

Tiered Governance and Demonetization: The Shifting Terms of Labor and Compensation in the Platform Economy

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Abstract

Social media platforms have profoundly transformed cultural production, in part by restructuring the terms by which culture is distributed and paid for. In this article, we examine the YouTube Partner Program and the controversies around the “demonetization” of videos, to understand these arrangements and what happens when they shift beneath creators’ feet. We use the testimony of YouTubers, provided in their own videos, to understand how creators square the contradiction between YouTube’s increasingly cautious rules regarding “advertiser-friendly” content, its shifting financial and algorithmic incentive structure, and its stated values as an open platform of expression. We examine YouTube’s *tiered governance* strategy, in which different users are offered different sets of rules, different material resources, and different procedural protections when content is demonetized. And we examine how, especially when the details of that tiered governance are ambiguous or poorly conveyed, creators develop their own theories for why their content has been demonetized—which can provide some creators a tactical opportunity to advance politically motivated accusations of bias against the platform.

Keywords

demonetization, adpocalypse, YouTube, platforms, advertising, content moderation

“What’s up, you beautiful bastards?” This is how popular YouTube creator Philip DeFranco greeted his fans in nearly every one of his hundreds of videos—until 31 August 2016, when he warned his followers that his greeting, and other elements of his show, might have to change. New “advertiser-friendly” rules enacted by YouTube would, he warned, impact his capacity to earn advertising revenue on the video-sharing platform (DeFranco, 2016).¹ Some of his videos had already been “demonetized” for containing “graphic content or excessive strong language.” The advertising revenue DeFranco earned from views of those videos would cease.

DeFranco’s video was a harbinger of nearly 3 years of complaints from YouTube creators, including the “adpocalypse,” when some advertisers threatened to pull out of the site after discovering their ads paired with videos encouraging terrorism and hate (Kumar, 2019). In response, YouTube adjusted their rules for creators and demonetized videos across the site, leaving creators frustrated and grasping for some kind of explanation. His video spawned the creation of thousands of similar videos from creators expressing their discontent with what they felt was a formal set of policies designed to de-prioritize user-generated content and prioritize traditional media clips that were more predictably advertiser-friendly.

These demonetization videos provide a strategic entry point for examining the current economics and governance of the YouTube Partner Program (YPP). As this article will demonstrate, the monetization of user-generated content is far more complex than even YouTube creators may be aware; even so, their concerns, criticisms, and lay explanations offer a powerful diagnostic of the fundamental tensions YouTube has been attempting to navigate for more than a decade.

As Lobato (2016) suggests, it is crucial “to scrutinize specific logics of commercialization at work within particular parts of that ecosystem, on the understanding that these are not monolithic in their operation or effects” (p. 349). Although YouTube began with a participatory call to action—to “Broadcast Yourself”—the company quickly worked to structure the underlying labor relations between creators and platform, financially, technologically, and contractually. Revenue sharing, though wrapped in a rhetoric of giving

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back and “reward[ing]” the “most dedicated community members” (YouTube, 2007b), was used to entice prolific users to generate even more content for the site, increasing the overall value of the YouTube platform (YouTube, 2010). While YouTube partners have a variety of motivations for producing content for the site, some now treat the promised financial compensation as a form of entrepreneurial employment, a part of the gig economy (Burgess, 2012; Burgess & Green, 2018). What may have begun as a “partner” revenue-sharing arrangement, a bonus offered to already motivated and prolific creators, has in practice set the terms for the labor of media production at YouTube, imposing specific expectations for users who count on that revenue.

In this article, we will examine the complex landscape of these arrangements and what happens when it shifts beneath creators’ feet. Amid many concerns expressed in these “demonetization” videos, three stand out as diagnostic of the underlying tensions YouTube is attempting to manage:

1. YouTube partners articulate a contradiction within the social imaginary of YouTube—the impossibility of squaring YouTube’s stated values as an open platform of expression, with the increasingly cautious rules regarding acceptable content and the shifting financial and algorithmic incentive structure.
2. YouTube’s *tiered governance* strategy—offering different users different sets of rules, different material resources and opportunities, and different procedural protections when content is demonetized—powerfully structures production in ways substantially different from the “open platform” promise that YouTube and other social media make to their entire user base, and different from the expectations of fairness creators bring to the table.
3. When rules are ambiguous or poorly conveyed, creators are more likely to develop their own theories for why their content has been demonetized. Some creators take this opacity as a tactical opportunity to advance politically motivated accusations about why their content has been demonetized.

YouTube, Content Moderation, and Demonetization

YouTube is, by an order of magnitude, the largest video hosting platform in the world and has been for some time. The site began in 2005 primarily to host the amateur videos scattered across the web—though from the start, its founders already imagined partnering with the biggest producers and broadcasters (Burgess & Green, 2018). Today, YouTube hosts an immense amount of content from established media networks, multi-channel networks (MCNs), and third-party developers, as well as producing its own content in-house (Burgess, 2012; Lobato, 2016; Vonderau, 2016).²

But they remain, culturally and financially, bound to their predominant role as host for user-generated video. In this sense, they have navigated a similar path as many other major social media platforms: growing wildly by providing an open space for amateur participation, then struggling to fit that participation with viable revenue streams—usually advertising.

What distinguishes YouTube from most other platforms is the YPP, their long-standing practice of sharing advertising revenue with some of their video creators. A few other platforms have developed similar programs, although few are funded through programmatic advertising like YouTube. Medium, the online publishing platform, has a partner program (though “partners” pay a small fee to join) (Grinberg, 2018) funded through subscription revenue rather than advertising (Medium, n.d.). Twitch, the live streaming video platform owned by Amazon, shares with some creators revenue from viewer subscriptions, the sale of virtual goods, and advertising. Some smaller sites including Byte, DLive, DTube, Mixer, Steemit, and Tsu also enable partnerships and are often floated as alternatives in the debates that follow YouTube’s policy changes (Alexander, 2018a; Twitch, n.d.).³

If ad revenue can be shared, it can also be withheld. “Demonetization” refers to YouTube excluding a specific video from the ad-revenue-sharing arrangement or excluding a creator from the YPP altogether.⁴ Demonetization is usually imposed as a penalty, for videos that violate YouTube’s “advertiser-friendly” content guidelines, specific to videos in the YPP; videos might also be demonetized when the terms for participating in the YPP change. This is not the same as a video being taken down. A demonetized video remains on the platform and can still be seen; only the ad revenue is halted. Nor does demonetization prevent the YouTube creator from earning revenue entirely; other means remain, including selling merchandise or taking donations directly from users (Hall, 2018).

Demonetization is just one element of a broader suite of governance mechanisms (Gorwa, 2019) available to YouTube: content moderation, which includes the removal of individual videos or the suspension of entire accounts for violating guidelines around sexual content, violence, harassment, hate speech, or misinformation; the placement of videos behind age barriers or other interstitial warnings indicating graphic content; the removal of videos deemed to be copyright infringement, privacy violations, or spam. The YPP, then, is only a part of this larger platform governance, but one that is specific to YouTube and platforms that share revenue with their creators.

Over time, YouTube has adjusted the rules and parameters of the YPP—sometimes to the benefit, sometimes to the detriment of the now hundreds of thousands of creators who receive revenue from it. Although these arrangements are largely hidden from public view, recent changes that tethered that revenue to follower counts and imposed stricter content guidelines pushed the YPP toward a public reckoning

(Alexander, 2018b)—driven in part by YouTube creators themselves, like DeFranco, raising their concerns with their audiences. Frustration has become so widespread that videos about demonetization have effectively become a YouTube genre in their own right. A search for the term “demonetization” or “adpocalypse” returns hundreds of thousands of videos featuring YouTubers offering their own experiences or commenting on the policy changes in general. Most recently, conservative YouTubers and Republican politicians have pointed to specific cases of demonetization as evidence that YouTube and other platform companies are targeting conservatives for their political views (Birnbbaum, 2019).

From Participation to Labor, From Partnership to Precarity

To return to the start of the YPP is to return to a different moment in the sociological examination of platforms and digital culture. With more than a decade of hindsight, the early hopes for “participatory culture” can look hopelessly naive. It seemed to some that the contributions of millions of users motivated by its own rewards rather than financial or other incentives, free of traditional gatekeepers, driven by genuine interests, and the organic formation of community, would be aggregated into an unprecedented human resource (Benkler, 2006; Jenkins, 2006; Shirky, 2008). Early platforms appeared to only amplify this flourishing social participation, buoyed by the promises of the platform designers and other digital culture gurus.

But where some saw participation, others saw exploitation (Andrejevic et al., 2014; Bruns, 2006; Scholz, 2013; Terranova, 2000). User content was a form of unpaid labor, generating massive financial value for the platforms distributing it. These platforms then developed new ways to encourage users to participate more and more, provide more and more content, and leave behind more and more data. Some thought users, celebrated as “producers,” were being hoodwinked into an unprecedented raw deal. Others noted that cultural production always wrestles with multiple and competing forms of compensation (Baym, 2018; Baym & Burnett, 2009). Still, this debate highlighted a second face of “participatory culture,” that the promise of amateur creativity was built on fundamentally exploitative terms.

The concern for user labor on social media platforms focused largely on what Campbell calls “abstract modes of exploitation,” where “the worker may remain unaware of the wealth his or her activities generate for a small class of people” (Andrejevic et al., 2014). Users were not being compensated because they did not perceive it as work or fully understand its financial value to the platform. With the introduction of its YPP, YouTube may have been responding to that concern: recognizing the inequity of capital accumulation and trying to rebalance it by sharing ad revenue with its valuable creators. But presenting the labor not as labor but as participation helped obscure not only the exploitation but

also the way platforms subtly structure cultural production while appearing open.

Unlike the (uncompensated) deal YouTube offers regular users, the YPP looks more like “sharing economy” services like Uber, AirBnB, and TaskRabbit, “multi-sided market” operators who broker the transaction between multiple parties eager to exchange and take a slice of revenue off the top (Burgess & Green, 2018). A platform like AirBnB operates a simple version of such “platform economics”: match those willing to rent spaces and those eager to rent them, convey payment from one to the other, and extract a fee for themselves. YouTube merges this with the traditional media economics of advertising: YouTube creators make valuable content; YouTube matches them with viewers eager to see that content; instead of paying for that content directly, YouTube viewers “pay” with their attention to ads; advertisers pay YouTube for the privilege of showing them; and YouTube delivers some of that revenue back to the creators, keeping the rest for themselves (Gawer, 2011; Kenney & Zysman, 2016; Rochet & Tirole, 2003).

This model is increasingly common, with the recent structural changes in cultural production (Mansell, 2015; Nieborg & Poell, 2018; Tufekci, 2016; van Dijck et al., 2018). Cunningham and Craig (2019) note that economic arrangements like these, alongside the uncompensated production that fills most social media platforms, represent a new landscape of cultural labor. “Social media entertainment” comes fitted with particular professional, financial, and legal mechanisms for managing how media production is structured and compensated:

It would be little overstatement to claim that these dynamics are a huge experiment in seeking to convert vernacular or informal creativity into talent and content increasingly attractive to advertisers, brands, talent agencies, studios and venture-capital (VC) investors on a near global scale. (Cunningham & Craig, 2019, p. 13)

Of particular concern is the precarity of so much of this labor (Ananny, 2018; Gray & Suri, 2019). Traditional media industries continue to shed salaried employees, turning instead to independent, freelance, and contingent production. Independent creators, handed the tools to produce content on their own and the promise that the tools are simple, democratic, and empowering, commit their time and resources while bearing so much of the risk, often long before any assurances of success or compensation (Baym, 2018; Duffy, 2016). Platforms invite both amateurs and professionals to distribute their content on the same platform, under the same nominal terms of service, creating enormous risk for professional content providers as well, who find their ability to reach audiences is now at the whim of an algorithm and its fickle managers, unless they have the clout to negotiate a bespoke deal of their own (Cunningham & Craig, 2019; Nielsen & Ganter, 2018).

Stahl (2012) argues that cultural work has long been both autonomous and precarious, in ways indicative of the changes

in Western labor arrangements more generally. Borrowing a term from Curtis, he suggests that musicians enjoyed “bird-freedom. They are at liberty to flit from place to place, from employer to employer, but they are simultaneously free (bereft, that is) of any substantive claims on the means of making a living” (Stahl, 2012, p. 11). We suspect that Stahl would agree that the terms under which cultural workers work have grown even more troublesome, as YouTube has consolidated its power and prominence. YouTube creators face the precarity that Stahl describes, but they have little opportunity to flit to another employer; YouTube’s terms become the only game in town. These arrangements, then, built on the premises of social media participation but structured more like independent contract work, bound by an entrepreneurial competition for audience and resources, are YouTube’s proposal for the new structure of cultural, creative labor.

Recent debates about the obligations of platforms to engage in content moderation have further complicated these arrangements (Gillespie, 2018; Klonick, 2017). Public concern for the circulation of hate speech, terrorist propaganda, misinformation, and harassment has grown in recent years, pushing platforms to take a more interventionist approach—all the while being called out by critics for failing to do enough, or failing to be neutral, or failing to protect free speech. Users provide the labor and cause the trouble. This leaves the mechanisms of incentive and compensation uncomfortably paired with the mechanisms of detection and punishment. It is left to YouTube to decide how to implement these two efforts, not always aligned; it is left to users to work out how and why their efforts are structured, compensated, and moderated—and how to navigate this shifting landscape, with the hope of being heard, building an audience, and earning sufficient compensation for doing so.

These complex arrangements of labor, compensation, and governance are not just imposed; they are lived, felt, anticipated, exploited, and negotiated. We do not know enough about these arrangements and their implications, but we know even less about how users and creators encounter them, understand them, and work around them in their own production practices (West, 2018). We believe, however, that creators’ efforts to grapple with and articulate these governance arrangements can help provide a diagnostic of their significance. This is part of a broader effort to understand how users perceive platforms, algorithms, and information infrastructures (Bucher, 2017; Eslami et al., 2015) and reminiscent of work in organizational theory that examines how members of an organizational community understand and share knowledge about the nature of their work (Bechky, 2003).

Method and Analysis

We collected YouTube videos, beginning with keywords like “demonetization,” “adpocalypse,” “adsensegate,” and “youtubeisoverparty,” to identify 90 videos between August 2016 and June 2018. To ensure these videos were diverse in terms

of politics and genre, we also paired these keywords with others, such as “lgbtq,” “alt-right,” “prank,” “horror,” and “beauty,” to identify videos that may not have been popular enough to surface in the broader search, but may nevertheless have been significant within their own circles. We found that 90 videos were sufficient to establish clear patterns in how creators spoke about the experience of being demonetized, with significant redundancy and overlap as to how these creators perceived how policies were being made and enforced at YouTube.

We conducted six additional interviews with YouTube creators to discuss their experiences with demonetization, including YouTube partners ranging from smaller subscriber counts (below 1,000) to larger ones (above 100,000). Interviewees were recruited through social media and through a snowball method. Though small in number, we made sure to include a diverse range of YouTubers in terms of channel size, to reflect the tiers YouTube has established for creators. These semi-structured interviews provided background information on how revenue for creators had changed over time, how that impacted their personal lives, and some additional details about interactions with YouTube when creators wished to regain their monetized status.

To situate these experiences within the broader history of the company’s practices, we conducted a discourse analysis of YouTube’s corporate communications about the YPP over more than a decade, drawn from YouTube’s Official Blog and the YouTube Creator Blog. We used the *WayBack Machine* to track when YPP policies had been instituted or adjusted and how they changed over time. We also drew on additional secondary sources, coverage in the technology press, and trade publications whenever possible.

Broadcast Yourself . . . But Keep It “Advertiser-Friendly”

Frustration about demonetization has grown over time. In our analysis, there have been at least six periods of demonetization that have fueled and structured the public debate. Each revolved around a controversial policy change in which YouTube re-negotiated and re-defined who counts as a partner, what content was acceptable for advertisers, or how the rules and decisions were conveyed. In response to each, creators took to the platform to express their discontent and disillusionment with the increasingly attenuated promise of shared revenues. It should be noted that this is not a definitive list, and different writers on the topic (Alexander, 2018b) tend to conflate one or two of these periods together:

August–December 2016: The #YouTubeIsOverParty, which began after DeFranco and others received notifications that their content had been demonetized;

March–May 2017: “The First Adpocalypse,”⁵ after advertisers expressed concern over their ads being paired with terrorist

content (during this time, Disney also cut ties with YouTuber PewDiePie for sharing anti-Semitic imagery) (Alexander, 2018b);

August–November 2017: the “Yellow Dollar Sign” controversy, after YouTube added icons to creators’ dashboards indicating which videos have been demonetized, fueling suspicion about YouTube’s algorithmic methods of policing videos;

November–December 2017: “The Second Adpocalypse,” following another wave of advertiser concerns, this time about lewd comments on videos featuring children (Handley, 2017);

December 2017–January 2018: The “Logan Paul incident,” after the prominent YouTuber uploaded a video depicting the body of a suicide victim, and public outcry led to changes regarding creator access, privileges, and benefits (YouTube, n.d.-a);

January–February 2018: The spam change, after YouTube announced a significant policy change that affected who had access to the YPP, excluding small channels under 1000 subscribers (YouTube, 2018a);

February 2019: “The Third Adpocalypse,” following the release of a video by Matt Watson demonstrating how YouTube family channels were being used by bad actors and pedophiles, leading to more advertiser pressure (Alexander, 2019).

DeFranco was not the first to complain about how the YPP had deviated from its initial promise (Alexander, 2018b), but he was one of the first high-profile YouTubers to do so. His videos helped spur a public discussion that soon consolidated around the hashtag “#YouTubeIsOverParty” (Ingram, 2016; Kircher, 2017b; Maheshwari & Wakabayashi, 2017). Creators across the site took issue with the vague “advertiser-friendly” guidelines that determined whether a video was acceptable for revenue sharing. Because these guidelines included broad prohibitions against “controversial or sensitive subjects and events, including subjects related to war, political conflicts, natural disasters and tragedies,” YouTubers like DeFranco challenged them as tantamount to the “censorship” of political and cultural expression (DeFranco, 2016).⁶ Curiously, YouTube had in fact not changed its “advertiser-friendly” content policies, only how users were alerted to violations (Kain, 2016).⁷ But as this new clarity helped make clear, YouTubers earning a share of ad revenue must meet different content standards for what is acceptable to advertisers, and their videos can be demonetized for violating those rules.

The experiences of creators were frequently at odds with the claims being made publicly by YouTube, fostering suspicion between the platform and creators, and between creators themselves. Some of YouTube’s policy changes appeared to have been triggered by major news coverage about potentially harmful or predatory content on the network (Wakabayashi & Maheshwari, 2019). For example, in the First Adpocalypse, the companies Johnson & Johnson and

AT&T threatened to pull their advertisements following reports about terrorist content and antisemitism on the site (Mostrous & Bridge, 2017). Suspicion that advertisers were setting YouTube’s agenda was persistent.

Some were sanguine about the reality of an advertising-supported model, sympathetic to YouTube’s financial bind. One noted that “most creators won’t admit it, YouTube is a business.” Another commended YouTube for actually sharing advertising revenue with creators at all, something few other platforms had done.⁸ Some felt that “creators have to keep advertisers happy” as an entrepreneurial strategy, because advertisers are not bound to the platform.⁹ But others rejected these guidelines as contrary to YouTube’s ethos and the central promise of the YPP. Some felt duped; one lamented that YouTube had been a space where he felt free to speak unhindered, that wasn’t “regulated and censored in the way that sterile, safe, sanitized, boring, and brain-dead old television had become.”¹⁰ PewDiePie, the site’s most popular user throughout this period, echoed this sentiment, warning that YouTube was being “forced” by advertiser pressure to turn “into television.”¹¹ Another noted YouTube’s hypocrisy, discouraging non-advertiser-friendly content while also depending on a recommendation algorithm that “rewards you for being an edge lord,” that is, being as “edgy” or risqué as possible.¹²

Beyond the sense of indignation, YouTube creators also confessed to their audiences that demonetization meant significant material and social losses, which they felt were also at odds with YouTube’s narrative. Exact figures are difficult to come by and easy to misrepresent. Some YouTubers reported losing as much as “97% of ad revenue,”¹³ whereas others described drops not quite so drastic, but nevertheless significant. Others enumerated the significant investments amateur production actually required, whether material resources like camera equipment,¹⁴ “shoes and clothing,” software like Final Cut Pro,¹⁵ and even just the costs of charging cameras.¹⁶ Others noted the massive commitments of time necessary; one YouTuber noted that she “puts more work into her YouTube channel than when she did a 9-5.”¹⁷

To counter the loss of revenue, many implored their audiences to support them financially in other ways.¹⁸ Many urged fans to donate through Patreon—a crowdfunding service widely used by artists and creators—or to buy related merchandise, both now common tactics for YouTubers needing to diversify their revenue streams¹⁹ and limit the risk of, as one creator put it, “putting all our eggs into the YouTube basket.”²⁰ In a few cases, YouTubers fretted that the lost revenue was reason enough to leave the platform. One noted that she had stopped “relying on YouTube,” noting the loss of revenue had affected her “motivations to make videos here.”²¹ For some, this meant a return to full-time employment and a “normal job,”²² or a migration to alternative platforms like Twitch,²³ or DLive, or to cryptocurrency-based alternatives like DTube and Steemit. One creator described how an alternative platform had used the demonetization crisis as a way to

recruit him to create exclusive content.²⁴ Still, network effects kept most creators tied to YouTube, with one creator lamenting, “it’s still the biggest audience.”

Tiered Governance and the Perception of Fairness

The #YouTubeIsOverParty was only the first public interrogation of YouTube’s revenue-sharing arrangements. Over the next 3 years, advertiser concerns led to additional changes in how YouTube implemented its policies across the platform. In many cases, these changes highlighted tensions around YouTube’s *tiered governance* approach, in which different users—amateurs, professionalized amateurs, legacy media organizations, and YouTube’s contracted producers of original content—are held to different standards in different ways. A frequent complaint, among our interviewees and in the demonetization videos, was that YouTube was prioritizing the interests of advertisers over the needs of creators: that established media personalities were seen as more “advertiser-friendly” and were thus being treated differently by the platform (Dwoskin, 2019), and that user-generated content was policed separately, more strictly, and through different mechanisms—including an over-reliance on flawed automation techniques.

Jimmy Kimmel, host of *Jimmy Kimmel Live!*, was frequently held up as evidence that the “advertiser-friendly guidelines” imposed on amateur creators were not applied equally to media partners. One series of videos pointed out that YouTube demonetized videos by Casey Neistat—a well-established YouTuber with millions of followers—that discussed the 2017 Las Vegas shooting, while Kimmel’s monologues discussing the same tragedy remained, with advertisements.²⁵ Others pointed to Vevo as indicative of YouTube’s hypocrisy. Although creators were demonetized for “bikini try-ons” that the platform argued violated their terms of service, Vevo music videos with sexual suggestive content continued to collect advertising revenue.²⁶

Some felt that YouTube was “picking and choosing who they want to have in their Premium.”²⁷ Neistat himself argued that YouTube may treat Kimmel differently because the partnership with ABC is structured differently, allowing ABC to sell *its own ads* alongside the content it posted.²⁸ Like many, Neistat believed that selective enforcement of the rules, uneven partnerships, and sudden losses of revenue were hurting all those creators who did not enjoy such deals, noting the community had “lost faith in YouTube.”

But focusing on this one distinction, between amateur creators and established media partners, belies the complex landscape of distinctions YouTube makes between many different types of creators: “whitelisted” media partners that sell their own ads (Alexander, 2017), the Nonprofit YPP (YouTube, n.d.-d), channels supported by third-party MCNs, YouTube’s own content, and YPP. YouTube also maintains an elite set of the most popular and acceptable channels that advertisers can

pay a premium to be paired with; these “Google Preferred” channels are selected according to oblique, algorithmic criteria including their popularity, engagement, and propriety (YouTube, n.d.-b). But even within the YPP, YouTube has instituted a tiered structure, offering benefits and material resources to some more than others, based on factors such as subscriber count, engaged time, and other measures of popularity (Popper, 2017).

There have always been constraints about who gets to be a YouTube partner. When the program was first launched in 2007, YouTube hand-selected who could join, prioritizing “the most popular and prolific content creators” (YouTube, 2007a). Creators like Lonelygirl15, smosh, and HappySlip were chosen because they had, according to YouTube, “built and sustained large, persistent audiences through the creation of engaging videos,” content that “has become attractive for advertisers.” Even as the YPP was extended to the broader YouTube community, the offer was limited to specific geographic regions: first to those within the United States and Canada, with Japan, Australia, Ireland, Brazil, and Spain added the next year (YouTube, 2007a, 2008).

The broadened YPP came with parameters for who could be included. Partners needed to have a large subscriber base and regular engagement; they also had to remain in good standing with the platform, ensuring their content not only follow the site-wide “Community Guidelines” imposed on all users, but also that it be “advertiser-friendly”—a second set of more restrictive guidelines Partners must meet, with “signals like community strike, spam, and other abuse flags” (YouTube, 2018b) used to determine inclusion.

Eventually, the YPP was systematized into an explicitly tiered structure, distinguishing not only between Partners and non-Partners, but also between Partners of different prominence, a “ladder” (Arnstein, 1969) that rewarded creators for increased engagement. In 2011, YouTube announced a “Medals” program (which built off of their existing “Honors” and “Goodies” programs, although we could no longer find information about those programs from official YouTube sources). These medals—Gold, Silver, and Bronze (Fratella, 2016)²⁹—rewarded users who had the most all-time engagement (Wilms, 2011). At first, these were merely awards, symbolic commendations of a YouTuber’s success. Eventually the medals became “benefit levels” (YouTube has since added lower categories such as Graphite and Opal), each indicating a higher stratum of subscribers and more “watch-time.”

These are more than mere commendations. Although the specific benefits have changed, each tier offers material resources and additional opportunities that could be used to further a creator’s career on the platform. For instance, while all partners have access to YouTube’s Creator Hub website (YouTube, 2012a), Opal Partners receive special invitations to onsite events and workshops that train creators in production techniques and audience management. Bronze partners get access to “creator spaces,” decked out studio spaces

owned by YouTube that include equipment like “DSLRs and cinema cameras” (YouTube, 2012b)—privileging creators near enough to London, Los Angeles, Berlin, Mumbai, New York, Dubai, Rio, and Toronto or with the sufficient funds to get there. Silver partners, with more than 100,000 subscribers, are each assigned a YouTube Partner Manager who promises one-on-one support, as well as insider access to new products and features (YouTube, n.d.-c).

These tiers thus offer not just different material benefits, but also differentiated access to the company itself. A direct line to a YouTube representative means unique expertise and resources, but it also offers an opportunity to build up trust with a real human point of contact within the company—who might then be a source of much-needed clarification of internal policies, an avenue for more directly appealing moderation or demonetization decisions against the creator, or a source of advice on how to carefully avoid such decisions. In our interviews, it was evident that creators with smaller audiences had quite limited means to contest a demonetization decision, while more popular creators often used their Partner Manager or other people they knew at the platform as a back door.³⁰ Kumar notes that YouTube quietly changed its appeals process to benefit established stars: only videos with at least 1,000 views in a week could be re-evaluated by a human, but this restriction did not apply to channels with more than 10,000 subscribers (Kumar, 2019, p. 6).

This tiered governance is wholly defined by YouTube. The terms of participation can be changed by the platform arbitrarily, unilaterally, even capriciously—changes that could have an immediate impact on a creator’s audience size and reach. This was the issue in the “small channel” purge in February 2018. YouTube tightened who qualified for the YPP, raising the number of watch hours and subscribers required (Welch, 2018). Smaller YouTubers who had already been receiving ad revenue were suddenly dropped from the program altogether. Although some acknowledged that this change might benefit creators overall by easing competition in the YouTube attention economy,³¹ others again took to the platform to complain about the new policy and how YouTube had implemented it. As one trans YouTuber worried, smaller channels from more marginalized communities might feel compelled to become more like “what mainstream America wants to see” or use “clickbaity titles” to bring in more traffic, all to ensure their sustained revenue.³²

Policies have to occasionally change. But this degree of unevenness, as a feature of the “private governance by platforms” (Caplan, in press; Gillespie, 2018; Klonick, 2017; Suzor, 2019), can violate one of the “most commonly agreed upon principles of the rule of law . . . that rules are applied equally and predictably” (Suzor, 2018, p. 6). Suzor notes that the “perceived arbitrariness” of rules being applied differently can be a “key source of anxiety around governance” (p. 7). This anxiety, propelled by information asymmetries and a lack of communication from YouTube about their policy changes, leads to a plethora of sometimes conspiratorial

explanations from YouTubers about *why* content was demonetized or why the rules were changing.

Information Asymmetries and Alternative Explanations

On 7 August 2017, YouTube implemented another change, not the *rules* themselves but rather *how* Partners would be alerted to the fact they had been demonetized (YouTube, 2017a). It may not be immediately obvious to a user when they have had a video demonetized: Users who earn significant revenue typically produce many videos, and those revenue streams vary week to week based on viewership. So in 2017 YouTube added three new icons to users’ dashboards to indicate the revenue-generating status of each video: green meant “videos that can earn money from the broadest set of advertisers and from YouTube Red”; yellow meant videos that have “limited or no ads because the video has been classified as either not suitable for all advertisers or has been fully demonetized”; a dollar sign with a strike through it meant the video was fully demonetized due to a copyright infringement, Content ID claim, or Community Guidelines violation. YouTube made additional changes to how users could appeal a decision and what information about the “status” of their appeal was provided. The icons, meant to offer greater transparency, were not well received.

The “Yellow Dollar Sign” controversy highlighted broader tensions around the information asymmetry or “information flux” (Bossewitch & Sinnreich, 2013) between the creators and the platform company. YouTube creators have long complained not just about being demonetized, or the capricious, ad hoc, and unpredictable changes in the rules, but also about YouTube failing (or avoiding) to communicate the rules and expectations clearly. Even as communication was being improved, opacity in how the rules were applied, along with the lack of access to personnel at YouTube who might explain, has led users to develop their own theories about how and why videos were selected for demonetization.

Around this time, YouTube was relying more on machine learning algorithms to help determine whether a video was “advertiser-friendly” (YouTube, 2017b). With the new dashboard icons, it became easier for creators to scrutinize which videos had been demonetized and which had not. Creators began noticing that both current³³ and *past* videos had been demonetized.³⁴ By matching this with drops in revenue, creators surmised that the detection algorithm had actually been in place for several months before it was announced, and that its criteria were changing.³⁵

But with so little information to go on, YouTubers struggled to know what exactly about their video was being judged unacceptable, leading to “an anxiety laden environment of second-guessing, self-surveillance and continuous tweaking” (Kumar, 2019, p. 7). One YouTuber criticized the system as “pure AI logic at work,” providing no information about “why the video is flagged, just that it is.”³⁶ This left Creators

with guesses rather than guidance as to how to stay within the rules in future videos: [One beauty vlogger noted that without an explanation, “I can sit here and speculate all day long . . . we can’t even curate our content to fit their algorithm.”]³⁷

Of course, “being in algorithmically controlled spaces entails trying to figure out how the algorithmic mechanisms of the platforms they use work” (Bucher, 2018, p. 139). In the absence of clear communication from YouTube, creators can draw their own conclusions (Kumar, 2019; Morris, 2018) about how and why YouTube governs the YPP in the way that it does. Some YouTubers theorized that the demonetization algorithm was parsing keywords, metadata, and text and might unfairly penalize words with multiple meanings—all by using a form of reverse engineering (Diakopoulos, 2014; Kitchin, 2017), changing tags or titles to see whether the algorithmic system remonetized their content. A creator who consistently posted about lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer (LGBTQ+) issues reported running an experiment, in which she gave the same video two titles—“gay couple” and “straight couple.” The “gay couple” video was demonetized, the other was not.³⁸ What may have been a detection error, the YouTuber took as a “form of censorship,” with the system treating the word “gay” “as if it’s a dirty word.” Another YouTube asserted that every time he used the word “ISIS,” he was demonetized, leading him to believe the algorithm equated all discussion about ISIS with pro-ISIS content.³⁹

For YouTubers who discuss controversial or contested subjects, it was easy to suspect they were demonetized *because of* their beliefs. Far-right YouTubers have gained particular traction with their audiences by asserting that YouTube is targeting them for their political beliefs, ending in their “mass demonetization.”⁴⁰ For example, some critics, like podcaster Joe Rogan, have accused YouTube of demonetizing videos to “stop the spread of conservative ideology and spread liberal ideology” (JRE Clips, 2018). More recently, YouTuber Steven Crowder claimed YouTube had revealed its bias against conservatives by demonetizing several of Crowder’s videos for using homophobic language and selling homophobic merchandise (a clear violation of YouTube’s policies) (Rosenberg, 2019). Such concerns about political bias in content moderation and platform governance more broadly have been gaining traction, even brought to the US Senate by Republican politicians such as Ted Cruz and Josh Hawley (Shepardson, 2019).

In fact, YouTube’s efforts to police creators through the rules of revenue sharing are not limited to one ideology. YouTubers across the political spectrum and across issues have asserted that their demonetizations were politically motivated. Among the YouTubers who reported being demonetized, political content was common, but this included creators from right, left, and center. Members of marginalized communities have also felt targeted. One user recounted how every video she makes about police violence was demonetized: “My Alton Sterling video, my Philando

Castile video . . . demonetized. Anything where I’m talking about Black issues, or sensitive issues, it gets demonetized.” YouTubers speaking out against environmental issues, mental health, and LGBTQ+ issues have also had videos demonetized (Kircher, 2017a). One YouTuber used evidence from his demonetization history to argue that YouTube was targeting him because of his sexual orientation: “I’m sure it’s not a gay thing, but it feels a bit like a gay thing. Feels a bit suspect, homophobic, and like YouTube is trying to say to me ‘you and your kind do not belong here’.”⁴¹

YouTube does maintain an appeals process, but significant lag times mean that even videos demonetized in error may lose revenue at the worst time, particularly in the first 24–48 hours when the most views are likely.⁴² Because of this, Partners have developed a variety of tactics (de Certeau, 1984) to test whether a video will be demonetized: Borrowing a tactic used to determine potential copyright strikes,⁴³ some Partners first upload their video set to private,⁴⁴ giving the algorithm time to assess the video before it is made public. Of course, implicit in this tactic is the widespread assumption that YouTube’s judgments should be consistent, although many complained that they are not:

it got demonetized twice, the third time it got through . . . I’m not sure how the YouTube algorithm works, but I’m sure it works a bit randomly. If it’s just machine learning, it should flag the same video every time.

This lack of clarity and control even led to emotional and psychological challenges for YouTubers. In one interview with a higher tier YouTuber, she noted her “depression or disappointment curve” began the moment the demonetization crisis began and worsened as she realized YouTube was claiming “everything’s fine” while her revenue was steeply declining.⁴⁵ Another interviewee, once he recognized he could not reach the threshold even to get a review on the decisions made against him, said, “It was heartbreaking. It was discouraging . . . What’s the point of creating new content at that point, you know?”⁴⁶

Conclusion

Media industries shape production in part by asserting the terms under which producers must labor. This is true whether it is the Hollywood contract, the record deal, the freelancer’s agreement, or now the terms of YPP. They do this to maximize the chances that they will get to distribute what audiences will want and that advertisers will pay to be near it. The YPP and similar revenue-sharing arrangements across social media are the next step by the media industries to fit creative production with the parameters of labor and compensation (Cunningham & Craig, 2019; Havens et al., 2009; Neff, 2012). The YPP is no longer a “partnership,” if it ever was; it is a labor contract in a new form, governing an enormous variety of creative work.

This contract limits who gets to take part and shapes what they produce. And it is slowly becoming an established and institutionalized element of YouTube and the industry as a whole (Caplan & boyd, 2018). Ways of doing things settle in as norms; initial strictures are implemented, then adjusted, then reworked, until they look more and more like a workable, intuitive compromise. One level of arrangements can meld with others, until the pathways of control and influence through an institution are hard to map onto simple aims, are closer to a patchwork of scratches across a landscape, and are slowly worn down into familiar pathways (Deuze & Prenger, 2019; Hesmondhalgh, 2019).

YPP can be read as just such a landscape, marked by the roles and responsibilities it lays out, the tensions it attempts to manage, and the controversies that can drive it to change. The specific tangle of reward and restriction of YPP, and the tiered governance model it imposes, represents a shift in YouTube's orientation toward creators: from a nominal partnership with users, to a more structured governance of media production labor. These tensions are indicative of the broader attempts to fit social media with an industrial apparatus of commercial production and distribution that will survive as a set of arrangements and sustain the profits of all the stakeholders. And creators have pushed back—partly as a way, in the absence of clear explanations, to even understand it; partly to score political points against YouTube, Google, and Silicon Valley in a moment of partisan warfare about the right to speak publicly; and partly to work out the fundamental tensions of being paid to produce in a social media landscape premised on amateur participation.

While YouTube's policies are stratified and structured, so is the population of creators who depend on them. Recent claims of “conservative bias” obscure how YouTube's demonetization of specific videos and the changes in the terms of the YPP itself affect users across topic, genre, region, and political identification. Outspoken right-wing critics decry the demonetization of their videos as a cloaked censorship of conservative speech; few are aware, or will acknowledge, that civil rights activists on the left also complain of their videos being demonetized—who also presume that it is their edgy political ideology that scared YouTube off. And demonetization hits not just political YouTubers but also those who play in other genres: horror and shock, pranks and bro culture, sexual expression and education. Still, even if such accusations of conservative bias are misguided, they help reveal how YouTube's policies leave some creators feeling unfairly targeted, suspicious of the entire enterprise, and looking for explanations more satisfying than those YouTube has been willing to offer.

Of course, demonetization matters differently, and is understood differently, depending on who is on the receiving end. Most importantly, creators who post videos to YouTube as part of their professional efforts experience demonetization differently than amateurs who happen to enjoy the revenue; celebrity YouTubers experience it differently, and have more avenues of

recourse, than small channels. This matters, given that YouTube now hosts, and governs, a variety of creators who labor in different ways: creators who enjoy the revenue they can accrue but have no professional aim beyond it; creators who come to depend on that revenue, but not as part of a media-producing institution; professionals in other venues, who enjoy reputational benefits from being on YouTube without drawing revenue from them; media professionals who use YouTube as a secondary venue for distribution; media institutions who partner with YouTube to take advantage of its distribution power.

The demonetization debate shows the tensions YouTube is attempting to manage as their new and old media models begin to clash. YouTube still wants to structure, fund, and govern the amateur production of media and sustain the promise of participatory culture. At the same time, the need to secure stable revenue streams, combined with pressures from advertisers to improve the quality and predictability of content, has driven them to install a system of tiered governance, hinged on rewarding audience size and celebrity, that is more akin to the contractual arrangements of traditional media. The YPP and the tensions revealed by the demonetization debate attest to the difficulty of holding these models in suspension.

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Notes

1. In most cases, we have chosen to anonymize the YouTube videos used within this analysis (with unique IDs), except in rare cases when a YouTuber has a significant following (several

million), is a mass media figure, or if the video itself has become a reference point for other YouTube videos.

2. According to documents from a copyright-related court case between Google and Viacom, YouTube's founders Chad Hurley, Steve Chen, and Jawed Karim initially pitched the company to venture capitalists as containing both amateur content that would "eventually sit alongside legitimately uploaded, professionally produced media content." From Burgess and Green (2018).
3. According to Alexander (2018b), YouTubers have also been losing their accounts over promoting alternative platforms on their channels (though we did not independently verify this fact).
4. This meaning of "demonetization" should not be confused with a second, contemporary meaning, where the same word has been used to describe the efforts of a community or nation to forego material currency in exchange for digital or some other informational form of monetary exchange.
5. The First, Second, and Third Adpocalypse are the terms given by the YouTube community for these controversies, as indicated through the YouTube fandom wiki, available here: https://youtube.fandom.com/wiki/YouTube_Adpocalypse
6. As of 27 August 2016, YouTube's guidelines noted that

Content that is considered inappropriate for advertising . . . includes, but is not limited to: Sexually suggestive content, including partial nudity and sexual humor; Violence, including display of serious injury and events related to violent extremism; inappropriate language, including harassment, profanity, and vulgar language; controversial or sensitive subjects and events, including subjects related to war, political conflicts, natural disasters and tragedies, even if graphic imagery is not shown.

<https://web.archive.org/web/20160827074034/https://support.google.com/youtube/answer/6162278?hl=en>

7. A search through YouTube's past policies confirms that the same five categories of "sexually suggestive content," "violence," "inappropriate language," "promotion of drugs," and "controversial or sensitive subjects and events, including natural disasters and deaths" were present as early as 11 March 2015, with this last category expanded to include "subjects related to war, political conflicts, natural disasters, and tragedies" later that year (YouTube, 2015).
8. From YouTube video ID #40.
9. From YouTube video ID #8.
10. From YouTube video ID #16.
11. From YouTube video ID #19.
12. From YouTube video ID #80.
13. From YouTube video ID #8.
14. From YouTube video ID #5; interview with W.
15. From YouTube video ID #74.
16. From YouTube video ID #64.
17. From YouTube video ID #5.
18. Interview with J.
19. From YouTube video ID #60.
20. From YouTube video ID #27.
21. From YouTube video ID #88.
22. From YouTube video ID #31.
23. From YouTube video ID #87.
24. Interview with J.
25. From YouTube videos ID #41, #42, #48.
26. Interview with A.; From YouTube video ID #2, #67.

27. Interview with J.
28. From YouTube video ID #48.
29. Graphite for under 1,000 subscribers, Opal for 1,000–10,000 subscribers and more than 1,000 watch hours in the past year, Bronze for 10,000–100,000 subscribers and 10,000 watch hours, and Silver for attaining more than 100,000 subscribers and 100,000 watch hours. In addition, much like the music industry, awards are given to those who cross the million and 10 million marks.
30. Interview with A.
31. From YouTube video ID #31.
32. From YouTube video ID #78.
33. From YouTube video ID #50.
34. From YouTube video ID #44.
35. From YouTube video ID #37.
36. From YouTube video ID #37.
37. From YouTube video ID #39.
38. From YouTube video ID #56.
39. From YouTube video ID #3.
40. From YouTube video ID #30.
41. From YouTube video ID #66.
42. From YouTube video ID #65.
43. Interview with W.
44. From YouTube video ID #58.
45. Interview with A.
46. Interview with J.

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