

Part II

Case Studies: Industrial and Ethnographic Perspectives

Social scientist Bell (2005, 10), argues that the case study approach can be ‘particularly appropriate for an individual researcher as it provides an opportunity for an aspect of a problem to be studied in more depth’ in a relatively short amount of time and can also shed light on a particular phenomenon occurring in a given geographical area.

However, case studies also carry their limitations. One of the most common issues with case studies is ‘the difficulty to cross check information’ (Doyle and Frith 2006, 568). Another concern when conducting case studies is the issue of ‘generalizability’ evoked by Denscombe (2010, 60–61) and the ‘extent to which findings can be generalized... depends on how far the case study example is similar to others of its type.’ Bassegy develops this argument by introducing the concept of ‘relatability’ that is arguably more significant than ‘generalizability’ in the sense that the case study should be judged ‘to the extent to which the details are sufficient and appropriate for someone working in a similar situation to relate his decision making to that described in the case study.’ He concludes that ‘relatability’ is more important than ‘generalizability’ (Bassegy 1981, 85). He considers that if case studies ‘are carried out systematically and critically, if they are relatable, and if by publication of the findings they extend the boundaries of existing knowledge’ then they are valid forms of research (Bassegy 1981, 86).

The case studies that I have selected are central to the finance, production and circulation of films online in China and in that sense they are relatable to other experiences of the same type. I cross-reference these case studies with other companies such as Tencent or iQiyi in China or Amazon in the US and with other types of film productions, which also carries an element of generalisability.

In Chap. 5, I observe Alibaba Pictures as a financier of original film content and as a potential sponsor for local emerging creative talent. In Chap. 6, the case study of *The Last Race* works as an example of a traditional film production originally co-produced, promoted and distributed by an online creative champion, Alibaba Pictures. This shows evidence of tensions between political and economic agendas as well as between traditional filmmaking and online working cultures. Finally, in Chap. 7, the case study of YT, one of the largest online circulation windows acquired by Alibaba in 2016 for film and media creative content, demonstrates a

first series of steps from digital creative online portals to identify and promote local emerging talents. Throughout these three case studies, I researched and analysed in real time how a film can go through the entire creative life cycle from its finance to its circulation in the current Chinese online media production chain.

As a side note, particularly given the large scale of Alibaba and the complexity of its structure, I will use the terms ‘Alibaba’ and ‘Alibaba Group’ to refer to the entire conglomerate, whereas, I will use the names of the other entities which I refer to specifically, such as ‘Alibaba Pictures’ or ‘Alibaba Pictures Group’ for the media and entertainment subsidiary of Alibaba Group. And ‘ANT Financial Services Group’ or ‘ANT Financial’ for its finance subsidiary, for example.

In this study, access to reliable information from surveying, interviews with film industry experts and scholars as well as industry reports help me correlate findings from distinct sources. The correlation of these various sources of information also helps minimise the possible risk of ‘selective reporting’ (Bassey 1999, 12). The interviews of film industry authorities, representatives of Alibaba, YT, and scholars were conducted in Mainland China, Hong Kong, Europe and the US, which gives a broad range of information. The perspective of the audience is also integrated and balances the academic and the industrial views of the phenomena under study.

The following chapter (Chap. 5) informs the reader of the steps that Alibaba took in order to contribute to the creation of original local content while facing tensions between the traditional and online film production models: the chapter describes the political-economic mechanisms behind Alibaba Group’s rapid creation and development since 1999 to the creation of Alibaba pictures in 2014 and the acquisition of YT by Alibaba in 2016. It shows how Alibaba is both a driver and recipient of a changing business culture in the Chinese media sector that is becoming increasingly IP centric and where the political-economic agenda of the government is increasingly framed as soft power. This chapter also describes the early stage of blockchain technology adoption by the group.¹

References

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