

September 16, 2025

Dear Chairman Williams, Ranking Member Velázquez, and Members of the House Committee on Small Business:

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to submit written testimony for consideration as part of the hearing on “Streaming Success: Small Businesses in the Age of Digital Influence.” As an academic researcher who specializes in content creation and platform labor, I understand the tremendous potential of the creator economy for independent workers and small business owners. Yet influencers and creators also face significant risks, including career instability, identity-based pay gaps, algorithmic bias, and occupational hazards that stem from their dependence on Big Tech platforms. Without regulatory oversight and a commitment to improving labor conditions, creators—and the publics who rely on them for information, inspiration, and advice—remain vulnerable.

Before detailing my concerns, allow me to briefly summarize my credentials and experience: Since earning my Ph.D. in 2011, I have dedicated my career to studying forms of work and labor mediated by social platforms. At Cornell University, where I am an Associate Professor of Communication, I lead a research group on Creators and Platform Labor and teach a doctoral seminar exploring power and precarity in the creator economy. I have published several books, dozens of peer-reviewed journal articles, and numerous popular essays exploring the role of social media in work and society. The testimony that follows draws on insight from more than 100 in-depth interviews I conducted with social media creators, influencers, talent managers, and platform representatives since 2020. My research reveals marked inequalities and power asymmetries in this rapidly emergent career sector.

Platform Dependence and Precarious Work

Participants in the creator economy are astoundingly diverse—spanning content niches, labor statuses (i.e., full-time, part-time), income streams, and platforms. What unites them, however, is a reliance on mainstream platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, and Twitch to create, distribute, market, and/or monetize their labor. Despite such a high level of dependence on these platforms, creators are not considered legal employees of these companies. Consequently, they lack the labor protections traditionally afforded by employer-employee relations.

Creators often report frustratingly limited communication channels and few systems of recourse, such as when their content seems wrongfully banned or when they are locked out of their professional account. Algorithmic opacity is an especially acute source of their angst—contributing to an experience described in a different context as “algorithmic anxiety” (Jhaver et al., 2018).

Structural Inequalities and Pay Gaps

Considerable research and policy interventions have debunked platforms’ claims of “neutrality.” Still, mainstream platform companies frame their creator programs as a content meritocracy where seemingly “anyone” can garner success and reap the rewards of visibility. My research, however, reveals marked disparities in platforms’ treatment of marginalized groups, including women, people of color, LGBTQ+ creators, disabled creators, and those with non-normative bodies. Some creators have documented racial and body-size bias structured into platforms’ recommendation systems (Hern, 2020). In other cases, marginalized creators or those working in socially stigmatized content categories describe fears of platform censorship or content suppression (Duffy & Meisner, 2023).

Brands, too, play a role in enabling or exacerbating social inequity. While influencer compensation rates are notoriously uneven and hidden, creators report labor exploitation, with some still being asked to “work for free.” Gender- and race-based pay gaps are, unfortunately, rife. Industry reports suggest that women are paid significantly less than their male counterparts, and the pay gap is far worse for women of color. Compensation delays are common, leaving creators scramble until brands deliver on their “Net-90” payment terms. It’s no small wonder that both creators and talent managers describe the creator economy as the “Wild West.”

Occupational Hazards

In addition to platform precarity and pay gaps, creators face occupational risks ranging from identity theft and copyright violations to mounting concerns about non-consensual image abuse (NCII). Over the years, many creators have recounted to me harrowing experiences with trolling, hate, and/or harassment—attacks which disproportionately impact marginalized groups. Far too often, these and other online and offline harms are dismissed as merely “part of the job.”

Creators’ careers mandate consistent posting—often across multiple platforms, and so, reports of burnout and overwork are prevalent. But they worry that stepping away from their accounts—even briefly—puts them at risk for lower views, lost brand deals, and/or reduced reach due to algorithmic penalties. In other words, the “always on” culture of platforms is a unique occupational hazard with implications for mental health and wellbeing.

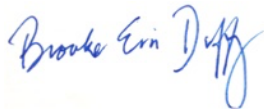
Looking Ahead

Recent years have revealed the critical role of influencers and creators in social, cultural, and civic life. But as laborers and small business owners, they require regulatory protection—and oversight. The American Influencer Council (AIC), a not-for-profit membership trade association, is one of the few resources available to help navigate this uneven landscape. As AIC Founder and Executive Director Qianna Smith Bruneteau writes of the urgent need to support and empower creators: “Overcoming gender and racial biases and socioeconomic barriers requires elevating the status of creators in every capacity, from no-cost small business education, to access to affordable healthcare, to the ability to acquire funding from traditional financial institutions, and public policy.”

With an eye toward the latter point, I close by reiterating three urgent priorities: 1). algorithmic accountability and platform oversight; 2). pay transparency and contract reform; and 3). basic labor protections to minimize the risks of occupational hazards such as harassment and overwork. Recognizing creators as a legitimate and socially meaningful labor category means taking their concerns seriously. I hope that these suggestions are a productive place to start.

Thank you for this opportunity to present this testimony. If I can be of service in the committee’s future work, please don’t hesitate to reach out.

Best,



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