project’ (Duffy & Pruchniewska, 2017, p. 844, original emphasis). Digital entrepreneurship – that is, creating new market opportunities and generating value by utilizing the affordances of digital and platform technologies – has been ever more vigorously celebrated in an African context whereby ‘digital entrepreneurs are cast as visionaries who will bring about leapfrogging with groundbreaking technological products’ (Friederici et al., 2020, pp. 12–14). Given their putative inexpensiveness, user-friendliness and ubiquity, digital technologies have been hailed to provide unlimited opportunities for African creative entrepreneurs to break into global markets and reach unprecedented levels of business success by frictionless cross-border trade (Aguiar & Waldfogel, 2018; Chávez & Cordes, 2018). The most dominant digital imaginaries purport that for entrepreneurs in Africa, digitalization ‘creates even playing fields with respect to access to information and markets’ (Wahome & Graham, 2020, p. 1128). Such techno-optimistic imaginaries, typically spawned and exported globally by potent Silicon Valley discourses (Friederici et al., 2020) are further reinforced by powerful imaginaries of the ‘New Africa’ (Bright & Hruby, 2015) and Africa Rising (Mahajan, 2009) where the continent is depicted as permeated with strong economic growth, a rising middle class and a youthful population, brimming with talent, creativity and entrepreneurship.

Yet, for all the techno-optimist imaginaries of platform and digital entrepreneurship creating a better world and democratized access to markets, scholars have shown how these technologies replicate and reinforce existing social divisions and inequalities (Duffy & Pruchniewska, 2017; Hoang et al., 2020), increase surveillance (Van Dijck, 2014) and inspire fear and distrust in members of the public (Steedman et al., 2020). Furthermore, many scholars have drawn attention to the *labor* required to produce and monetize digital content, and how doing so requires a confluence of creative and business-minded skills (Duffy, 2017; Hracs, 2012); skills that creative workers possess only unevenly leading to stress, anxiety and burnout (McRobbie, 2016). Furthermore, the democratizing potential of these technologies in Africa, and other developing contexts, has not gone undisputed. Scholars have pointed to a persisting digital divide consisting of disparities in access to – and use of – digital technologies based on geography, gender and education levels and have questioned the extent to which digital technology can in fact ‘leap frog’ development (Avgerou, 2010; Friederici et al., 2020). In contrast to techno-optimist imaginaries, scholars have increasingly argued that digital technologies are neither ‘the geyser of wealth cascading down to all’ nor do they create a level playing field for small digital entrepreneurs (Curran et al., 2016, p. 4).

Techno-optimistic imaginaries of platform entrepreneurship that proliferate around creative workers influence their ability to self-reflect on their own entrepreneurial practices as ‘individual aspirations are informed by imaginaries’ (Wahome & Graham, 2020, p. 1126). These imaginaries thus must be neither essentialized nor universalized on the basis of technological attributes: namely, the user-friendliness, global reach, interactivity

or accessibility of platform technologies. Rather, they should be examined in specific industrial and socio-cultural contexts as worked with and worked upon by situated social agents. To that effect, we examine how filmmakers in Ghana undertake platform entrepreneurship. In particular, we investigate how filmmakers relate to and imagine the potential of video platforms, both global giants such as Netflix and local platform alternatives, in their accounts of platform entrepreneurship. Drawing on in-depth interview and focus group data from 50 respondents, we trace the ways in which Ghanaian filmmakers engage with, mobilize, redefine and subvert the techno-optimistic imaginaries surrounding the potential of video platforms for creative work. We argue that Ghanaian filmmakers, rather than merely embracing or faithfully translating the universalizing techno-optimistic imaginaries in the local context, have exercised varying degrees of agency in forging spaces of revision and subversion in order to re-imagine local platform alternatives and re-invent a novel set of technological affordances and business potentials.

In so doing, we make two contributions to the literature on platform entrepreneurship. Firstly, based on our empirical material, we contribute to studies that have contested the global and universalizing reach of Silicon Valley digital imaginaries, by showing how African entrepreneurs work upon, with, and against imaginaries of platform entrepreneurship in their local and situated creative work practices. Secondly, by specifying the techno-optimistic imaginaries surrounding video platforms, we respond to recent scholarly calls to treat platform entrepreneurship not as an undifferentiated, globally uniform and unproblematic bundle of digital media, but to differentiate and discriminate between various and local types of platforms and their affordances (Friederici et al., 2020; Graham, 2015; Hoang et al., 2020).

In what follows, we discuss the concept of the imaginary and then proceed to explain why Ghanaian filmmakers are a critical case for rethinking techno-optimist imaginaries of platform entrepreneurship. The methods section is then followed by our data analysis and discussion of our contributions.

## 2. Imaginaries of platform entrepreneurship

Social imaginaries point to the established, historically contingent ways in which people *imagine* their collective and social life. Through this lens, the imaginary is not merely a set of ideas but ‘rather it is what enables, through making sense of, the practices of a society’ (Taylor, 2004, p. 2). Imaginaries are thus ‘the means by which individuals understand their identities and their place in the world’ (Gaonkar, 2002, p. 4). The social imaginary refers thus to institutionalized ways of understanding the social which mediate and even constitute, a person’s life, agency and aspirations as well as their understanding of what the world is and what it ought to be.

The imaginary concept is particularly useful for thinking about the technological mediation of social life and how socially shared and affective ideas about technologies and their operational power guide and structure people’s behavior and identity (Bucher, 2017; Jasanoff & Kim, 2015; Mansell, 2012; Markham, 2021; Wahome & Graham, 2020). ‘Sociotechnical imaginaries’ refer to the ‘collectively imagined forms of social life and social order’ that drive the design of scientific and technological projects, policies and materialities (Jasanoff & Kim, 2015, p. 4). ‘Technoscientific imaginaries’ of ‘imagined

future technologies' populate 'the cognitive gap and tension that the widespread perceived inadequacy of working practices and concepts create' in innovation professions (Marcus, 1995, p. 4). The forward march of technology can seem inevitable and totalizing, making imagining differently about technology very difficult (Markham, 2021). Nonetheless, even when faced with black-box technology, such as Facebook algorithms, imagination and, therefore, action is possible (Bucher, 2017). Reformulating Bucher's work on algorithms, we can say a platform imaginary is 'the way in which people imagine, perceive and experience [platforms] and what these imaginations make possible' (Bucher, 2017, p. 31). Turning to the specific case of Ghanaian filmmaking entrepreneurs, we ask: how are platforms imagined and what do these 'imaginations make possible'?

The imaginary as a mode of collective understanding of personal circumstances is often nebulous, normative and resistant to both logical inference and quantification. Hence, it manifests itself in the guise of folk theories and metaphors that, by virtue of their wide circulation rather than empirical corroboration, have become normalized and sanctioned as socially acceptable and aspirational within specific contexts (Gaonkar, 2002; Taylor, 2004). Powerful state, corporate and civil society actors orient and guide the making and managing of future technologies via the fabrication and promulgation of socio-technical imaginaries (Jasanoff & Kim, 2015; Mansell, 2017). Although there always exist multiple and competing socio-technical imaginaries or counter-imaginaries (Markham, 2021), some imaginaries are nonetheless entrenched as dominant through an 'authoritative' propagation by key globally networked, but typically West-based actors, who establish as given and inevitable a universal trajectory of technological development (Mansell, 2017). As such, imaginaries are never neutral or fixed but rather ideologically-laden and politicized (Taylor, 2004). Wahome and Graham (2020), for example, demonstrate how the appropriation of Silicon Valley imaginaries about globalized and equal access digital economies exhibit distinct colonial tendencies and expose African digital entrepreneurs to potential vulnerabilities because of the disjuncture between their local conditions and the place particularities of Silicon Valley.

Techno-optimist imaginaries abound in the creative industries. In relation to platforms, these center on the twin benefits of democratization and monetization. The imaginary of global reach is promulgated by major platforms – for example, Netflix presents itself as a 'global TV network' (Lobato, 2019). Platform distribution has been seen by some scholars to offer the potential of radically reconfiguring the hierarchies that had previously shaped film distribution (Iordanova, 2012), leading to increased access to audiences and markets, particularly for independent producers who can then expand the geographic reach of their films and develop niche audiences (Chávez & Cordes, 2018, pp. 193–194). With platforms, everyone with an internet connection can potentially become a creative entrepreneur with the ability to monetize their creative projects, in contrast to the traditional exclusionary structure of the creative industries (Duffy et al., 2019; Hracs, 2012).

However, when evaluating what these imaginaries make possible, we must examine the 'power geometries' in which entrepreneurs are situated (Wahome & Graham, 2020). The disadvantages of 'marked bodies' do not disappear for other digital entrepreneurs (Duffy & Pruchniewska, 2017; Dy et al., 2017), and African entrepreneurs do not work in a 'global village' but rather within the socio-political context of their countries

where borders are a defining feature (Graham, 2015). In contrast to the notion that ‘any-one’ can be an entrepreneur online, scholars have shown that the social capital and skills needed to use the internet *beneficially* are not evenly distributed: lower educated internet users are at a distinct disadvantage (van Deursen & van Dijk, 2014). In the face of imaginaries that are positioned as innately global, some entrepreneurs are then positioned at a deficit because they do not fulfill the entrepreneurial persona embedded in these imaginaries (Ahl & Marlow, 2012).

### **2.1. Techno-optimism in Ghana: ‘it’s digitime in Ghana!’**

Ghana serves as an important case study to show the contradictions, tensions and sub-versions of global and universalizing techno-optimistic imaginaries for three reasons, which we will now outline in turn. First, Ghana is an exceptionally entrepreneurial country. After years of economic instability and economic reform, Ghana was officially classified ‘a lower middle-income country’ in 2011 (World Bank, 2011). However, despite showing relatively high economic growth rates during the past decade, the economy of Ghana is still estimated to be 80–90 percent informal (Langevang et al., 2015). The government of Ghana promotes entrepreneurship as a key to solving the unemployment problem among the growing youth population, and as a means to economic development. However, despite such proclamations, actual support for entrepreneurs is limited and unequally distributed (Gough & Langevang, 2016). Entrepreneurship rates are nonetheless remarkably high, with more than a third of the adult population involved in business startups (Yankson et al., 2011).

Second, global techno-optimistic imaginaries of platform entrepreneurship are enthusiastically endorsed by key Ghanaian governmental actors. The Ghanaian government has championed the potential of digital technologies in the creative industries – epitomized by, for example, the 2017 declaration by the Minister of Communication that ‘it’s Digttime in Ghana!’<sup>1</sup> or in current election manifestos by the major political parties promising the creative industries digital platforms for the global market (Dadzie, 2020a). The National Film Authority has registered a global outlook on the future of the industry and has launched a Pitch Series Project in 2020, to among other objectives ‘promote and facilitate high-quality local production to appeal to a global market.’<sup>2</sup> This imaginary is further reflected in digital distribution conferences and seminars currently organized by the film, television and music associations in collaboration with telecom companies and other partners (Dadzie, 2020b). These techno-optimist imaginaries in the creative industries run parallel to wider optimism about the potential of digital and platform technologies for enabling entrepreneurship and development in Ghana, which came to the fore with the 2003 Ghana Integrated ICT for Accelerated Development Policy. Even though Ghana is counted as having one of the best internet services in Africa, problems of access and digital skills have been identified as preventing digital participation (Endert, 2018). Ghana’s techno-optimist aspirations are now nurtured and supported by efforts of the government and telecommunication companies to provide skills and improve access to the internet, especially in rural communities (Endert, 2018), as well as by incubators and accelerator projects for young entrepreneurs such as the National Entrepreneurship and Innovation Program.<sup>3</sup> However, efforts to support

the digital agenda are mostly concentrated in Accra, which ‘has enhanced Accra’s advantages’ and deepened longstanding geographical divides (Zachary, 2004).

Third, Ghanaian filmmaking entrepreneurs have enthusiastically embraced video platforms as a way of revitalizing their businesses in a period of crisis. Until the late 1980s, filmmaking in Ghana consisted of a very small elite making movies on celluloid. The introduction of video technology radically transformed film production in the country leading to a commercial industry for the first time and democratization of access to the medium with a vast number of entrepreneurial filmmakers joining the industry (Garritano, 2013). Now, the film industry is undergoing another period of dramatic transformation driven by changes in film distribution. Aside from a small elite making movies with the production values and esthetics suitable for prominent global video platforms, Ghanaian filmmakers ‘continue to adopt the straight-to-video release model that has dominated the industry since the 1990s’ (Garritano, 2017, p. 201). However, this model is currently failing. Consumers now have access to digital television and video platforms, and with them, almost limitless content, and thus have dramatically reduced their VCD purchases driving many filmmakers out of business (Garritano, 2017).

Film and other creative industries in Ghana are significantly under resourced and lack key governmental and infrastructural support, making entrepreneurialism vital to the success of any creative endeavor (Alacovska et al., 2021). Ghana has a stark North–South divide with development and infrastructure concentrated in the South (McKay & Osei-Assibey, 2017) and the filmmaking industry reflects this pattern. Generally speaking, Kumasi-based filmmakers tend to make films with low-budgets in the Akan language, whereas Accra has an elite group of filmmakers making films with significantly higher budgets, in English. Filmmaking in northern Ghana closely resembles the Kumasi model, albeit at a much smaller commercial scale and targeting different linguistic groups. The diaspora has always been an important market for Ghanaian films in all languages (Garritano, 2013), and it is likely to be even more important now, in the context of video platforms, given that access to video streaming services is much easier outside Africa than inside (Dovey, 2018).

Those filmmakers that remain in the business – such as the 50 respondents in our study – have a sharp focus on how they can exploit the technologies that are upending their business environment and great enthusiasm for newly emerging techno-optimistic imaginaries associated with platforms.

### 3. Method

This paper draws on data gathered from January to March 2020 in the hubs for filmmaking in four regions of Ghana: Accra (Greater Accra Region), Kumasi (Ashanti Region), Tamale (Northern Region) and Bolgatanga (Upper East Region). Our research included a total of 50 respondents. In-depth semi-structured interviews were carried out in Accra ( $n = 9$ ), Kumasi ( $n = 16$ ), Tamale ( $n = 6$ ) and a small village near Bolgatanga ( $n = 2$ ) with film producers and two further informal interviews were held with industry personnel in Kumasi and Tamale ( $n = 2$ ). Participants were identified using a combination of industry gatekeepers and snowballing. The criteria for selection was that they worked as film producers, but many also occupied other roles concurrently (e.g., as director, actor or distributor), as is typical in the Ghanaian film industry. We included filmmakers early in



their careers as well as those with decades of experience in the industry. The majority of our participants had 10–19 ( $n = 13$ ) and 20–29 ( $n = 11$ ) years of experience. They ranged in age from 26–60 years old. Our participants were relatively highly educated in a Ghanaian context. All but two had finished secondary school, and 13 had university degrees (3 of which had master's degrees). Importantly, relatively few ( $n = 11$ ) had sector specific qualification and most instead had on-the-job training. Interviews were held in English, lasted from 1 to 3 hours, and were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

This paper also incorporates data from a focus group ( $n = 17$ ) held in a small village near Bolgatanga. Participants included film directors, producers and actors, and almost all occupied a combination of these positions. A focus group was chosen as a method because they are highly effective at scoping research (Stewart et al., 2007). Participants responded to questions in English or their local language, and a translator provided live translation for non-English responses. Following the ethics procedures and approval of the University of Ghana, participants gave their informed consent to take part in the study. All participants have been given pseudonyms to protect their identity and privacy.

This paper's authors are based at universities in Denmark and in Ghana. Our disciplinary backgrounds are geography, sociology, film studies and theater studies, and the geographical focus of most of our research has been Ghana and other African countries. The study was jointly designed and executed.

In order to understand the way filmmakers in Ghana imagine video platforms, we interviewed filmmakers who were using these technologies *and* those that were not. In this study, we focus on their platform imaginaries; however, it is important to note that filmmakers did not invest all their energies in platform strategies. Rather, they frequently had diversified businesses or a range of jobs that they used to support their creative endeavors, as is typical for creatives in Ghana (Alacovska et al., 2021). Our focus group and interviews centered on the entrepreneurial strategies filmmakers use to navigate the challenges and opportunities of working in Ghana, their aspirations, their feelings about place and how filmmaking fits into their overall work portfolios.

We used an interpretivist approach focusing on understanding the perceptions and experiences of our participants (Creswell, 2013). Our focus in analyzing the data was to understand Ghanaian filmmakers' experiences with platform entrepreneurship, particularly as it related to film distribution. We were equally interested in what film producers were doing *and* how they imagined the futures of their creative businesses. The discrepancy between techno-optimistic platform imaginaries and the brute realities of entrepreneurial practice in an industrial context replete with infrastructural shortcomings, including expensive access to the Internet, emerged as a central theme during our data analysis. Thus, we subsequently coded the data iteratively to hone in on how filmmakers thought about various platforms, how they used them and what they hoped these technologies could do for their businesses in the future.

Our data analysis revealed a resounding resonance of global techno-optimistic imaginaries in Ghana. However, we have also noted strong tendencies towards revision and resistance to the global techno-optimistic imaginaries, tendencies that were often exhibited contemporaneously by a single filmmaker.



## 4. Intertwining imaginaries

### 4.1. *Techno-optimist imaginaries of global reach and business growth*

A common imaginary amongst the filmmakers in our study was that technology could enhance the global reach of their business – leading to bigger audiences, more funding and better career prospects. And getting this international reach was necessary, as a representative of a governmental film institution said:

Obviously, we're now in a global market especially when it comes to filmmaking [...] But we're only 30 million people [in Ghana] and so we don't have enough people to support a thriving industry, so we need to be more global in our mind-sets and outlook.

Distribution via platforms was seen as critical to this global mind-set and building a thriving industry.

Kumasi film producer Sampson, who had 25 years' experience in the industry, saw the future of filmmaking as 'very, very bright,' despite the fact that technological change had made his business model of selling physical copies obsolete (Garritano, 2017) – he was down to producing two movies a year with a sales run of 15,000 copies from a previous standard of 20 films annually each selling 200,000 copies. He was confident he could use platforms to revitalize his business. His optimism was underpinned by the audience numbers he could see for old Ghanaian films on YouTube – proof for him that an audience was waiting there to be captured. Although Sampson was making only a small income from YouTube, he saw platforms as offering tremendous opportunities to assess the future of his business based on hard data metrics. Even a filmmaker like Zaafer who was too afraid of piracy to distribute his films online, had a techno-optimist orientation as he saw the future success of the film industry in Kumasi depending on harnessing technology: 'The filmmaking in Kumasi will survive, but it will not survive with the current practitioners. It will survive with a different generation. A generation that believes in technology.' Harnessing platform distribution technology would 'save' the industry for these filmmakers and restore lost prosperity.

Views of technology-enabled business growth were widespread. Isaac, a filmmaker in Accra with 27 years of experience in the industry, had an extremely positive view of technology: '[technology] is the only thing that can help us leapfrog the challenges that we face in terms of all these traditional channels that have not helped us.' His view of technology was comprehensively positive – developments in cameras and lighting equipment (reduced cost and size, increased portability, etc.) expanded where he could shoot content, and there were many more ways of distributing content:

Right now, we have hundreds and hundreds of TV stations, local TV stations as well as international channels that are open to us. Apart from that, [...] you can also sit in your corner and create an online channel for yourself. Where you can have viewers watching your materials and you can also make money as well as getting viewership. So, you know, the opportunities are endless in the industry.

Isaac's perspective aligns with the early optimism of Iordanova (2012) that new technology 'radically undermined' traditional modes of distribution.

A small number of Ghanaian filmmakers are currently doing business with prominent global video platforms such as Netflix and Amazon Prime. These filmmakers were not

‘seduced’ by the platforms (Oyedemi, 2021), but rather saw them critically as part of much larger business and branding strategies. For Accra filmmaker Akosua (who had worked with prominent global video platforms), the benefits of distribution on platforms such as Netflix were symbolic rather than economic. As she said, ‘if Netflix is not taking it as an [exclusive], you are not making that much money’; however, Netflix is ‘great in terms of bigger audience[s] getting to know about you’ and ‘I definitely think it’s important to be even seen to be affiliated with a brand like that.’ Showing at major international film festivals is the conventional way African films gain symbolic capital (Dovey, 2015), but for some filmmakers in Ghana, Netflix was also seen to have that consecrating function, a view that is in line with Netflix’s own corporate presentation as a ‘quality’ brand (Burroughs, 2019). For other filmmakers, participating in international distribution networks, including platforms, would enhance their chances of finding financing for future projects. Accra filmmaker Patrick’s first film, had a large distribution run (for an independent film) – 11 airlines, multiple TV networks, film festivals and prominent global video platforms – a distribution track record he wanted to convert into future financing:

So, if I come to you and say I need money to make a film, of course I don’t think you will let me talk too much because you’ve seen the track record and where the film has been. And if you’re visionary enough, you will give me that money.

Although the filmmakers we interviewed did not outrightly view video platforms as a magical solution to their problems, their personal imaginations of the future were nonetheless inflected by techno-optimistic imaginaries championing enhanced opportunities for brand visibility, seamless distribution and access to global audiences that in turn promised to grow and revitalize their film businesses.

#### 4.2. Revising global imaginaries

Our participants, however, did not naively buy into techno-optimistic imaginaries. They also expounded their limits. Principally, many saw platform distribution as difficult to monetize (convert the accumulated symbolic capital and visibility on video platforms into pecuniary benefits) and difficult to access (the barriers to entry were perceived to be very high given a self-assessed shortfall in digital skill sets and networks).

With the collapse of the VCD direct-to-customer model of selling movies, film producers knew they needed to follow their customers online/onto TV, but the challenge was how to do that while also generating comparable *revenue* to the past business model of VCD distribution. Ebenezer, a major Kumasi producer, explained that in the past ‘after we produced the movies [...] we get our money instant. Like one month, you can get all the money you put in.’ While it is ‘easy’ to distribute films on YouTube (posting is free, etc.), producers in Ghana have so far found it nearly impossible to *monetize* this method of distribution. Jack, a Kumasi-based film producer said:

We were on CDs and now the CDs are not selling anymore, so how to sell our product is a bit difficult for us now. We try to sell it on internet and other stuffs but, we are not getting the revenue from it.

Anyone can post on YouTube, but building a business on YouTube is remarkably difficult, as our participants were well aware. It remains remarkably difficult to capture

the streaming market in Africa, and even Iroko.tv, the largest distributor of Nollywood content, had to change its business model from a streaming platform to a phone app to enter the Nigerian market (Dovey, 2018, pp. 98–99). Monetizing distribution via platforms is difficult even for major global players such as Hollywood studios, as seen, for example, in the recent collapse of Quibi (Sweeney, 2020).

Abdullah, a film producer in Tamale with ten years' experience, had not tried to distribute his films via YouTube because he did not understand how to make money on the platform. As he says, 'a lot of people try but they didn't get their money. So, some of us, we fear to put our movies inside.' Another Tamale producer, Rabiū, who had decades of experience in the industry and who also held a leading position in a national filmmakers association, had a similar view:

For now, we lack the internet education [...] when you go to the Internet, especially YouTube, you see most of our movies dumped in there and you don't know who has kept them there. We cannot even block them; we don't even have the knowledge. [...] So, we are not benefiting.

For him, the crucial problem with YouTube as a platform was *not* the unauthorized posting of videos, but rather one of education. Rabiū did not imagine the *platform* as limited, but rather saw himself (and the 'we' of other Tamale filmmakers) to be limited. Inequality shapes how people think and feel about complex technologies like video platforms, and this, in turn, shapes how they use them (Kennedy et al., 2021). In contrast to the imaginary that 'anyone' can be an entrepreneur online, the filmmakers in our study were acutely aware of their own skill and network limitations and these shaped how they imagined and used video platforms for distribution.

A perceived lack of skills to navigate platform distribution was a central concern to many filmmakers, particularly in northern Ghana. Esther, who made films in the Upper East Region, said 'we need more education in filmmaking. Those of us here, we have the talent, we want to do movies, we are doing our best, but most of us have not been to film school to learn,' and another filmmaker from the region echoed, 'we need a special training in posting on YouTube.' Esther had posted her movies to YouTube but had not been able to monetize those postings because of inadequate viewership. Nevertheless, she remained very optimistic about platform distribution and reaching international audiences online, if only she could get the training on how to use those platforms:

I know when you send your movies [to Netflix] and people watch you get something from it because it's purposely for movie making. So [that] digital market, it will help [...] But,] we don't know anything about it, so we are now praying that we will get the training.

These filmmakers imagined platforms such as Netflix and YouTube as offering opportunities, and like Rabiū, they perceived themselves as deficient at seizing these opportunities. 'Naturalization occurs when we accept current elements of sociotechnical contexts as simply "just the way it is." [...] Over time, the naturalization of objects, processes, or systems also neutralizes them' (Markham, 2021, p. 16). The technology itself was not challenged, the imagined affordances were still monetization and democratization.

All the Ghanaian filmmakers with films on prominent global video platforms are based in Accra and work with international distributors. The digital distribution landscape for creative content is not a democratic space where anyone can make it, rather

intermediaries and the right social networks are critical (Curran et al., 2016; Lobato, 2009). Kumawood films (as well as those from Tamale and the Upper East) largely circulate as ‘sub cinema’ (Lobato, 2007) rather than in formal distribution channels, but it seems accessing prominent global video platforms requires formalization. Sampson, for example, had repeatedly tried to do business with Netflix but was ‘still searching that we can get a marketer who can link us to the Netflix.’ This problem of not knowing *how* to get access to Netflix was repeated by other long-term industry players, such as Ebenezer, who described his failure to distribute his films via Netflix as a result of not knowing ‘how to get in touch with them.’ Sampson and Ebenezer were extremely well connected in the Kumasi film industry, but they did not know how to do business with prominent global video platforms. Not knowing ‘how to get in touch’ with these platforms was about more than contact information, but rather about the skills, social capital and business-entrepreneurial acumen necessary to compete within that field. Highly educated filmmakers living in the capital were distinctly more successful. The right skills and entrepreneurial acumen are needed to become a successful platform entrepreneur. However, when the digital imaginaries posit a Silicon Valley entrepreneur as the universal norm, African entrepreneurs are almost necessarily at a deficit, because of the unacknowledged place specificity of that archetype (Ahl & Marlow, 2012; Wahome & Graham, 2020).

#### **4.3. Imagining otherwise: creating Ghanaian platforms**

Aware that the global tech giants’ business models actually impeded their own business success by constraining their agency to access these platforms (given demands for capital-intensive quality productions and bandwidth-consuming technology infrastructures) and therefore prosper, Ghanaian filmmakers toyed with the idea of creating local digital platforms.

Kofi, a Kumasi filmmaker, wanted to work with prominent global video platforms; however, he also wanted to create his *own* online space. ‘I want to create a website where I’m going to put all my work [...] So, I’ve contracted somebody to create one for me. He’s not finished with it yet because it’s capital intensive.’ Filmmakers with businesses large and small saw a clear value in creating their *own* online platforms. Kofi has a micro-sized filmmaking business operating from his home, but equally, Isaac also envisioned a future where his business would work with selective global platforms while also running its own distinct online space.

Sheila (Accra, 12 years’ experience) has a large media business and has already distributed her movies on prominent global video platforms but working with these platforms is only part of her long-term business strategy. She has been running a pay-per-view platform for four years and generated significant earnings doing it, and is now converting the platform to a subscription-based model. As she says:

In future what we are looking to do is also create unique contents for [our platform] exclusively, because we want to be able to create our own, for want for a better word, a mini Netflix, where we will be creating our own content and being able to put it out there.

Cinema ticket sales are currently her most important revenue stream, and Sheila’s plans for her platform exist in part to get away from dependence on distribution

platforms governed by others: ‘when you have created a platform where you have a waiting audience [...] it is the easiest way to make up your money.’ This strategy is about cutting out middle-men and dealing directly with consumers (a key supposed benefit of platform distribution in the creative industries (see e.g., Hracs, 2012)).

A film producers association in Ghana is currently in the process of developing an App – ‘similar to Netflix and Amazon Prime’ in the words of a representative of the association – where they can distribute Ghanaian movies. The hope with this app is that it can offer a new model of profitable distribution to producers to replace the lost VCD market but also compensate for the cumbersome access to global video platforms. Another association representative was fervent in this belief: ‘In five years, the industry will be better, far, far better than ten years ago. [...] if we are able to move with time, *build a platform like Netflix.*’

If we are able to do that, I will say majority of our problems is solved. Because we will make the movies more available to Ghanaians both home and abroad [...] With the advent of internet, no matter where you live, the opportunities are enormous. Because, when we were selling CDs, it was limited to the Ghanaian market, but this time if you have a Ghanaian who is living in Greenland, the only thing the person needs is access to the internet and the person can watch.

Kwame, a veteran Kumasi filmmaker, for example, had high hopes for the future because of the app and saw it as something that could re-start the movie industry in Kumasi because ‘almost everyone owns a phone now.’ He was not encouraged by YouTube as a platform because it was too difficult to monetize, but was confident that the Ghanaian association’s app – created by and for Ghanaian filmmakers specifically – would take care of film producers and ‘you will still make some money’ even if your movie only attracted ‘ten people.’

There is currently an app devoted to local language Ghanaian content, run by a Kumasi media entrepreneur for the past four years as part of his broader media business (which includes a satellite TV station). Film producers with movies on the platform split 80% of the app’s revenue based on the number of viewers per film, but the revenue generated is small – GHS20,000 to split between producers in the best ever quarter – and with 1,000 movies and 100 producers on the platform, the individual income going to any single producer is likely to be very small. He partnered with a tech company to run the platform where they provide the infrastructure, and he provides the content. The platform works for him because of the mass of content, he makes something off of every viewer, but by the same token, this model of distribution is of limited value to *individual* producers because their films are part of a large crowd. It seems, for now at least, these Ghanaian apps work for the benefit of app owners and audiences of Ghanaian films much more than for individual film producers.

As Markham (2021, p. 4) says, ‘although the capacity for imagining something new or different resides in all of us, the available material for any imaginative act is greatly influenced by prior imaginations.’ The filmmakers did not challenge the techno-optimism underpinning the imagined affordances of platform technology, but what they did address – in their practice – is the power geometry of the current platform ecosystem dominated by major Silicon Valley players.

## 5. Conclusions

Through research with 50 respondents across four regions of Ghana, we revealed the presence of interrelated imaginaries about the possibility of platform entrepreneurship in African creative industries. A fundamental imaginary of platform technology is that it will democratize and facilitate access to and success in the creative industries, remedying the persistent inequality that has long characterized these industries and making way for the success of previously marginalized creatives (Gillespie, 2010; Hesmondhalgh, 2010; Hracs, 2012; Iordanova, 2012) – such as African filmmakers.

Our findings contest this stance, and hence this article contributes to studies that problematize digital technologies as democratizing and inclusive tools (Bucher, 2017; Friederici et al., 2020; Gillespie, 2010; Mansell, 2017). Platform imaginaries are neither equally distributed nor universally accessible but are negotiated and contested in local entrepreneurial practice. Film entrepreneurs in Ghana take-up and subvert universalizing platform imaginaries in complex responses to their locally situated business aspirations for the future and in the face of a self-assessed dearth of skills, capital and appropriate infrastructure to prosper on global video platforms. These creatives, however, are neither ‘seduced’ nor debilitated by these imaginaries (Oyedemi, 2021), rather they critically adopt or discard them as they work towards their desired business futures.

The digital economy in Africa has been surrounded by hype, but lacking in hard data (Friederici et al., 2020). We contribute to filling this gap. Through our in-depth study of the Ghanaian case, we contribute vitally needed empirical information about how entrepreneurs outside the narrow domain of digital enterprises and tech companies use and imagine platform technologies. Platform entrepreneurship is a complex phenomenon and individual platforms and types of platforms require careful scrutiny to study their imagined affordances, and how these affordances are shaped by the location and socio-economic position of the entrepreneur (Hoang et al., 2020; Nagy & Neff, 2015). Ghanaian film entrepreneurs almost all face an empirical reality starkly different from the one underlying techno-optimistic imaginaries emanating from Silicon Valley, while also believing strongly in the power of technology to change their business lives. However, rather than naïvely adhering to the imaginary, through their practices they challenged the power geometry of the current platform ecosystem dominated by major Silicon Valley players.

While platforms have been celebrated for facilitating global audience reach, easy monetization and diversified content offerings, recent studies have demonstrated that global streaming giants, such as Netflix, actually privilege large-scale US-producers to the disadvantage of geographically diverse small-scale producers (Aguar & Waldfogel, 2018). We show empirically how such imbalance in power is negotiated and re-imagined daily in the entrepreneurial practice of Ghanaian filmmaking entrepreneurs. Instead of transforming filmmaking and film distribution into a hyper-deterritorialized arena (Curran et al., 2016), the commercial and exclusive logics of global video platforms seem to have engendered strong local counter-imaginaries. Ghanaian filmmakers, aware of industrial, technological and infrastructural shortcomings, do not give in to despair and inaction (Alacovska et al., 2021) but dare to ‘imagine otherwise’ and escape the totalizing commercial logic of global tech giants. They work to build uniquely local solutions

to achieving their ambitions of global reach and business success, such as creating their own Ghanaian platforms.

Such geographically diverse counter-imaginaries are worthy of further investigation, if we are to critically understand the spatiality of digital and platform imaginaries. Future research is needed to further understand the local specificity of platform imaginaries in African creative industries, and it would be fruitful to explore how creatives working in rural areas, small cities and peripheral locations imagine and work with platforms. We hope to have laid a foundation for this kind of research.

Knowledge of platform entrepreneurship in the creative industries outside the Global North is still rather sparse (Alacovska & Gill, 2019), which hinders our understanding of the limits and perils of imposing digital imaginaries originating from the atypical geography of Silicon Valley, as natural and desirable across the whole world. We urgently need an examination of the experiences of African creatives and the way they localize and contest the imaginaries promulgated by powerful international actors, including technology companies, platforms, governments and international organizations, so that we arrive at fairer and more responsible internet governance (Curran et al., 2016; Mansell, 2012). At the same time, an empirical study of the spatial reworking of digital imaginaries, will also alert us to the overlaps and continuities of creative work practices across the South–North divide. Attention to such spatially shaped imaginaries, will help us rectify the typical overemphasis on techno-optimistic imaginaries, while fostering an inclusive understanding of platform entrepreneurship in the creative industries.

## Notes

1. <https://www.moc.gov.gh/government-embarks-digital-inclusion-agenda>
2. <https://www.nfa.gov.gh/nfa-pitch-series/>
3. <http://neip.gov.gh/>; see also <https://newcareerplatform.net/2019/08/28/incubators-accelerators-ghana/>

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