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Practice, Community, and Algorithms: How YouTube Creators Learn Through Making

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PRACTICE, COMMUNITY, AND ALGORITHMS:
HOW YOUTUBE CREATORS LEARN THROUGH MAKING

by

Morgan Forbush

A Thesis Submitted in
Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Science
in Anthropology

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May 2022

ABSTRACT

PRACTICE, COMMUNITY, AND ALGORITHMS: HOW YOUTUBE CREATORS LEARN THROUGH MAKING

by

Morgan Forbush

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2022
Under the Supervision of Professor Thomas Malaby

In this thesis, I answer the following questions: How do YouTube content creators learn content creation through their practice and participation in communities of practice? How do these communities help creators form identity? And, lastly, how do the YouTube's automated systems shape creators' practice and impact their identity? To explore these questions, I observed a community of new creators to understand how creators learned about content creation from others. I interviewed 11 YouTube creators that ranged in size of viewership and experience to understand how they personally adapted their content to the platform of YouTube as they create videos. I find that creators create a situated practice drawing from a bricolage of information coming from many sources. I also find that this individual practice and communal practice in creator communities contributes to the process of identification. Both practice and identification are influenced by the strategy that YouTube puts in place through its complex automated systems and algorithms that incentivize creators to make content that is in line with the platform.

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I dedicate this thesis to Eli, an amazing husband and father, who never gave up on me.

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LIST OF NOMENCLATURE

Analytics	A set of data that YouTube creates for each video on a channel. It gives creators data including how many viewers a video has had, its total watch time (see below), how viewers found it, and other data.
Content ID	Used as a verb, to be “content ID’ed” is to have a video is flagged by the algorithmic system which recognizes copyrighted material and flags the video for the copyright holder to review.
Monetization	A feature of YouTube that allows a video to earn ad revenue and other monetary benefits for its creator.
Discord	A collaborative software platform used by many content creators. Groups will often refer to their Discord server as “the discord”.
Views	The number of times viewers have clicked on a video and watched it for more than 10 seconds. Views are not counted if a viewer clicked off the video within 10 seconds (if the video is longer than 10 seconds).
Watch Time	The total amount of time all viewers have watched a specific video. The term can be extended to indicate a cumulative metric for a whole channel.

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Chapter 1 – Introduction

“Getting paid as a musician is hard, we make the bills, and we chase the bills. To have this one monthly payment in my life is just so grounding. I would love to do this full time, that would be amazing...” Wade from the channel *Dankmus* states in a 2019 video, “but when my biggest hurdle is fighting the very platform that I want to be employed through what kind of motivation is that?” Wade is standing in front of a thick blanket hung up on the wall, holding his pet snake, and talking frankly about his issues with YouTube as a creator. When he made the video, titled, “YouTube kinda stinks. My experience being a small weird channel on YouTube. *feat. Frank The Snake*” he had roughly 30k subscribers on his channel, considered to be a small channel. Even though the video was meant to air some of YouTube’s “dirty laundry,” as he put it, he had an overall sense of gratitude for the work that he was able to do for money.

“Being able to pay off my credit cards with my weird Simpson remixes feels great,” he chuckled, but there were issues that he could not ignore with the platform. YouTube would hold comments back for review. He argued that limited his ability to interact with his community that he was so proud of. He was also upset that YouTube took a 30% cut of donations from fans. Perhaps most egregious of these issues was the automated process that he had to engage with to get his channel monetized. He tried for a full year to regain monetization after it was taken away with no explanation from YouTube support or any way to plead his case. Wade detailed how he could only click on a button to have his channel reviewed and then wait a month for the verdict to come back. If it did not work his only recourse was to click the button again to wait another month. Despite these serious issues, Wade still expresses, throughout the video, how amazing creating content is and what his little community means to him.

Fast forward three years. Wade has mostly stopped making *Dankmus* videos but has been able to make content creation his main source of income. His second channel *Dankpods* passed one million subscribers in December of 2021, with his third channel *Garbage Time* having 270,000 subscribers. He has said in multiple videos that YouTube helped him through the COVID-19 pandemic as his music career was put on indefinite hold. YouTube and Patreon (a website for people to donate a monthly amount to creators) were his lifeline through lockdown. While Patreon has eased some worry about being demonetized, he still faces issues with YouTube and other platforms. In 2021, He had to move his streams from the leading streaming platform, Twitch, to the subscription-based streaming platform Floatplane due to copyright issues. As a creator, Wade is constantly fighting platforms to make the content he wants to make with as little compromise as possible.

Wade is not the only creator who contends with the complicated process of creating content for themselves, viewers, and the YouTube platform at the same time. There are 51 million channels with more than 10 subscribers as of 2020 and 500 hours of content uploaded to YouTube every minute. There are 29,000 channels that have over one million subscribers, another 306,000 have over 100k subscribers. Channels with over 500k subscribers are usually considered larger, successful channels. The mid-sized channels have between 100k and 500k, with the small channels being under 100k. With over two billion monthly logged-in users, the scale YouTube developers must cope with is hard to grasp. Any one of those logged-in users can upload a video to the platform, get lucky, and go viral—or at least that is what YouTube would like users to think. If I have learned anything from doing this project, it is not luck that creates successful channels, but instead a deep, and largely practical, understanding of the platform and its viewers.

Creators engage with a vast network of sources to learn about YouTube. Each creator constructs their specific understanding of YouTube and content creation from official sources, anecdotal stories from other creators, and importantly their own experience. Through trial and error, creators iteratively build on what they learn from each video. This practice can yield information on which video format works for their audience as well as which copyrighted material is most likely to be detected by the algorithm. Outside of their individual practice, creators emulate larger creators and listen to podcasts or interviews to learn from them. Importantly, creators connect with others through their mutual engagement in content creation in communities of practice to learn from each other's experience. Through this process, creators move through multiple platforms to build a comprehensive understanding of content creation.

Understanding how creators create community and identity gives us an understanding of how social life is connected and constructed on the internet. Creators can be mostly isolated, but still in touch with the greater creator community in their shared efforts and problems. Researching how creators engage with each other allows a deeper understanding of learning on the internet and how users learn about platforms through practice. This learning process is important to understand as it applies outside of YouTube to other platforms with automated moderation and recommendation systems. Users on social media platforms like Twitter or Facebook similarly learn about these platforms through their practice and use of the platform. T.L. Taylor, in her study of the platform Twitch (2018), argues that qualitatively studying the streaming of digital games can help researchers understand how players encounter such software systems, create from them, and also be transformed by them (p. 237). I suggest that examining even a few YouTube creators' ways of navigating the platform can help us to understand the complicated ways that users interact with automated systems that increasingly moderate content

on social media. As well, through this investigation of content creators we can glimpse how connected the modern landscape of the internet is.

In this thesis, I answer the following questions: How do creators learn content creation through their practice and participation in communities of practice? How do the platform's automated systems shape creators' practice? And, lastly, how does the platform of YouTube and the creator communities of practice create the identity of creator?

Methodology

I conducted research between May 2021 and December 2021. The Institutional Review Board at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee classified the study as exempt and approved it in early May 2021 and research began shortly after. There were two main components in the methodology for this project. First, I observed a community of creators on two online platforms—Reddit and Discord. Second, I interviewed 11 creators about their experiences on the platform. I supplemented interviews and observations with other media about YouTube. This media included YouTube videos and news stories. In the coming sections, I will provide a further detailed account on these methodologies and analysis.

Creator Interviews

I recruited creators via email and Discord. I interviewed each creator virtually on Zoom or Discord, interviews were typically between an hour to an hour and a half. Creators were given a choice if they wanted to remain anonymous or not; every creator I interviewed consented to be

named in this project. Notes were taken during each interview and interviews were recorded with the consent of the interviewee. A full list of questions can be found in appendix A.

The creators who were interviewed range in how many subscribers they had and in experience level. A detailed list of creators interviewed for this project can be found in appendix B. A majority of the creators I interviewed were involved in some form of educational entertainment. I reached out to about 30 different creators in several other genres, but educational content creators were seemingly the most willing to be interviewed. Educational channels take a topic of inquiry whether it is a piece of media, recipe, or scientific study and discuss it in an entertaining way for a mass audience. This genre of channel is a substantial and successful part of YouTube content. I was able to interview four creators in this genre who had over a million subscribers on their channels; these channels were *Overly Sarcastic Productions*, *Tasting History with Max Miller*, *Solar Sands*, and *Practical Engineering*. There were also several smaller channels in this genre I was able to talk to: *Curious Tangents* (28 thousand subscribers) and Alexis Dahl's channel (3.5 thousand subscribers) are both interested in scientific topics.

I was able to interview two creators in the genre of video games, one with 800 thousand subscribers *Bricky* and one with 11 thousand subscribers *mrixrt* (also known as Moriarty). Both channels review different video games as well as provide commentary on the state of the video game industry. Three channels did not share categories with any other interviewee. *MistaGG* is a variety channel creator with 800 thousand subscribers, *ASavageWorldGM* has one thousand subscribers and is focused on giving tips for tabletop games, and, lastly, is *Gamer Pizza* (also known as Beryzan) who makes pizza based on video games, as the channel name would imply, and has 800 subscribers. This group of creators allowed me to explore the differences in experience primarily between large and small subscriber count creators. The larger creators

tended to be older channels. Several creators had been making content since 2014 while the oldest channel was *Overly Sarcastic productions*—they have been producing content since 2011. The range in channel age helps show the process of learning, the changes to the platform over time, and how the older creators have changed their content as a result. Newer creators give a snapshot of what the current YouTube learning process is and provides a contemporary account. This pool of interviewees allows for that discussion and analysis of the journey of content creation from new creator learning to old successful creator. That being said, there are significant limitations of the group I interviewed.

As I stated above, most of the creators I was able to interview were in the educational genre. This bias toward educational content does affect what experiences I was able to learn about from my interviewees. For example, a creator who reviews movies and music may have a different experience with the Content ID system as compared to someone who covers news stories. While the channels in different genres I could interview had similar experiences, I do not want to conflate the experiences of the one or two creators in a genre to the entire group of creators. This is one of the reasons I supplemented my interviews with YouTube videos concerning other creators and their specific problems with the platform.

Perhaps of greater note is that the creators I interviewed were all based in the United States and mostly had a middle to upper class socioeconomic background. All were able to dedicate a substantial amount of their time into video creation and some were either pursuing a college education or had graduated with a degree. This type of creator is very distinct in their social position on the platform. They are reflective of who is programming YouTube and as a result benefit. Only one of my interviewees identified as African American and another identified as Hispanic, the other nine interviewees were either white or did not identify their

ethnicity. This drastically limits how much I can discuss the experience of creators in vulnerable groups and the possible oppression they face on the platform. There are studies on race, oppression, and algorithms (see Noble, 2018), but due to my pool of subjects I do not have the data to engage further with that literature.

Observation

Initially, I intended to make and maintain a YouTube channel to understand the systems that creators interact with firsthand. I had previous experience archiving YouTube videos for the Serious Play Twitch channel; I uploaded previous live streams that the group Serious Play conducted on their Twitch account to YouTube. I chose a thumbnail, added a description with relevant links to the group's social media, put the video in the correct playlist, and then scheduled the video to be made public. I did not edit the videos, so I had no experience making YouTube videos or trying to grow a dedicated following. In April of 2021, I started to do some research on how to make a channel, edit videos, and how to advertise a YouTube channel. Through these research attempts I found several Google support pages and forums, branding websites, and news articles. I attempted to look for other creators to learn from them and found several sub-Reddits that claimed to support YouTube creators. Several of these sub-Reddits were dedicated to self-promotion; each had posts that featured links to videos which users hoped would garner a few views, the posts were not typically commented on by other users which made the sub-Reddits feel abandoned. There was another sub-Reddit specifically for creators that were monetized, but it was not very active as posting was restricted to those who had been verified to have a YouTube channel that was monetized. Their Discord server was similarly restricted.

As I my continued search on Reddit, I found a sub-Reddit that was for new creators and quite active. NewTubers is a sub-Reddit that is has over 150k subscribers with several posts per day with different questions, stories, and advice that regularly spark discussions between users. On the sub-Reddit home page, it linked several different social media platforms NewTubers had a presence on which included their Discord server. I joined the NewTubers discord server in June of 2021 and this is where the bulk of my observation took place. The Discord has about two thousand self-identified creators and it is open for anyone to join using the link on the sub-Reddit. Members are welcome to post, ask questions, and review the server's resources provided they follow the rules which moderators enforce regularly.

Ultimately, I did not elect to continue maintaining a channel during my research. Time was a major factor in that decision. Making one video took a large portion of a week which did not include the time needed for promoting that video to build an audience. To put in meaningful effort to create a channel would have disallowed me from pursuing the other aspects of this research. Instead, I decided to focus on NewTubers and interviews. The understanding I gained through the failed attempt at starting a channel and the previous experience I had with Serious Play archiving did factor into my interview questions, however.

I observed NewTubers throughout the summer of 2021 and into the fall. Through these roughly six months, I took screenshots of particular conversations from the two general chat channels and the video creator channel. Discord allows for server owners to separate the server into channels which function as separate chats that can be general or more specific. In NewTubers channel topics were usually enforced. For example, members were regularly pointed to the feedback channel if they asked for feedback in the general chat channel.

Outside of screenshots, I did observe other chats to understand the community better and took notes. These channels included the topic-specific chats like anime, food, and pet pictures. Screenshots I took mainly focused on questions concerning YouTube and stories about content creation. In total, I screenshotted 70 conversations for analysis. In each screenshot I took, I noted the channel these screenshots were taken from and the date I took them. Typically, screenshots were taken on the day the messages were sent, but the day sent will be noted as such in the captions throughout this piece.

Participating in NewTubers allowed me to have a direct window into how new creators engaged in the processes of content creation. NewTubers is specifically for small creators that are typically under 10 thousand subscribers—most creators have just started, but some have made content for a longer time but have not garnered a large audience. In NewTubers, Creators asked all manner of questions about thumbnails, titles, copyright, monetization, and, of course, algorithms. It was a great opportunity to understand new and small creators as they learned about YouTube.

I could see creators learn from the feedback they received on their videos. I could also see new members transition from getting feedback to giving advice as they gained confidence in their YouTube knowledge. This discord was not just a technical support forum but a community of fellow creators. It was interesting to see how creators discussed their struggles in making content and seeing the reassurance from other members when videos were received poorly or the congratulations when the video did well. Of course, there is going to be some limitations when focusing on a group of small, new creators like NewTubers.

Communities of large creators could have different concerns than communities of small creators. They have more anecdotal evidence to share with each other about their experience

with the systems of YouTube. They might also discuss analytics more because they have bigger audiences to analyze as compared to small creators. As well, they are monetized creators, whereas many members of NewTubers do not meet the requirements. I was not able to see how more experienced creators talked to each about being monetized and the specific issues that follow. I was able to learn about some issues large creators face in my interviews but being able to observe the more casual conversations would have been enlightening.

Through my interviews I found out about other creator communities like WeCreateEdu, and communities centered around multichannel networks. These communities were not accessible to me for this research, but it is important to understand that NewTubers is not the only community for creators. WeCreateEdu is open to creators who are making educational content and they have an application they ask creators to fill out before they are invited to their group on Slack. In their rules section, they stated that conversations held in the group were not to be shared outside of the Slack server. I attempted to contact the owners of the WeCreateEdu via email, explaining the purposes of my research and asking to join the group for observation, but I never received a reply.

Other media

In addition to observation and interviews, I looked at several YouTube videos and news stories to understand the greater landscape of content creation. I have personally been using the YouTube platform for close to 13 years and been paying particular attention to the problems on the platform since around 2016. Outside of archiving and uploading some videos for school, I have been a viewer. Throughout my time on YouTube, I have watched videos from many creators which poke fun at YouTube, cover new policies, and discuss major flaws on the

platform. I revisited quite a few of these videos during my time researching for this thesis. These videos supply snap shots of the platform at that time but also provide accounts from more creators outside of my group of interviewees

I used news stories that cover specific situations on the platform to better construct an overview of the multiple controversies in which YouTube has been embroiled. I was able to find news stories from the past that detailed reasoning and official statements from YouTube concerning these situations. These new stories offer small glimpses into YouTube as a company and their values. It is particularly important to note that both videos and new stories are situated in the very public medium in which they are produced. Creators may be forthcoming with their emotions in a video, but they are telling a story and perhaps elaborating on certain aspects while playing down other aspects. YouTube as a company engages in making statements about controversial situations that aim to create as positive of a picture of the platform as possible. With that said, these pieces of media are used with an understanding that they are biased towards or against YouTube.

Analysis

After I conducted interviews, I transcribed the recordings. Interview transcriptions, interview notes, and observation notes were coded based on different themes that emerged. These themes included subjects like how creators defined success, creators learning individually, learning from other creators, learning from official sources, practice, identity, YouTube systems, YouTube algorithms, and trust in YouTube. I categorized screenshots based on theme as well.

Structure of thesis

The coming chapters look to explore different elements of creating content on YouTube. In chapter 2, I establish the theoretical underpinnings of this thesis. I introduce the concept of platform and contextualize it within existing literature on sociotechnical systems and assemblages. I also consider how technical systems create a material agency that affects creators and developers. Throughout, I rely on a practice-based approach following De Certeau and as developed by Wenger in the concept of communities of practice.

Chapter 3 will further delve into how new creators learn about content creation. To do this, I focus on creators' experiences practicing content creation, both individually and within a group. The chapter will look at how creators engage in situated practice wherein they mobilize information derived from their own experience, public videos, blog posts, and the community of fellow creators. I will delve into the community of NewTubers to highlight how advice and stories are shared between creators

Chapter 4 focuses on the assemblage of YouTube as well as the platform's impact on creators. The chapter starts with an explanation of the process of uploading a video to YouTube then delves into how these menus frame content creation and how they reflect the history of YouTube. I will look at how the platform's material agency impacts creators' agency through algorithmic moderation. Through interviews and observations, I will explore how creators contend with and learn about these algorithms through practice.

Chapter 5 focuses on how creator identity is formed through several different processes of identification. I will discuss this process by examining how creators are labeled by themselves, the creator community, and by outside persons. These labels are then complicated by

metrics provided by the platform and how creators understand success. Lastly, I will show how stories help confirm and celebrate the identity of creator within communities of practice.

Lastly, I will reflect on this research project and the possible paths forward in the conclusion. The chapter will discuss what limitations are apparent and how the project could have been better conducted to mitigate these limitations. I will also talk about what possible questions and dynamics could be further investigated with this research as a starting point. Content creators exist in a complicated social web that involves both humans and algorithms, while this research explores some pieces of the puzzle there is more left to understand.

Chapter 2 – Literature Review

The internet is an amorphous term that is difficult to classify in our modern society as it is so integrated into our social structure. In this work, the internet will be understood as the backbone on which all websites are built upon. It is not a single place but rather the infrastructure that connects many places which have changed and advanced as the internet has progressed throughout the 21st century. The advancement of the internet has also meant a substantial increase in the number of users who have adopted the technology since it first came into personal use in the mid-1990s. With the vast number of users frequenting the information superhighway there have been several different theories brought to bear on the sociality of the internet. This chapter will delve into the specific theories that I will utilize to understand how the platform of YouTube operates as a sociotechnical system with material agency as part of the social network of YouTube creators. I will also explore how one can understand the moment of interaction between the platform and user as an assemblage as well as how users interact with each other in communities of practice.

Understanding Platforms

In the early days of the internet, websites were smaller in scale and number. This internet—called Web 1.0—was mostly hyperlinks and there was not much interaction except to host servers or digital catalogs to peruse. In the mid 2000’s technology had progressed to be able to have users actually interact and talk to each other. This technology gave rise to megalithic platforms like Facebook, Google, and YouTube. These websites are expansive, with millions of users and billions of website visits every month. Data collected in 2019 showed that the Alphabet

company, the owners of Google and YouTube, accounted for 43.7% of all the traffic to the top 100 websites (Visual Capitalist, 2019). In 2021, the monthly visits to Google alone were 86.9 billion (statista.com, 2022). These websites are not simple webpages with a few links, they are platforms with increasingly complex systems. Platforms are built upon the infrastructure of the internet, so they are influenced by the internet but go a step beyond that and become something different as Srnicek defines.

Srnicek defines platforms as “digital infrastructures that enable two or more groups to interact. They therefore position themselves as intermediaries that bring together different users: customers, advertisers, service providers, suppliers, and even physical objects” (Srnicek, 2016, p. 31). As intermediaries, platforms provide unique access to their users in ways that are not necessarily new, but new in the scale of such operations. There is a platitude that states, “If a company offers their service for free, you are the product they are selling”. It is an old business model for newspapers and radio stations to sell the attention of their viewers, offering advertisers advertising space for specific shows and times for varying price models (Wark, 2004). Today, platforms do the same thing but at a very individual level and at a scale that is far beyond the abilities of conventional viewership polls. Platforms like YouTube and Facebook have access to so much data that they can sell advertisers personalized advertisement spaces for demographics of users (Srnicek, 2016). This data comes from platforms harvesting data from user activities in any way they can. Want to sell to people looking at cowboy hats? They can do that, and they charge advertisers a decent amount for the privilege. Data is the driving force that makes a platform competitive. The more data you can scrounge from user activity, the better inferences you can make about your users and the more money you can reasonably charge advertisers. 21st

century capitalism is not based on production, Lessig (1999) and others argue, but on data mined from customers to better advertise to them.

Platforms need to have a critical mass of users to have the large amount of data they need to effectively sell advertising space—a large user base typically begets more users as word-of-mouth spreads and more users means more data (Srnicsek, 2016). A small competitor of YouTube, VidMe, shut down in 2017 and one of the reasons they cited for the closure was the lack of data they had for advertisers to utilize (Shaeffer, 2017). VidMe did not have enough advertising incentive to sustain and make user generated content profitable, even with a direct patronage option. Of course, it does not help that Facebook and Google account for 60% of online advertising space, which pushes out a lot of platforms because they cannot effectively compete for advertisers (Shaeffer, 2017). Cost is one main reason new platforms do not just appear overnight and the few dominant ones we have been popular for a long time; platforms big enough to compete are prohibitively expensive to run.

Moderating Platforms

Data harvesting is what makes a platform competitive for advertisers, but to get that data platforms first must attract users. How a platform moderates its content makes it competitive for users. Moderation, as Gillespie (2018) discusses, includes curation of content as well as censoring content deemed inappropriate for a specific website. Effective curation and recommendation of content on a platform is important to keep users on the platform; keeping users on the platform means they are giving more data which to sell to advertisers. The ability to amass a large library of content either user-generated or licensed is also important to attract users.

Music platform Spotify keeps users on the platform for longer with recommendations from its expansive library of audio content; it also attracts more users based on the convenience of its catalog which leads to more advertising space to sell. On the other hand, how Spotify moderates' problematic content can impact the platform in several ways. For example, after the recent Joe Rogan podcast controversy, artists decided to boycott the platform and pull their music out. If the content that users come for is gone, then Spotify has a hard time keeping them around. The lack of moderation has also led to issues for other platforms, leading to advertisers pulling their money out which creates more problems as the main source of revenue for platforms disappears. This is why many platforms enact policies that moderate content that would be seen as problematic to advertise on. Many websites enforce these policies with automated bots, colloquially known as algorithms, which can be ruthless on user generated content.

Platforms walk a fine line between allowing creative content and pleasing advertisers—Too little moderation and advertisers leave, too much and users leave. Not to forget that if the platform cannot show users what they want to see, users probably will not stay for long. The content, moderation, and curation all combine to produce a larger user base which means large amounts of data. Platforms exist to primarily make money. Turner (2003), Lessig, and others warned that the wishful utopic understanding of the internet in the late 1990s and early 2000s was just that—wishful thinking. There was nothing in the code of the internet that meant it would be a shining beacon on the cyberspace hill for all people. Lessig could see this coming in 1999 and further commented on it in 2004 and 2006, arguing that the freedom of the internet and the platforms/cyberspace built upon it would always be corrupted by the needs of governments to regulate and companies to make money.

Platforms feign freedom, but for all the posturing they are ultimately still limited in scope and in content by the people who program them—the people who want to make money.

Platforms need to look attractive to various users; they show themselves as empty spaces to inhabit and make one's own but that is just a façade. Srnicek (2016) argues that underneath that façade are different systems which moderate the user in what they see, how they interact, what they can say, and ultimately how they can use the empty space put in front of them. Social media can create large communities via the tools that platforms provide users, but they are still boxed in by a core architecture of rules set out by the developers. Gillespie (2018) agrees, saying that because platforms are products of companies, they structurally have the ultimate say in what happens on their platform. As Kelty (2008) argues, a platform developer advertises their platforms or applications as open, but it is only selectively open. A developer makes their own system of platforms and software convenient for the user to move between; however, to leave that system as inconvenient as possible. The seamless integration of Google accounts into various other services is sold as the freedom of movement and convenience on the internet; in reality, it is masking the fact they can see everywhere you log in to with your account. As well, to move away from Google accounts is difficult for users who have used the account as log in credentials for other websites. They design and provision convenience so that they can obtain users' data, a seemingly beneficial relationship if the user does not mind the constant data collection.

Company goals

Platforms are made by companies; thus, platforms reflect the values of their parent company. However, this is complicated by the various interests that intersect with the platform.

Gillespie points out that companies are constantly having to reassure advertisers, honor regulations, and on top of that make their users happy (Gillespie, 2018, p. 11). The values that platforms end up standing for are actually a mixture of ideals from the company and the societal pressures on that company. Platforms are embedded in the time that created them, but are always adapting to new user demands, societal changes, and government regulation. Platforms, therefore, are not neutral places floating in the nebula of cyberspace. They are coded with specific values and goals in mind which can be seen through the various policies that the company implements as well as actual coded affordances of the platform.

While platforms compete against other platforms for the users and content, they are still intrinsically linked to one another. Discussing game streaming, Taylor argued that media now take place across multiple platforms and communities, linking them all in a greater web. There is a culmination of practice, experience, and production that entangles multiple platforms into one ball of yarn (Taylor, 2018, p. 13). Platforms in this regard can be thought of as sociotechnical systems, the play between action, technology, and the social.

Sociotechnical Systems and the Assemblage

Pfaffenberger (1992) defined sociotechnical systems as a way to understand the relationship between the coordination of human labor and technology. Sociotechnical systems exist between human knowledge of material and societal resources and the material culture that is produced. He specifies that it is more of an activity system of purposeful, goal-orientated action in which knowledge and behavior are reciprocally constituted by social, individual, and material phenomena (Pfaffenberger, 1992, p. 508). Platforms are coded sociotechnical systems;

they draw from existing knowledge and preferences of the current society then create new ways of understanding the material culture they produce. Looking at a platform like Facebook, they saw a need for an easy way to keep up with friends, find old acquaintances, and make new ones. They took ideas from previous social websites and how people interact in the real world to shape what they saw to be a better way of socializing online and were so successful they became the standard for what we know as social media today. To make sociotechnical systems work, builders must draw from existing resources in society but modify them to make them function the way they envision (Pfaffenberger, 1992). These sociotechnical platforms are snapshots of their societal context, being built with resources and knowledge of the society they are created in. Twitch and YouTube are both embedded in the web 2.0 user-generated content era, and even though they have drastically changed since their inception they still maintain their reliance on user-generated content. (Taylor, 2018).

Hughes (as cited by Pfaffenberger) stated that designers of new technologies must concern themselves with not only techniques and artifacts; they must engineer the social, economic, legal, scientific, and political context for that technology. Platforms aim to create the very structures that are necessary for them to flourish. For example, social media platforms created indicators of success such as the ‘like’ and people have shifted their social goals to pursue these indicators of success; ordinary people curate and brand themselves on the internet to be more ‘like’able (Senft, 2013). People make themselves more presentable to friends and family as well as more easily found and present by the algorithms (Gillespie, 2017). We understand YouTube channels in terms of subscriber counts not because they are naturally important, but because they are made to be important. Sociotechnical systems are not merely engaging in creative or productive activity, they aim to bring a deeply desired vision of the social to life

(Pfaffenberger, 1992). Perhaps that is the ultimate aim of a platform-making institution—to become so fundamentally important to social life that the platform is hegemonic. In this sense, Facebook and Twitter have become so important to our social life that they have irrevocably changed it. Similarly, the verb google (conjugated googling) is in the Merriam-Webster dictionary, the phrase having become common enough for the dictionary to deem it intrinsic to the language. Society is reconfigured by these large sociotechnical platforms just as the platforms were defined by society when they were first produced. If we drill down to see how individuals are impacted by these new technologies and systems, we see a similar relationship between user and technology.

The ways that actors, concepts, practices, and relations can make up a moment of technological interaction can be wrapped up in the notion of assemblage that Taylor (2009) describes. Assemblage is the tendrils of influence upon an object, and that can mean the cultural, political, and corporate influence that went into the creation of the object as well as the different relations the finished object has to users, developers, and perhaps even other technology. While Taylor (2009) used this idea to discuss how games can highlight an assemblage, the notion of assemblage can be used at many scales. Collier and Ong describe assemblages as a way to examine specific practices or phenomena that animate broad structural transformations in society. Assemblages as they describe them include, “technoscience, circuits of licit and illicit exchange, systems of administration or governance, and regimes of ethics or values” (p. 4). In this way, they argue that taking on this notion of assemblage allows researchers to stay analytically close to the practice of individuals as they are embedded in these systems. This definition echoes the understanding of assemblages as Taylor describes as well as the way that practice is a major component of this research.

In the context of a platform, the assemblage highlights how developers are impacted by the disparate elements of society, users, and regulation which then change how they program the platform. Interacting with a platform or technology reconfigures individuals to do what the technology wants, as Taylor says, “We do not simply play but are played, we do not configure but are configured” (Taylor, 2009, p. 336). This research hopes to zero in on this cycle of configuring and reconfiguring; that is, to understand how developers and users are in a cycle of reacting and changing practice.

The way that companies build their technology, games, and platforms is meant to define the way that users interact with them and produce an intended response. In the case of YouTube, the intended response to the uploading process that creators go through could be a copyrighted, music-free, family-friendly video that can serve as a vehicle for advertising without any worry of backlash. How sociotechnical systems work on the broad scale of society can also be seen in assemblages on a smaller scale. Through the usage of their platform or their game, individuals are configured the way that developers want them to be, and the platform become a central figure in the network they create. Platforms and specifically the systems that run in the background become nodes in a ball of yarn.

The concept of treating objects and technology as actors within social networks can be attributed to several people. Latour discusses this prospect and provides a groundwork for how nonhuman objects interact with social systems. Latour discusses how when humans interact with machines, they become part of that machine in a way (Latour 2005; see also Orr, 1996). However, given how integral the automated features of a platform are in the use of the platform, a different lens is needed, such as the concept of material agency as described by Pickering (1995). Material agency is the unavoidable action upon humans that objects exhibit, like the

weather impacting a construction site or, perhaps important to this study, how machines impact humans in certain situations. Pickering argues that machines are not symmetrical nor exactly like humans—a departure from Latour’s understanding of actor network theory—but nonetheless asserts that they are a crucial part of social networks in the roles manufactured for them. Machines deeply impact humans in their specific inputs, parameters needed, and other requirements to function that change human behavior. The way that these machines function configures the way that humans become more machinelike as they use machines; Pickering argues that they do this without intention. Of course, humans impact how digital systems are programmed and thus machines are vessels for what humans have attempted to accomplish through them, but unintended consequences arise. The exact contours of material agency are never known in advance; how a programmed feature or system will interact with human agency is never a given. In this way it is unpredictable what happens when human and machine interact. The relationship between machine and human is somewhat unpredictable and moving. (Giddens, 1984; Pickering, 1995)

Material Agency and YouTube

Material agency is an interesting lens to look through at YouTube in particular as its algorithms lend a certain mystery to what is happening behind the scenes. This is because algorithms move in ways that are not apparent to the average content creator or viewer. Recommender algorithms are made using machine learning, creating a virtual black box where a desire gets programmed in and an outcome happens. The exact way that outcome happens is not readily understandable, and so the reasons why a decade-old video is picked up by the search algorithm are not necessarily understood, even by those at YouTube. For instance, in 2012

YouTube decided that watch time was more important than views, so it redefined the goals of the search and recommendation algorithm (Meyerson, 2012). This drastically changed what videos were shown and it had the unintended effect of launching vlogs into the limelight. The developers were not looking for vlogs to be highlighted or for certain genres to be effectively wiped off the platform, but the algorithm took such actions as necessary in accordance with its chief metric. Outside of search and recommendation algorithms, there are also automated moderation bots that act without the direct action of YouTube employees. Bots are necessary due to the amount of YouTube content uploaded every day and this fact of automation changes how content creators interact with the systems of YouTube. No longer is an employee looking at a creator's video to say whether or not it is appropriate for advertising, it is an automated bot.

The automated process on YouTube creates an agency that is different from more straightforward technologies, like a printer. A printer acts on users through the very limitations of printing like what inks can be used, what the printer supports for paper size, etc.; characteristics that were designed into it by engineers in an unchanging way. Unless the user buys another printer, their printing capabilities will be the same over time. YouTube the platform is continuously performing many actions upon users over which its developers do not really have firm control or even understanding. Algorithms are not entirely autonomous, nor beyond the need for human oversight, but over them developers—at least on a day-to-day basis—are more guides than dictators. As Morris (2015) argues, algorithms are the result of the complex interaction of human actors and code to curate experiences given a database of raw material with instructions for a distinct goal. The platform, through automation and algorithms, has much more say over important things like monetization, copyright moderation, and who gets shown the creator's content. In this way the platform is always present, moving around, and shifting to

maximize what the developers want but in an autonomous way. The platform has an almost programmed agency that complicates our understanding of objects within a social network.

The concept of assemblage also highlights the complex interrelation between users and technology, the emergent play between them and also in relation to developer interventions. It draws our attention to the back and forth between the developer and user that happens over time, with users doing something, developers responding, users changing their habits, and the cycle going on. Pickering (1992) describes this as a mangle of practice. A mangle is an appropriate term; it refers to a 19th century mechanical laundry aid, a wringer which creates wrinkles that are wholly unpredictable and impossible to replicate in their pattern, but at the same similar one to another. Pickering discusses, for example, how material agency and human practice collide in the production of scientific experiments on the Quark. The design of the instruments guided the practice of science and as the instruments were further calibrated by scientists their material agency changed. In the context of digital platforms, this mangle of practice can be seen in the many different genres, creators, and big-name companies that have found great success on the platform of YouTube, specifically through their various ways of utilizing the technology of YouTube and possibly taking advantage of the material agency of the YouTube platform itself. Each of these is unique and contingent yet is at the same time part of broader patterns of digital platform interaction. This adaptation to the platform and the constant relationship between developer and user that assemblage and mangle help us to understand are further illuminated by an additional lens, that of De Certeau's (1984) understanding of tactics and strategy.

Practicing in Communities of Practice

Practice is embedded in personal experience, the routinization of everyday life. De Certeau (1984) utilizes the term to show how people express and appropriate the institutions of our society; this is called tactics. Tactics are quick small adjustments that become larger actions that contribute to a shift in institutions, they are ephemeral and usually taken for granted, like taking the path that is shortest across a grass lawn. Strategy, on the other hand, is about moving slowly and methodically, according to an ordering scheme. Strategy shows the values and objectives of institutions, creating written plans of actions to achieve those goals. Strategy would be putting in a paved walkway in response to a well-worn shortcut across the lawn, but then it has to act again when a new shortcut is found and taken tactically by more people. This cat and mouse of tactics and strategy is what lies underneath the relationships that Taylor and Pickering talk about when looking at the relationship between developer and user. The user uses tactics every time they open the platform in the ways they search for content, how long they stay on the platform, and a myriad of other practices that are informal and unable to be coded into a platform. Developers on the other hand use code to subjugate the user in what they can or cannot do; they enact a strategy to force the software to be used a certain way or prevent unscrupulous actors from upending the system. However, that is not to say that developers are against using tactics or that users do not use strategy in their use of the platform—a crucial point which is worth exploring further.

The company inscribes their values, rules, and curation goals into the ways that content is uploaded to a social media platform. The specific affordances coded into a platform reflect the strategies of the company behind it. Features like tags, descriptions, hashtags, and even polls are strategies for companies to know and better manipulate the tactics of users. They provide tools

that they believe will be utilized for specific things. However, for all the specific use cases developers come up with for the platform there will always be uses that they did not think of where tactics take precedence over strategy to redefine what the institution is. When controversy hits a platform, the executives have to quickly put out any fires by tactically making quick decisions. For example, YouTube had to quickly shut down large creator Logan Paul's ad revenue after a controversial incident in Japan (BBC, 2018) to quickly reassure advertisers. There are also hotfixes that developers need to make to an online game, making the quick decision to take down servers to fix things before anything gets damaged. In that case, it was a tactical move by users that was then needed to be combatted quickly.

There will always be users who find loopholes in the system to hijack the algorithms in order to get their videos on trending pages or to force a trending topic. It is inevitable that a group starts to collect these little tidbits—a new YouTuber starts a sub-Reddit to start documenting these capsules of knowledge and before you know it they have to create rules for posting, mods to enforce those rules, and be a leader to plan out what will happen. This, we can note, sounds more like strategy than tactics, and it is. De Certeau argued that strategy is for institutions and tactics are for everyday people, but the inverse works as well, as Sally Falk Moore insisted (1987). As more people adopt the platform, more success stories pop up and more people who see that success. Therefore, knowledge on these exploits or anecdotal discussion on how to be successful become more popular. Any grouping of individuals with a shared interest can start to form communities and then start to organize themselves, strategically, to swap advice, collaborations, etc.

Communities of practice typically form around workplaces where the employer has in place specific policies that are seen as unmovable. Workers band together to learn how to do their

jobs more efficiently, get away with shortcuts, and learn which boundaries can be pushed and which cannot. The seminal work on communities of practice was illustrated looking at insurance claim specialists; Wenger (1998) showcased how these specialists would share advice or know who could do what the best. He argues that communities of practice may extend beyond workplaces—perhaps they are family units or a sports club and generally are defined by several characteristics. A community of practice is a group of people who are interested in the same activity, and they cooperate together to learn more about that activity (Wenger, 1998).

Communities of practice are based in the idea that humans are social beings, and we learn best through a cooperative process together. Wenger specifically highlights the importance of the levels of participation in a community as well as the need of a joint enterprise for members to work toward.

Participation is important because members learn by doing then passing on their stories to other people, the practice of trial and error benefits the group as a whole. It is also what binds the group together and creates the community. The experience of mutual participation is the source of identity and membership within a community. Wenger's definition of joint enterprise also plays a role in the defining of membership and identity for the participants. Membership in a community of practice implies a certain competence for the joint enterprise, whether or not a member is new or old. A joint enterprise is not static—it changes for each member, and it means something different as time goes on as the community matures and becomes more institution-like. In pursuit of that joint enterprise is the creation of stories and a shared repertoire of experience that is codified and reified by the members of the community.

Communities of practice can be almost seen as a series of tactics that get concretized over time as members continuously share it and it becomes common knowledge. As Wenger would

argue, common sense is what it is because it is common (Wenger, 1998, p. 47). Members practice their pursuit of the joint enterprise finding small adjustments and sharing them with each other. These are particularly important communities for up-and-coming free lancers for example who need to find peers to ask questions and to understand what it takes to be successful, and this is true for YouTubers as well. YouTubers are often isolated and trying to learn as they go about uploading content; often they run into problems for which they cannot readily find answers. This is where a community of practice comes in; ultimately they are about learning as well as finding a shared identity tied to their joint enterprise, being a YouTuber means you do X, Y, and Z. Wenger argued that communities of practice are tied to individual identity and meaning making because of participation, engaging in the joint enterprise, and recruiting new members.

A Note on Terminology: Creators and Algorithms

Throughout this thesis I refer to creators as those users who produce the content that platforms are built for. YouTube creators are the users who produce and upload videos, specifically those who upload videos with the purpose of fostering an audience. Some creators make videos as a hobby or as a career, but generally all want to create a core audience of viewers. Viewers are those users who watch what creators make. They are the group that YouTube advertises products to and collects data about. The last group of users on YouTube are the advertisers, they are the companies and individuals who purchase advertising space in front of videos from YouTube. These groups are not isolated, at any given time a creator might also be a viewer or an advertiser as well. These groups are delineated to better show how the platform of YouTube treats each group differently.

Another term that begs a definition is that of Algorithms. The dictionary definition of algorithm is a “set of steps that are followed in order to solve a mathematical problem or to complete a computer process (“Algorithm”, def. 1).” However, colloquially algorithms have become a catch-all term for any system or process on social media; algorithms can be social media feeds, Google search results, and even Amazon recommendations. Even Merriam-Webster notes how the word has become broadly used for the set of rules a machine uses to achieve a particular goal; in this sense it is used to describe a force that shapes our banking systems, social media feeds, and what music we listen to. What Merriam-Webster misses in their understanding of algorithm is the colloquial inclusion of personalized recommendations and machine learning that are readily associated with the term algorithm. The Pew Research Center’s 2017 article “Code-Dependent: Pros and Cons of Algorithmic Age” used algorithm to mean everything from recipes and math equations to search engines and artificial intelligence. Obviously, a narrower definition is needed but not as simplistic as the dictionary’s. To that end, we shall focus on algorithms for computers, which Diakopoulos (2014) and many others have discussed at length. Diakopoulos’s understanding of algorithms is in line with popular understanding of algorithms on the internet and generally fall in line with definitions other researchers have utilized.

Computer algorithms are coded features that analyze vast amounts of user data to achieve a goal set by the developers of a platform; this is the definition for algorithm that will be used going forward. Algorithms make decisions on what will happen next based on rules that may be fully articulated by the developers or based on the real-time analysis of massive amounts of data. The latter is how machine learning algorithms work; they take data to predict what will happen next which then gets translated into action in pursuit of a goal set by the developers. After the action has been completed, the algorithm looks at the data generated to see if it the action was

successful and then creates a new course of action. This iteration cycle continues until the algorithm has “learned” what to do in order to achieve the goal, even if that creates unintended consequences. Goals for algorithms that recommend content, for example, can be directed to prompt a user to stay on the platform for longer, such as the automated recommendation algorithms that Morris (2015) discusses, or—by contrast—to click on more pages.

Diakopoulos helpfully breaks down algorithms into four self-explanatory categories: prioritization, classification, association, and filtering. All four categories can be seen at play in a social media platform. *Prioritization algorithms* bring what content it thinks is most important to the top of the list—What is trending on YouTube is possibly an example, but these see more service in civil services. *Classification algorithms* organize content; in the case of YouTube, classifying what videos have copyrighted songs in them is an algorithm called Content ID. *Association algorithms* decide what content goes with other content. Search engines are perhaps the best example of association algorithms. *Filtering algorithms* decide what content to show users. Filtering algorithms can be used for recommendations on Spotify as well as what shows up on someone’s Facebook feed. Importantly, filtering algorithms filter out what is not appropriate or against Terms of Service, like the monetization bots on YouTube or moderation on Twitter. Filtering algorithms can play a large part in censorship as well as potential radicalization (Diakopoulos, 2015).

Algorithms have been made intentionally and unintentionally obtuse. They are intentionally obtuse because they are made to be difficult to decode or break down from users’ and creators’ points of view. The ways that platforms stay competitive—keeping people on the site for longer by showing them what they want to see—are closely guarded and algorithms are a significant part of that. However, algorithms that utilize machine learning are obtuse in an

additional, unintended way, because even their developers often cannot begin to describe exactly what patterns any given algorithm is matching, comparing, analyzing to get to its current state. Developers set the goal and the algorithm sets course into uncharted territory to blaze a trail. For users, algorithms are largely opaque, often recognizable only in moments of anomaly. After mis-clicking a link—that is, clicking on a different link than was intended—they may see on YouTube a video markedly contrary to their interests appear as a strange homepage recommendation, or while surfing the Internet they may notice an advertisement pop up for a product they looked at recently. Outside of that, algorithms are black boxes in our digital age of knowledge.

YouTube has several black boxes and while it explains some things, the creators are left to contend with these black boxes. They learn through the practice of making videos and as well as taking advice from fellow creators. In the next chapter creator practice and community will be explored to understand how creators fill in the gaps of knowledge that are left by the developers at YouTube. In particular, I discuss a community called NewTubers both as a community of practice and as compared to individual practice.

Chapter 3 – ‘doing YouTube’ the practice of content creation

“It’s been a journey of small discoveries for sure, I feel incredibly lucky to have an audience where I can continue that journey.” Grady stated with a slight smile. Grady has run the channel *Practical Engineering* since 2014; it has about 2.6 million subscribers and covers topics that mostly focus on Civil Engineering concepts. However, he first started the channel as a wood and DIY Channel. “I saw a lot of people taking part in a community of uploading woodworking projects and I was captivated.” He recalled from the early days of his channel, he has continued to seek out community and meeting people which he said has led to him meeting many good people both creators and audience alike. Nowadays he has made content creation his full-time job, Grady has said that he still endeavors to make his videos better now that he can devote his full attention to it. He attributes a lot of his improvements to the other creators on the platform making videos, “You know, I decided to be an on-screen host from YouTube videos. I take all sorts of inspiration from YouTube and other media, it’s a natural part of creation.”

Creators are put in a complicated spot when it comes to learning the YouTube platform and creating content for it. Creators have to be willing to play around to find out what works best for their own creative workflow and finding their own voice through content creation. They also have to contend with the platform of YouTube and learn the ways of ‘the force’—how to do well on the platform and succeed in building an audience. It falls to creators to tactically adjust their content overtime to get into a position where they can succeed. Creators do this by practicing content creation over time, iteratively building an understanding of the platform that works for them. Importantly, they also get a helping hand from fellow creators at several different levels. Fellow creators might be a source of inspiration, emulation, and information in the form of

anecdotal evidence. This chapter will focus on how creators learn to get better at YouTube content creation through individual practice as well as group participation in communities of practice.

Trial and Error

All of my interviewees argued that YouTube has some interest in supporting creators. Without the individual content creators, YouTube would not have the bulk of the content so vital in getting viewers on the platform. It benefits YouTube to produce information for new creators and offer support to established creators. How well they succeed at providing this support is up for debate. They produce a series of educational videos that are short and to the point; the videos detail simple tasks like uploading videos to more complex understandings of the recommendation algorithm. What they say is somewhat guarded and kept vague in videos talking about specific topics like how to get a video recommended or easily found through the search function. A few creators speculated that the company kept information minimal to keep channels from taking advantage of the recommendation systems. In this way, YouTube intentionally or not leaves holes in the information provided and it falls to creators to figure out what the rest.

Travis is a smaller creator, he currently has 28 thousand subscribers on his channel *Curious Tangents*; he makes a broad range of educational content on the side while he goes to college. Travis has been making short videos for two years, but in the last year he has been putting in a more concerted effort to make the channel more successful. He is mostly self-taught, stating “I’ve been mostly learning by trial and error. I cut 30 minutes of footage into a 3-minute video, so it takes a lot of time to get enough footage for a longer video for me.” He also has been

experimenting with starting a script with an outrageous quote and then moving into the video, he stated that it has forced him to actually script his videos more and continue improving his videos. Travis looks for feedback on his titles and thumbnails from friends, he also looks at how successful a video is to understand if he is on the right track. For him, he focuses on comments and like/dislike engagement to understand if a video was successful and by extension if his new strategy worked. This iterative approach is strategic and methodical, change a few things see if that worked and then go back to the drawing board.

A more tactical and spontaneous practice of making videos is the way that Mista GG figured out what videos to keep making. GG is a creator that has been on YouTube for about 7 years, and currently has approximately 800 thousand subscribers on his main *MistaGG* channel. He first gained a following covering the How to Catch a Predator series, but he transitioned to covering YouTube drama and now does mostly horror movie or video reviews. GG tried a bunch of different types of videos before he found one that did well—throwing proverbial spaghetti at the wall and seeing if it stuck. When I asked him how he goes about doing new types of videos for the channel he chuckled a bit, “I don’t really ask, I just do and see if it works. If it does, like the horror movie reviews, then I’ll keep doing it. If it doesn’t work, whatever- at least I tried.”

GG’s content is always comedic and lighthearted; GG himself is a pretty laid-back person, talking casually about content creation as a full-time career. He acknowledged that he was extremely lucky to be making content as a full-time career which has been able to support his family and even buy a house. However, he is always aware of the moving tide of YouTube and how quickly it can shift. “You have to advertise to your subscribers. If they don’t care, then you aren’t going anywhere. You can’t just do the same thing over and over, your audience will

get bored, so you always have to be moving, always have to be adapting.” His movement through different types of content exemplifies this, always coming out with new video ideas.

Sometimes a video goes over really well, and a creator is left wondering what they did differently to make that video better than the rest. This presents another process of trial and error- picking out a factor like thumbnail or title and getting into the video elements of script or editing to figure out what exactly worked with a specific video. Max Miller was presented with this conundrum, trying to capture lightning in a bottle a second time. Max has a cooking channel where he talks about historical dishes, cooks them, then tries them. He started the channel in lockdown and quickly found success—just two years later he has 1 million subscribers on his main channel. In 2021, he quit his job at Disney to focus on his channel, *Tasting History with Max Miller*, as a full-time job. Max has a history in entertainment and marketing, having trained in theatre and worked in marketing distribution for Disney; that doesn’t mean that he had an easy time on YouTube, however. Max said that he had four other channels before he found success with *Tasting History*.

His first video that exploded was a video called “I finally made GARUM | Ancient Rome's favorite condiment” which has 2.3 million views at the time of writing. Max recalls waking up the morning after it was published and his subscriber count had doubled since he went to bed. He smiled thinking about it, “I was stunned! Everyone wants a break, but then how do I capitalize on success? I had a small catalog, but I was still learning how to make videos... took a few more tries to figure it out, it was a really hectic time.” Over the year between the video and our interview he had cemented his format that Max felt was spurred on by his Garum video and how it did so well. “Looking back Garum was my one video when I told a story rather than just facts. Story telling makes it interesting, so I kept it the same. Pretty sure it works; I have 60%

retention rate which is ridiculously high.” He laughed remembering how amateur his first attempts were, “I didn’t even try the food at one point? Like duh! Why didn’t I think to do that until the commentators said something?”

The practice of making successful YouTube content is a process. Some creators take the time to plan out a scientific approach to find what elements are the best for the desired results; others start making content and see what finds success. While success can be defined differently for every creator, creators make do with the knowledge they have and figure out what works to achieve their goal. A creator cannot understand content creation until they create content. When I first started this project, I imagined that it would be relatively easy to start and maintain a YouTube channel for this project. I was very sorely mistaken; content creation is difficult. Creating videos is a process with filming footage, writing scripts, and then editing it all into a cohesive bundle with interesting visuals and clean audio. On top of creating videos, creators then have to figure out how to market their videos and brand themselves to make a successful channel. I was able to gain valuable information about certain processes like making channel branding and dipping my toes into editing programs; but there was simply too much to build from scratch for this project. Travis said that his videos took about 30 hours in total to make while Max said that it could take upwards of 80 hours of work to make a video. Therefore, creators might find it attractive to short cut their individual process of learning and look at how other creators have found their success.

Creators teaching creators

The nebulous world of success on YouTube has created a lot of space for educational content about making content on YouTube. Max said that he looked at these “how to do YouTube” centered videos for months before he started trying to make his own content. He even paid \$100 to get some one-on-one advice from a mentor, he said that it helped a lot to focus him on what aspects of a video to really focus on. Bishop (2020) detailed the ways that Matt Pat of Game Theory and other very successful channels selling consulting and courses on making channels. Matt Pat’s courses are focused on his own personal experience with building a family of successful channels on YouTube; the course also offers to look at someone’s channel statistics and offering advice based on his anecdotal experience. Matt Pat sells himself as an expert but still relies heavily on personal experience, but small creators look up to him because he has it “figured out”.

Some creators opt to do research on other creators to get a better understanding of what to do. Imitation is the highest form of flattery, but creators are not just imitating they are building their own voice through the understanding of other content. Solar Sands started making, as he puts it, “funny meme videos” about 6 years ago when he was a teenager. In the last few years, he has transitioned into making more serious art critique videos. He documented how he watches channels that have similar educational goals and study the way they deliver their content. He was adamant that he did not copy the topics, but he specifically watched how they conveyed complex topics in simpler terms. Solar Sands has been by himself throughout his content career, he googled what he needed to and for the rest he taught himself. However, he is very much still in touch with the greater community of content creation through emulation and keeping up on creators’ concerns.

Mista GG said that information gets passed through the grapevine between creators and it becomes a golden rule. These golden rules were evident in my observations and interviews. One creator stated, “I guess something that is passed around- like an old wives’ tale I guess- is that faces are important for thumbnails. I don’t know the reason, whether it’s the people clicking on the video who like the face or if the algorithm specifically looks for faces... but putting a face in the thumbnail really works... or so they say, haha.” Travis had heard the same thing, so did GG, but they did not know where it originated from. Creators also pick up advice via interviews or videos from large creators; this advice gets spread among creators as they watch and share with fellow creators. For example, creators in 3-1 and 3-2 are utilizing Discord to share advice with from large creators. In Figure 3-1, a creator (notadoor) is sharing a video by Casey Neistat who has 12.4 million subscribers. 3-2 is a discussion on Discord between Meliex and Beryzan. Beryzan passes on advice from Mr. Beast who has 92.4 million subscribers about coming up with the title for a video before the script; Meliex says that they had seen the advice come up several times as well. These examples show creators pick up information from large creators with a similar authority to Matt Pat, noting these creators to lend authority to the advice. Notadoor states the video in figure 3-1 is a wonderful example and that people should follow his advice.

Creators do not get information from one source, but from many disparate sources. Creators create content in a bricolage—they use whatever information is at hand and mobilize it in an attempt to pursue their goal of making it on YouTube. Golub (2010) argues that it is important to understand how interconnected online places and practices are in looking at World of Warcraft. Players are not just interacting in the game world, but rather on multiple chatrooms, websites, and forums; he argued that these websites are equally important contexts that players

interact and learn about the game. Golub (2010) and T.L. Taylor (2018) point out how interconnected the internet is with multitudes of platforms being used. Creators pull from their own practice, official YouTube developers, tidbits they heard from interviews or videos to cobble together an understanding of YouTube that works for them; they also utilize google support forms, Reddit, and Discord to talk to other creators. Orr (1996) would describe this as situated practice, which is a practice that is linked to the context of getting the job done in any way possible. In Orr's case it was troubleshooting printer repair, but it can be applied here as content creation can be seen as troubleshooting success—a trial and error method of a creator figuring out what is right (or wrong) with their content and how to fix it. Creators piece together a bricolage of understanding about a situation and devise possible directions they could take their videos in utilizing a complex milieu of platforms.

While YouTube is the site of practice, publishing content is nestled in a network of understanding. Creators do not live just on YouTube, in fact most of creator community is found off of the platform on social media platforms like Twitter, Instagram, and Discord. YouTube itself has shown this interconnectedness of platforms in creator's practice; YouTube has an official support line Twitter account.

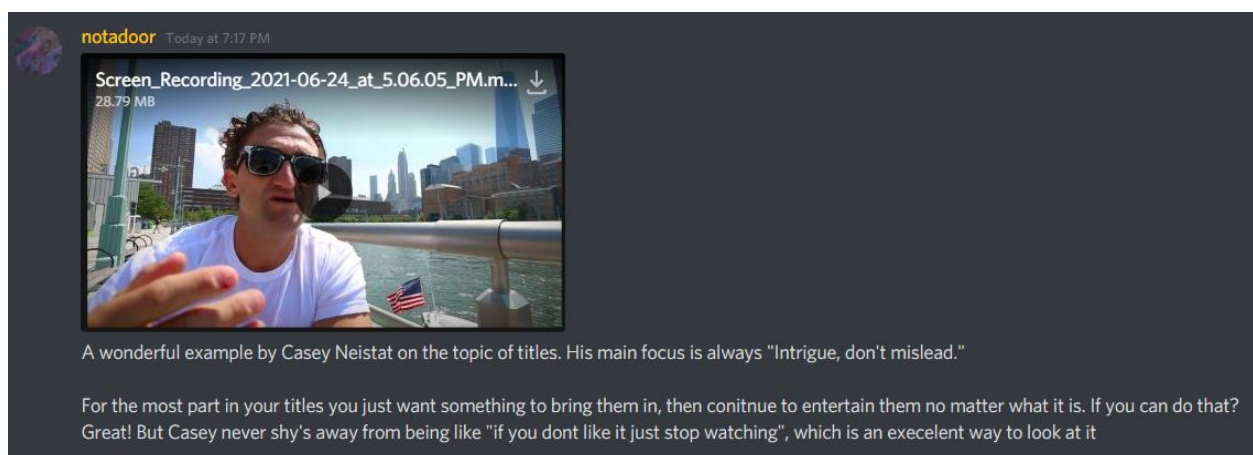


Figure 3-1 A video of Casey Neistat shared in NewTubers Discord. Screenshot taken 06/24/2021

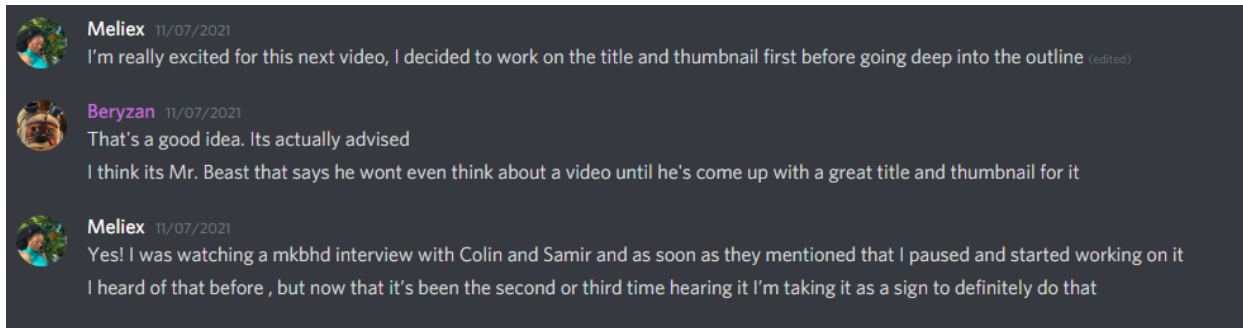


Figure 3-2 Two creators discussing advice from Mr. Beast in NewTubers Discord - Screenshot taken 11/07/2021

Creator community

Content creation has helped foster a social network for Grady; it is comprised of creators and viewers he has met over the years from doing videos in the woodworking scene and in the educational space that he is currently in. For some, however, content creation can be a very isolated proposition with only a few fellow creators who are close enough to be considered friends. Travis feels isolated as a creator; he said that he is living out his dream of making educational content but besides from the two creators he knows it feels pretty lonely. Making friends as a creator is different than a conventional job, Travis argued, “Most social interaction is forced in a workplace, but YouTube is mostly doing stuff at a computer so your main way of finding friends is limited.” On top of being socially isolated, being recognized as a content creator can be difficult sometimes. Even though he has created lasting friendships as a creator, Grady still has a hard time introducing himself as a creator regardless of the fact he has been publishing videos for 7 years and has made it his full-time job. “It’s just easier saying I’m a civil engineer. People understand that—they don’t understand content creation. I’d rather just say civil engineering to get it over with rather than explaining making YouTube videos. I’m in the same realm anyway, I just don’t practice civil engineering—I teach it.”

Creators gravitate to each other to swap advice, seek collaborations, and in general share in the experiences each other had. There is no shortage of communities that seek to help creators make videos or to provide a social outlet. Grady was part of a multichannel network (MCN) which hosted a slack server for all the creators involved to talk shop. A few educational creators, including, Travis, are a part of WeCreateEdu; A slack server that is run somewhat professionally to specifically help educational creators in making content and succeeding on YouTube. I was not able to gain access to these communities, but I was able to join a community called NewTubers. NewTubers is a sub-Reddit and Discord community that appeals to new creators of all walks of life whether they are educational, gaming, or media analysis focused.

NewTubers

NewTubers is a community of creators learning to do content creation specifically on YouTube, but there is some Twitch activity as well. On their sub-Reddit they describe themselves as the following: “You're a YouTube Video Creator or Twitch Streamer? NewTubers is the Premiere "Small Content Creator" Community, created to allow up-and-coming channels to improve with resources, critiques, and cooperation among tens of thousands of peers! We teach you how to Start, Build, and Sustain your Content Career!” (Accessed on 03/01/2022). Reddit is a forum website that allows for threads to be voted on to rank them higher or lower on the front page. This allows users to make decisions about what is particularly important or interesting to the community to be apparent. Sub-Reddits are sub forums that users can subscribe to and create a community separate of the greater community of reddit users. Sub-Reddits consolidate those who are interested in the same thing. The sub-Reddit for NewTubers houses posts that ask various things about the YouTube content creation.

The sub-Reddit has several different categories of posts. Some ask specific technical questions they cannot find answers to with a simple google; a post from July of 2021 asks if YouTube is bugged as the likes and views on their statistics page is not the same as their current view count (figure 3-3). There are others posts that ask for feedback or retrospectives on their channel. There are posts that offer advice couched in their personal experience or retrospectives of what they did wrong. A post from November 2021, for example, warned against shorts as it had—in their mind—ruined their watch time and killed their channel (figure 3-4). These posts garner a decent response, with advice as well as reassurances. In response to trying to understand view count, a user stated “... YouTube seems to take a minute sometimes, I wouldn’t stress it. I had a video get around 60 views in an hour or so, then 40 of those disappeared. It is what it is, I’ve just got to assume many of them clicked off quickly or were bots or something and move on. Can’t control that stuff.” (see figure 3-3) A quick answer but also a reassurance, they had also had a similar experience. There were many reassuring messages to the poster who thought their channel was dead as well, showing a community of creators coming together as a group.

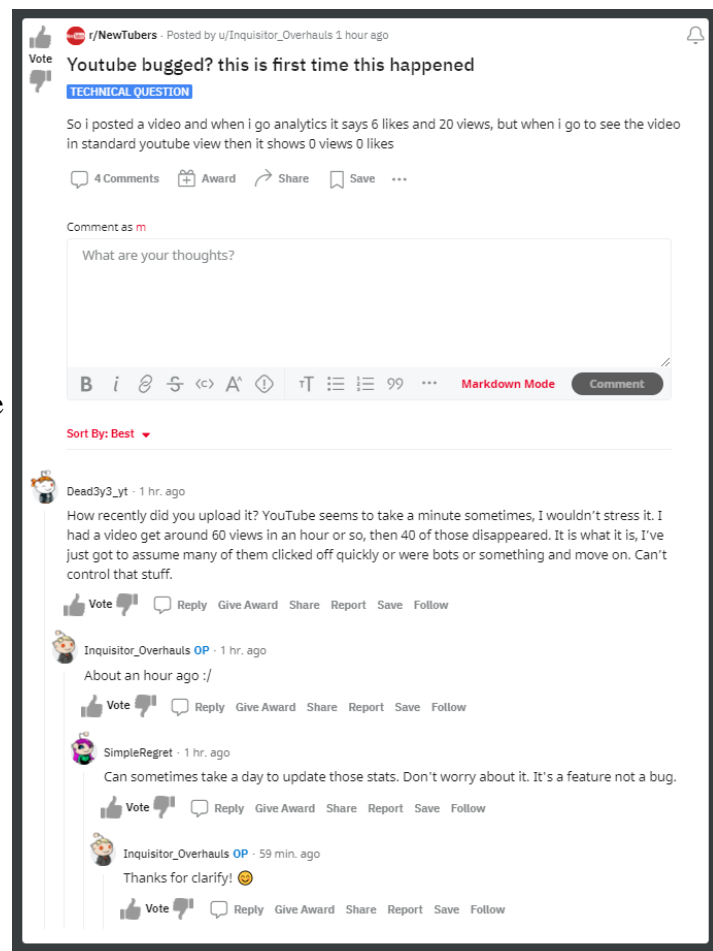


Figure 3-3 NewTubers sub-Reddit post - Screenshot taken 07/23/2021

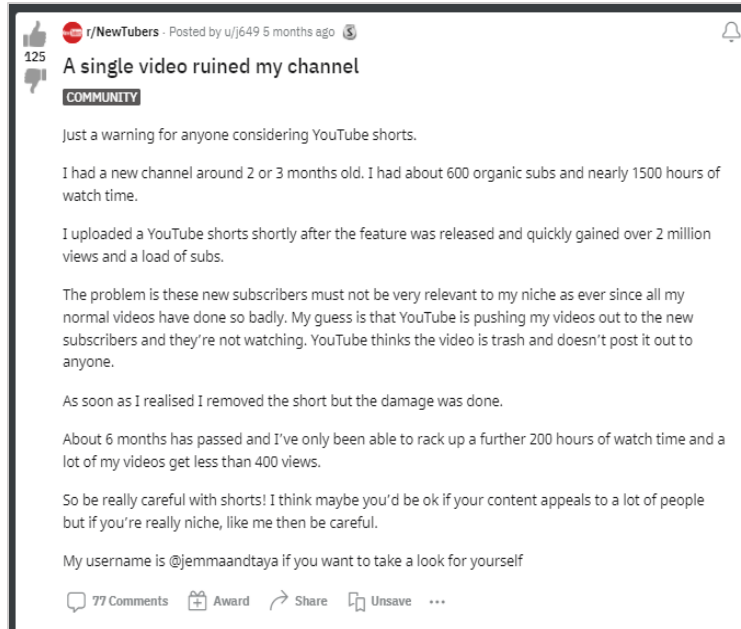


Figure 3-4 NewTubers sub-Reddit post - Screenshot taken 03/20/2022

This community is also present on Discord. Discord is an instant messenger service which was originally designed for gamers but has morphed into an all-purpose platform for all types of communities. Discord is a platform made up of servers (known colloquially as discords) that are discrete from one another which users create; Each server allows a group of people to text, share photos, and video stream. Servers are invite-only, allowing it to be as private or public as the server owners want. Servers have different channels that can be utilized as chats for different topics, i.e., a general chat versus a scheduling chat. Additionally, discord owners have the ability to create roles that allow certain people certain privileges and permissions in the server like seeing specific channels or moderating duties. The discord for NewTubers is prominently displayed on the sub-Reddit and is how I entered the community.

While both the Sub-reddit and discord have information concerning content creation in long form FAQs, Discord may afford a more engaged community. Reddit's format is in discrete posts that are separated to produce clarity, but it does not link together the greater community;

community stops and starts in threads on posts without much continuity. On the discord, members can chat in general about content creation as well as personal problems and situations that are not typically found on the Reddit thread. Even though the discord's population of 2,500 is dwarfed by the 200k followers on the sub-Reddit, the discord felt livelier. The discord always has at least 10 people active at any given time in different channels and the instant response created a constantly moving social space. For this project I focus on the discord as there was less formal discussion in the discord and the discord saw more daily activity than the sub-Reddit, at least at the time.

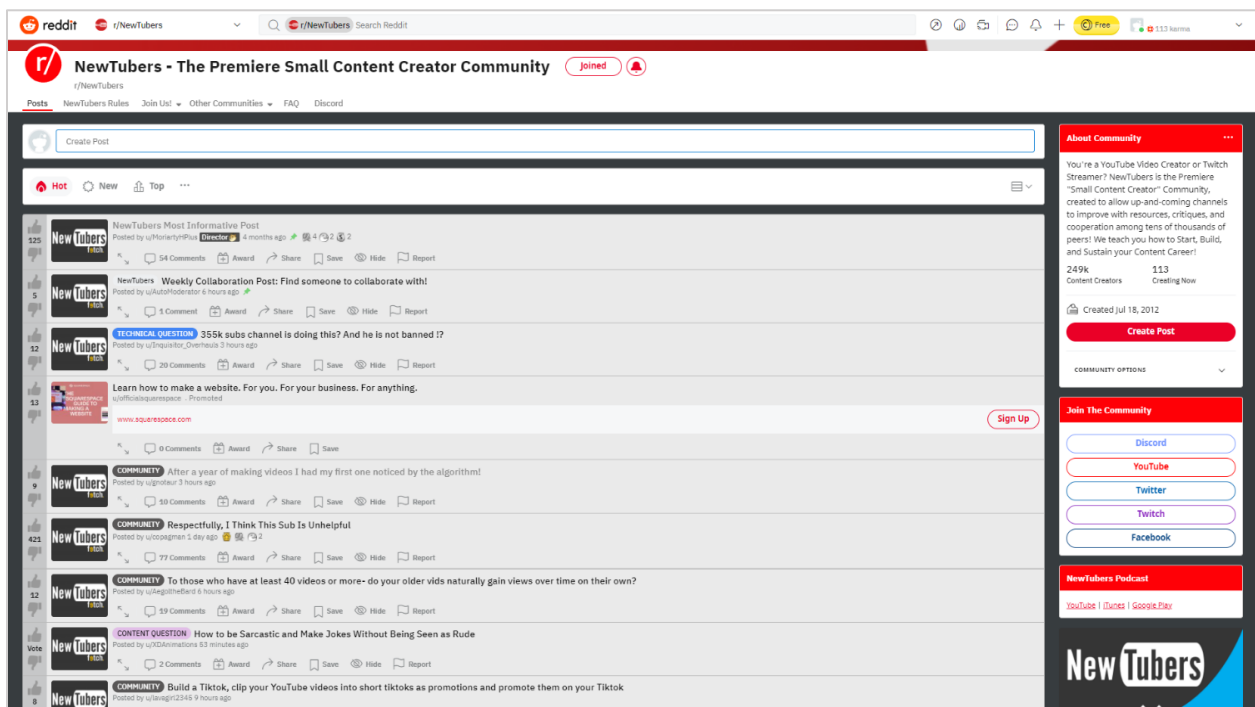


Figure 3-5 NewTubers Sub-Reddit front page - Screenshot taken 03/08/2022

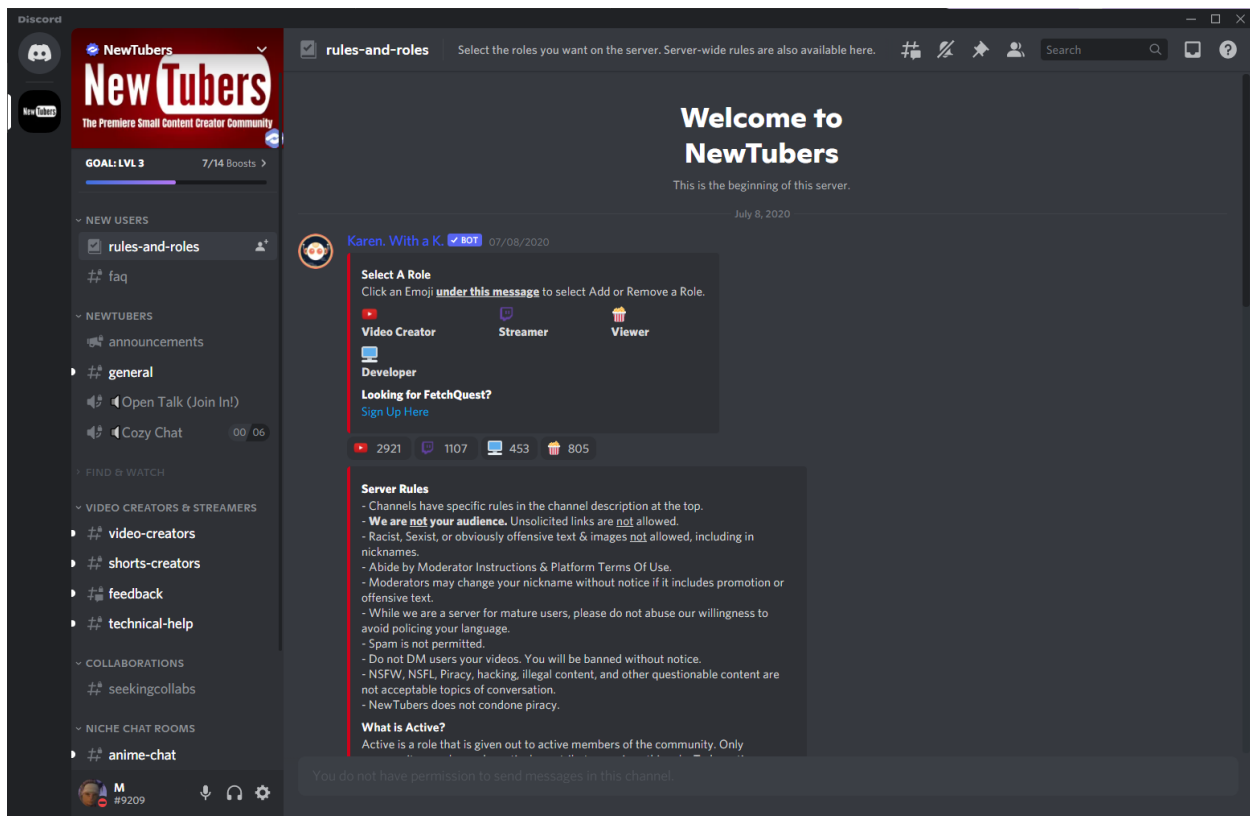


Figure 3-6 NewTubers Discord Server - Screenshot taken 03/08/2022

Moriarty is the owner of NewTubers; he acquired the sub-Reddit in 2016 and shortly after made the discord. When he found the sub-Reddit, he was looking for a place to find out about content creation. The sub-Reddit was a mostly abandoned state, being as Moriarty said a “link-farm” where people would post their videos in hopes of getting a few clicks. Moriarty has changed the sub-Reddit and discord to be a community for people; a place to both learn about content creation and commiserate with others. Being a content creator is arduous and time consuming; Moriarty says that most people do not make it to a year of content creation. Those creators who do make it past a year are still in need of a community like NewTubers for a social outlet. Moriarty is blunt about the realities of creating content as a small creator; they are often left behind by YouTube or not taken seriously by larger creators. Most of the members of NewTubers are under 10k subscribers, with most having channels under 100 subscribers,

Moriarty talked about how the community is a place for small creators- “The most members don’t have more than 100 subscribers, getting a few views a video. Their family and friends don’t take the channel seriously ‘cause it is almost always a side hobby. NewTubers is a place where people are interested in content creation and can commiserate together and be recognized as YouTubers you know?”

Moriarty is still regularly active on the discord. He updates the FAQ and sends announcements out when needed about other platforms or updates on YouTube. He also continues to work on long form essays on his channel *mrixrt*, as he has been doing since 2015. Moriarty said he could not find that any consolidated resources about YouTube, it was scattered on all manner of websites and YouTube had not really committed to making educational material about the platform. NewTubers has become that resource and more, offering a comprehensive information hub as well as hosting talks with YouTube developers as well as FAQs with large creators. Over time, NewTubers has become more refined and entrenched in its rules. YouTube is not interested in making communities of creators, Moriarty argued; YouTube is happy there are communities of creators that they can take advantage of for good press, but they do not want the work of moderating and recruiting for these communities. There are several different tiers of members starting at the top with Moderators, then active members, and at the bottom non-active members.

When a user first enters the discord of NewTubers, they’ve already been looking for knowledge on YouTube because the link for the discord is on the sub-Reddit. They are present with a choice of roles—video creator, stream creator, viewer, or developer. These roles define what channels are seen that are specific to that role- for instance when someone takes the role of video creator it shows them the channels for YouTube in particular, chats to get feedback on

YouTube videos as well as technical support. After you select a role, scrolling down you will be given the rules of the server and, further down, the FAQ—which everyone is strongly encouraged to read before going into any other channel to ask a question. The second role is listed in all bold font: **“We are not your audience. Unsolicited links are not allowed.”** (Figure

3-7) which surprised me when I joined the discord. How would a member improve their channel if creators could not promote it?

Moriarty said the reason for this is that he did not want the community to devolve into what it once was, an abandoned link-farm. He wanted a community that was not just about clicks but about the process of content creation and learning. The

community is not there to give hollow views, it is there to give feedback and create better content. NewTubers is a community of people practicing their craft and to partake in the iterative process of content creation

NewTubers is creators teaching creators through their slightly different approaches to the platform. With so many new creators, it falls to the older creators like Moriarty and others to take them under their wing and show them the resources they need (see figure 3-8). They reassure new creators, share their experiences and give them tips to follow. This is a similar process to how Steinkuehler and Oh (2012) described apprenticeship in online games. In their

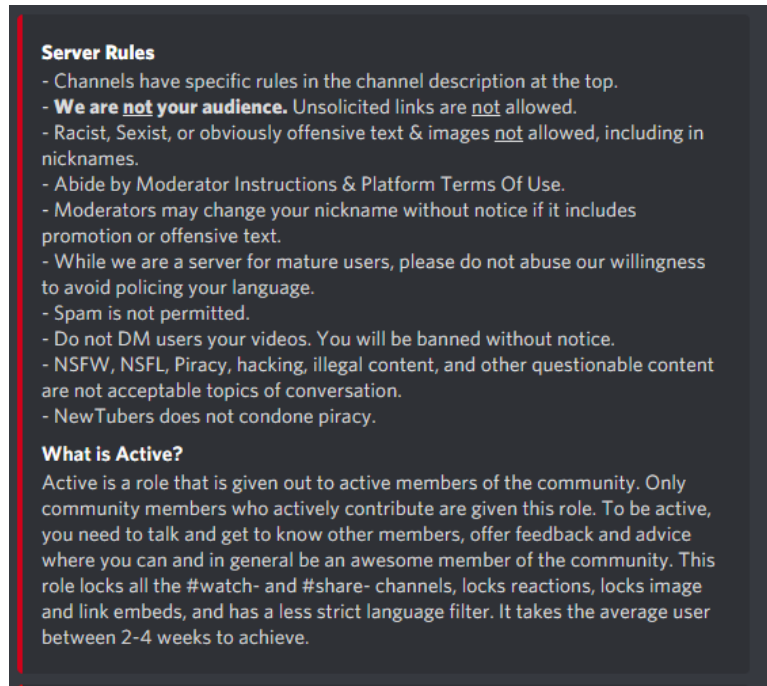


Figure 3-7 NewTubers Discord Server rules - Updated July of 2020, screenshot taken 02/17/2022

paper a new player signals they are new or are lacking experience in a field, older players notice this and guide them through their learning. In Figure 3-8 for example, a creator asks how to get views- a few people answer and one in particular asks to see their channel. User Saint Fuki is taking a mentor role for Lahni, taking the initiative to guide them. The active discussion and learning from each other lends NewTubers and the creator community as a whole as communities of practice.

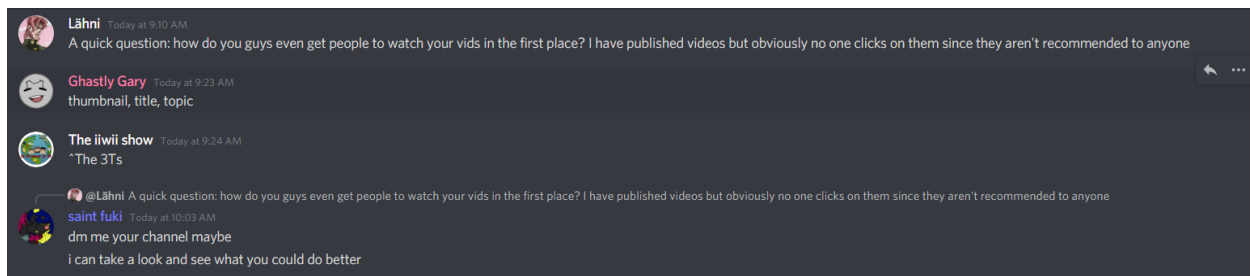


Figure 3-8 Moriarty (Ghastly Gary) and others mentor a new creator - Screenshot taken 09/10/2021

A community of Practice

Wenger (1998) describes the two important pillars that communities of practice are built on. The first being participation which is founded in the tactical everyday practice of being in the community. Participation allows community members to do things together and learn from them as a team. It also allows for the flow of information that comes from talking to each other and sharing stories. These stories become part of the shared repertoire of the community and contribute to the knowledge of participants. Stories are tactics that are preserved for future understanding for Orr the narrative preserves the specific elements of practice for problematic scenarios for others to learn from and build an experimental knowledge. De Certeau first came up with the notion that stories are tactics made lasting. Tactics are normally ephemeral decisions that do not leave behind objects, however by telling stories these tactics become preserved for

others to learn from these tactical maneuvers. Orr (1996) encountered war stories in groups of Xerox technicians. Technicians would share stories that illuminated a particularly hard scenario, made light of a frustrating situation, or a funny anecdote. This same story swapping happens in NewTubers, creators share stories about videos that did well, what worked or didn't work about a particular topic, etc.

Participation is also key to creating shared knowledge and learning from the group, without communal participation from those learning and those teaching then the group would not function as a learning community. Martin & Steinkuehler (2010) stated that "in online social contexts such as *World of Warcraft*... information literacy is contingent on the presence and availability of other people. Peers are often the first line of inquiry because, simply put, storing information across one's social network and then querying that network... is far more efficient and adapt than storing copious amounts of information in one's own head." (p. 363) in this way the group is sustained by its ability to store information as collected by various members, not just one person knows everything it is instead spread across many people and in the artifacts that the group creates. At this point it is important to draw the parallel to game communities' fervent theory crafting efforts to better understand the opaque nature of a video game. A group of people will test and evaluate to understand the best builds for games, the best skill progression, and share what builds they used which worked or did not work (see Choontanom & Nardi, 2012; Golub 2010). This process is remarkably similar to how creators in a community like NewTubers formulate the best approaches to being successful at YouTube.

Theory crafting is similar to how the shared repertoire of a community of practice starts to be built up. Through the stories of members, their situated practice, and members coming together to swap notes communities of practice build up a shared knowledge base that is

concentrated on practice of the joint enterprise—the shared interest—of the group. In the case of theory crafting, the joint enterprise is to create characters that can take on the challenges of a game; in the case of NewTubers, that joint enterprise is getting better and hopefully more successful at doing YouTube. When stories are told they get turned into artifacts to be circulated. That experience becomes reproducible and reusable as a tool for members in the community (Orr, 1996). In the realm of understanding YouTube, stories can be used to examine a situation with another's expertise and fill in some of the edges of a creator's knowledge. This is part of the shared repertoire and the bricolage that is created in the practice of making content. These stories are also be combined with other artifacts to become reified in the continual practice of the community.

Reification is the explicit, mostly written down, rules of thumb. Reification takes the shared repertoire and the cumulative practice of community members and creates something that would be useful for members. This reification process can create a false concreteness to the world, making it seem that the artifact is everything to know and eliminating edge cases. For NewTubers it is the FAQ, the gospel of NewTubers. The stories told by members contextualize the FAQ in way that makes up for how authoritative it may seem; creating content based solely on the FAQ is fine but the practice and participation in the community would lead to continued growth. As creators continue practicing content creation they can start to see where the FAQ is and is not applicable which then they can use their stories to educate those participating in NewTubers. In this way, reification and participation fold into one another to make communities of practice work. The process of creating these artifacts, is strategic in that it benefits the institution—the community of practice- for the better recruitment of new members to grow the community.

New NewTubers

New members that join the community of practice are typically allowed a period of transition; they go from a lurker on the outskirts of the community to being an active participant. Wenger called this “legitimate peripheral participation”, the process in which a newcomer is on the sidelines observing yet still participating in anticipation of becoming a full member. In NewTubers it is an unspoken rule that new members should read the FAQ before asking any questions. During my time observing, people were pointed to the FAQ repeatedly before any follow up questions were answered; Moriarty said he has gotten sick of answering the same questions over and over so he points people to the FAQ frequently. New creators are still practicing content creation as everyone else in the group, but they need to catch up to the current state of the communal knowledge by reading the FAQ. New members slowly adapt to the common practices and turn from new member to regular member to mentor.

Mark joined NewTubers in July 2021. When he joined, he posted that he wanted to learn more about content creation on his DIY channel as well as find a community of fellow creators. For the first few months, it was seen that he asked one-off questions about content like how long his introduction should be or where his mid-video advertisement should be placed. He also made the point of commenting on threads in general chat, saying hello to members who just joined or joking about pop culture when the occasion arose. Over time, the question asking turned into advice giving. This turn can be seen in several creators, they have had enough practice and heard enough stories perhaps to tell new members what they should do. Beryzan said that he started to give advice probably a year after he joined. Beryzan is a moderator in NewTubers, regularly giving detailed advice to new creators and outside of moderation he has a small YouTube channel that covers teaches people how to make pizza called *Gamer Pizza*. Beryzan at first gave

small tidbits, things that had been passed around in the greater community but then started to be more confident in his channel as well as in his knowledge to start dispensing more impactful advice like how to read analytics. Interestingly, Beryzan has largely stopped creating content due to life circumstances but still is very active in NewTubers which is a testament to the community of active users on NewTubers.

Toward August or September, Mark started to point people toward the FAQ. Sometimes this was in a helpful tone (hey, that question is in the FAQ! It's a great resource for what you are looking for) and sometimes it was more angry tone (similar to figure 3.9). Perhaps this is the reason why the FAQ becomes assumed fact as older members consistently point members to it; The fact that it is pointed to repeatedly reifies its importance and assigns it a weighty importance to new members. It in that weighty importance that it becomes an object, the culmination of all NewTubers experience and something not to be questioned.

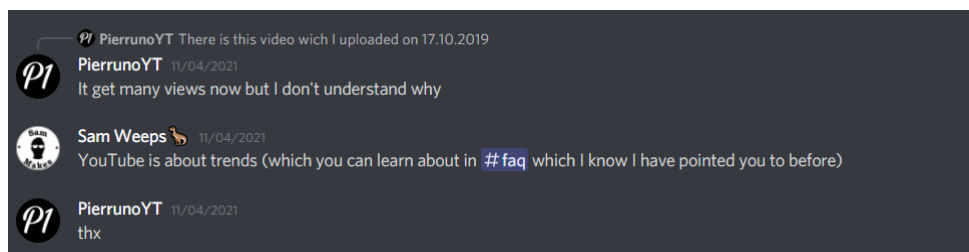


Figure 3-9 User Sam Weeps responding to PierrunoYT in a somewhat annoyed tone. Screenshot taken 11/05/2021, message sent 11/04/2021 in NewTubers General chat.

The FAQ as shared repertoire

The FAQ is both tactics and strategy; it is a culmination of all the theory crafting and communal practices, a tactical understanding of the platform. However, it is also strategic in that it represents the institutionalized nature of NewTubers. NewTubers has become very institutionalized; what was a place to concentrate knowledge found across the internet about

content creation has become a group that has created a hierarchy of members (mods, active members, everyone else) and rules to follow. Part of the benefit of this is that NewTubers has been able to solicit information from YouTube that would not otherwise be shared and organize talks from the developer of the platform. It benefits the community but also YouTube as it can bring NewTubers closer to what YouTube wants to see, NewTubers toeing the company line of YouTube.

That does not mean that the practice of content creation and learning to create content is lost in the institution. The benefits of NewTubers and other communities of practice is that changes and the effects of those changes are disseminated quickly. Moriarty posts updates and notices in response to news in the announcements channel. Creators who are making content can see any immediate effects of changes to monetization or other systems and report it back to NewTubers faster than YouTube is made aware of any unintended consequences. This is similar to how documentation is seen by technicians (Orr 1996), the documentation is seen as fallable in how it lags behind certain techniques and cannot hope to cover all the complexities of troubleshooting. NewTubers find and compensate for these unintended consequences by sharing their stories of overcoming it.

Adapting to change

Communities of practice for YouTubers allow for creators to invent and maintain ways of squaring the demands of the platform with the shifting reality of YouTube. Taking everyday experience from other YouTubers can better prepare creators for when a community or copyright strike threatens their channel. It also helps them adapt to stricter monetization policies seeing

what videos other people made which got fully monetized or ways around the algorithms all together. Monetizing a channel on the surface is quite easy. If a YouTube channel meets the requirements, then they can apply to be part of the YouTuber partner program. Notably, a channel must have 4,000 hours of watch time (time viewers have spent watching the channel), have 1,000 subscribers, and follow all YouTube channel monetization policies in order to apply. Once accepted into the program, a creator can monetize their channel by allowing advertisements to play before, in the middle of, or after videos which earn them ad revenue. Getting monetized can be an opaque process, as Wade's issues with his Dankmus channel showcase. Even once a creator is able to monetize their videos, that does not guarantee every video will be able to have advertising.

Videos that contain media that is copyrighted can be manually reported to YouTube or YouTube can detect it using content ID. These videos are copyright "struck" or "claimed," which means that the copyright holder can either take the video off the platform or take any advertising revenue earned, respectively. Content ID will be discussed more in chapter 4. The other way is to be demonetized. Demonetization is where videos are automatically analyzed to see if advertisements can be shown with the content. This system was put into place very quickly in 2017, and for content creators this is particularly challenging; fast, abrupt changes to core systems as well as small updates to terms of service or community policies quickly render informational webpages, whether from YouTube or other sites, obsolete.

Creators lean on each other for more anecdotal, up to date stories that can guide them on changes as they happen. Changes to the platform often come with several unintended bugs or issues that only show up after the millions of channels are interacting with new systems. Creators fill in these knowledge gaps as they emerge by comparing notes and passing what others have

seen on to each other. A great example of how this knowledge is passed around is when the demonetization system was implemented.

The adpocalypse was a new era of demonetization in 2017 that hit many creators after advertisers boycotted the site due to anti-Semitic allegations against the platform's largest creator PewDiePie (Romano, 2017). Although YouTube stabilized over time, the monetization policy changes that YouTube put in place became something of a nightmare for certain creators. Mista GG stated that it took him a bit before he understood what it took to keep the same feeling of his videos while compromising for monetization. He knows now to limit swearing until after 30 seconds for example and to avoid certain words. After the adpocalypse, H3H3—a large satire channel—made a video claiming that if you label your video as satire in the tags then the video would be monetized no matter the subject matter. Nerd City posted a video November of 2017 showcasing a study on how demonetized videos don't get recommended as well as a later on in 2019 that revealed that bots had a list of demonetized words (see Nerd City, 2017 & 2019). These videos were widely cited and utilized at the time, passed down the proverbial grapevine.

It is surprising how fast information spreads throughout the creator community. When the Covid-19 pandemic first hit the United States in early 2020, there was a myriad of content that was released addressing it. At first creators freely said words like corona virus, COVID-19, or pandemic, but then had to quickly pivot away from Covid-19 coverage or change the way they talked about it due to YouTube's policy change YouTube posted on Twitter on March 6th about their plans for the platform stating they wanted to raise up reputable news sources and remove videos that spread misinformation (YouTube, 2020). However, this was a double-edged sword—while it helped get a lot of misinformation off the site, it also demonetized many independent creators who were spreading reputable information or just commiserating with their viewers on

the situation. These kinds of unintended consequences happen any time a policy change happens on the platform; there will always be innocent people who get mistakenly targeted by automated moderation and are forced to adapt in different ways. For example, Phillip DeFranco, a popular independent news content creator, has always felt that he was always at a disadvantage because he would get demonetized for the same content mainstream media outlets would report on. The demonetization policy highlighted these issues as he could not report effectively without his revenue taken away (Alexander, 2020).

Independent creators who still wanted to speak about the pandemic were forced to improvise and test out ways that they could talk about it. Creators tried to bring in different words or imply what they were talking about. Vague platitudes about the “situation” or direct substitutions like “beer” (referencing the Corona brand of beer) or the “big C” were used to be able to talk about the situation with viewers, but even these measures sometimes did not work (Alexander, 2020). Some creators just forfeited monetization in order to talk about the pandemic, others made a note on their social media that they would not be talking about it at all for fear of demonetization. Linus Sebastian, host of Linus Tech Tips stated in a video titled “Buy a computer. Right now.” in February 2020 that “I won’t be directly commenting on the recent health related news because A, I am not a health care professional, and B, I don’t need my video demonetized.” The developers of YouTube meant to target misinformation and somewhat succeeded at the cost of some creators who were forced to censor themselves. Algorithms are difficult to tweak on a large scale without these unforeseen issues coming up. Unintended consequences come up due to the black box nature of these automated systems and the way that developers can only guide systems.

In the next chapter I explore these systems and how they impact creators further. The

platform of YouTube will be analyzed for how it has changed due to societal pressures and creator exploitation. As well, the systems at play in the uploading process will be assessed to see how they directly impact creators and reconfigure their videos. I will also examine how creators adapt their practices to automated moderation and recommendation through interacting with the analytics and what little feedback they get from YouTube.

Chapter 4 – Creators and “the Algorithm”

From the outside looking in, it may look like creators are always pushing back against the weight of the algorithm, struggling against an unknowable obstacle that bars their way to an audience and success. At least, that was my assumption going into the project. I had seen a vocal minority of creators who were always upset when the YouTube developers changed the platform. I thought that YouTube was an enemy to creators rather than an ally. However, when I talked to creators, I found that the algorithm was not a major concern. In fact, some creators praised it, saying YouTube did a good job of recommending the video. Perhaps the sentiment is best described in a conversation on the NewTubers discord that culminated in the exchange on the right (Figure 4-1). “The algorithm are the people on YouTube and those interested in your niche” is a powerful statement, as it is unexpected. The algorithm in this context means the search and discovery system, but the algorithm could also mean copyright or moderation systems.

YouTube has three separate algorithms that creators all interact with for every video they upload. The ways that

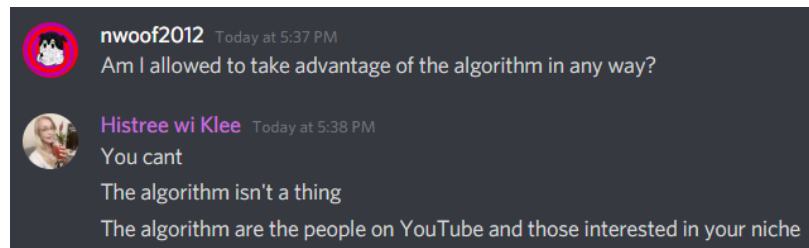


Figure 4-1 An older member (Histree wi Klee) advising a newer member (nwoof2012) in General chat on NewTubers Discord. Screenshot taken 07/07/2021

creators become accustomed to the platform in this way and how the platform acts upon creators will be the focus of this chapter. We will delve into the way that uploading can reconfigure the way that creators see their content as well as how the platform has a direct impact on what creators create. Creators can also have an effect on the platform through their own actions and practice; this chapter will look at the back-and-forth relationship between YouTube and creator.

The first interaction with YouTube is from a viewer's point of view. A creator logs in to YouTube and is still put onto their personalized homepage. This showcases how YouTube views creators and viewers; they are both users just one might upload videos and the other does not. In this way, creators are set in a duality of watcher and maker. Moving away from the homepage, creators go into the creator studio. The creator studio is where creators interact with the platform and can change their channel as well as video. Importantly this is where creators upload their videos and walk through the process of uploading. The studio mostly in service to uploading videos but it also houses the analytics for videos as will be discussed later. YouTube has a straightforward way of uploading videos, the way that it is programmed is meant to take you through the process of uploading and go through several checks as well.

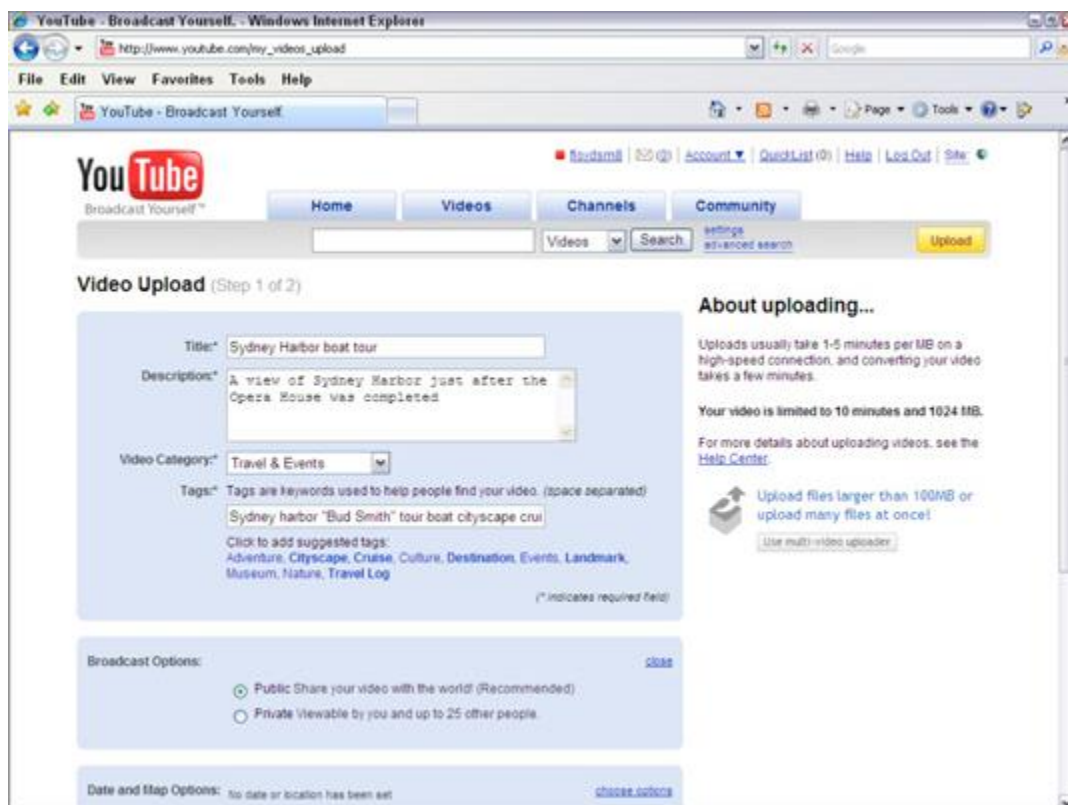


Figure 4-2 Screenshot of 2008 uploading menu – Taken from <https://www.dummies.com/article/technology/social-media/youtube/how-to-upload-a-video-clip-to-youtube-206144#tab2>

In the early days of YouTube, the uploading system was a simpler affair. Uploading was a single page form that asked for a video title, description, searching tags, a category of the video, and privacy settings (whether it was public or private). A person could upload the date and location the video was filmed and select monetization options (ads at the beginning or banner ads). These options are still present in the uploading menus in the current YouTube creator dashboard, but the process has added several more menus that make the process more involved.

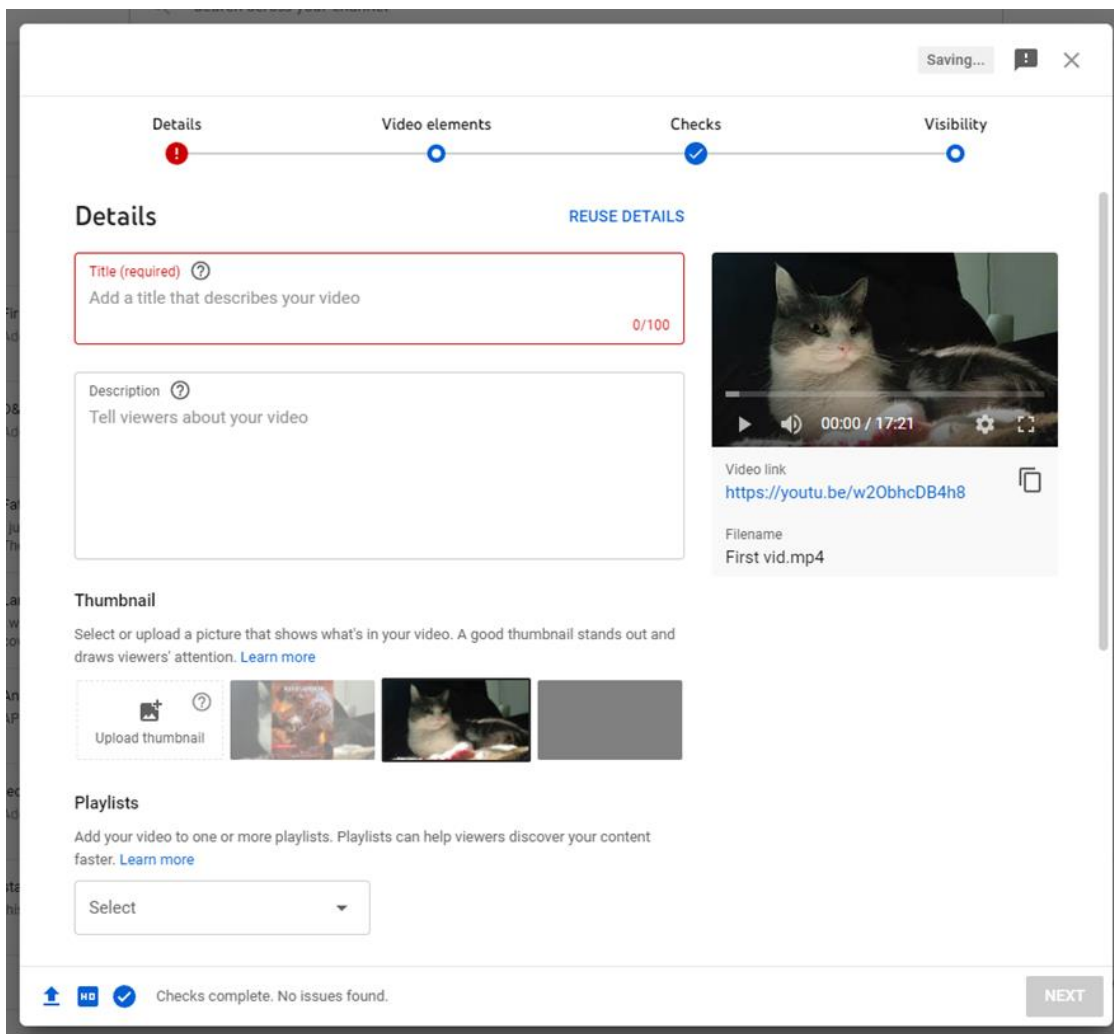


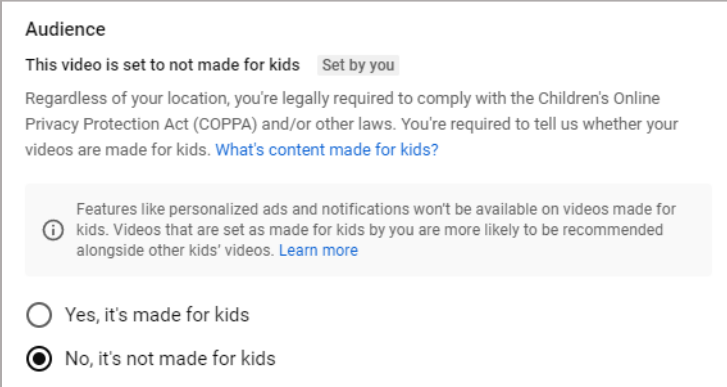
Figure 4-3 First menu of current upload menu, titled Details- Screenshot taken 03/05/2021

The current process of uploading has four menus that it walks creators through when they upload. This is a guided process that takes uploader from the first to the last menu in a way that is meant to be simple and intuitive. Developers have added more features over the years to the uploader like adding captions, end screen options, and closed captioning; they have also taken features and hid them under advanced menus or shifted what those features actually do. These changes illuminate how the platform is a product of company values mixed with the pressures from legislators and advertisers.

Uploading content

The first menu of the current uploader has many of the same features as the basic uploading page from 2008 with some notable additions and changes. At the top of the menu—titled “details”—YouTube asks for the basic information: title, description, thumbnail, what playlist to add it to. Scrolling down on the first menu, you find a section titled “Audience” that asks whether the video is made for kids, along with a description that reads “Regardless of your location, you're legally required to comply with the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA) and/or other laws. You are required to tell us whether your videos are made for kids”

(figure 4-4). In 2019, the FTC settled with YouTube for 170\$ million in fines for collecting data from children under 13 for use in targeted ads which was a direct violation of the 1998 COPPA law (Jennings, 2019). The settlement required YouTube to



Audience

This video is set to not made for kids [Set by you](#)

Regardless of your location, you're legally required to comply with the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA) and/or other laws. You're required to tell us whether your videos are made for kids. [What's content made for kids?](#)

i Features like personalized ads and notifications won't be available on videos made for kids. Videos that are set as made for kids by you are more likely to be recommended alongside other kids' videos. [Learn more](#)

Yes, it's made for kids

No, it's not made for kids

Figure 4-4 Audience declaration, found underneath the playlist option in the details menu - screenshot taken 03/05/2022

put further measures in place to prevent children's data being collected hence the required declaration. This is a part of the assemblage of the platform of YouTube as a non-static artifact that shows its history through the platform itself.

Ramifications of past events often can be seen through precautionary measures found in present times. A single instance of a terrorist concealing a bomb in his shoe aboard an airplane in 2001 has led to the requirement for all passengers to take their shoes off at airport security to have them x-rayed. Caution signs on equipment, gas pumps, and even coffee lids all point to the history and past influences on the present experience of an object. YouTube is no different and these declarations can give us a glimpse of issues that arose in the past that impacted the assemblage of the platform. The declaration changes how you can monetize the video from personalized ads (ads based on collected data) to contextual ads (ads that are based on the content of the video). Contextual ads are not as profitable as personalized ones, leading to a complete change in the kid's content space as large content farms were not as profitable so became less prominent. This was a known consequence of the settlement, but creators who covered typical children's topics in adult ways were worried how they would be pursued by YouTube or the FTC in unintended ways. These content creators, like Chadtronic, were concerned about how their content would be classified under the vague definitions of content for children as he made videos intended for an adult audience that covered children's products like easy bake ovens. In a video titled "Marking 'not for kids' Doesn't Protect You—COPPA update" he discusses the issues with the COPPA settlement, specifically how the FTC defines children's content.

The definition of children's content includes subject matter that would be enticing for children which could be video games, movies, toys, and a myriad of other things. Chadtronic

made the argument that anything could be considered “enticing for children” and pointed out how context matters a lot, but he was not sure that the FTC or YouTube would understand that. He was concerned that YouTube would penalize his content if he played it on the safe side and declared his content for kids, effectively throttling his earning potential. If he did not declare the content for kids, he thought he risked being pursued by the FTC; being backed into a corner, Chad has pivoted away from reacting and reviewing children’s products and focuses a lot more on reacting to content less aimed at children. This is an unintended consequence brought about by a change in the platform of YouTube. The sociotechnical system of YouTube had a drastic impact in Chad’s change in content, the material agency of YouTube and the political regulatory forces at play both impacted him.

Underneath the COPPA declaration, there is an option to “show more”. Once clicked, it shows an advanced settings menu that houses many more settings for creators. These advanced settings range from what language the video is in, to what categories the content is in, as well as how many comments the creator wants to automatically filter. These features are hidden by YouTube which shows they are unimportant to platform developers or features that they do not want the average creator to mess with. There are settings that are on by default, leaving it up to the content creator to say no to these. An example of this is the option which allows people to sample the video—a recently added process where a 10 second clip is taken from the video and published separate of the creator—and that option is always on so if a creator would want to turn it off, they would need to go into the advanced menu and change it. In this way, YouTube has introduced a new feature and forced adoption by default. They also have taken older features that are less relevant and placed them in the advanced menu. This is strategic practice on the part of

developers, following a policy to influence the practice of the users. Tags are an interesting example of this as their role has drastically changed over the course of the platform's history.

Tags were once described as “Keywords used to help people find your video” (figure 2) but they are now described as “useful if content in your video is commonly misspelled. Otherwise, tags play a minimal role in helping viewers find your video.” As well, Tags were once featured right under the description field as can be seen in Figure 2, but they are now buried in the “show more” menu away from the average creator. This demotion is important as the developers strategically placed it there to signal its unimportance, leaving a new description as well to really tell creators that it is not important. However, it has taken a long time for creators to realize that tags are not important. Tags are a common misconception on NewTubers, I saw many times where someone asked what tags do or giving advice based on the old understanding of tags; Moriarty brought it up in his interview pointing out how people do not believe YouTube developers when they state as a fact that tags no longer do anything. He laughed at the prospect of developers lying "why would they leave in this secret way to get popular? Why would they then lie about it, if they say it's useless for SEO [search engine optimization] then it is useless! I wish people would stop thinking it was the key to getting views.” While I have no direct evidence on the question, it is possible that this understanding comes from outdated websites referencing tags' importance.

The change in how tags work is correlated to how the platform itself has changed the way that videos are found. In 2008, the descriptions of certain fields—specifically tags, categories, and location of video—clearly state how they make the video more easily findable by viewers. The platform was performing the task of a librarian or a database, the creators controlled their video's entry in the database which dictated how viewers could search for that video. The viewer

was also in charge of looking for videos they wanted to see rather than being recommended videos. Now, YouTube does not directly tell creators how their videos get found. YouTube has developed several systems like discovery and search that show videos to viewers based on viewers' preferences instead of pulling information from tags, location, etc.

A creator has some control over search and discovery algorithms, but it is limited to having a good title and thumbnail. Search and discovery algorithms take videos and present them to viewers as recommendations or search results based primarily on title, thumbnail, and sometimes description. This hand-off approach of uploading a video and letting YouTube do its thing takes away human agency from creators and gives more material agency to YouTube as it is allowed to make decisions on who should be recommended a video. Creators can figure out through practice what titles and thumbnails do better compared to other video, but they are never going to be explicitly told what the discovery system did with their video. The platform provides statistics for creators about how many people were shown the video versus how many clicked on it as well as where traffic comes from (if viewers come from YouTube or another website). This data is only usable in a productive way if creators have other videos to compare it to, so it falls to creators to play around with elements to see what works the best for them. Creators are less anxious about this than one might expect as it has become incorporated into the video creation process.

Alexis was a content production manager at the channel Sci Show which is produced with a team of writers, editors, and hosts. She was in meetings that discussed topics to choose for videos; I asked her if the search or recommendation algorithms were ever considered when creating videos. She said that it was never considered a high priority- they made videos in line with the values of the channel rather than what was thought to be right for the platform. She and

several other interviewees said that they focused heavily on title and thumbnails, making sure the topic of the video was presented in interesting ways. The play between creators and the platform comes into its own when creators go back after uploading a video to understand how the video preformed.

Analytics

YouTube imparts its values and wants on a creator is through analytics, defining what is and is not important about the specific aspects of a video. After a video is uploaded, creators have access to a plethora of data relating to their videos. There are trend graphs that show a lot of data for one video; they show audience retention, watch time, number of views, if subscribers watched it, how many impressions (who was recommended it), click through rate, unique viewers, and more. Out of all of these analytics the first to be shown is views, it pops up in a graph when the creator first clicks to view the videos data. This makes views important, most of the creators interviewed said they thought views were important for monetary reasons as well as knowing they are reaching a large audience. Gillespie (2017) argued that the way that this data is shown and processed through the platform (YouTube shows highly viewed videos more than less viewed videos) is internalized by people on the platform who then make themselves algorithmically recognizable. It is this process that shows how the material agency and structure of YouTube reconfigures the creator.

Algorithmically recognizable means that creators understand what a website wants in terms of popularity markers that changes how they make content to better suit the algorithmic desires of a platform. For example, YouTube wants engagement, but it does not care if that

engagement is negative as long as it is engagement, so creators will spark controversy, looking to have people comment or dislike their videos to feed into the engagement wants of the platform. People come to understand the algorithm based on the analytics they are given. Views are important so creators do things to get views like clickbait titles or exploiting glitches which were previously discussed. YouTube through giving analytics changes how creators view success and what they strive for in analytics. There were only two creators that said they did not care about analytics in quantitative terms like views, subscribers, or retention; rather they cared about comments or a lively community. The other 9 creators said they based their success on the numbers they see in analytics.

Getting better numbers means to understand the platform of YouTube, stooping down to its machine level thinking to understand how it works. To improve a videos success is to make the video in the image of what the platform wants, which is why videos that are successful get copied or why creators change topics to be more in line with what YouTube wants. To become algorithmically recognizable is to make yourself in the image of the platform. However, if a creator's analytics are not favorable, they can feel like a failure. Travis stated that his channel is still small, and he gets rather discouraged by analytics specifically because they make him feel like a failure. A feature he pointed out was the page that ranked the top 10 videos on a creator's channel. Travis said that it is really discouraging when he makes a new video, and it does not rank at the top or does not get on the list at all. He said it feels like he failed in some way, that he did not do something correctly. This sentiment is similarly echoed by creators in NewTubers (see figure 4-5).

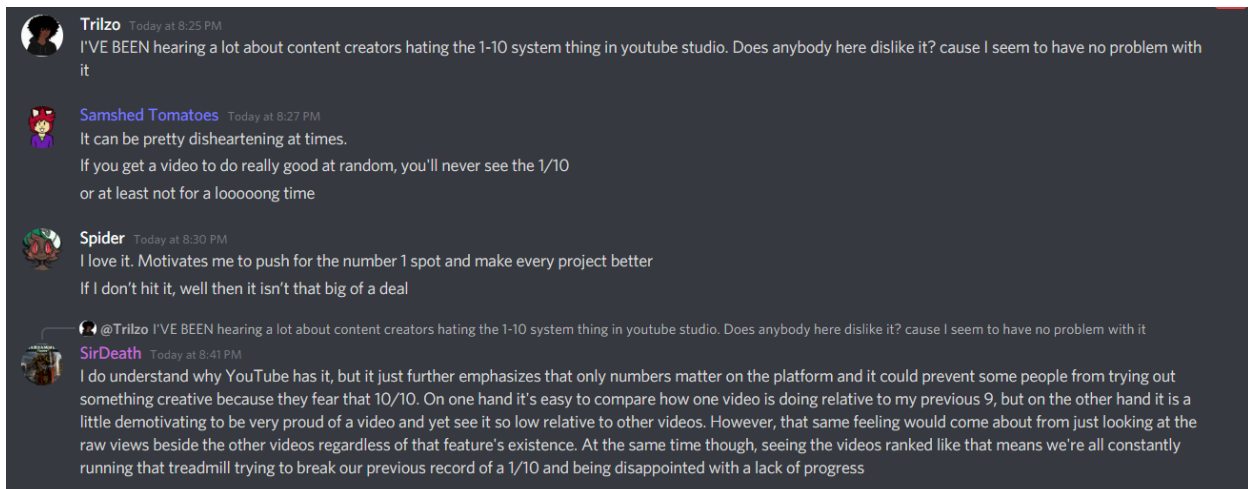


Figure 4-5 Creators on NewTubers discussing the ranking system in Video-creator channel - screenshot taken 08/17/2021

Analytics can define success and failure, but they can also cause a lot of confusion for small creators. This is not well understood in NewTubers, many creators there take analytics very seriously whether they are over 1,000 views or not and can be very distressing as they can paint an inaccurate picture for creators. YouTube does not do a great job of explaining these problems so small creators are left assuming they are important and meaningful. YouTube makes these analytics important by showing them prominently and even ranking videos for creators so they small creators think they are the issue instead of understanding the short comings of the system.

Bricky is an older creator, starting to produce content in 2015 based on a popular video game called League of Legends. Throughout his time on YouTube, he has accrued a very keen sense of the platform of YouTube and its automated systems. He argued that the algorithm doesn't like multiple uploads in a day or inconsistent upload schedules. To mitigate these issues, he has a second channel that he uploads streams and other things which he doesn't rely on to be

recommended. On his main channel, he makes sure that he has a stable content schedule that he keeps “to make the algorithm happy.” His understanding of the algorithm makes him keep a schedule and enforces how much he uploads; it is an invisible task master. While bricky understands the algorithm as what the platform wants, he does not see it as a good or bad thing. The algorithm to him is functional, it is up to him to take advantage of what the algorithm does. The algorithm does not make or break his channel, it is not the invisible censor or mysterious provider of videos. It is just a system to be learned and the real source of success is bricky himself and how well he can keep an audience.

Controversies and necessary moderation

Multiple controversies have changed the way that the YouTube platform deals with uploaded content; even before it gets onto the platform it preforms checks and flags problematic content. The checks menu—the third and the last menu before you publish the video—shows if the automated system flagged copyrighted material or problems in monetizing the video. These checks are echoes of situations that threatened the platform in the past and are now there to ensure that those issues will not be a problem in the future.

Content ID

The content ID system flags copyrighted material indiscriminately and claims the revenue the video would have made for the copyright holder. This system generally works on audio only, being implemented very quickly in 2008 in response to pending lawsuits from Viacom and other major copyright holders (Delaney, 2007). The ramifications of these lawsuits

are felt to this day and show how technology is built for the time in which it exists. The sociotechnical system of YouTube offers little snapshots of when changes were made and the reasons behind them. Every change YouTube has made in response to a controversy creates an artifact from that time, a piece of history in a living platform. This applies to more than copyright ID; it also applies to the COPPA declaration as well as the demonetization system. Even things like tags and the history of outdated resources point to where the platform was and the path it took to get to its present state.

As a result of lawsuits and continued pressure from copyright holders, Content ID is very sensitive to any copyrighted material no matter how little is used in a video or if that content falls within the fair use. Fair Use is outlined in the Digital Millennium Copyright Act of 1998, which stated that copyrighted material could be used in transformative ways, as part of review, and as part of education without prior authorization. Content ID has a very pronounced effect on the content which users can upload as the system protects YouTube rather than creators. Creators have said that they have changed their way of making videos in direct response to this system. Some creators opt to completely avoid any copyrighted material or work around the systems in place to avoid the headache of dealing with the system. At one point, Max Miller got an incorrect copyright claim for a piece of classical music he had in the background, but instead of fighting it he simply changed the music. A human review takes time, and he had an uploading schedule he wanted to keep, plus it was not guaranteed that the false claim would be overturned so he opted for the easiest option. Most of my interviewees seek out copyright-free music to play in their videos as well as stating how difficult it is to fight a copyright claim even if the use of copyrighted materials is within fair use. The way that YouTube has set up the copyright claim system sides heavily with copyright holders, probably due to copyright holders

having much more legal power than creators. If a creator disputes a claim, it sent back to the copyright holder to review instead of going to a YouTube employee.

In a 2017 video titled “what I want to teach, but can’t, thanks to Universal Music Group” creator Adam Neely details how his channel constantly bumps up against content ID. Adam states that he wants to teach musical concepts the way that he was taught music- by listening to and breaking down excerpts from exceptional pieces. Adam details how the content ID system on YouTube flags his content that is well within fair use and Universal Music Group then claims for their profit. This has led him to omitting music clips from his videos which he argues limits his teaching ability. He has several ways of getting around copyrighted material; like other channels, he links to the music he is talking about or if he knows the whole video would be claimed he gets a sponsor. Mista GG in our interview also said he does this, opting to not deal with the fair use issues and get a sponsor to still get paid. There are also creators that are so small that they are not part of the partner program so they have little care if their video is claimed as they would not have made money off the video anyway. The platform of YouTube directly alters what content is created due to the strictness of the content ID systems and the material agency in the automated claims process.

A content creator AuthorMan stated in a public interview that he did not want to add copyrighted music into his podcasts even though he was specifically covering that music. He stated “Part of the reason why I've been doing covers for the Lord Huron series, for the end credits... even though I'm not getting paid a damn cent for these videos, I still don't want the possibility of a bot coming in and knocking me in the testicles for using a piece of music that was copyrighted by a super corporation.. even though that wouldn't happen in the real world, again, cause it's parody, its cover, or its being used for educational purposes and blah blah blah.”

(Serious Play, 2022, 51:30) AuthorMan is a content creator with 176 subscribers at the time of writing and he is not part of the partner program so he cannot make money off his videos, but he is still weary of putting any part of copyrighted material in his videos. Content ID is a problem for every creator, even if the creator does not care about copyright claims, they only get three copyright strikes for their whole channel to be taken down. Claims only take the revenue of a video and give it to the copyright holder; a strike is when the video is taken down off the site per the copyright holder's request. Strikes are also sent to the copyright holder for appeals, they hold the power to potentially maliciously strike a video and then refuse the appeal. Content ID puts a lot of the power over a creator's channel in copyright holders' hands.

It is a scary idea for a creator that the channel they have dedicated days, weeks, years of their time to establishing could be gone because of some copyrighted music or movie clips. Creators can avoid the copyrighted material all together like Max, they could do covers like AuthorMan, they could also try to trick the automated system. The channel *Overly Sarcastic Productions* consist of two creators who run the channel together; they have 1.9 million subscribers and produce videos that cover literature, mythology, and other media. They said when they wanted to transition covering media like video games or movies, they had difficulties with Content ID system. Luckily they could talk to a fellow content creator for advice, but it still took a lot of tactical maneuvering to figure out what actually worked for their clips or not- saying "Who claims what is still a very disorganized process, so it's largely quite unclear, even to us, but we've developed strategies to cope over time, through heavy trial and error, and then when the Content ID system changes (as it did over the past year) we do trial and error again to figure it out."

The iterative practice of doing content creation is present throughout the interactions with the platform, from understanding recommendation algorithms to bypassing content ID- making do on YouTube can be seen throughout. For Overly Sarcastic productions, they have found a methodology that works for them stating “Nowadays, we've found solid success by slowing down media clips to 60-75% of their original speed, cutting clips up so there's no direct clip longer than 10 seconds, and zooming the frame slightly so that the outer 10-20% of a clip is cut off. All those things together are what we've found to work well, for now, but it could very well change again in the future.” Through practice and trial error, creators can somewhat crack the code to figure out what works but like Overly Sarcastic Productions point out- the platform can change at any time, starting the process all over again.

Ad Suitability

The second automated system in the check menu is the “ad suitability” section for those content creators that have channels that are monetized. Ad suitability was another system that was added in response to controversy, specifically the allegations against PewDiePie for his antisemitic jokes. In the aftermath of this controversy, many advertisers boycotted the site as they were not made aware of what exactly was playing in conjunction with their advertisements. This again shows the pressures that the company of YouTube is under, perhaps even more so as it was the main revenue source of the platform that was boycotting them. As Gillespie argued, YouTube and other platforms need to constantly make advertisers happy or the whole monetary system collapses (Gillespie, 2018). Bricky said that his advertising revenue dropped some 20% when the boycotts—referred to as the adpocalypse—hit. This prompted YouTube to act quickly

and harshly against problematic content, but in their haste, demonetization hit many content creators with little or no explanation.

The content ID system is relatively simple to understand and get around. Overly sarcastic Productions, a large creator who started to do media reviews, said they were able to ask other creators to understand the ways to get around content ID with methods like mirroring the image and lowering or raise the pitch of audio clips. These methods are commonly used on the platform, along with large disclaimers at the beginning of media reviews stating they fall under fair use. How effective the disclaimers are is hard to quantify, but over the years these disclaimers have become more and more prevalent in my viewing experience. The demonetization algorithm is a different sort of animal to figure out. The topics it views as problematic are not said except for exceptional cases like the pandemic. It is left up to the creator to figure out what is and is not suitable for advertisers.

The ability to parse what the demonetization system does is important because without advertising money, creators have to rely on other means of sustaining themselves. In fact, most of my interviewees had multiple sources of revenue aside from ad money which included sponsorships, Patreon pages, as well as merchandise in case videos are not able to be monetized. It is difficult to parse the ad suitability system because it is perhaps the most nebulous of the automated systems, being programmed to pick up on topics that are subjective in their nature. For example, in 2017 and 2018, content creators criticized the system for age-gating and demonetizing LGBT content from larger creators and smaller ones (Farokhmanesh, 2018). There have also been issues regarding independent news channels like Phillip DeFranco that are demonetized for showing the same videos as larger news sources. The inability to get ad sense

makes these videos effectively silenced, as creators are disincentivized from making content on topics that are unmonetizable in the eyes of the YouTube moderator bots.

YouTube claims censorship is an unintended consequence, that the monetization bot was incorrect about filtering out certain topics or channels but there is no other good alternative for these bots. Gillespie (2018) argues that through understanding the way that platforms moderate we can understand the way that platforms impact discourse and fulfill their economic imperatives (pg14). The implementation of the ad-suitability system showed that YouTube needs to retain advertisers and keep them happy to remain profitable. Advertiser boycotts can be the most effective way in getting YouTube to change things rapidly. The accidental demonetization of LGBT videos is a product of this, some advertisers might think that it is not a suitable topic to be monetized and the platform bends to the paying customers instead of the users who get the service for free. In this way, there is a direct correlation between YouTube's business model and the unfolding of social discourse on YouTube.

Moderation shapes the landscape of YouTube as creators play around and figure out what is able to be monetized, shifting toward those content topics that are safe just as content creators shift away from content that is easily copyright claimed. GG and other creators slowly build up a knowledge of automated systems as they make videos, get automated feedback (a copyright claim or monetization issue), and then act on that feedback. GG stated "of course, I want to make the stuff I wanna make- but I also want to make money, so I do the things that I need to- getting royalty free music, not swearing before 30 seconds, you know that kind of stuff- to stay monetized. I do have sponsors which is good but being able to have ads is also great"

Creators self-optimize and change their videos to suite advertisers, leaving those who do not adapt behind, as Bishop (2018) argued. In this way, YouTube creates a website in its image

based on the guidelines for these automated systems which are more often than not created with privileged classes in mind. Taylor (2018) discusses how software developers often have middle class white American in mind when they program software, and it creates a dynamic where algorithms favor the privileged and leave disenfranchised behind. Of course, some creators do not easily bow to the platform; if they can skirt around these automated systems to continue making what they have always made, some will endeavor to do that.

Exploiting YouTube

People often find distinctive ways to appropriate and utilize technology; while YouTube is locked down development-wise from creators, that does not mean that creators do not find techniques to counteract or exploit the platform's systems. Eglash (2004) described three levels of adaptation beyond simply consuming technology. The first level is reinterpretation, which is a change in the semantic association of a technology such as taking a mundane object and painting it to be an art piece. The physical object can be used for its intended purpose, but the artist has changed its semantic meaning by imbuing it with whatever themes they painted onto it. The second level is that of adaption—Eglash described it as a discovery (or invention) of a latent function of technology; there is a change in the semantic association and use of a technology. The technology must be somewhat flexible in use and be used for purposes that developers did not intend. An example that Eglash discusses is how the Bedouin society figured out that the cassette tape players could be used to record music and led to the rise of a Bedouin pop star (Eglash, 2004, p. 7). The third level is reinvention. This is where the semantics are changed completely- the association, use, and structure of a technology is changed. Eglash utilizes the example of low-rider cars for reinvention, but an example in the digital is game modification.

Game modding is where players of a game take the code and change it to be what they want it to be. The popular game of Counter Strike was originally created as a mod of another game Half-Life. The creators of Counter Strike “broke” the code and made something new out of the parts of half-life in a way developers did not intend.

I would not go as far as to argue that creators have the ability to reinvent YouTube, but it is plain to see a reinterpretation and adaptation of certain features by creators. As an example, the trending tab used to be curated list of YouTube specific creators but now has become mostly big-name media channels. This has led to a reinterpretation of trending as big-name media and nothing to care about, this shift happening over several years. This is an example of reinterpretation, but a larger impact is how creators adapt to the algorithms. It has already been discussed how creators change themselves to be more algorithmically recognizable, but there also ways to take advantage and adapt the system to a means that the developers did not think about.

Exploits in recommendations have been rather popular on YouTube. The most recent one being sparked by a creator known as The Spiffing Brit in a video called “The YouTube Algorithm Glitch (The Secret YouTube Exploit) - YOUTUBE IS A PERFECTLY BALANCED WEBSITE”. In the video, Spiffing Brit explains that community posts—a feature intended to let creators post updates or poll their audience directly on YouTube instead of Twitter—was glitched and lead to viewers who were not subscribed to a channel seeing their community posts. This is nothing new; when live streaming was introduced, developers did not weight the recommender algorithms properly. Shorts and Stories (under a minute video that were portrait rather than landscape) also created biased recommendation feeds as they were put in their own little section of the website. In all cases, it was very apparent that people knew about it and took

advantage of it while the glitch remained on the platform. For about 3 months after the Spiffing Brit video started circulating, many people's homepages and recommended feeds were inundated with poll community posts. Some creators asked a simple question, masquerading as a normal post, while others utilized the copy paste community post that Spiffing Brit provided in his video (figure 4-6). It went on for about three months until the developers at YouTube cut back on the recommendation priority of community posts.

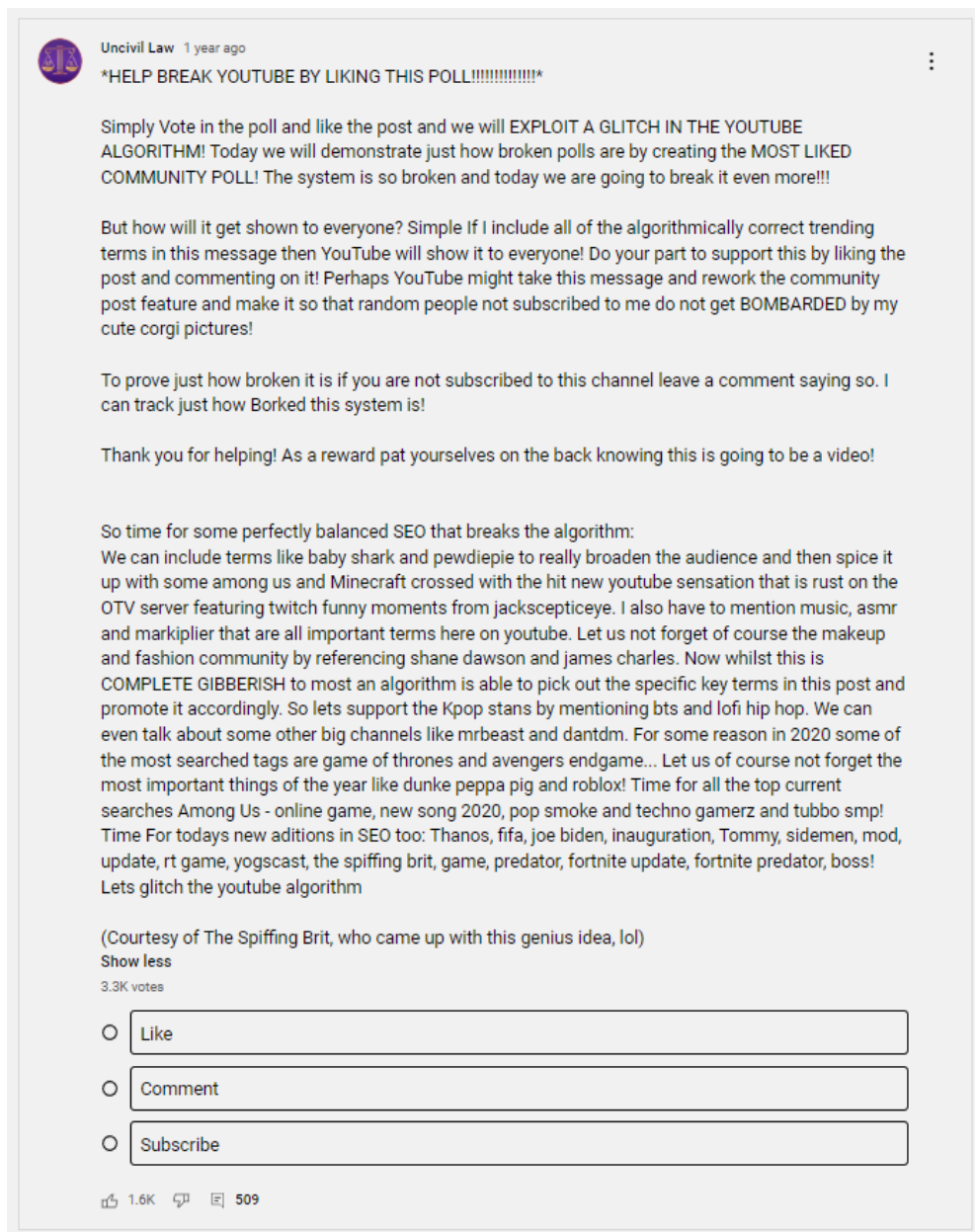


Figure 4-6 A community post utilizing polls in direct reference to Spiffing Brits' video. Taken 03/10/2022

Community posts became something that the developers did not want them to be. Stories and community posts are talked about in the way they allow a creator to connect to their already established audience via updates. How creators were actually using it was purely promotional; they were writing posts to target people outside their subscriber base. A similar thing happened for live streaming. When streaming was first a feature, the algorithm recommended them more readily than normal videos so channels would put up a stream of music or random clips from TV shows to be promoted. This is how the channel Lo-fi Girl (formerly ChilledCow) became so popular because they were constantly streaming and constantly being recommended. Semantically these features change from an additional way to produce content to promotion as the creators discover a latent function. Developers never intend to make a feature so easily exploited, but it's hard to know how the algorithm will change the recommendations based on developer's programmed priorities. Unintentional exploits create unintended consequences as creators are always looking for ways to get ahead.

Overtime these exploits are patched and sometimes they are buried further down for fear of the exploit. Community posts and stories are harder to find now that these exploits were patched, and live videos have disappeared entirely from homepages unless the user has subscribed to the live streaming channel. Actors that were not exploiting the features continue to use them in the way that developers intended, but there is always the history of that feature that can be seen in how the platform has overcorrected. Sociotechnical systems come up when looking at how a platform can inscribe history in how features are underdeveloped or abandoned because of exploits so they remain static. Stories were left in favor of shorts, leaving stories to just be abandoned as a vestigial feature on the platform because of exploits. One can infer some

history as to why certain things are the way they are, backed up by outdated videos and websites exclaiming "this simple hack will get you on trending!"

Hacking or taking advantage of systems is not exclusive to the platform of YouTube of course. There has been exploits found in many mediums. In the 1960s and 1970s there was a group of people who had figured out the signals on the telephone network and used them to “phreak” phone calls to get free long-distance calls (Lapsley, 2013). Consalvo (2009) looked at cheating and exploitation in video games. In her book, she understands exploits as actions or moves that are found by players which are then appropriated by them to gain a lasting advantage over fellow players. Consalvo used the idea of game capital—a concept intricately linked to Bourdieu’s understanding of cultural capital—in conjunction with exploitation to understand the relationship between games and players. Cultural capital can be used in an interesting way to understand the exploitation of YouTube as well as social stratification, these ideas will be discussed in chapter 5

Plugins

Sometimes creators instead of exploiting the platform or finding flaws, they create something that adds to the experience in a positive way. In a video titled “Fixing what YouTube Couldn’t. -ThioJoe Spammer Purge” Linus Sebastian talks about a piece of software that fellow creator ThioJoe made to deal with comment spamming bots. These bots have become a major issue on the platform; in personal experience it is quite common to find a comment section that is plagued with bots that reply to comments asking people to click on this link for a ‘good time’ or pretending to be the creator asking them to enter a giveaway. These comments are hard for

creators to moderate manually due to the sheer volume of them as Linus states, but YouTube does not have any easy options to sort them out using their automated moderation feature. So, it fell to creators to come up with their own solution.

The video goes into detail about the program, how to use it, and the way that it works in general. Both Linus and ThioJoe are technology focused YouTube creators, so this program was an appropriate subject for them, but the way that Linus showcased the video made it possible for other creators to use the program without much technological understanding. In a comment under the video ThioJoe states “I got so fed up with spammers I decided to pull a Thanos and do it myself [shrug emoticon]” (see figure 4-7). It highlights the relationship between developer and creator. Creators are pushing the boundaries of what they can do with the platform in multitudes of ways, changing the way that the platform acts in some capacity with the use of plug-ins.

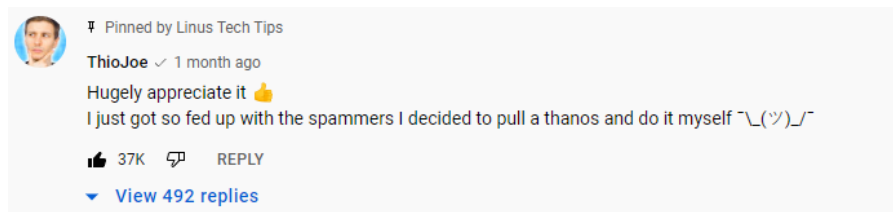


Figure 4-7 ThioJoe comment on Linus Tech Tips "Fixing what YouTube couldn't. - ThioJoe Spammer Purge." screenshot taken 03/23/2022

Plug-ins, or sometimes called extensions, are third party software that add functionality and features to a game or website. Chrome and Firefox both have dedicated stores for extensions and plug-ins for their browsers. Massively multiplayer online games also have a wide array of plug-ins that offer players a variety of functions. These plug-ins serve to alter the experience of a website or game in the way they interact with the program. In the case for ThioJoe’s plug-in acted as the creator to go in and delete any comment that matched the criterion given to it by the creator. This changed the way that comment sections looked and felt. When creators used the software, I as a viewer could tell as I was no longer subjected to the off-putting messages from bots and could go back to enjoying participating in the comment sections.

Some plug-ins preserve old features no longer visible to the viewer; these features include tags as well as the dislike button which was recently discontinued. Announced in spring of 2021 and implemented in December 2021, the dislike button was still there to allow viewers to give supposed feedback and give information to the recommender algorithm, but the number of dislikes would not be visible. The change was seen as YouTube getting rid of all dissenting voices and pandering to the advertisers; Many viewers and creators brought up concerns that videos that were inaccurate or promoted scams would not have the dislike count for people to gauge the video's quality. There were many jokes describing how they would simply make a comment saying, "like to show your dislike." The fact that the dislike button still exists is a product of the history of the platform and the meaning behind that button. To combat the change, people created plug-ins that restored the ability to see the number of dislikes. Plug-ins are software the people program to add features onto software they would not otherwise be able to change and exert some agency over it. In this case it allowed creators to see dislike buttons, in other cases it can make the color scheme for YouTube different or show all the analytics that one might want on a specific video.

Much like how Taylor (2009) talks about plug-ins utilized *world of Warcraft*, there is a triangular relationship between the platform of YouTube, the experience of it, and sociality. Taylor displayed how a plug-in preformed tasks like assisting in difficult dungeons significantly alter the played experience of *World of Warcraft*. As they are outside of the intended features that developers had programmed the impact the played experience, yet developers also allowed for their game to have plug-ins so took them into account when programming new dungeons. Perhaps most important is how these plug-ins affected the sociality of the game; it took effort to make sure everyone was using the same version of the plug in and if someone did not have the

plug-in the group would have to compensate to keep the member apprised. In a similar way, plug-ins affect the experience of the platform. Bringing back the dislike button after it was removed using plug-ins does not change the experience of the platform but rather preserves the way it was before. YouTube wanted to stop targeted attacks which bombarded the video with dislikes, but with plug-ins these attacks are not rendered inert. That is not to say that some plug-ins do not add on to the experience. There are plug-ins that shade the site to a different color, add on keyboard shortcuts, and add other quality of life features. There are also plug-ins that help creators gauge what other creators are doing.

There are a few plug-ins that can be used to see the analytics of a video like the tags, the engagement rates, where it was shared. Creators in NewTubers are encouraged to use this tool to better optimize their content by understanding what works for other creators. In this way, the practice of content creation may be sped up as creators do not need to have a successful video first to look at what works with their content—they can look at someone else’s content. There are multiple plug-ins that get and interpret data from YouTube for users to look at. Social Blade is one such tool and has been used as a trusted source for seeing long term trends like subscriber count (see figure 4-8). Plug ins are an adaption of the platform. It does not create a new product completely but instead utilizes already existing data and features to augment the experience of YouTube. These tools are incorporated into the learning process of content creation and the general discussion in the creator community of comparing channels. As well, these plug-ins exert a material agency as well, changing how creators operate on the platform of YouTube.

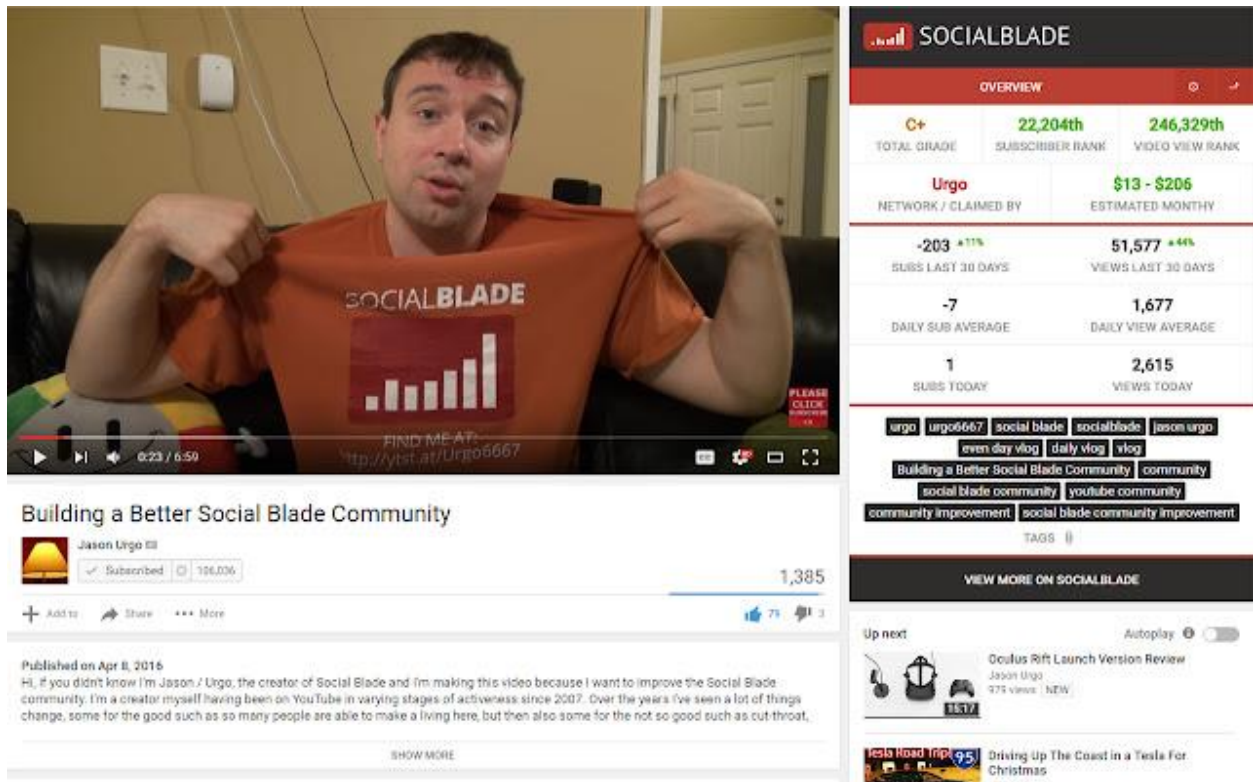


Figure 4-8 Promotional image of the Social Blade plug-in. Taken from <https://chrome.google.com/webstore/detail/social-blade/cfidkbgamfhdgmedldkagjopnbobmdn?hl=en>

Eglash says the institutions which control the technology can stifle adaption and YouTube is a perfect example. Instead of letting these exploits lie and the features take on a life of their own, developers elect to change them and recode them in a way to better control them. Outside of coded law, there is the TOS which allows YouTube to ban creators who purposefully take advantage of the Algorithm. Taylor argues that governance of a platform operates at many levels from interpersonal to algorithmic. She states nodes push and pull against each other; communities have forms of control, law and intellectual property come into play with what is permissible content, and there is the matter of algorithmic regulation via automatic curation and monitoring (Taylor, 2018, p. 218). In all of this is technology and the regulation via code, the presence of it all in the sociotechnical system that is embedded in our society. Gillespie states that there is no truly open platform, no platform that does not impose rules to some degree. The

varying actors and regulations dispute any claim that there is an inherent openness of platforms. Instead, emergent practices—like exploiting recommendation algorithms—are always embedded in the practices of a platforms sociotechnical system of governance and regulation.

The algorithm is the audience

Bricky described the algorithm as simple: “YouTube shows something to the audience, the audience likes it, so the algorithm takes that thing to more people.” The algorithm acts as an infomediary, taking a video and showing it to viewers. However, I was incorrect assuming that it was an obstacle to understand and overcome; instead, creators did not put much stock into ‘figuring’ the algorithm out. Creators had a trust in the platform that I was not expecting. Solar Sands stated, “There have been millions of dollars that went into developing the technology to show interesting videos to users, why wouldn’t I trust that”. Solar Sands was adamant that he did not need to use outside social media to advertise, stating that he got 99% of his traffic from YouTube itself rather than from sites like Reddit, Twitter, or Facebook. “I post there every now and again, but really, it’s a waste of time- I get like, what, 99.9% traffic from YouTube. As much as its broken, YouTube does a good job on promotion.” He stated that people should make stuff for themselves; if people made what they want to see, others will want to watch. This came through in most of my interviews and I constantly saw it in the NewTubers discord, it was almost the motto for the server- make good content and they will come (eventually).

Beryzan stated “There’s no luck involved. All the elements are there, and they worked hard and got success” he said there was no magic trick, no recommendation trick or exploit that could made a channel consistently successful—it all came down to good content for the right

audience. Beryzan said that it might have been easier in the past with a less saturated platform, but that does not change the fact that content needs to be good. Beryzan has discouraged people from playing with the algorithm or ‘testing’ videos, an example being Figure 4-9. Beryzan uses the opportunity to guide people into looking at their content and focusing on audience. Moriarty, the owner of NewTubers, does the same thing. In Figure 4-10, a user named Sir Palepaw was talking about his channel and frustrated with the lack of success. Moriarty encouraged the user to figure out how to better make YouTube videos instead of blaming the platform.

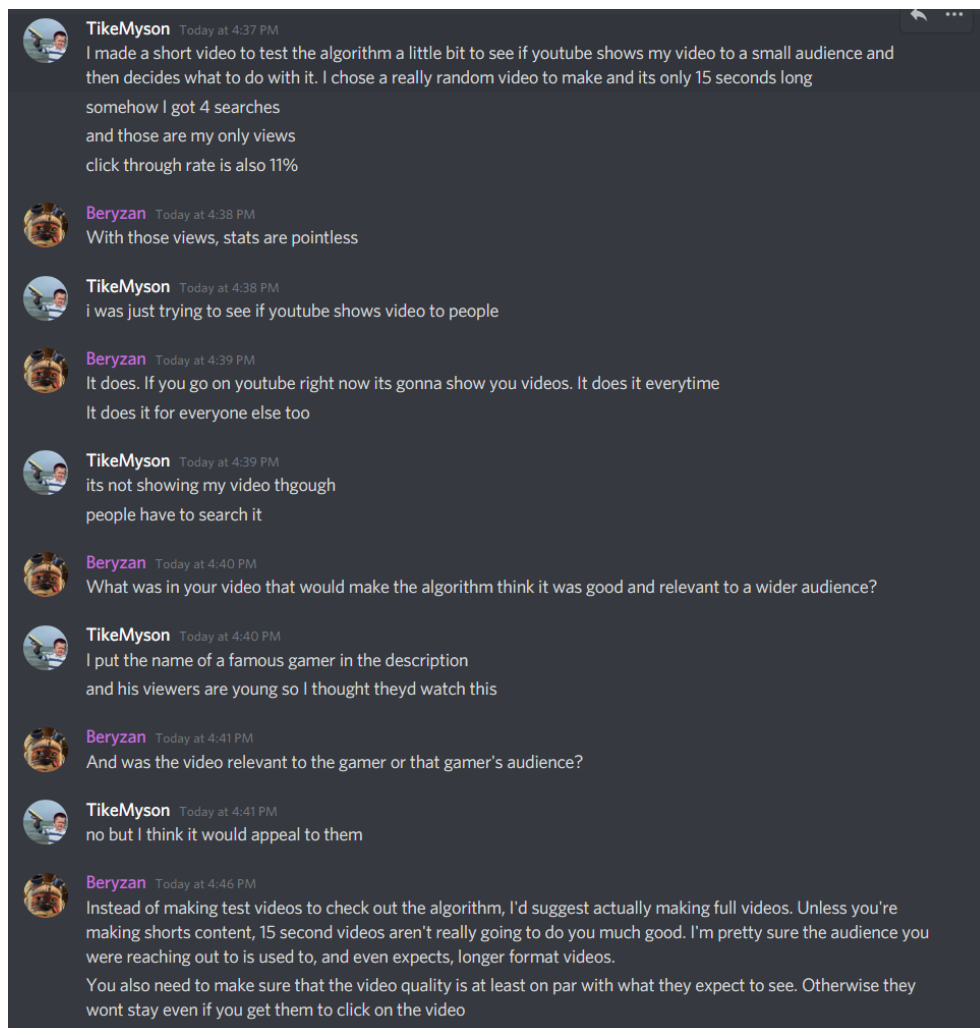


Figure 4-9 Beryzan talking to someone experimenting with the search and discovery algorithm. Posted in general chat in NewTubers- screenshot taken on 07/22/2021

Moriarty states “Make videos that people are interested in watching... the rest of the algorithmic stuff really, really, really isn’t important” (figure 4-10). Creators like Moriarty and my interviewees take the algorithm and recommendation system as what it is. Moriarty and other active members or mods have said to not worry about the recommendations, just worry about your content (see Figure 4-1). Moriarty said during his interview that it is annoying to see creators talking about ways to fool the recommendations, stating “I tell people that they’re wasting their time putting in a miles’ worth of tags when they could just make a better video. I don’t know, some people just put effort in the wrong places.”

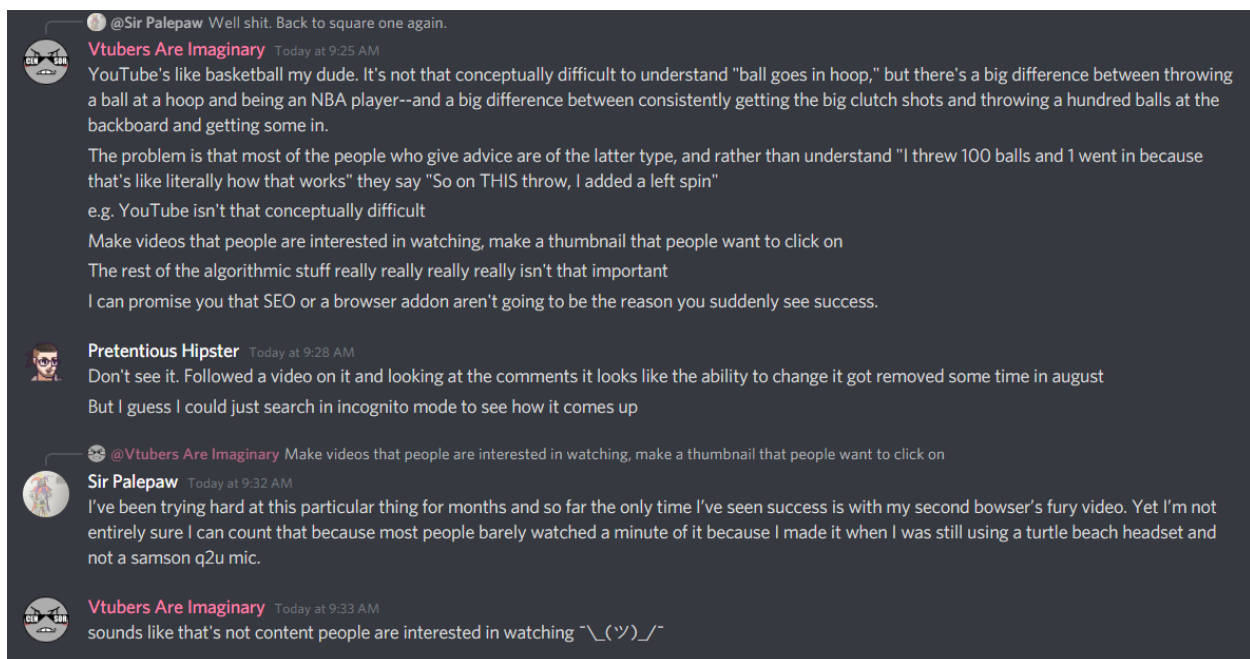


Figure 4-10 Moriarty (Vtubers Are Imaginary) talking to Sir Palepaw about video topics. Messages sent in Chat channel on NewTubers Discord. – Screenshot taken 06/16/2021

During my time on NewTubers I saw a specific user ChristhePheonix asking questions about his channel; some questions were about scheduling videos or when to post community posts, but there was one conundrum that was particularly interesting. He had stats showing his reviews of Minecraft mods did better than his Minecraft let’s play videos, but he was hesitant to

move to exclusively reviews. Reviews were harder to make, and the let's plays were fun to make with friends. He had a choice to make for his channel, did he want to capitalize on success if that meant the videos would be more laborious or should he forfeit his forward momentum by sticking to what he found fun. This is a choice for many creators in what they want to make versus what will do well.

“I am aware that I have an audience that will follow me if I do a topic off the beaten path, I am very lucky to have that. When I switched off of League of Legends, I thought I would never recover, and some left- but others stayed, and I can still make money off the channel. I realized that, at least for me, the audience is there for my personality rather than the topic so I could theoretically do anything as long as I let my personality keep center stage.” Bricky stated this when I asked about how he changed video topics, he chose to start making videos that he was interested in after he was burnt out in League of Legends. GG also followed what he wanted to do rather than what was popular, he found an audience that stuck around for him. Both of these creators were rather successful however, both have 800k subscribers, so they have more leeway. Alexis when she was a part of Sci Show was in meeting that decided what videos to do, she said that they would choose videos that aligned with the channel's value rather than what would be popular. Sci Show has been around for a decade and has a subscriber count of 7 million. In these large channels can get away with ignoring the algorithm, they have an established base that will watch videos they make.

For content creators that do not have that an established base, knowing what people interested in the niche want is important. They have to make content that people will click on when it is served to them in the recommendations, then that video can propagate out. Although

there are some exploits that are found to get recommended more, it seems that the creators I interviewed were happy to let the platform do what it will.

It comes back to the unofficial motto of NewTubers, good content makes or breaks a channel. The algorithms on YouTube, really the platform itself, obfuscates the people finding and watching videos. As Srnicek argues platforms are the intermediary between groups, in YouTube's case it takes videos from creators and serves it to viewers to watch. This process is complicated, influenced by the way that content creators upload their videos, viewers personalized recommendations, and the parameters that the company of YouTube programs into the algorithm. Parameters like watch time and retention are important as showcased in the analytics of a given video, YouTube in this regard shows what it views as important to creators which may give clues as to what is important for the algorithm. As well, YouTube impacts what creators make as the automated systems that exert material agency and force creators to work around these systems.

In the next chapter how, creators construct their identity through the practice of learning and making content on YouTube. the process of identification with content creation as well as with other creators will be examined. As well, the ways that YouTube the platform impacts creator's identity as well as how the company of YouTube impacts creators through social boundaries will be explored.

Chapter 5 – Constructing Creator Identity

Gamer Pizza is a channel that has roughly 800 subscribers and has not posted a new video in 11 months as of writing. From a viewer's point of view, the channel may look like a failed experiment; there are a few somewhat successful videos for a small channel but overall, it looks like the channel was not doing well so it was left as is, the creator moving on to greener pastures. However, that is not the case when talking to Beryzan who runs the channel. He states that he's just on a hiatus, work and his personal life got in the way, but he'll be back making content soon. Interestingly, He still counts himself as a creator even though he has not created content in almost a year. This chapter will explore the processes which Beryzan and other creators engage in to construct the identity of creator. There are many ways to look at identity, but I will be focusing on how creators are externally identified via categorization in addition to the ways that creators identify themselves with content creation. These two factors work together to create and solidify a creator's sense of self. This process of identification can be seen in how creators are categorized, how creators understand success, and how they tell stories to each other.

In order to understand identity and the processes involved in creating it, a definition of identity is needed. Glaeser (1998) defines identity as the meaning of self to itself or to others. He argues that identity is best understood through the process of identification as it showcases the process of identity formation and is a more visible process than the abstract concept of identity. Glaeser showcased this approach with his study on Berlin police officers after the German reunification and how they contextualized themselves in the spaces they policed. Officers understood their identities through the context of their precincts; this pointed to how identity is

created through placing oneself in context with a place or thing to create meaning. This process is what Glaeser defines as identification.

Glaeser describes meaning as being created through context; therefore, when someone places themselves in connection to something—in context of something- they create a meaning for themselves. Building context of the self is identification. These identifications are repeated by an individual over time as they consistently place themselves in concert with something. Interestingly, Glaeser argues that the identification only becomes stable and a part of an identity when an outside party recognizes these identifications. This outside recognition is similar to how Jenkins (2000) would talk about categorization. Jenkins argues that internal definitions created through identification are conferred by categorization, or external definitions.

There is a constant negotiation between internal identification and external categories. External groups are consistently recategorizing groups as internal groups create stronger definitions of identification to reinforce group identity to withstand outside impositions. However, Group identification requires recognition by outside groups to be seen as legitimate (Lamont & Molnár, 2002; Jenkins, 2000). The back and forth between external and internal definitions becomes manifested in social boundaries. Social boundaries are the perceived edges of membership in a group and are the result of the ongoing process of understanding the similarities of group members compared to the differences from outside persons. Simply put, understanding the self is through the identification with an in-group and the separation from others (Giddens, 1984). These social boundaries can be seen in communities of practice. Wenger (1998) argues that communities of practice “emphasize the ability of social configurations to constitute our identities through relations of belonging or not belonging” (p. 210). Wenger argues that through membership in a community of practice, identity is formed by participating

in the joint enterprise. Membership is obtained through a certain set of rules and practices that can be implicit or explicit which sets the group apart from those who are not in the group.

NewTubers and identity

“It’s helpful to have a creator community, so much of your identity is your profession so having a community of like-minded individuals - a peer group I would say - is a good thing” Grady stated, talking about his involvement with other creators. Creators form a large collective which is increasingly recognized by outside media and society as a somewhat legitimate profession. However, those who are understood as creators are typically those who can make content creation their full-time job. While Beryzan (nicknamed Bery) would not be considered a creator by outside media, more of a hobbyist, Bery still understands himself as a creator through his membership in NewTubers. That membership continues even if creating content stops, allowing Bery to continue in his identification with NewTubers and content creation.

Moriarty stated in our interview that “NewTubers is a community where you learn you’re not alone in the long run. It’s a lot more helpful than making content in a vacuum and there are other creators you can talk to.” NewTubers as a community has an established definition of content creator—no matter the size of the channel, if someone makes content, they are a content creator. This is important for these small creators who may not be conventionally categorized as creators. A good portion of creators on NewTubers have less than 500 subscribers, some of them are just starting on their journey of content creation. Whereas larger creators or friends and family would not classify them as creators, NewTubers welcomes them as fellow creators which confirms their identification with content creation as part of their identity.

NewTubers members commiserate together, give feedback to each other, and also just chat as friends. As Wenger (1998) argues competency is implied with membership in a community of practice. A creator in NewTubers merits some credibility through their active participation in the group which lends legitimacy to small creators' endeavors to be seen as content creators. This credibility confirms creator's identity through the perceived understanding that they know what they are doing or are on track to learn about content creators. There is an implied understanding in NewTubers that everyone needs to put in the work to make a successful channel. As seen in several figures, short cuts or exploiting the algorithms are discouraged.

Stories

Orr (1996) argues that stories are used to make claims of membership and seniority within communities. The Xerox Technicians Orr studied tell stories that identify them as their given occupation, showing off their ability to deal with a specific task that only that occupation can solve. Creators in NewTubers do a similar thing, telling stories about their experiences which helps create the identity of being a content creator. Members often commiserate with each other about the struggles with editing software, finding time to film, and other issues. These struggles bring each other closer and also solidifies what being a content creator means to these individuals. The knowing responses of "yeah I've been there too" helps tell small creators that they are not alone and their identity as a creator is not in jeopardy.

Stories are hard won information that is then shown off to other creators as badges of honor and expertise. It proves a competency in the enterprise of content creation and cements their participation in NewTubers as well. Although this process of boosting can make the

community a little intimidating as Beryzan stated, “Comparing data and stories doesn’t build good knowledge. Their experiences are always different so it’s not that helpful” However, Beryzan says that stories can be celebratory and really help a creator push through even if it does not teach good information. He stated, “It’s important to celebrate the small victories or making a milestone. Like— ‘I accomplished something!’ You got to take the time to appreciate the small things to keep going. It took me 10 months to get 100 subs, working to get those 100 subs was not easy.” In this way creators confirm their own credibility and identification through success on the platform, making stories that celebrate their success makes them a part of the group and community. The community in turns celebrates and recognizes those milestones, further confirming a creator’s identification.

Stories hold a complicated place in NewTubers as knowledge sharing, boosting, and celebratory. Stories solidify a creator’s identity in that they have experiences like other creators, they can also celebrate the creator in their success and make the creator important. Stories are used to create a group identity for NewTubers with inside jokes and anecdotes that are passed around the group, knowledge of these signifies membership. It also creates the ideal, abstract “you” as Orr describes. The abstract figure of the ideal content creator is then used to compare oneself against and identify with.

Digital identities

The internet has changed the way that identities overlap in time and place. Conventional categories like race, gender, nationality still exist but there have been added categories added on to users that complicate their identity. The access to the ability to influence people in the way that social media creators can do means that these creators are asked to think about how they

come across as trusted citizen journalist, popular fans, smart shoppers, and other identities linked to the complicated process of information dissemination on social media (Senft, 2013: pg348). Because of the dynamics of social media reliance on attention, users frame themselves as seller, buyer, and commodity. A user of a platform may see themselves as an influencer who takes sponsored products and sells it to their followers. Creators on YouTube take sponsorships to showcase a company's products as their temporary salesperson for example. Viewers and creators can also be contextualized as commodity as they are the very thing that YouTube is selling to advertisers to make money.

Gallagher (2019) described people on the internet in similar terms. He utilizes the term digital subjects in his discussion. These digital subjects exist in the context of large data collecting platforms which views them as ever-expanding masses of information waiting to be taken advantage of. In this way, digital subjects are constantly sorted into types and demographics to better be analyzed. He argues, much like Senft, that digital subject are expected to be flexibility in their actions and identity; he argues "as consumers, digital subjects are expected to seek out new products and experiences; as professionals, they are required to adapt to the changing needs of a volatile labor market; as performers they are expected to keep their personal brands fresh and relevant." (p. 3).

Senft observed the practice of maintaining one's identity as if it were a branded good, something she defined as microcelebrity, has become common on social media. Grady stated that he has worked hard to brand himself, making a cohesive image on his thumbnails and titles as well as the general format of his videos as become somewhat branded. While he has not deleted his old videos, he has rebranded them to look like all his other video thumbnails. Some creators go through and delete their first few videos to curate a cohesive channel library for a solid brand

image. Moriarty discussed how he only has about a fifth of his content public on his channel, the rest being private or unlisted. When I asked about it, he said that those videos did not reflect what he wants for the channel. Creators look to keep a cohesive vision for their channel which is in part encouraged by YouTube and thus changes their online identity.

YouTube Branding

YouTube also has an influence over how creators understand themselves as creators. The second menu in the uploading process is called “Video Elements” (figure 5-1) and it allows creators

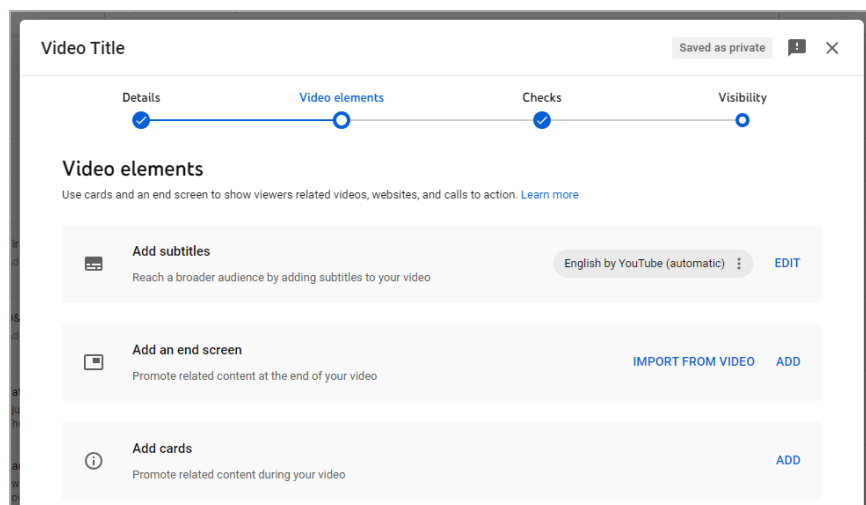


Figure 5-1 Video elements menu - screenshot taken 03/05/2022

to add subtitles, an end screen, as well as information cards during the video. YouTube describes these elements as ways to better promote content or reaching a broader audience. This contextualizes these elements as part of a brand, a professional aspect of being a content creator. When a creator goes to change their profile picture or the banner image, the whole page is titled “branding” which lends a certain professionalism as compared to calling it a profile page. In the same way that Taylor discusses how technology reconfigures us, YouTube changes the way that content creators see their channel and themselves as branded individuals. Their description under contact information is “Let people know how to contact you with business inquiries” clearly pointing to the channel being a business rather than being a hobby project.

Platforms are as much as part of the identification process as other people are. Gallagher argues that people on the internet must “share their sovereignty with nonhuman agents whose modes of apprehending and acting upon reality are often very different to ours.” (p. 4). In this way the material agency of the platform of YouTube is directly involved in the process of identity creation. An example of this is how channels—where creators upload their content—become an intrinsic part of a creator's identity both in the ways that it is a reflection of the creator and how the platform then categorizes the channel.

Channels as identity

Channels are closely linked to creators' identities because they are in direct reflections of their online persona. Not only are channels the main component of a creator's career, but creators can adopt their channel name as their name online. MistaGG and Brickyy use their channels' name to present themselves to the internet for example. Creators make channels that both reflect them as people as well as what they think would work best as a catchy name for viewers.

Jerolmack and Tavory (2014) state that objects create new relevancies for an interaction which transforms both the situation and the self that is evoked. The argument is framed with Actor Network Theory in mind, arguing that objects are understood by the user how others would perceive them. As an example, someone purchasing a T-Shirt has in mind what other people would associate that T-Shirt to the wearer's identity. The T-shirt is contextualizing the wearer to others. Channels contextualize creators as they create the channel with the viewer in mind.

The channel reflects the creators to viewers, this is why branding is so important. The way viewers see creators is part of the identity process. Viewers legitimize the channel by watching it and directly legitimizes the creator because they see success. Channels are also the way that YouTube sees creators. This relationship with the platform also reflects on the creators, it creates their social position and the relationship to other persons. Creators are conscious of this and brand themselves to attract a large audience or present themselves in a certain way to be algorithmically recognizable to both viewers and the platform.

Platforms are as much as part of the identification process as other people are. Gallagher argues that people on the internet must “share their sovereignty with nonhuman agents whose modes of apprehending and acting upon reality are often very different to ours.” (p. 4). In this way the material agency of the platform of YouTube is directly involved in the process of identity creation.

YouTube creates ways to understand success through metrics that will be discussed later, but it also creates social boundaries between creators. YouTube classifies creators based on their subscriber count. They send plaques to creators when they hit subscriber milestones of 100k, 1 million, and 10 million. They also use subscriber counts to unlock features like community posts, live streaming, and monetization. This stratification of channels based on subscriber numbers categorize the creators associated with them into certain groups based on perceived importance. A creator like Matt Pat can sell his courses because in the hierarchy of YouTube creators, he is seen to be of higher importance based on his multiple high subscriber count channels (Bishop, 2020). YouTube places importance on subscriber counts so creators with high subscriber count channels are seen as important in the community.

In practical terms, Moriarty argues, subscriber counts have become less important for success. He stated, “Subs don’t matter, they can only guarantee some ancillary success. Subs don’t get notifications anymore anyway. Sub counts are used for sponsorships and that’s pretty much it.” Subscriber counts categorize creators and allow for creators to hold up plaques that tell them their important, their identity is linked to their categorization in the ecosystem of YouTube. It may be interesting to note the transactional nature that subscriber counts have. With creators trading on the credibility they gained from subscriber counts, it is reminiscent of cultural capital. Consalvo (2008) and Malaby (2005) both discuss this idea in the realm of multiplayer games, and it can be seen in a similar vein on YouTube in the ways that subscriber and view counts are used as virtual social currency. However, subscriber count is not the only aspect of identity, and it is part of a larger process at work in creator identity. Numbers play a large in a creator’s identity but there are other layers of identification and the process of identity creation instead of a static number.

Metric Success

Beer (2016) argues that metrics are deeply woven into our everyday lives and the social worlds of the internet. He says that metrics are a complex component of our lives as they act on us, and we act according to their rules, boundaries, and limits (p. 3-4). This aligns with how Taylor (2009) understood the ways in which systems reconfigured users. YouTube has defined what is important to the growth of someone’s channel, showing selected analytics to creators and acting upon these analytics. These impart a value to these analytics and metrics about one’s channel which thus defines the creator based on external markers.

When I asked creators what they defined as a successful video, all answered with a specific analytic they looked at for feedback. Metrics function as a measuring stick for how well a video did and, when compared to other videos, can tell creators what they did correctly. Views was cited the most as the marker of success, with Bricky saying matter-of-factly, “At the end of the day, I look at views—comments are nice, likes and dislikes are fine. But views are what pay the bills if you know what I’m saying.” Creators’ get advertising money based on how many views their videos get, it is understandable that creators focus on views as that is the main way of making money.

YouTube imparts the idea that views are important because of the direct connection to advertising income and because views are what the recommendation algorithm operates on; the more people watch something the more it will be recommended. This is why creators spend time on branding their thumbnails and titles to advertise their channel as much as possible, utilizing the video thumbnail to brand their content and themselves. However, the recommendation system also operates on viewer retention as the developers want viewers to stay on the site as long as possible. In this way, creators also prioritize watch time and look for improving it overtime (see figure 5-2). Success through these metrics reinforces the creator identity as the YouTube platform is telling them they are successful creators in the way they show good numbers. If the analytics do not look good, then creators can start to question themselves.

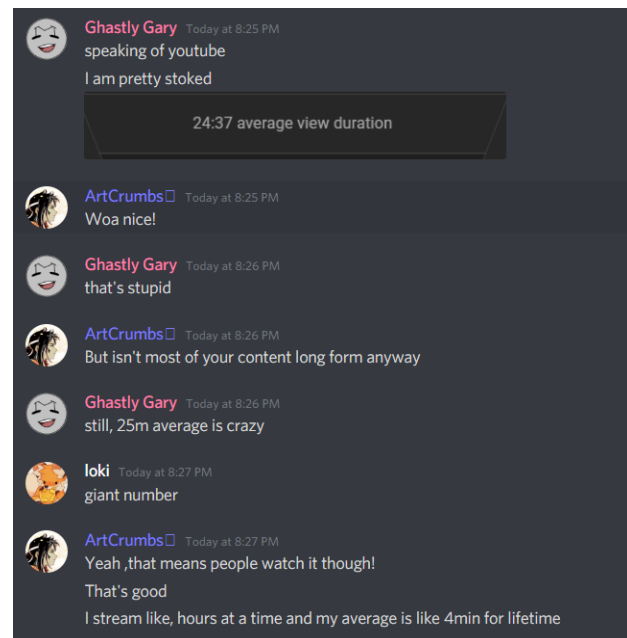


Figure 5-2 Moriarty (Ghastly Gary) celebrating his viewer retention rate in general chat – screenshot taken 09/10/2021

Beryzan stated that sometimes creators can get discouraged when other people are sharing their good analytics, saying, “it can be really discouraging to see someone talking up their numbers when your numbers aren’t the best.” It is especially a problem in NewTubers and other small creator communities as analytics are not accurate until the video has a statistically relevant number of viewers. Moriarty has discouraged people in Newtubers several time during my research from looking at analytics (see figure 5-3) because they just don’t have enough data to make accurate conclusions from. Moriarty stated in our interview, “They really need to be better at explaining analytics. If you don’t have more than 500 to 1,000 views, then analytics are going to look really weird for you. I see members of the group trying to figure out trends with 10 views and that’s just not enough to make heads or tails out of it. Google puts a lot of weight on these analytics, but for small creators it just causes confusion and sometimes despair ‘cause their numbers don’t look right.”

Without the ability to understand if their analytics are good, small creators are left to figure out what success means to them in spite of what the platform of YouTube encourages. Their membership in NewTubers helps small creators especially feel like they are still creators whatever YouTube thinks. Participation in NewTubers fosters the recognition of the identification of content creation. Small creators look at other small creators, realize that everyone is having the same problem with analytics and understand that it does not mean that they are not creators just that the system does not work for them.

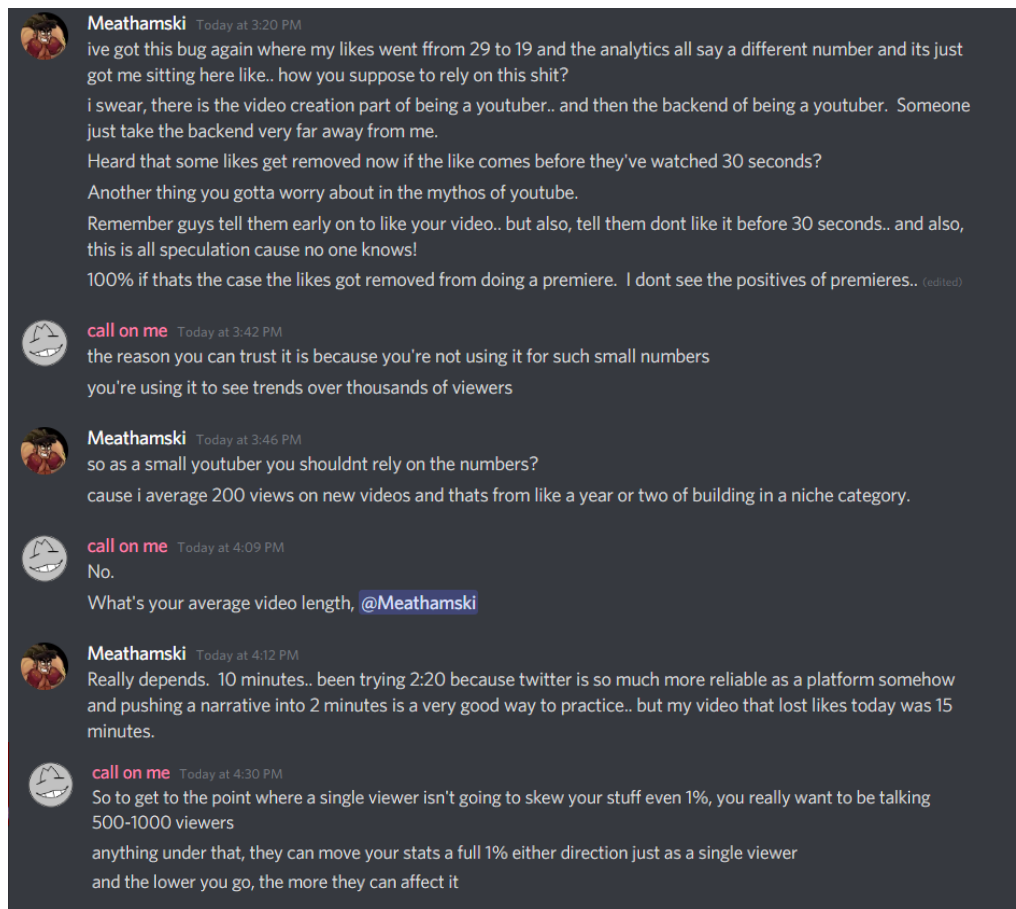


Figure 5-3 Moriarty (call on me) discussing why analytics cannot be used for small channels in the video creator channel – screenshot taken 08/04/2021

Hobbyist success

Carl makes content on his channel *ASavageWorldsGM* which recently passed 1k subscribers. When I interviewed him, he had been making videos about Savage Worlds—a tabletop roleplaying game—for about a year and was close to 500 subscribers. He wanted to make the channel focused on being a game master in Savage Worlds having some short videos as well as longer podcast-like videos he does with his friend Eric. He is a full-time manager at a large corporation so only creates videos as a hobby, so he does not care about having an optimal schedule or consistent schedule like Brickly talked about. He aims to have one or two videos out a month. He is more interested in the process of making videos than actually building an

audience. “I know that I will never have a big audience- there’s just not enough people in my niche, so to speak. But I very much enjoy what I focus on and that’s all I can hope for, just playing around seeing what happens- if I make a few bucks on the videos great, that can go right back into my videos with like some cool backgrounds or buying more savage worlds stuff to review.”

Carl wanted an audience that watched the videos even if it was pretty small, he enjoyed making videos, but he saw little point to it if no one watched his videos. The community surrounding his videos really helped him justify creating content and defined being a creator, that viewer/creator interaction. “I’d really like to see comments that are more active, I want to be able to have, like, conversations or debates in the comments. I like replying to comments, the best one was when one of the main writers at Pinnacle left one arguing with us about our conclusions— that was something cool, Podunk no-ones like us got noticed by him and, well, made him angry but it was cool nonetheless.” To Carl the community aspect of having an audience and them engaging in his audience was part of his understanding of a successful video and being a successful creator. He had a lot of reservations about doing a livestream several weeks after our interview but was really happy to have at least two people contributing to chat, he got the experience he wanted doing a live stream as a creator.

As a hobbyist, Carl is a creator almost entirely for the practice of content creation. He seems to be creating content for the fun of understanding editing, making assets, and learning about the platform of YouTube but there is an underlying want to be legitimized by people watching his videos. Viewers watching his videos helps enforce the meaning of what he makes and because of a creator’s connection to their content that bolsters the meaning and identity of a

content creator. In this way, his videos important to his understanding of self in the way that others perceive it.

Content that creators make, whether to make money or to have fun, are extensions of the creator's self. They seek validation and legitimation from other creators in communities of practice and ultimately viewers who see their creations. The old saying "if a tree falls in a forest with no one around, does it make a sound?" is apt in this discussion because doing YouTube and uploading content is just a part of creating identity. The identity of creator is complex. Creators identify themselves with the practice of making content and that is then legitimized by the markers of success that YouTube creates like subscriber count, view count, and retention rate.

YouTube categorization help reify creator's identification; but for smaller creators who do not fit with the categories in place, they find their identity in the communities of other small creators around them as well as the small, dedicated audiences they build for themselves. Being a part of a community like NewTubers which has a strong internal definition of content creators that is robust enough to shield its members from outside legitimacy questions. As Moriarty stated, one of the main reasons the community exists is to have a space for new creators to come together as recognized content creators. Many members in the discord expressed how friends and family members did not fully understand or back the new hobby of content creation because it was not successful quickly; members found solace in relating to other members' stories of doubt and perseverance.

Outside of communities, small creators like Alexis, Travis, and Carl find validation in their audiences. The viewership they get spurs them to continue making content and signals that what they are doing is legitimate. Alexis actually went as far as stating that she is attempting to make a community that was in her words was more "quality over quantity." Which points to an

idea that the community around a creator also contributes to their identity. Large creators may also derive meaning from their audience. Bricky discussed how the successful shift away from League of Legends content showed that his audience liked his personality and would watch him regardless of topic. He stated that it felt nice that his audience was there because of him rather than just the game. In addition to the audience, large creators are recognized in mainstream media and by YouTube themselves as legit creators who can go full time into making content.

Overall, the two intertwined factors of identification and external recognition discussed by Lamont & Molnár (2002) as well as Jenkins (2000) and Glaeser (1998) are complicated. The process of contextualizing oneself is ongoing as a creator puts themselves in concert with their creations as they make more videos or change what subject they talk about. As a result, external recognition is always shifting and attempting to refocus the perceptions and definitions of what a content creator looks like. Creators navigate this through the practice of making content, the ways that the platform and the creator interpret success, and how other creators in communities support each other.

Chapter 6 – Conclusion

This thesis has focused on the ways that creators learn and adapt to the platform of YouTube as well as construct their identity through communities of practice. This research stands as a foundation to understand the complex web in which creators exist. Creators contend with the platform of YouTube, their viewers, fellow creators, sponsors, and other social media platforms to create and sustain their content. To understand better the way that creators are connected within this web, I looked at how creators learn content creation and identify as creators. Learning content creation involves piecing together information from one's own practice to become acquainted with the automated systems of YouTube as well as other creators' stories about their experiences to further inform their own practices. In this way, this research showcases how creators are specifically connected to other creators and YouTube. YouTube itself is embedded in a large social context which then imprints itself onto the content that is produced on YouTube.

Creators and practice

I joined and observed a community of small creators that help creators feel recognized and supported by other creators. This community is called NewTubers. These small creators commiserate together, celebrate the little milestones, and share their experiences through story. These stories represent tactics preserved as they are passed between creators to inform their own situations and experiences. Creators construct a bricolage of information to mobilize the creation of content in their own situated practice; they pull information from stories told by creators either in forums, public videos and interviews, as well as official documentation from Google or advice

from advertising agencies. In a community of practice, the flow of information is concentrated with creators directly swapping advice with each other and engaging jointly with the enterprise of creating or improving their content.

Stories and knowledge that creators bring to communities of practice in addition to the communal practice creates a shared knowledge base, a shared repertoire, which is used to inform each member's participation in the group as well as creating objects to better recruit members. In the case of NewTubers, this object that is the FAQ; the FAQ is reified by members, illustrated most starkly in how they consistently point all new members to it so they might read it. It holds much of the shared repertoire that the owner Moriarty has collected and curated into a set of questions and answers. However, as Wenger (1998) would argue, these reified objects start to exclude edge cases over time and take on a misplaced concreteness. The FAQ reflects the tactics preserved in the stories and shared experience that went into the information provided; at the same time however, the FAQ is strategically created by NewTubers to teach creators what NewTubers thinks is important, creating an object that furthers the needs of the institution of NewTubers.

The FAQ is good for creators to start from, but it does not have all the answers—it is up to creators to practice and build upon the FAQ to make their own understanding of the YouTube platform. There are other communities of practice for creators, as well as the greater creator community. As Mista GG stated, things are passed through the proverbial grapevine and overtime become golden rules. Creators take cues from other creators about what they should do or how to improve their craft. There is an abundance of videos in which creators discuss their story, offer anecdotal evidence, and give advice on good practice for other creators. In this way,

the larger creator community is a significant part of the knowledge that creators accumulate and pass on through the grapevine in their own practice and advice.

NewTubers and communities of practice play a critical role in understanding how creators form their identity. Creators' identity is constructed through a process of identification and categorization. Creators identify with the creating content, contextualizing themselves with the practice of making and uploading content. Membership and participation in a community of practice like NewTubers—or on a larger scale of all YouTube content creators—creates a social boundary of who belongs and who does not belong through the definition of what content creation looks like in practice. These criteria are confirmed by external categorization by groups like YouTube or viewers. The negotiation between external validation and internal identification is what makes up any creators' sense of identity, on an always ongoing basis.

Large creators may be more readily recognized externally by their ability to make a career out of making content or markers of success that YouTube has created like subscriber counts. Therefore, large creators are validated externally; small creators, by contrast, are not necessarily externally validated by outside groups. They rely on other small creators or NewTubers to validate their identity through membership in the group and joint participation in the enterprise of making content. NewTubers has a strong definition of themselves, which shields small creators from external categorizations problems. NewTubers is a place for small creators to be creators instead of being seen as 'playing' at being a creator.

Creators vs. YouTube

Understanding the platform of YouTube is a process of trial and error. Creators attempt to understand the audience through experimentation with different video topics, formats, and other elements. Creators also go through a similar experimentation process to understand the automated systems of YouTube. Systems impact what creators can and cannot make through the material agency of the platform. Automated moderation systems are programmed to detect certain topics that may be unsuitable for advertisers, restricting income for creators through restricting advertisement. This incentivizes creators to avoid things they have discovered demonetizes their video. Censorship is the end result of these restrictive moderation bots. Bots leads to creators avoiding copyrighted material to the detriment of their channels and at worse censors' vulnerable groups who are forced off the platform because they cannot sustain themselves monetarily. Creators find a way around systems through a myriad of methods taught to them through their own experience or from other creators, such as through substituting words that are found to be problematic with innocuous ones or adjusting copyrighted footage to avoid the copyright ID system. These are tactical practices trying to subvert the strategic automated systems of YouTube.

Unintended consequence is expected when material agency and human agency come into contact through practice (Pickering, 1995). Developers cannot predict exactly how algorithms operate at scale due to their black box properties; they can only guide the algorithm and then react to when things start to go awry. We explored the examples of how creators have exploited the recommendation systems several times, most notably each time new features were added to YouTube—starting with live streaming and ending with the most recent example of community

posts. Creators were able to appropriate the systems of YouTube for their own gain in being recommended much more than they would otherwise be. The developers then stepped in to correct those exploits. In this way, the relationship between developers, creators, and platform are laid bare. Taylor (2009) stated how systems reconfigure the users as the users reconfigure the platform. The platform configures creators in the content they create and the topics they avoid. Creators reconfigure the platform by finding the specific loopholes or exploits they can use to make what they want and succeed.

YouTube is not just affected by creators, the platform is also impacted by government regulatory bodies, advertiser demands, and public outcry. YouTube is embedded in the history of the platform and looking at how these changes influence the platform can show the way that sociotechnical platforms form. Throughout the process of uploading there are checks in place that arose from different historical situations that locates YouTube in its historical context. The Copyright ID system was put in place to appease record labels in 2009 so the record labels would settle or drop the case. The ad-suitability system was implemented after advertisers boycotted the website in 2017 after the largest creator on the website, PewDiePie, was accused of producing antisemitic content. In 2019, the FTC stepped and sued YouTube for \$170 million due to the platform collecting data on children in violation of the COPPA rule; YouTube was ordered to require creators declare if their videos were for children or not and change what advertisements were shown on children's content. There have been additional examples, but these three examples highlight the pressure points for the YouTube sociotechnical system.

YouTube may offer a free service for viewers and creators in hosting videos, but ultimately it exists to make its parent company Google money. When money is threatened through lawsuits or advertisers boycott, new systems are implemented swiftly. With the COPPA

ruling, it highlights the regulatory pressure from governments. These processes impact and ultimately mold the values which the platform once stood for. These threads of influence factor into the platform that creators interact with today, making up the assemblage of YouTube. Assemblage can be utilized to understand the greater influences that went into creating the platform and how it has been changed. These changes are reactive, a continual response from developers as issues come up. The platform of YouTube is full of unintended consequences; when one problem is fixed for advertisers such as restricting ads on controversial topics, then an issue comes up for creators like LGBTQ+ content being demonetized, and it falls to developers to find a middle ground.

YouTube gained popularity using the motto “broadcast yourself” creating the image of the independent creator finding success. The platform made a name on being open for creators to build a community utilizing their platform as an intermediary. However, the platform has always been present with certain rules and constraints on content uploaded to the website. As time progressed, the platform has become more constricted due to the amount of content needing to be moderated and controversies forcing YouTube’s hand. These changes have made YouTube into much more than an intermediary in the social network, instead molding the social landscape through its policies and moderation.

Creators and Audience

The most interesting trend that I found throughout the project is how creators understood the importance of their content. According to my interviewees, successful channels were not the product of luck but a matter of good content. While creators were upset and tried to work around

the moderation systems, they were fully trusting in the recommendation systems. The recommendation system was thought to be good at its job of showing videos to potential audiences. Some creators went as far to say that promoting on other social media platforms was a waste of their time with how well YouTube recommendations worked. While creators did exploit the way that algorithm recommendations worked, NewTubers discouraged this stating that sustained success would only come through good content.

The recommendation system shows the video to people, and it is up to the creator to make sure that the people then click on the video. This puts control into the hands of the creator instead of the platform. Creators in NewTubers were given advice on thumbnails and titles to make it more appealing to viewers rather than strategies to get better promotion. Creators made content they wanted to watch and let the viewers come to them.

If there was more time to put into this project, understanding the viewers role in content creation would have been a great topic. While there were some insights to how creators choose topics and how they go about pivoting to more successful content, there was a lack in focus on viewers. This project has been primarily interested in the ways that creators learn through the practice of content creation rather than their relationship with viewers. If the study was continued, there would be a more in-depth analysis on the way that viewership impacts creators and their identification with being a content creator.

Viewership is the ultimate marker of success; they are where the advertising money comes from through views, sponsorships come from viewers subscribing, and where the fame of content creation comes from. While the creator reaps the benefit of a large audience, the audience still holds power over them; without a consistent audience the creator would lose their livelihood. This power dynamic has been explored before (see Gilani, et. Al, 2020) but through

publicly available content. Engaging in a more ethnographic method with more creators may yield better insights and showcase how creators who are reliant on attention navigate this power dynamic.

In my interviews I encountered two creators who were more excited to have a community of viewers rather than making money off their channels. Carl stated that his main focus is getting people to discuss the topics in his videos more; he loves replying to comments and engaging people. Alexis also said the same thing, going as far as to say that she would rather have a small community with quality people than a large community. Alexis made efforts to promote her videos but was very selective in where she promoted her videos to create this community that she wanted. The ways that creators create their community is a very interesting path to take that could involve research on parasociality between creators and viewers and the more involved approaches to foster community like Discord, Patreon, and Twitter. It further would highlight the interconnectedness of the internet's web of platforms.

Limitations and further research

This project was focused on the socialization processes involving creators in community and identity; learning how creators lean on community to learn about content creation. An understanding how the platform's assemblage is constructed and how assemblage impacts creators in real ways. This project was limited in scope and while it focused on certain aspects it left out several other aspects such as power, viewership (as discussed above), and in person meet-ups.

During the research for this project, the Covid-19 pandemic was ongoing so there was no conferences or meet-ups to attend. However, it is a meaningful aspect of creator culture to attend these in person events to meet fans and other creators. There are classes and other meet ups that YouTube themselves host for creators, as well as conferences that are held by third parties in partnership with YouTube. The largest of these conferences is VidCon which organizes fan meet ups, panels, and presentations for creators. There is also a yearly award celebration—the Streamies—which creators are nominated for categories and invited to an Oscar-like event. These in person events are important for large creators and small creators; they offer the opportunities for creators to connect with one another which can lead to friendship and collaborations. NewTubers has a meet up around VidCon as well, which would be another excellent opportunity to participate and understand how identity is further reified through meeting in person. If research concerning creator community is continued, these events would ideally be attended and further examined.

There is a hierarchical nature in the creator community which is organized mainly by subscriber count; this creates a stratified community and creates social boundaries within the creator community. Large creators typically congregate with other large creators, small creators congregate with small creators. This could be explored further through the ways that creators meet and interact. These connections are important as creator social networks contribute to the process of identification for creators. In Carl's interview he stated he wanted to connect with other creators in his genre but figured he would wait a few more months until he had a bigger audience to reach out. This points to social boundaries that are perceived between creators. Even if those boundaries are not tested—how these perceived boundaries are realized and constructed through social processes is a fascinating place to take this research.

Along with hierarchy within the creator community, there are power dynamics between platform and creator. YouTube holds the keys to creator success and destruction; what they give, they can take away sometimes without warning. While the creators I talked to did acknowledge issues communicating with YouTube support, there was still a trust in the platform. Other content creators, however, have talked publicly about their channels being deleted, their channels being threatened by malicious copyright strikes, or being forced to reapply for channel monetization and losing revenue for an entire year. Because of the size of YouTube, small creators are forced to go through automated process after automated process to fix any issues with their channel. Large creators may have a contact at YouTube, but sometimes they are forced to mobilize their large community of viewers to force YouTube to pay attention to the issue. This dynamic is worth study how platforms take advantage of their power over creators' livelihoods, how creators operate under such institutional threats, and how creators can mobilize the community to offset the power imbalances.

As discussed earlier, there are issues with the implementation of algorithms to moderate content and unintended censorship of topics involving vulnerable groups. There are also problems with recommendation algorithms that were not explored in this piece. While creators discussed how they dealt with the recommendation algorithm, it boiled down to making good content and not much else. There have been studies about how viewers are lead through filter bubbles (Bryant, 2020 is just one example) and lead to alt-right radicalization or taking on conspiratorial beliefs. Other research has framed the recommendation algorithm as infomediaries (Morris, 2015). Both these understandings show how viewers are not totally in control of what they watch, YouTube is serving content they are enticed to click and stay on the platform longer. A consequence of this may be the continued oppression of creators of color and in the LGBTQ+

community. Noble (2018) discusses how algorithms continue oppression, there are also other researchers who have looked at how algorithms recreate real life power dynamics in the digital world (Bucher, 2018).

Due to my group of creators, I did not have the data to explore dynamics regarding recommendation algorithms. Travis was my only African American creator but had little to say when asked about how he felt as a creator of color on YouTube; he shrugged, “I haven’t had any issues, but I did notice that the video where I used Einstein’s face in the thumbnail was watched more than the videos where I use my own face. That was a little funny, and a little disheartening I guess” It merits more research to look at how the experience of creators of color are different than white creators and how the platform of YouTube creates these power dynamics through their platform.

These prospects for future research show how complicated the dynamics between creator, platform, and viewer are. While this research showcased one aspect of creating content, there are many other avenues to follow. Platforms and users alike are entangled in the interconnected web of the internet. There has never been a better opportunity to be independent creators, finding an audience, and experiencing fame without the traditional gatekeeping of conventional media.

User generated content will continue to be a large part of the internet, how its creators engage in the processes of identification, learning, and socializing will be important to understand as more people engage in the making content for audiences on YouTube and competitors like Twitch (see Taylor, 2018) and recently Tik Tok. Content creators are in unique positions as they constantly negotiate their place on their platform of choice as well as their relationship with viewers and their content. Creators and users both are caught in a constantly changing ecosystem of platforms on the internet; creators find themselves constantly evaluating

their position. Mista GG summed this up when he ended our interview by saying, “the most important thing on YouTube is to keep moving, never stop or get complacent, you have to keep evolving, adapting, to stay relevant. That’s the secret, just keep moving.”

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Appendix A: Interview Schedule

1. How long have you been uploading videos on YouTube? What kind of videos do you produce?
 - a. Could you describe your thought process in setting up your channel?
 - b. Do you have any goals for your channel? If so, what are they?
2. Do you use YouTube and social media as a primary source of income?
 - a. If so, how well do you feel YouTube supports that effort?
3. Has your content changed over the lifetime of your channel? In what ways?
 - a. What led you to change your content?
4. How did you learn how to do YouTube content creation? Were there specific resources that you made use of to start a YouTube channel?
 - a. Tell me about the information YouTube provides about growing your channel.
 - b. Do you have a Patreon or accept sponsorships so you can sustain the channel? How did you learn about these additional sources of support?
 - c. Do you continue to look for resources that support or improve your production of content or your marketing?
5. Does YouTube offer support to newer creators? If so, in what way?
 - a. Do you see any differences in levels of support across different channels? Why do you think that is?
6. What kinds of challenges did you face trying to find success for your channel in the beginning?
 - a. Have those challenges decreased or increased, or changed, as the life of your channel has continued?
7. Do you think YouTube communicates effectively with you and other creators? Why is that?
 - a. How does YouTube tell you and other creators about changes they make to systems like content ID, Algorithms, change in TOS?
 - b. Do you have a direct line of communication with YouTube, or do you have to use the automated reporting/reviewing process?
8. Have you discussed problems with fellow creators about your success and failures when uploading different types of content? Do you swap advice with creators?

9. Tell me about your production process with new videos. For example, do you try them out on Patreon or another platform before posting it on YouTube?
 - a. If so, why is this a useful process for you?
 - b. Do things like trending pages, algorithms, and Content ID change what content you decide to cover?

10. How have you come to understand what does and doesn't work with content ID or monetization?
 - a. Do these conclusions come from a certain source, or do you figure it out via trial and error?

11. How do you measure the success of these videos, comment response, likes, views?
 - a. Do you worry a lot about statistics when you upload a video?

12. Have you developed Workarounds for any systems on YouTube? If so, what are some examples of these?
 - a. How did you learn about these work arounds? Like using a discord server for video uploads

13. Do you have anything you would like to add in addition to anything I have asked?
 - a. Would a follow up interview be okay if I need additional information?
 - b. Do you have anyone else in mind that would be willing to help me in my project?

Supplemental questions for new (Just starting) YouTubers

1. Why did you decide to start a YouTube channel in 2020?
 - a. Is income support part of your goals for the channel?

2. Have you relied on communities that support learning how to create content? How did you come across them?
 - a. New tubers specifically: you are pretty active- how much advice do you take from NewTubers or do you get a lot from outside sources and share.
 - c. What do you get from New Tubers outside of advice?

3. How have you started to promote your content?
 - a. Has it been successful? What ways do people recommend?

4. Have you looked into what resources YouTube has to offer?
 - a. Are these articles helpful for monetization, setting up the channel?

5. What struggles have you faced breaking onto YouTube?
 - a. What do you think are the causes of these struggles?

Appendix B: Interviewed Creators

This is a table of creators interviewed for this thesis. If creators' names are available, they are listed. If creator names are not available or they are the same as the channel name, a dash is used. Channel start date represents the first video that creators identified as their first video. Listed subscriber counts are current as of March 31st, 2022.

Channel name	Creator name	Channel start date	Subscriber count
Alexis Dahl	-	2020, February 21	3,700
ASavageWorldsGM	Carl	2019, December 23	1,060
Gamer Pizza	Beryzan	2019, October 18	809
Bricky	-	2015, February 12	803,000
Curious Tangents	Travis	2019, October 28	28,000
MistaGG	Mista GG	2016, September 27	800,000
Mrixrt	Moriarty	2017, October 23	11,100
Overly Sarcastic Productions	-	2012, December 18	1,910,000
Practical Engineering	Grady	2014, October 10	2,600,000
Solar Sands	-	2016, January 22	1,180,000
Tasting history with Max Miller	Max Miller	2020, February 25	1,120,000