

KEEP IT SIM- PLE MAKE IT FAST!

AN APPROACH
TO UNDERGROUND
MUSIC SCENES (VOL. 4)
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Keep it Simple, Make it Fast!

An approach to underground music scenes (vol. 4)

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3.1 Digital platforms and the professionalization of DIY in the popular music field. The experiences of long-time independent musicians

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A b s t r a c t

Over the past ten years grassroots music production has been incentivized by an increasing number of web-platforms that allow to autonomously manage music promotion and distribution. The adoption of such tools has been fostered by the promise to facilitate the development of sustainable DIY careers, however is widely debated 'how much' and 'for who' they are actually able to do so, especially considering the wider changes affecting music production. The article aims to offer a specific contribution to this debate, presenting the results of a qualitative research which investigates the practices and evaluations of fifteen DIY musicians who experienced the transition from the pre-web 2.0 era to nowadays. It will be highlighted how experiences and uses of digital platforms supporting self-production are generated at the intersection between the conditioning of the hyper-competitive context that they contributed to create, perceived as a request of *professionalization*, and the different sensitivities, resources and aspirations of the musicians.

Keywords: *music, DIY, digital platforms, social media, economy of attention.*



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1. Premises and promises

Over the past ten years grassroots music production has been incentivized by an increasing number of web-platforms that allow to autonomously manage fund-raising, promotion and distribution of music contents, such as social networks and content aggregators (Facebook, Instagram, YouTube), generic and specialized crowdfunding platforms (i.e. Kickstarter and Music Raiser), various web-services specifically aimed to musicians (i.e. Soundcloud, Mixcloud, Bandcamp, Tunecore, Reverb Nation). The adoption of such tools in the context of music self-production has been fostered by the promise to facilitate the development of sustainable DIY careers, engaging wider audiences and improving the efficiency of self-production despite the limited resources that typically characterize it. However there is currently much discussion concerning 'if', 'how much' and 'for who' they are actually able to do so, especially considering the wider changes affecting the context of music production (Hesmondhalgh & Meier, 2015; Haynes & Marshall, 2018). Maximizing the potential of the platforms requires new skills, an exhausting affective labour and considerable investments in time and social capital, while the results are often below expectations (Sargent, 2009; Young & Collins, 2010; Hracs, 2015; D'Amato, 2016; Haynes & Marshall, 2018). At the same time, old and new gatekeepers and intermediaries still seem to have considerable relevance in the current environment, overcrowded of proposals and new tools to be used strategically (Young & Collins, 2010; Hesmondhalgh & Meier, 2015; Hracs, 2015; Haynes & Marshall, 2018).

In order to offer a specific contribution to this debate I will present the results of a qualitative research investigating the practices and experiences of fifteen Italian musicians who have been self-producing since the beginning of the millennium, who directly experienced the changes in self-production from the pre-web 2.0 era to nowadays. Such a type of respondents clearly implies a remarkably defined and narrow point of view on the research topic, however for this same reason it can offer very specific – and in my opinion valuable – insights on the changing conditions of music self-production. The musicians were all between 33 and 40 years of age, they all regularly play live and published several albums (never less than three), most of which self-produced, acting within the same or with different projects.

They all can be considered underground, albeit with different degree of popularity in the scene, and almost all of them do other jobs in order to make a living, mostly related to the music field. Four of them also created their own independent micro-labels and have produced other musicians. Their music can be ascribed to very different genres: progressive, alternative and post-rock (Davide, Andrea, Marcello, and Federico), elettro-rock (Gianluca), pop-rock (Marco, Ascanio), industrial and avant-garde (Giuseppe), elettro-pop (Paolo, Fabrizio), breakcore (Riccardo), garage and noise (Luca, Stefano), a mixture of rap, rock and canzone d'autore (Lucio), jazz (Alessandro). The in-depth interviews aimed at exploring which changes these musicians have experienced in their work – especially in relation to the introduction of web-platforms supporting self-production (the most used by the respondents were Facebook, YouTube, Soundcloud, Bandcamp, Tunecore and to a lesser extent Mixcloud, Jamendo, Cd Baby, Kickstarter and Music Raiser) – how they evaluate such changes and what affects different perceptions regarding improvements or worsening of both their situation and music self-production in general (Bennett & Guerra, 2019).

The rest of the paper will be organized as follows: the second and third paragraphs will present the the discourses of the interviewees concerning their approach to DIY, the current context of self-production and its problems, while the fourth and fifth will shift the focus on the potentialities ascribed to digital platforms, the skills and resources considered necessary to use them effectively, the ways in which different types of musicians deal with these issues. The last paragraph summarizes the results and place them critically in the context of wider cultural and social dynamics linked to what Bascetta (2015) calls the 'economy of promise'.

2. The musicians and their context

Talking about the motivations leading to self-production, most of the interviewed spoke about the literal "urgency" of making and realizing their music, despite the lack of financial support from a label, which in some cases was not found, at least not without the request to modify their projects, while in other cases was not sought, in order not to risk to incur in interferences or because the labels were considered substantially inefficient - or even counterproductive - for the 'alternative' proposals of still unknown musicians.

In the past, with a label that came into play before we recorded, it happened that they chose the artistic producer and the person for the mixing, and it came out a record that I don't like how it sounds, I listen to it now and I'm not happy. Instead for that album I wanted to have complete control: I chose the engineer, working closely with him, I chose who made the cover, who took the photos, who made the video, I chose the press agency, I even found the evenings alone, and I had to match everything ... it was a very tough job. (Gianluca).

Instead of sending it to labels, with which to quarrel, because that was my experience, I said to myself "you know what? I make myself a vinyl in 500 copies". I wanted to have complete control of the product, including graphics, photos, etc. (Riccardo).

Most labels ask you money to press the record and then care more about the selling than the promotion and circulation of the music. (Alessandro).

In some cases, taking of the DIY path was influenced by the discourses linking alternative culture and expressive freedom to independence from the music industry.

I started to produce myself in part because an independent label would not have guaranteed anything more than you could have done alone, and in part because from of my political background, I

came from the social centers, from that path, so obviously there was an ethical discourse linked to independence. (Lucio).

It was probably a choice conditioned by the cultural and social dynamics of the time, because between the 1990s and 2000s, when we were just eighteen years old, we were pervaded by an atmosphere and by a corridor voice that stimulated to start self-production, since it was considered the only way to be able to propose your own idea of an artistic project. So, we were partly stimulated by a desire for autonomy, partly 'conditioned' - in quotation marks - by this rumor, that the official recording industry would never ever funded and supported alternative culture. So, for those who did alternative culture the only way was self-production, if only because there were specific spaces dedicated to this, such as the social centers and many fanzines. (Andrea).

The dilution of these spaces is perceived by all the respondents as one of the defining features of the actual context, in which their uses and evaluations of the digital platforms are formed. There are two aspects shared by all the representations of the changes in the music production environment that emerged from the interviews. First, an overflow of content supply, favored by the democratization of the means of production, promotion and distribution of digital content, which for some is also contributing to blur the boundaries that defined self-production as a niche and alternative practice, *distinct and distinctive*, since now it has become the 'normal' way of doing things, especially among younger people, regardless of the adherence to an antagonistic ethos (Guerra & Feixa, 2019).

The DIY was once the exclusive production of the underground, the hardcore, and those people there, who made the political choice of doing everything by themselves, so there were also few who did this thing. Now since everyone can do it, everyone does it, even the ones who are more in the mainstream environment. (Gianluca).

Second, the confluence of this enormous amount of contents within the same digital channels – such as YouTube - despite their differences. According to the interviewees, the same has happened in Italy - to a certain extent - also in the venues for live performances, mainly due to the downsizing and transformation of the occupied social centers, which in the nineties were crucial to the growth and circulation of independent cultural production. Such a change is generally considered to be connected both to their failure of the search for alternative economies able to guarantee a long-term sustainability. Different intersecting explanations are generally provided for this change: the difficulties in developing alternative economies able to guarantee a long-term

sustainability (De Sario, 2009), the internal tensions derived from attempts at transforming social centers in social enterprises (Moroni, Farina, Tripodi, 1995), the weakening of countercultural social movements following the dramatic events occurred in 2001 during the G8 in Genoa.

Such changes resulted in an increased crowding of proposals, implicitly determining heightened competition for the public's attention. Moreover, due to the second aspect, niche and self-produced projects would no longer be in competition only with each other, within limited but distinctive spaces in which to meet a partly self-selected and potentially interested public. It follows, on the one hand, the persistent position of power of the gatekeepers controlling the places of offline and online access to the public (such as local promoters, traditional media or those crowdfunding platforms selecting the projects to be published on the website among those received), on the other the perceived relevance of those subjects and services considered to able to facilitate access to such places and/or to increase one's own visibility (i.e. press or booking agencies, the sponsored post on Facebook, the premium account on Soundcloud).

3. DIY ways

This understanding of the context conditions the possibilities identified by the interviewees in order to grow and sustain the independent music activity. In the first instance there is a kind of *free- or underpaid- labour*, as in the case of venues offering the chance to perform live but without providing any cachet (often not even the refund for the expenses). Sometimes the venues propose economic agreements that incentivize the promotion of the concert from the part of the musicians or explicitly entrust the sale of the tickets to them.

Do you know what happens in the smaller clubs? They propose you a different treatment on an economic level: if you have the name or a label behind you are guaranteed a cachet, on the contrary you arrive as any band that is trying to get noticed, then they offer you a percentage, which means that you have to fill the place [...] sometimes you even have to make pre-sales, ask your friends to come, something that benefits mainly those who organize. The club tells me 'if you bring me people, I pay you', all right, I have many friends who come to my concerts, but if I keep playing for my friends tell me what the fuck I'm going to do in the club? (Gianluca).

Such practices – that appear to be conventions of the independent music world (Becker, 1982) – point to and imply another crucial work from the part the musicians: *the accumulation and mobilization of social capital* (Reitsamer, 2011; Hartman, 2012). This could consist, as in the quoted example, in the mobilization of 'bonding' social capital convertible into economic capital. Other times it takes the form of networking aimed at building the linking social capital able to connect with specific subjects and channels, deemed necessary for growth and which would otherwise be difficult to access.

In the context of self-production, if you don't have an agency, or someone who actually proposes you, or friends who make you play, then you can't go around playing. (Luca).

Everything happens through personal knowledge, through people you know in the scene that introduce you to other people with whom they have already worked, while when you write by yourself generally you don't get any answers [...] you can't get to some types of venues and get some types of reviews unless you have to have someone talking about you, sponsoring you, you have to have a label, or to be luck and have friendships in circles that can help you to get known, otherwise you alone, even if you work like crazy, you don't access some more important places and channels. You keep doing concerts, sell something, but can't climb a step further. (Gianluca).

Even being reviewed requires an intermediary, at least for me it was so, because from the moment that this guy, who had a billion contacts, has taken the trouble to promote the record, two reviews each day came out. Before that I guess we wrote 100 times to Radio Onda Rock, in vain, then when this guy said 'I take care of it' in two days the review came out. It's a matter of contacts, it's a world that moves by contact ... even to get to the press, you get there only if you know someone who knows someone, at least for us it was like that. (Marcello).

A third order of actions – aimed at increasing the visibility both towards music professionals and audiences – imply the *investment of economic resources*: the purchase of the opening of concerts by famous artists (critically mentioned by one interviewee who was talking about the heavy metal scene); the subscription to more or less prestigious contests whose mission is to spot and guarantee fair recognition to the best proposals from new and unknown musicians; the hiring of booking and press agencies; the sponsorship of contents posted on social media and the subscription to premium accounts or programs offered by some web-services. Regarding the live contests in Italy, Jacopo Tomatis (2018) has noticed that they hardly produce a significant boost for the careers of those investing in them (through the payment of the subscription fee and sustaining travel and overnight expenses), rather he identifies their function in the artificial creation of a demand able to absorb the enormous offer of aspiring musicians. Booking and press agencies are often deemed necessary to access venues and media. It's interesting to note that, according to many interviewees, one of the main reasons why local promoters favor the musicians proposed by a booking agency is because they consider the hire of such agencies as a sign of *professional investment*, an heuristic useful to make a quick discrimination among the huge amount of musicians who propose themselves.

The problem with doing everything by yourself is that it is considered unprofessional, for example the fact that you directly call the promoter to ask to play [...] there is a request for professionalism, intended as professional who take care of that, while if you do it by yourself it seems a rough work. (Marcello).

The problem is that if the director of the venue receives fifty e-mails it's difficult to break into his mailbox. In this case the booking agency works, because the director already know the professionalism of the agency and just looking at the mail sender decides to open or not [...] today it is more difficult that they pay attention to musicians and bands that propose themselves autonomously. (Giuseppe).

It's hard to find gigs without having a booking agency or without being able to write that you are produced by a label [...] this trend is arriving even to the smaller club, it doesn't reach all of them yet but middle-size clubs are already beginning to do some stories. (Gianluca).

Another of the most important criteria adopted by the local promoters to choose performers, and partly by journalist and bloggers to decide who to write about, concerns the numbers and the follow-up on social media, as already pointed out also by Haynes and Marshall (2018). The same happens with those crowdfunding platforms that choose the projects to be published – and therefore eligible for financing – on the basis of the proponents' following on social media, considered a proxy of their chances to reach their goals. Such platforms usually earn money only from the successful campaigns and to host a large amount of projects with little chances of success only risk of creating background noise, diluting financings and negatively affecting the results of others (D'Amato, 2017).

4. DDIY (Digital-Do-It-Yourself)

These reports represent digital platforms as tools to foster visibility and cultivate reputation both with the audience and – as a consequence – with the subjects that potentially allow to monetize the musicians' following. However, in the musician's opinion, for their use to be effective, considerable investments and skills are required. One kind of investment, already mentioned, concerns the sponsorship of posted contents or the subscription to premium accounts. Another one concerns the production of high-quality contents used to promote the music on hyper-crowded channels, primarily videos for YouTube. Skills in the strategic planning of promotional activities and contents and in the use analytics – framed by some platforms as a sign of professionalism and an essential activity to improve one's career (Maturo, 2015) – are also considered very important.

All these aspects are often summarized in the idea that DIY through digital platforms requires – in order to maximize their potential benefits - a *more professional approach*, that is a serious, scrupulous and competent use of such tools, which in turn requires differentiated skills, not only technical ones but also in the areas of management, fund-raising, marketing, SEO, web-design, storytelling, as well as the mastery of different codes, in order to properly take care of the various multimedia contents.

There is also the work on analytics, so you go to see how much of a song has been listened to, the average of the minutes listened to, you get a little more scientific idea of your results looking at the statistics. (Marco).

Music today is just as important as the video-clip, as the image you give of yourself, as having to take a picture when there's a lot of people under the stage, taking a selfie with the people behind you because then you work more, because the more people see that there is other people behind you, the more they come to see you the next time. Today you find out that music is probably the last of the important things: if you are very good at telling your story, at pushing yourself, promoting yourself, then your product counts up to a certain point. This is the change, I've understood you can't focus only on the songs anymore, on what you write, but that you have to take care also of the whole story. (Lucio).

Before, there wasn't much care of the image, from the point of view of the pictures or other, because in any case there was no way to publish them, there was no web-space for that, so everything was aimed only to play, to improve playing and recording [...] Now you have to take care of your Facebook page, you have to take pictures, you have to take care of the graphics, and you have to do everything with more care and attention. This is the work that takes most of time, personalizing every single e-mail, working on your image, taking care of the way you dress, calling a photographer and paying for it, because as soon as the shot is not professional everyone recognize that, and that difference, between your amateurish photo and the ultra professional one causes people to bypass your proposal, your page, your link [...] once you played once it was played, you spent time, but without this extreme care of so many details, because the relevant details were only those in the music [...] all this takes time the you should devote to writing, to what is the art with

which you propose, since you have to learn to use the media, to become a communicator, to become a graphic designer, to become a digital PR, to become a booking agent [...] On the one hand this gives you the mastery of your project, which is great, the real problem is that it takes carefree and linearity to the composition. (Giuseppe).

The complicated thing is that everything is becoming a little more professional, the independent music, even small and underground, is starting to have very industrialized features. You have to have the press office to do promotions, otherwise nobody pays you attention and you don't get reviews, then if you do not have the booking is very difficult that somebody replies to your request for gigs, you have to put money to increase visibility on the internet [...] All of them probably have understood that they can perhaps earn more money from so many small groups trying to be noticed, so they say 'come on, seriously, you are not going to hire a press agency for the video? Aren't you going to use a press office for the record? How could you think to post about your new video without paying at least 50 euro in sponsorship? How can you think of looking for gigs by yourself instead of paying for a booking agency?' (Paolo).

The choice of how to deal with these perceived "requests" implies for the interviewees whether or not accepting to act differently and to be different compared to the ideals of musical activity and performer to which they aspired. Of course they are all well aware that self-production has always implied by definition a certain amount of self-management and the burden of having to deal with extra-musical obligations, nonetheless some of them have pointed out that *the amount* and *the type* of things to deal with has changed: on the one hand, there are more aspects to take care of, more options to evaluate, more choices to be made (i.e. regarding the tags to be found more easily from the algorithms or the settings when sponsoring a content, and if the sponsorship doesn't bring the expected results some are never sure if the whole 'sponsorship' thing is a swindle or if they haven't made the right choices), more contents to produce, all obviously at the expense of the time devoted to the composition and the improvement of their musical skills; on the other, all these activities require new skills (e.g. SEO or web-design) and concern aspects that were not considered so relevant in the underground independent scenes, while now they appear crucial.

Those who self-produce had always been more managers than the others, those who self-produced before the web had to send the demo to record companies, DJs and journalists, bring them to the local promoters, make the posters of their concerts, there has always been

more work. In this historical moment, however, there are seven more: in addition to those things, you have also to prepare the videoclip, open your profile on Bandcamp, on Sound Cloud, on You Tube, you have to continuously publish content there, get in touch with the digital distribution, two hundreds passwords, you're the secretary of yourself, you lose the pieces, it's a mess. And everything to get very few moneys as always, if everything goes well. (Lucio)

Having to cultivate your image consistently on social networks, this is really a novelty, because this thing was once less required to small underground self-produced bands [...] today you can delegate part of your musical ability if you are good at building a coherent public imaginary. Today the musician must be able above all to handle the communicative codes, but the novelty lies in the fact that this leads - in part - to a discharging of responsibility with respect to the product, the product is less necessary, I mean it's more a mixed thing, it's the resulting of your way of showing it and making this process become part of the fascination. Your product is completed completed with what you show, your art today is completed in part with your being there as a character. All this, of course, is to the detriment of music, because you have to dedicate time and energy to the social media. Before, this happened much less, because there was no need to have a constant public image. Now even if you are an underground musician you have to be partly a musician, partly a designer, partly a creator of stories and imaginaries. (Fabrizio)

5. Reactions and dispositions

What are the actual reactions of the interviewed musicians to what they perceive as the approach required in order to maximize the potential of digital platforms and, more generally, to improve their career chances in the actual environment? Simplifying a little, it was possible to distinguish three dispositions.

- The *disposability to adapt* to a more professional approach, investing resources and adapting one's skills, in the belief that this can improve - or has actually improved - the self-production performance, so as to reach either an acceptable level of activity or a degree of following and public appreciation that could attract investors. In these cases, planning strategies and taking care of communication contents are sometimes seen as an opportunity to reflect more deeply on the project, as well as a widening of the areas in which to exercise the authorial activity, that

is in which to recognize themselves as authors. This means that these activities don't appear to be merely instrumental but integral parts of the musicians' efforts for self-determination and self-realization.

The use of many new platforms forces you to consider with more awareness and from a wider perspective the coherence of the various elements articulating a project, with music being the central one but not the only one. It forces you to pay equal attention to all the contents of which the musician is author and responsible: the videos, the photos, the posts and other things. It's hard but compelling. It forces you to design different things in connection. It is an enlarged concept of composition: not just music but of the whole process, of which music is one part. There are many more choices to make in order to build your own recipe. (Alessandro).

Of course, in my ideal world I'd stay at my house to take care of the music, while someone else takes care of all the other things... which in reality is not even so true: I really enjoy having the complete control over all I am doing. (Federico).

- The *refusal to adapt*, either because some don't believe this would change much – unless they don't modify their music too, abdicating what they (like all the respondents) perceive as their *vocation* (Bellini 2015) - or simply because they are unwilling to adopt a professional approach to self-production (regardless of any political commitment). Therefore, in these cases there is an acceptance of the prospect of continuing to do other jobs to maintain themselves and the musical activity, which is ultimately not self-sustainable. Music career is subordinated to a sense of self-determination which lies in the choice of doing what they want in the way they want to do it.

You do what you feel you have to mainly for an existential reason, so once you do it, once you are able to make it listen even just to three people, putting it there [on YouTube] and having this possibility it's already a lot [...] I also sometimes think 'if I had a little more economic stability, it would be better', it's normal because I'm working my ass off, but in the end you think 'Am I working my ass off because it's the doctor's prescription? No, so what? It's me who want it, is clear' [...] you must simply do what you feel you have to, because if you start thinking about how to make a market strategy, then it becomes a strategy, you're doing something else. (Stefano).

Moreover, here the judgments on digital platforms are not necessarily negative, since - according to some - at least they make easier to maintain the same level of musical activity, although that's not enough to live on it.

- Between these two extremes there is an area of more ambivalent experiences, where opposing tendencies and concrete difficulties generate greater tensions and frustrations. What emerges in this cases is a *difficulty to adapt*, which may regard, on the one hand, the acquisition of skills or the availability of resources to invest, including time, but, on the other, also a marked hostility towards the culture of access and constant self-promotion, particularly evident in the aversion of many towards

crowdfunding, inasmuch to undertake a campaign would require precisely the latter. Above all, some of them seem to suffer the *continuous* exposure, evaluation and competition fostered by the use of social media.

With others we talk about this worry of continuously doing things showing you are doing them, even when you don't actually do that much. There is the continuous observing what others do, measuring yourself on what others do, and since you are in turn subjected to this thing you need to continuously implement this machine, putting things in it, so as to give others the impression that you too are doing a lot of things... it's an exhausting machine, especially if you're not so competitive. Sometimes you spend more time at showing than at making, because inevitably you have less time [...] but you have to stay there [on social media] because everybody is there, it's the only way to let people know what you're doing. (Fabrizio).

It's nice but it's also a crazy effort. I mean, it also depends on your age, this year I am 40 years old, and I have made records in every way, self-produced, half-produced, honestly sometimes I think I'd like to worry only about my music. (Davide).

6. Final considerations

Many of the interviewed musicians share the opinion that digital platforms can help increase the sustainability of DIY careers, however only on the condition of contextualizing their use in a more general approach defined by greater professionalism and strategic thinking, fostered by a renewed hyper-competition and covering all aspects of self-production, included the management of available resources. Such an approach requires giving the communication activities and contents the same importance as the music and requires resources to invest, skills to be trained, even an adequate personality. Most of the musicians interviewed believe that digital platforms benefit the subjects most skilled in self-marketing and self-branding strategies, something already noticed in the literature on micro-celebrities and publicity through social media (Marwick, 2013). Few others are more skeptical towards the democratizing potential of digital platforms and refuse to adhere to a more strategic approach, because of its perceived distance from the 'original' ethos of 'true' DIY or simply from their own sensitivity.

However among the musicians who believe, to varying degrees, in the empowering potential of digital platforms, there are some who manifest, on the one hand, tensions related to the greater quantity and the different type of work necessary to self-produce effectively and efficiently, to the constant examination of their skills (not only the musical ones) and to the increase of options to choose from, and therefore also of the risk of making mistakes; on the other, sometimes the regret emerges for not having been able to better exploit the opportunities foreshadowed by the new media, because of unskillfulness, gaps or an aversion to the kind –and quantity– of communicative work required. These experiences seem to exemplify the paradox of choice (Bellini, 2015, p.78-79): if on the one hand the autonomy and control produced by a variety of options are positive, on the other hand, an excessive range of choices risks overloading and debilitating rather than liberating, while results more easily end generating frustration and debasement.

It must be noticed that, beyond the results achieved by the musicians, their work involves an economic benefit for the services used, both when they are paid and when they look free (Terranova, 2000, Maturo, 2015). In this context of heightened competition the marketplace of attention (Webster, 2014) feeds the economy of promise (Bascetta, 2015), which stands at the base of new declinations of neoliberal capitalism aimed at the very long tail of aspiring creative competing for the attention of online and offline audiences: the *promise of visibility* it's the 'value proposition' through which many physical and web services are promoted and for which some musicians agree not only to play for free, to sponsor contents on social media, to subscribe premium accounts, to pay booking and video production agencies, press offices and digital web-services, but also to continuously share different type of data and contents that feeds the value of digital platforms.

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