

# **The Rise of Content Creators and Online Media Platforms**

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On my honor as a University Student, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid on this assignment as defined by the Honor Guidelines for Thesis-Related Assignments

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## **Abstract**

Online media platforms have grown exponentially in the past decade, becoming the hallmark of both entertainment and advertising. This growth has been accompanied by a large rise in the number of content creators who have found independent content creation a lucrative career. The actions of content creators have shaped the guidelines and tools of content platforms they use through collective action on social media. Pushback to targeted harassment and unfair treatment have caused Twitch to improve moderation tools and YouTube to remove dislike counts. Content platforms have also changed the popularity of content made through algorithmic updates and advertising policies. Shifts to YouTube's content selection algorithm resulted in an influx of vlog and long-form content, including videos made for children. These changes are analyzed through actor-network theory and framed through the cause-and-effect of social collective action (Latour, 2005).

# The Rise of Content Creators and Online Media Platforms

## Introduction

Today, nearly everyone has viewed videos from YouTube, Twitch, or Facebook. Yet, these platforms only began in the early 2000s. In two short decades, online media platforms have revolutionized the entertainment and marketing industries, dominating both short-form and long-form content. About 2.4 billion people worldwide have made accounts on Facebook since its inception in 2004 (Roser, 2015). The average person spends almost seven hours a day browsing online media, while teenagers and young adults spend over three hours daily on social media alone (Top Media, 2021). In 2020, users consumed around 28 billion hours of content across Facebook, YouTube, and Twitch (Michael, 2021). This new demand for online content led to the emergence of many successful independent content creators, inspiring others to also pursue content creation. Today, about 30% of kids in the U.S. say their dream career is becoming a YouTube star (Yuan and Constine, 2021). In 2021, there were 50 million active content creators in the U.S., meaning one out of every six Americans monetize original content (Yuan and Constine, 2021). As the rise of online platforms shaped the entertainment industries, the influencers and their audiences have also established practices that changed the platforms they use. Content creators have greatly influenced the policies of online platforms they use through social and legal means. Online platforms have also altered the direction of popular content through policy and algorithmic updates. The constant push-and-pull between content creators and their platforms results in the online content we watch today. This paper will specifically focus on social policy changes, highlighting changes that were the result of social efforts. This includes algorithm modifications due to social issues and changes from influencer pressure. The paper will cover media-focused creator platforms, primarily Twitch and YouTube, which offer

content creators ways to monetize their content. This does not include changes to primarily social media services or forums, like Twitter, Instagram, and Reddit. However, quotes and activities on social media services and forums will be used to show public opinion on issues involved with changes to media-focused platforms.

## **Method**

The relationship between content creators and online media platforms will be analyzed through actor-network theory (Latour, 2005). Bennet and Segerberg (2012) discovered that collective action has been accelerated by the rise of social networks and digital media, which influencers thrive upon. This co-dependence between social networks and influencers mirrors the relationship between news media and social media reported by Roesse (2018). In this paper, the actions and agendas of creators and platforms will be sourced from social media and news outlets and treated collectively as the same actor. For content creators, this will include both individual creators and communities created or sponsored by content creators. For content platforms, this will include statements made by the CEO, blog posts from engineers, and social outreach efforts. Osborne et al. (2018) found collective action often arises from the conflict between groups challenging and defending the status quo, as that unifies participants within each group. The connection between creators and content platforms will be examined through the cause-and-effect of actions that triggered transitions in the online media status quo.

The paper will first analyze platform changes to advertising and the effect that had on online creators and their content and the pushback in advertising practices. Next, there will be a discussion focused on the use of copyrighted music in online content and fair use of existing videos, including what online platforms have implemented to enable users to protect their work. Finally, the paper will examine how content creators have campaigned to prevent unfair

treatment and reduce harassment on their platforms, resulting in platform policy and moderation tool changes. These topics have been chosen due to their significance to trends in online content and the high frequency they appear in public discourse on social media.

### **Advertising Policies**

Online platforms often update their content selection algorithms to appeal to advertisers, attract new audiences, and stay on top of the latest trends. Major changes greatly impact creators and the popularity of various types of content. In 2017, due to advertisements playing on extreme and inappropriate content, YouTube released new advertising guidelines to grant advertising agencies more control over the videos behind their advertisements (Kumar, 2019). YouTube also added an algorithm that would automatically tag uploaded videos with five general labels such as “Profanity and rough language” and “Tragedy and Conflict” (Kumar, 2019). As the release of this new feature was not transparent to the content creators, a massive number of channels began getting demonetized without explanation, dubbed the “Adpocalypse” (Dunphy, 2017). A vlogger who focuses on mental health, Arianna Pfleiderer, reflected the sentiment of the YouTuber community: “I don’t feel like [YouTube] ever really explain[s] things well. Even after they explain things, I don’t think their explanation makes total sense” (Dunphy, 2017). Commentary channels that focused on more controversial topics such as news and politics were affected the most (Weiss, 2017). Creators such as Philip DeFranco, h3h3Productions, and PewDiePie reported having up to 85% losses in monetization revenue (Weiss, 2017). Many influencers became frustrated with the way YouTube was miscategorizing their content and not taking into account the context surrounding words and phrases. Nick Schade, who uses a technique called “strip building” in his woodworking videos, found that YouTube was demonetizing his video due to the word “strip” in his titles (Kumar, 2019). Another channel, *Faerie Rings Crochet Things*

discovered that the phrase “bugging me” was causing YouTube to flag the video for demonetization (Kumar, 2019). The outcry from the creator community caused YouTube to start improving the algorithm to support context analysis and build a more robust tagging algorithm. YouTube has since updated its advertiser-friendly content guidelines and YouTube CEO Susan Wojcicki announced that YouTube’s policy team would be more transparent about how YouTube labels content (Alexander, 2019b; Weiss, 2017).

To become more advertiser-friendly, a large number of creators began shifting to creating kids' content as it was deemed an easy and safe way of generating revenue. In 2017, many creators were already writing skits or creating animations using popular characters such as Elsa, Spider-Man, and the Joker to appeal to younger audiences (Alexander, 2017). However, as this genre became more and more saturated, some creators began releasing more extreme videos to stand out. These often had inappropriate themes or actions, including urination and sexual acts, between popular characters (Brandom, 2017). In addition, family channels that included child abuse also began gaining popularity. The success of creators like FamilyOFive, despite having been criminally charged for child neglect, showed that the YouTube advertising changes did not greatly affect content around children. A study from Mott reported that about a third of all videos targeted toward kids had three or more ads, including banner ads and sidebar ads (Mostafavi, 2020). Up to 22% of these advertisements were age-inappropriate, with violent, sexual, or political content (Mostafavi, 2020). Some creators began noticing this trend of extreme children's content and created a community on Reddit, known as ElsaGate, to report creators and videos with inappropriate content (Brandom, 2017). Redditor screenshots of video thumbnails that displayed content like “Examples of BDSM and Fetish Themes” caused outrage in the creator and viewer communities (concernedr3dditor, 2017). Horror at these videos and fear of another

Adpocalypse caused creators like Keemstar to “work privately behind the scenes with YouTube to get this content taken down” (Alexander, 2019a). With increasing pressure from content creators and parents, YouTube began working on stricter criteria and channel requirements for children’s content (Alexander, 2019a). In 2018, YouTube also hired 10,000 moderators to focus on identifying inappropriate children’s content and implemented additional parental controls on the YouTube Kids app (Brandom, 2017; Alexander, 2017).

To increase user retention and watch time, online platforms have implemented longer video length thresholds for advertising. Over the past few years, YouTube has updated its policies and content-selection algorithms to encourage creators to make longer videos to show more advertisements (Zilles, 2019). In 2016, YouTube introduced a 10-minute requirement for creators to add midroll advertisements to their videos (Youtube2016, 2016). Creators discovered that by adding these midroll advertisements, their revenue on each video would more than double (YouTube2016, 2016). Shelby Church, a tech lifestyle vlogger, found that adding only two advertisements tripled her profits every month (Alexander, 2019d). Many content creators, such as vloggers and makeup channels, began increasing the length of videos to fit more midroll advertisements (Alexander, 2019d). The “Trending” page, which used to be filled with the most popular content on the site, began only showing videos ranging from 10 minutes to an hour in length (Alexander, 2019d). YouTube’s addition of subscriber and viewing hour requirements for new channels also discouraged new creators to make short-form content (Zilles, 2019). This frustrated many creators, who claimed that the new algorithm and advertisement changes were “murdering animators” and “destroying freelance journalism” (ipinteus, 2019). Pushback from influencers eventually caused YouTube to reduce the midroll time requirement from 10 minutes to 8 minutes (Hutchinson, 2020). Due to the success of TikTok, YouTube and Facebook also

released YouTube Shorts and Instagram Reels, which specifically target short-form content (Spangler, 2021; Hutchinson, 2022).

The stricter limitations for advertising by online platforms have caused a major shift in the attitude of content creators and their perspective on content creation. This transition is similar to the findings of Cotter (2018), who studied the effect an advertising algorithm change had on Instagram influencers. Cotter (2018) reported that when Instagram updated its post-selection algorithm, some influencers supported the change as a challenge to game the system while others protested that the algorithm stifled creativity in posts. After the Adpocalypse and following YouTube algorithm changes, many creators have either criticized YouTube or adapted to the new monetization policies. Cotter (2018) labeled these two groups as relational influencers, who focus on cultivating relationships with their viewers, and simulated influencers, who aim for high visibility and engagement without authentic relationships. Relational influencers like cdmcgwire have lamented that “anyone appealing to a very niche audience is pretty much dead in the water” and that “there isn’t even a proper incentive to create and post videos as a side project” (ipinteus, 2019). Others have said that YouTube has lost its capability of showing viral videos and lost interest from “really edgy content creators”, greatly shifting the bias towards vlog content (Zilles, 2019). Although some creators like PewDiePie have called out fellow creators on superfluous tactics to extend content, like “disappear[ing] to use the bathroom”, other simulated influencers have begun writing guides highlighting similar techniques (Alexander, 2019d). Zach Snyder, a freelance video editor, created a tutorial on how to easily satisfy the new watch-time conditions for a new channel to monetize their content, suggesting that small content creators should treat more of their videos as raw live streams than edited videos to maximize video watch-time (Snyder, 2021). This new shift to creating advertiser-friendly content is also



expressed by Törhönen et al. (2019), who discovered that the motivating factors in content creation are shifting from enjoyment to income. As these platforms continue pushing for higher watch time through advertising policies, small creators without additional revenue sources will be forced to create “safe” videos to generate income.

### **Copyright and Fair Use**

Online platforms have become a battleground over music copyright as content creators utilize popular songs in their videos or streams. In a lawsuit in 2014, make-up guru Michelle Phan was sued by Ultra Music over copyright infringement for using 50 of their songs in her videos (Moon, 2014; Rawlinson, 2014). Despite some of the artists showing support to Michelle and her content, a legal battle ensued and the two parties ended up settling out of court (Gutelle, 2015). This lawsuit was a precedent for the following struggle between video creators and music corporations over the Digital Millennium Copyright Act (DMCA). In 2020, a sudden influx of DMCA copyright strikes on Twitch caused many creators to get banned without prior notice (Kim, 2021). Streamers like RATPARTY began tweeting out warnings to fellow creators, stating the situation was “really bad” and “kind of terrifying” as entire channels would get banned within the span of a few days (RATPARTY, 2021). Surprise and fear soon turned to anger and frustration as more videos began getting deleted from these copyright strikes. Devin Nash, a financial advice streamer, posted a screenshot of an email received from Twitch that wrote that Twitch was “not giving [anyone] the option to file a counter-notification or seek [retractions] from the rights holder” (Kim, 2021). Another video game streamer, BikiniBodhi, also complained that Twitch “didn’t tell [them] what got striked, nor did they tell [them] who issued it” (Kim, 2021). Initially, Twitch released a statement warning creators about using copyrighted music in their streams and videos (Fudge, 2021). However, due to mounting pressure from creators, Twitch

began negotiations with the National Music Publishers' Association (NMPA) to enable creators more flexibility when receiving a copyright strike (Grayson, 2021). Twitch also revamped its content review policy for DMCA strikes, hiring moderators to decide to issue a warning or more severe punishment based on the usage of music in streams (Grayson, 2021). Other platforms, like Facebook and YouTube, have also tried to secure licenses for their creators with limited success. Facebook Gaming has negotiated with music companies to provide creators with a "safe" collection of songs that are properly licensed and implemented tools to identify songs without appropriate licenses (Takahashi, 2021). YouTube has added an audio-swapping tool in their video editor and a selection of free sounds called the YouTube Audio Library (Alexander, 2019c; YouTube, n.d.).

Fair use of digital media has also been a pain point for content platforms and their creators, as influencers often use clips from popular media and other creators in their content. Fair use is a doctrine that enables the use of copyrighted material without permission from the copyright owner for "transformative" reasons (Stim, 2013). The creators of the fair use doctrine intentionally left the definition of transformative ambiguous, leading to a myriad of copyright disputes on content platforms, especially for reaction-based content (Stim, 2013). To enable users to claim copyrighted content on their site, YouTube has tools for users to manually submit a copyright strike on any video. In 2017, a pick-up artist and parkour channel, Matt Hosseinzadeh sued h3h3 Productions, a commentary channel, for using various clips of his videos in their content and submitted a copyright strike on their content (Foxx, 2017). H3h3 Productions won the lawsuit after a large crowdsourcing campaign, leading to the copyright strike being lifted on their video (Foxx, 2017). However, most content creators can not afford the lengthy legal processes to get a copyright strike removed, so YouTube's copyright tools have

become used for extortion and censorship (Wodinsky, 2019). Anonymous scammers often target small channels, demanding a ransom to lift copyright strikes (Wodinsky, 2019). If the channels do not comply, the copyright strikes could result in the demonetization of their content or a channel ban (Wodinsky, 2019). Small creators, such as ObbyRaidz, are not able to contest the copyright strike through legal means and are forced to pay to keep their channels alive: “If I don’t pay this dude, he’s going to strike a third one of my videos down” (Wodinsky, 2019). In addition, arguments between internet personalities can often result in targeted and unreasonable copyright strikes. In 2018, the streamer Alinity was offended by the use of her clips in a criticism video made by the YouTuber PewDiePie and asked “Can we copystrike PewDiePie?” on stream (Koepp, 2020). PewDiePie’s video was then issued a copyright strike and removed from YouTube temporarily before PewDiePie’s legal team was able to restore his video (Koepp, 2020). Many channels are also victims of baseless copyright strikes from outside corporations, which often result in a sudden number of copyright strikes, often without warning. Some large creators have been able to settle copyright strikes through legal avenues or public pressure. The Korean company MBC issued strikes against h3h3 Productions for using a snippet of their TV show featuring scenes from h3h3 Productions (Alford, 2021). A Japanese animation studio, Toei Animations, made over 150 copyright claims on the videos of Totally Not Mark, an anime channel, for his content including anime and manga reviews (Colbert, 2022). Due to public outcry over this overuse of the copyright system, YouTube’s team stepped in and assisted Totally Not Mark with regaining his video rights and added a regional copyright tool that enables companies to strike videos within their jurisdictions (Colbert, 2022). Susan Wojcicki has also met with h3h3 Productions to discuss concerns about copyright abuse on YouTube and has

promised to work on additional tools to prevent invalid strikes from occurring and affecting creators (Alexander, 2019b).

### **Equal Treatment and Harassment**

The content guidelines and restrictions on online platforms are often vague, and large moderating teams can struggle with consistent enforcement of these policies. During some of Alinity's streams on Twitch, she threw her cat over her head and fed her cat vodka (Chen, 2019). As mistreatment of animals is not allowed on Twitch, many creators expected her to receive a temporary ban for her actions, but her account remained unaffected (Chen, 2019). This caused outrage in the creator community, who accused Twitch of unfair and preferential treatment toward popular and attractive streamers (Belcher, 2020). Streamers and content creators like Keemstar, a drama channel, protested double standards from the Twitch moderation team: "This woman has broken every rule! [...] Stop treating men & women different on your platform!" (Belcher, 2020). A gaming streamer, kaceytron, tweeted that "Kneecoleslaw was permabanned for a year for animal abuse, they won't even give Alinity a slap on the wrist?", comparing Alinity's treatment with the penalty given to a smaller streamer (kaceytron, 2019). Another instance of unequal treatment occurred when a popular chatting streamer, Amouranth, accidentally exposed her genitals on stream, resulting in a three-day ban (Richman, 2021). Alinity also accidentally revealed her breasts on stream and only received a 12-hour suspension after she self-imposed a ban on her account (Richman, 2020). A chatting streamer, Barry74, was upset about the length of the ban, writing "I've been banned for over 90 days and [nudity] gets 3 day suspension awesome" (Smith, 2020). Another streamer JustaMinx was banned for seven days for words that she "didn't even mean in a hostile way" (Smith, 2020). Under pressure from creators to enforce fair treatment, Twitch has worked to expand its "Nudity & Attire" and

“Sexually Suggestive Content” guidelines, as well as defining what actions fall under “sexually explicit content” (Twitch, 2021). To better control advertising and be transparent about exceptions for certain types of streams, Twitch has also added a new category of content called “Pools, Hot Tubs, and Beaches” (Twitch, 2021).

Targeted harassment and bot accounts have been issues that online platforms have struggled to address as their platforms grow. On online media platforms, creators can instruct their fans or use automated bots to leave hateful comments on another channel’s stream or videos, known as a “hate raid” (Shutler, 2022). This is especially prevalent on Twitch, as harassment can occur in a real-time chat. Rami\_Speed, a gaming streamer, reported that in a hate raid her chat “was spammed with hateful comments, sexualizing comments, [and] tonnes of slurs like the N-word and the R-word” (Pandey, 2021). In 2022, a streamer known as JiDion ordered a hate raid on Pokimane, asking his fans to harass her stream, and only received a two-week ban (Shutler, 2022). As popular creators such as Myth and Disguised Toast spoke out against hate raids, other creators organized a campaign to protest Twitch’s lack of action against these raids (Shutler, 2022). In 2021, streamers RekItRaven, Shiney Pen, and Lucia Everblack successfully ran a social media campaign using the hashtags “#ADayOffTwitch” and “#TwitchDoBetter” to boycott Twitch for a day (Kamen, 2021). Other creators programmed a “panic button” for streamers to use during hate raids, which clears and disables the chat for non-subscribers to neutralize the attack, but the effectiveness of these tools has not been proven (Parrish, 2021). Due to creator pressure, Twitch has promised to “work[...] hard to make Twitch a safer place for creators” (Kamen, 2021). Twitch has since improved ban-evasion detection and launched more granular controls for streamers and moderators to grant and revoke chat privileges (Allen, 2021).

YouTube has also made the dislike counts on videos private to reduce the targeted harassment of creators (The YouTube Team, 2021).

### **Online Content Landscape**

Some may argue that the evolution of online content from content creators is only credited to trends and changes in the general population's interests. In this viewpoint, the changes to online content are a result of only what the public wants to see and not altered by changes to the platform's algorithm. Although online content does tend to reflect some popular trends, such as the popularization of short-form videos on YouTube and Facebook after the success of TikTok (Spangler, 2021; Hutchinson, 2022), patterns like the popularity of vlogs and children's videos were direct results of changes in advertising policy by YouTube (Alexander, 2019d).

Likewise, it could be contended that all changes in online platforms only occurred for an increase in profit and were not due to creator pressure. An example supporting this argument would be when YouTube changed its algorithm to push for longer videos and increased watch time, hurting more niche creators in the process (ipinteus, 2019). However, if this was the case, YouTube would not have implemented restrictions on new accounts to reduce harmful videos targeted toward children or reduced the video length limitations for midroll advertisements (Alexander, 2019a; Hutchinson, 2020). Twitch would also not have held negotiations with the NMPA to reduce the severity of DMCA strikes for streamers and built better tools for streamers to prevent hate raids (Grayson, 2021; Allen, 2021).

Content creators and online media platforms have evolved together over the years. Platform changes to advertising policy and content-selection algorithms caused a shift in the types of content creators produced. The collective action of content creators caused online

platforms to add restrictions and limitations to prevent harmful content, enhance tools to reduce false copyright strikes, and improve methods of reporting harassment. Although not all platform issues have been resolved, creator communities will continue working together to influence the future of media platforms. Online platforms will also continue to impact creators in their content and creative environment. In the future, platforms will likely further restrict divisive or disturbing content, overcorrecting to remove any content that appears to be harassment. This will also decrease the diversity of content on the platform, causing backlash from creators that would result in more leniency in content restrictions. Researchers should further examine this relationship and the shift in types of online content and the diversity of creators, and its effect on the prospects of independent-creator entertainment.

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