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**YouTube and the Adpocalypse:**  
**How Have The New YouTube Advertising Friendly Guidelines**  
**Shaped Creator Participation and Audience Engagement?**

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## **Abstract of Thesis**

Across 2016 and 2017, YouTube was subjected to an advertising boycott, widely known as the Adpocalypse, after a number of adverts were placed in content that promoted extremism. In response YouTube undertook a complete restructuring of their advertiser-friendly guidelines. These changes involved a number of restrictions on the content creators, who were forced to adapt or risk losing out. The changes, in turn, placed a greater emphasis on audience engagement.

This thesis attempts to discover how these changes have shaped creator participation and audience engagement. Through an extensive literature review, in-depth interviews with both creators and audiences, a thorough coding process and a detailed analysis of the findings, this thesis seeks to answer the question of how have the new advertiser-friendly guidelines shaped creator participation and audience engagement. This thesis will also be looking into the conflict between the various parties involved, looking at the rise of audiences, and what these could all mean for the future of YouTube.

Keywords: Digital Media, YouTube, Adpocalypse, Social Media, Audience, Creator, Participation, Research

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## **Table of Contents**

Abstract.....	p.1
Acknowledgements.....	p.2
Table of Contents.....	p.3
1. Introduction.....	p.4
2. Literature Review.....	p.7
2.1. Audiences.....	p.7
2.2. YouTube: Structure and Business Model .....	p.9
2.3. Participation Culture.....	p.13
2.4. Situating the Thesis.....	p.16
3. Methods.....	p.17
3.1. Participation Action Research.....	p.17
3.2. Audience Research.....	p.22
3.3. Ethics and Interview.....	p.23
4. Analysis.....	p.24
4.1. Power Relations: Adpocalypse and Conflict.....	p.24
4.2. Smaller Creators and the Adpocalypse: Money vs. Creativity.....	p.26
4.3. Conflict Over Content.....	p.28
4.4. Knowledge and Awareness.....	p.32
4.5. Audience Empowerment: The Role of the Audience post-Adpocalypse.....	p.34
4.6. YouTube vs. Mainstream Media.....	p.37
5. Conclusion.....	p.41
References.....	p.46
Appendices.....	p.48

**YouTube and the Adpocalypse:**

# How Have The New YouTube Advertising Friendly Guidelines Shaped Creator Participation and Audience Engagement?

## **1. Introduction**

When you consider how many millions of people access YouTube every day, it is no wonder then, that according to the internet traffic analysis site Alexa.com, it is the second most visited website on the internet (Alexa.com. 2018). Since the video hosting service was launched in 2005, YouTube has rapidly become a ubiquitous element of our modern, mediated society. On YouTube Van Dijck (2013) points out:

What is most striking about sites like YouTube is their normalization into everyday life-people's ubiquitous acceptance of connective media penetrating all aspects of sociality and creativity. Millions of users across the world have incorporated YouTube and video sharing in their quotidian habits and routines  
(p. 129)

It has become a website accessed by everyone, to cater for every need. From the the most dedicated fans and followers, to educators using the site as a tool to enhance learning, or to people looking for advice and reviews on any number of subjects. Ultimately though, the majority are those just looking for entertainment. However, how many of these dedicated and casual visitors who visit the site everyday are aware of the unseen impact of each and every click they make?

Across an 18 month period covering starting in 2016, YouTube was subjected to a major advertising boycott. Today it is most often referred to as the 'Adpocalypse' (YouTube, 2017), a term coined by Felix Kjellberg, more commonly known as PewDiePie, the platforms most subscribed creator. During this period a large number of high profile brands began to quickly and quietly withdraw their adverts, en masse. This was done after it was discovered that a number of them had been placed, via the platforms automatic algorithm, in thousands of videos which broadcast messages of hate, violence and extremism<sup>1</sup>.

The platforms response was twofold. First, was a complete reform of the YouTube advertiser-friendly content guidelines<sup>2</sup>. These are the guidelines content creators (more commonly known as

1 This was discovered during an investigation carried out by *The Times* newspaper, and can be read here (subscription required) :<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/youtube-hate-preachers-share-screens-with-household-names-kdmpmkjk>

2 The current YouTube advertiser-friendly content guidelines can be viewed here: <https://support.google.com/youtube/answer/6162278?hl=en>

Youtubers) must adhere to if they are to become eligible for advertiser revenue through the YouTube Partnership Programme (YPP)<sup>3</sup>. The second was to carry out a wide scale, retroactive demonetization of the millions of videos that were now considered to be in breach of the new guidelines. This process was carried out by another automatic algorithm, and was not taken on a case-by-case basis, instead the process was a blanket one, later placing the emphasis on the creator to appeal the ruling in an effort to regain monetization status.

Most controversial of all perhaps, was that both these processes were undertaken without YouTube notifying any of the creators. The hope was that a quick solution could be found to stem the mass exodus that was taking place. It did not take long for companies from the United States and the United Kingdom such as the BBC, McDonalds, PepsiCo and Starbucks to pull all their adverts from not just YouTube, but its parent company Google as well. It was not until 2017 that YouTube's attempts to keep the events secret while a solution was found, were uncovered. A small number of the sites most popular creators began to notice large discrepancies between the number of views their channels were getting, and the amount of advertising revenue that should have equated too. This prompted many of them to use their stature on the site to bring the events to the wider audience, and raise deeper questions about the future of YouTube.

By the end of 2017, YouTube appeared to have recovered. The advertisers had returned, encouraged by the large scale changes made. The site was regaining back its financial losses, and at face value at least, all was well. Behind the scenes however, the platform was still in turmoil. The creators, the very people responsible for YouTube's success, were still embroiled in a bitter and lengthy battle with the site over creative freedom and fair distribution of revenue. For many, the new guidelines were too restrictive, punishing creativity and guiding new and existing creators towards making a more simplistic and inoffensive style of content. Those that had previously operated as video gaming, independent news outlets or documentary channels for example, were now finding themselves unable to make money through adverts. As a result they were either having to, provided they had a large enough fan-base, seek external sources of income through sites like Patreon<sup>4</sup> or Twitch<sup>5</sup>, adapting their content to fit in within the new guidelines, or in some cases,

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3 The YPP is the programme put in place by YouTube that, once a content creator reaches certain requirements, entitles that creator to monetize their content through the placement of adverts.

4 Patreon is a fund raising website, through which people within the creative industries can appeal to fans or members for funding, often in return for exclusive benefits, such as unseen content or limited edition releases. It saw a huge rise in usage immediately during and after the brand boycott. The site can be viewed here: <https://www.patreon.com/>

5 Twitch is a live streaming platform that is owned by Amazon. It is primarily used by video gamers, through which fans and audiences can donate directly to a streamer, allowing them to retain a greater share of revenue. Again, the site saw a large spike in usage during and after the brand boycott and can be viewed here: <https://www.twitch.tv/>

completely leave the platform.

This was the fate of many of the smaller creators. The large majority of which were those without a large enough base to seek external income, and who now found themselves in a situation where they were caught between producing the type of content they wanted, or producing the type of content YouTube would allow. As such felt as though they were finding their content largely ignored.

Now, in what could be classed as the post-Adpocalyptic landscape, clicks are, quite literally, currency. In order to be eligible for advertising revenue, a creator must have accumulated a combined total of 4000 hours worth of views across their channel<sup>6</sup>. This then places a greater emphasis on the creator, particularly those with a smaller fan base, to produce and upload a large number of videos in as quick a fashion as possible, but also, and a fact that is quite often overlooked, draws greater attention to the new role of audiences of YouTube.

The audiences have recently discovered how the impact of the brand boycott has affected them. For one, creators now appreciate more the importance of every click the viewers make, and as such have begun to treat and target them very differently. The viewers have also begun to learn of the power they, as a mass audience, wield. This has led to periods of intense back and forth between both parties, as they attempt to discover how they fit into the post-Adpocalyptic landscape. The constant negotiations that take place between creators and audiences is one that is rarely looked at, yet is one upon which the outcome could change how YouTube operates, and as such is one of utmost importance.

Which leads to the question of the thesis; How have the new YouTube advertiser-friendly guidelines shaped creator participation on the site, and then by extension, audience engagement? In order to attempt to answer this, this thesis will need to carry out a number of investigative measures. It is first important to conduct an extensive literature review. Through this it is the intention to place this thesis within the wider scope of study in relation to participation, audiences and YouTube as a digital media platform. Following this will be a detailed outline of the methods this case study will intend to use, and why they are the best methods for this particular case. Following this will be a detailed analysis of the findings of the participation action research, interviews and thorough coding

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<sup>6</sup> It is important to distinguish that there is no difference between a view and a click. Simply by clicking on a video constitutes a view, regardless of how much, or how little, of the video is actually watched.



process, linked with a number of theories and literature. Finally, in the conclusion, this thesis will seek to tie together the findings of every stage of this case study, with the aim of answering the overall research question.

With the status of the Adpocalypse unclear, and its impacts still entirely yet to be felt, it makes this case a very interesting one for study. Even more so when considering that the focus of this case will be that of the relatively small creators, for whom the boycott has hit hardest.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Audiences**

To find a clear and academically unanimous definition of what constitutes an audience is problematic. It is a concept that is widely discussed and always expanding, as the term adapts to keep up with the ever-changing demands of a more mediated society. Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998) put forward the notion that 'audiences [...] are changing with wider social and cultural changes' (p. 3), and so definitions include McQuail (1987) suggesting an audience is made up of 'a collectivity which is formed either in response to media [...] or out of independently existing social forces.' (p. 215). A more updated view would be that of Hartley (2002) 'The term audience is used to describe a large number of unidentifiable people, usually united by their participation in media use' (p. 11). Perhaps the most simple definition of an audience comes from Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998) themselves, with the simple idea that 'Audiences are groups of people before whom a performance of one kind or another takes place' (p. 40). While this definition predates the advent of the Web 2.0, and by extension the changes to the media and performance landscapes that came with it, it is still very apt. Even though performances have moved to a more mediated and digital space, and as the nature of being an audience ebbs and flows, it still rings true.

While the definition of audiences varies, it has long been accepted that the nature of what it means to be 'an audience' is changing, or it could be argued, evolving. Livingstone (2005) puts forward the notion that, at one point in time across “ [...] both popular and elite discourses, audiences are denigrated as trivial, passive and individualized.” (p. 18). This is echoed by Ross and Nightingale (2003), in the suggestion that the audiences have grown “from passive saps to interactive critic(s).” (p. 120) . On this understanding then, it is easy to track the evolution of audiences. From those, for example, attending the theatre in 1800's America, passively absorbing the performances before

them, to the audiences of traditional British musical hall in the 1900's. During which time audience engagement was more common place, elevating them up to become more active audiences. Through to the 2000's, with the advent of the Web 2.0. At this time allowing for a greater degree of interaction through social media platforms, and what Jenkins (2002) would label as being a new form of 'interactive audience' (p. 1). This, however, is not a view shared by Napoli (2011) who argues that, in fact:

The history of audiences has frequently demonstrated that the early manifestations of the audience were very much participatory and interactive. [...] It was only with the development of electronic mass media [...] that the dynamic between content provider and audience became increasingly uni-directional  
(p. 12)

The argument made by Napoli then, would suggest there is more of an adaptive fluidity to audiences, which allow them to grow and change with the tide of social, political, technological and economic changes, as opposed to the notion that audiences are evolving in a simple, binary way, as they have previously been considered. It is this idea that seems to hold the most weight when it comes to discussing audiences in a modern sense. Now, with the nature of Web 2.0 and access to portable and internet ready devices being easier than ever, it is returning audiences to the more dominant and active end of the spectrum. Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998) argue a similar point; “there is little doubt, that over the last 10 or 20 years, the pendulum has swung more towards the Dominant Audience end of the spectrum.” (p. 29). Knowing what we know now about the nature of the Web 2.0 environment, it may be hard to see the nature of audiences as being a pendulum. Many of the leading Web 2.0 platforms (YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram) have now completely changed what it means to be both an audience and a producer. Over time the lines between the two have become blurred, and as such it would be difficult, if not impossible, for the pendulum to swing back. This combination of what were previously two very separate and clearly defined roles, has led to what Bruns (2008) labels as 'Producers', a term which carries, among others, the definition that users:

[...] no longer produce content, ideas, and knowledge in a way that resembles traditional, industrial modes of production; the outcomes of their work similarly retain only few of the features of conventional products, even though frequently they are able to substitute for the outputs of commercial production processes.  
(p. 1)

It is this term that is quite hard to shake off when it comes to any research case on YouTube. This new concept also brings with it a huge shift in the power dynamics. The notion of audiences being, as Tulloch (1995) described them, a 'powerless elite' (p. 16) is outdated, at least in terms of the mechanics of Web 2.0. Instead now, audiences and producers work side by side to create, enhance and contribute to the Jenkins, Ford and Green (2013) idea of the 'spreadability' (p. 3) of content. With this new shift, audiences find themselves charged with an ever growing degree of power, as they have a greater say in the way content, across all digital media platforms, is shaped and shared. However, with that comes a heavy degree of responsibility, as they become targets for advertisers and creators who look to exploit that. It is difficult to argue then with Ross and Nightingale (2003) and their suggestion that "today, being an audience is more complicated than ever." (p. 1).

Another contributory factor for this is the more on demand nature of audiences. Technological advancements have made it possible for more and more audiences to be reached by, and to reach out to, more digital media while on the move. This has had a major impact on the digital landscape as a whole. With audiences now expecting content faster than ever, creators are now under a greater degree of pressure to keep up with audiences demands or risk being left behind. While this is not a new aspect of audience evolution, it is one that, when coupled with the Adpocalypse, has taken bold leaps forward. The YouTube algorithm that promotes regular uploads has almost turned the demand for more content, into an expectation.

## **2.2 YouTube: Structure and Business Model**

Nowhere is this concept of dominant and interactive audiences, more evident, than on YouTube. The video sharing platform has framed its entire business model around audience engagement and creator participation. Burgess and Green (2009) describe the platform as being "a platform for, and aggregator of, content, but not a content producer itself" (p. 4). This is a rather apt description, as YouTube itself serves only as the framework upon which the content, conversations and community have been built. Burgess and Green (2009) again put forward that:

YouTube's value is not produced solely, or even predominantly by the top down activities of YouTube, Inc. as a company. Rather, various forms of cultural, social and economic values are collectively produced by users en masse, via their consumption, evaluation and entrepreneurial activities  
(p. 5)

It is through the use of free labour of its users that YouTube has become a success. Whereas all forms of social media require some degree of labour from its users, it is on YouTube that this labour is most clearly seen. The time it takes to compose a status on Facebook, or upload a picture to Instagram, is incomparable to the time spent filming, editing, rendering and uploading a video to YouTube. As such the labour involved takes on a greater form. Terranova (2000) describes free labour as the “moment where the knowledgeable consumption of culture is translated into productive activities that are pleurably embraced, and at the same time, often shamelessly exploited.” (p. 333)

The use of free labour is one that has grown as the platform has (or, it could be argued, the platform has expanded to accommodate the growing number of `workers`). While YouTube has always made use of its users willingness to spend time and effort to produce content, it may not have entirely been the case in the platforms early days. Van Dijck (2013) makes the point that while “YouTube [...] did not produce any content of their own; they merely accommodated the distribution and storage of content produced by their users” (p, 113).

Indeed, historically, the platform was initially designed solely as a digital place on which users could store home videos. The idea of audience interaction and engagement was more of an after thought. This was evidenced further in the platforms initial launch tag-line “YouTube: Your Digital Video Repository” (2005). This drew in many amateur video producers, who had been attracted to the idea of a platform that would allow them to emulate the professional producers. Offering them a space where they could create, edit, upload and share their own content, as well as comment on and share the content of others. This gave rise to a new form of user generated content (UGC) which was rapidly then able to compete with the content being generated by more professional producers (PGC) for a variety of different reasons. Chiefly, it could be argued, was it was able to bypass a lot of the restrictions placed on more professional producers, allowing fans to become producers for the type of content they wanted to see.

Van Dijck (2013) again states that if one were to “look at much of YouTube's current content, it is hard to tell any distinction between typical YouTube channels and broadcast content.” (p. 119). It would be hard to completely agree with this statement, as by doing so would undermine the very purpose of the platform. One which has been moulded into something that, if not to compete directly with mainstream broadcast media, can allow for amateurs to fill gaps for the content they wanted to see. While of course advancement in technology has allowed for greater professionalisation in how to create content, the style of content itself is very much noticeable

against that of a professional in a lot of cases. This applies in both the technical aspects of production and the subject matter. For example, if a professionally produced short video were to include as many jump cuts, quick zooms or odd camera angles as a YouTube creator like *How to Basic*, it would be considered unwatchable. Equally the subject matter of a creator such as *iDubbbz* dedicating a whole series on his channel to the safe capture and removal of squirrels from his property, would, in all likelihood, be a commercial failure. Yet on YouTube these types of content, and the millions of other types of obscure and niche content, not only have a home, but a dedicated and loyal fan base.

As YouTube began to grow in popularity the platform quickly learned it was important to recognise and reward those creators who were responsible for aiding the platforms rapid growth. As a result YouTube introduced its YouTube Partnership Programme (YPP), through which the most popular creators received a small amount of the the advertising revenue shared by YouTube. For many this unique business model would present the opportunity to earn a high enough revenue to turn content creation into a full time career. In return, YouTube would offer further boosts in popularity to the videos of those in the YPP, by pushing them higher up the ranking systems. The benefit for YouTube here was offering further promotion to content they know is already drawing a significantly large number of views, which, by extension, draws in more advertisers, and with them more money.

Many creators however were unhappy with this, arguing it allows for YouTube to determine what sort of content should be seen, rather than the open and more democratic system previously in place. Further arguing that those who could not, or did not want to join the YPP were instantly alienated, regardless of the popularity of their content. In their work on attempting to understanding YouTube uploaders, Ding et al (2011), put forward the suggestion that “YouTube's recommendation system seems to be biased towards less popular uploaders.” (p. 363). It would be very difficult to agree with this idea and simultaneously view the YouTube business model as something that could work successfully.

The recommendation system put in place by YouTube needs to constantly push the most popular content, by the most popular creators, in order to generate advertising revenue. This is backed up by YouTube software engineer, James Zern (2011), in an official blog, in which he claims that 99% of the views YouTube receive are spread across just 30% of content. While this was claimed in 2011, it is a figure that has seen a sharp change over the last two years. With a large number of content creators now trying to find that balance between content that is both popular and monetizable in a

post-Adpocalyptic landscape, the percentage of content receiving the most views has actually narrowed somewhat. The uncertainty caused by the boycott has meant fewer, and certainly less diverse, forms of content are now being seen on the trending rankings. Now, as advertisers seek to take greater control on where their adverts are placed, creators are now having to operate in a narrower field.

Advertisers have long been a part of the political economy of social media, and so for them to wish for (or take a better opportunity) a deeper involvement on YouTube is not a new idea. What the Adpocalypse has done, is allow advertisers the opportunity for them to take greater controlling share in their relationship with YouTube. For example, the placement of adverts is now something advertisers have more say in. Before, the advertisers were granted some freedom in where they could place their adverts. Now however, they are almost given a free reign. This has allowed for them to benefit greatly from the labour of creators, and treat audiences more as commodities to a much greater extent. Taking the Toffler (1980) notion of prosumption, the “progressive blurring of the line that separates producer from consumer.” (p. 267). Fuchs (2013) expands upon it, suggesting that “social media that are based on targeted advertising sell prosumers as a commodity to advertising client.” (p. 33).

When speaking of the capitalist nature of advertisers and social media platforms, Fuchs (2013) brings up the notion put forward by Marx (1867) of relative surplus value production, which put simply, “productivity is increased so that more commodities and more surplus value can be produced.” (p. 31). In regards to YouTube, the case is there to suggest that this notion is in affect here. By working with the platform to put in place new, and what some have considered overly restrictive guidelines, the type of content that can make money for the producers is drastically reduced. This means in order for the creators to maintain good levels of income, the producers must upload on a more regular basis. This is further evidenced by the changes to the YouTube algorithm that promotes consistent regularity of uploads, as opposed to the considered quality. This, in turn, offers the advertisers a much wider scope of content in which they can, working along side the creators, place adverts. There is also a greater emphasis on targeted advertising. Adverts that will most often be targeted at specific audience demographics, based on their collected user data. Fuchs (2013) again backs this up by stating that “the more targeted advertisements there are, the more likely it is that a user will recognise ads and click on them” (p. 31). As a result the political economy of YouTube will have completely changed.

This is often the case for free-to-use social media platforms. A perfect balance needs to be struck between the free labour of users and the relationship with advertisers. Van Dijck (2013) citing Clemons (2009) backs this up:

social media's business models are a delicate harmonizing act between user's trust and owner's monetizing intentions. If users feel they are being manipulated or exploited, they simply quit the site, causing the platform to lose its most important asset  
(p. 40)

To counter this a lot of social media sites have begun to think of new ways to lessen the reliance on advertisers, while simultaneously maintaining power and income. To do this they have begun to look to the audiences to cover the costs. In 2015 YouTube launched their own pay-to-view subscription service, YouTube Red<sup>7</sup>. While the service is still in its early stages, it signals YouTube's attempts to move away from its dependency on advertisers, while at the same time moving towards a more mainstream direction. However the service has not had the impact YouTube may have wanted. In the early days it was heavily criticized by both creators and audiences, who felt the move to a subscription service would alienate huge numbers of audiences who could not, or did not, want to pay to view a level of the platform. The move has also drawn criticism from the advertising companies, who were not happy at the prospect of losing out on millions of perspective viewers should the service really take off. While there is no direct link between the launch of YouTube Red and the Adpocalypse, many have suggested the boycott has set YouTube Red back, as YouTube were somewhat forced to cool their plans for expanding the service to Europe.

### **2.3 Participation Culture**

For a simple definition of what participation culture truly means, one need look no further than Jenkins (2006), with his suggestion that:

a participatory culture is also one in which members believe their contributions matter, and feel some degree of social connections with one another (at least they care what other people think about what they have created)  
(p. 7).

Even as far back as the 1990's, the idea of the internet being a tool to aid the early advancement of

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<sup>7</sup> Currently only available in America, Mexico, Australia, New Zealand and South Korea.

audiences to participants was evident. Ross and Nightingale (2003) wrote of the number of fans and audiences who had 'moved over to cyberspace with enthusiasm, quickly realizing the medium's potential to share discussions, writings and ideas'. This could be considered a precursor to the web as we know it today. Delwiche and Henderson (2013) add that:

functions once monopolized by a handful of hierarchical institutions (e.g. newspapers, television stations, and universities) have been usurped by independent publishers, video-sharing sites, collaboratively sustained knowledge banks, and fan-generated entertainment  
(p. 1)

YouTube, much in the spirit of those audiences of the 1990's, embraces the notion of a participation culture. It has cultivated an ever growing number of users whose constant uploading, discussing and sharing of content has meant the site has been able to thrive. It has also been the subject of much discussion by academics. Livingstone (2013) puts forward the notion of a participation paradigm, in which 'audiences are becoming more participatory, and participation is ever more mediated.' (p. 25). The line between audience and participant is a very thin one at times. For many the simple act of an audience member clicking a 'like' or 'share' button is enough to class them as a participant. For others more is needed. Livingstone (2013) however, again argues that

Where once, people moved in and out of their status as audiences, using media for specific purposes and then doing something else, being someone else, in our present age of continual immersion in media, we are continually and unavoidably audiences at the same time as being consumers, relatives, workers and, fascinating to many, citizens and publics.  
(p. 22)

This notion then causes Livingstone (2013) citing Rosen (2006) to suggest that, at its very core, "audiences are dead-long live the user" (p. 22). The notion of users seems to be the next evolutionary step for audiences, at least in the case of YouTube. It could be suggested that where once audiences would simply just view something, in this mediated society they are now more likely to make use of something, be it a platform, a 'like' button, or a comment section. This is a key core value of YouTube. Gauntlet (2011) shares a similar view that:

[...] YouTube's huge popularity, and dominance in the online field, is due to its emphasis on establishing its framework as one which primarily supports a *community of participation* and *communication* amongst everyday users, rather than elite professionals.



The extent of community offered by platforms such as Facebook and Instagram is much narrower, with users taking a more self-gratification approach. YouTube on the other hand offers, while still allowing creators to indulge in self-gratification, provide a community that is built around the betterment of everyone involved. Be it through the more open and democratic forums for discussion, such as the comments section, or through the content design to teach or enlighten. Or simply through the entertainment value offered.

The notion of participation has long been engrained into the YouTube core values. Indeed, YouTube, until 2011, championed the slogan 'Broadcast Yourself' (2007), suggesting the emphasis was on the creators to truly broadcast themselves. This signalled a change for YouTube. From simply being a platform upon which people could store content, it became one through which users could broadcast themselves in both senses of the term. Broadcasting themselves, their lives and interests, while simultaneously broadcasting it all themselves, cutting out the professional aspect of media production and distribution. As with the attention the previous slogan garnered, this too drew in large numbers of people, encouraged by the idea of being able to engage and involve themselves in a new participatory community. One that was not offered in quite the same way by other video-sharing site, such as Vimeo which seemed to lack that freedom desired by a large number of users.

It is this freedom that has been the cause of much discussion over recent months. The very concept of participation invokes ideas of freedom. A point made by Livingstone's (2013) in the suggestion that "participation represents a positive freedom" (p. 25) and while that statement may have been true pre-Adpocalypse, there is something of an undercurrent across YouTube that suggests that may no longer be the case. The participatory freedom that was once so large a part of the YouTube framework has now been called into question by many of those involved with the platform. While it would be difficult to obtain an absolute answer as to whether or not this is the case, the potential is there for this thesis to at least gauge the tone of how a small section of creators feel about this, and determine whether that positive freedom still exists. To many that freedom is still there. The opportunities for people to upload almost anything are still possible, and in that sense the boycott appears, from the outside, to have done little to dampen that notion. Others may disagree, certainly those who have been hit hardest by the restrictions put in place. There are the grounds that they could put forward an argument of the notion of 'positive freedom to an extent' is more accurate at this time.

## **2.4 Situating this Thesis**

As previously mentioned there has been a lot of academic work on YouTube, on audiences and on the concept of participation, yet there has been little, if anything, that looks at the three together in the way this thesis intends to. This study will hope to bridge the gap between the three, and attempt to understand, firstly, what it means to be a creator of small statue on a platform that has, or indeed is still undergoing, a major shift. By speaking to those directly involved at the ground level of participation, it is the hope that this thesis will be able to determine what the impacts of the boycott have been to them. By looking to determine whether or not the boycott has changed the way they think or go about content creation, we can hope to discover if the nature of participation on YouTube has changed as well, and what this could potentially mean for the platforms future.

Secondly is to look at the audience of YouTube. Again, by speaking to the members of the audience community, the hope of this thesis is to discover a different perspective on the same event, and to discover how these events have potentially changed the nature of being a YouTube audience member. It is unclear as to whether or not the the two are linked, but it not to far a leap to make that if the nature of one has changed, so to must the other.

It is also the hope that through this thesis, we can gain a truer idea of the power of audiences on YouTube. Through the methods detailed in the following section, it is the intention to discover if the section of audience members to be interviewed feel any great shift of power in their favour, and if so how they use it.

Thirdly, by gaining a deeper insight into the the potentially changing roles of participants and audience, through the processes of interviews, coding and analysis, this thesis will hopefully, as a result, determine in some small way what this means for the future of the platform. Though this final point may be difficult to accurately determine, it will hopefully go some way to providing the framework for further study to be conducted.

While there has been a large amount of academic work on YouTube, such as the aforementioned examples, there are very few, if any, on the Adpocalypse and the changes it has wrought. Given the recent, and some would argue still ongoing nature of the case, it has become difficult to truly appreciate the scale and impact of such an event. It does however allow for a new research, such as

this thesis, to hopefully find out how far the impact has been felt thus far, and look to the future to determine what the long term effects could be.

### **3. Methods**

For a case study such as this, it is important to speak to those directly involved with the creation of content for YouTube and those who view it. The two chosen methods of study therefore are; Audience Research and Participation Action Research, and they have been selected on the basis that they allow for the opportunity to pick, through a process of sampling<sup>8</sup> a cross section of people and afford them the opportunity to speak openly and honestly about their own direct experiences.

This is an important factor for having selected both methods, as while there has been many academic works and studies that use YouTube as a basis (Burgess and Green (2009); Van Dijck (2013)) there are none that appear to have been found in researching this project, that have focused directly on the participants, or audiences. Even studies such as Ding et al (2011), who have looked at attempting to understand YouTube users, have done so from a data analysis point of view, rather than through a more qualitative method. Now, given the potential upheaval the boycott may have caused, it is now more important to speak to those directly involved with the platform, even more so while the event is still fresh in the minds of those involved.

#### **3.1 Participation Action Research**

##### **First Stage Action Research**

Before conducting the the first stage of any Participation Action Research it was important to reflect and address any elements of the researchers own bias. Ladkin (2009) states that through a process such as this it is import to recognise and adhere to the “commitment to rigorously question, examine and reduce one's own blindness to those biases” (p. 481). It is important to identify what these biases are, examine how they could influence, directly or otherwise, any part of the investigation and, by doing so, seek to minimise any potential impact or influence they may have on the findings.

While it is impossible to completely eliminate all bias, by highlighting and bringing attention to it,

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<sup>8</sup> See Appendix two for Sampling Guide

the researcher is then able to greater shape the investigation, and become a more active participant, an important aspect of Participation Action Research, rather than a passive investigator. It is this active participation that makes this method an ideal choice for such a case study. By fully being able to embrace the cycles of investigation, interviews and reflections, it allows for a more detailed and deeper level of understanding of a subject that other methods, those that require a stricter level of neutrality from the researcher, may not ordinarily uncover.

Once the subject of internal biases has been addressed it was important then to focus upon any external sources of bias and influence. This is more important in any case involving social media, as often audiences and researchers may not be fully aware of what these influences are, or how they (the audiences and researchers) can be effected by them. Again, while it is impossible to eliminate all biases and influences, certain steps can be taken. In this instance there is the necessity for this researcher to sign out of their personal YouTube account and disable any software that prevents adverts from being shown. This removes the possibility of having previous viewing habits or subscriptions influence what is found during the first stage of research, or of missing any advert placements that could be important to the overall results. Once both of these potential issues have been addressed the first stage of the Participation Action Research can begin.

For this case study it was important to begin by gaining an understanding of the type of content that was considered most popular on the platform. This is so as to discover which genre of content is most popular, how the content is marketed to the audiences, who the content was uploaded by and how many views it has received. This will help to determine if the brand boycott, the dispute surrounding advertiser revenue, and the subsequent changes to the advertiser-friendly guidelines bought about as a result, has affected the type and genre of content being produced. Or at the very least, that is being promoted by YouTube which, as a result, will receive higher viewing figures from audiences.

In order to ensure the findings were fair and accurate, it was important to approach the platform as if a first time viewer. Once the aforementioned steps to remove and acknowledge biases have been implemented the investigation could then turn to the YouTube homepage. As the home page is the first point of entry to YouTube for visitors to the site, it is where the platform itself focuses much of its influence in regards to the promoting of channels and content, and as such much of what can be seen would be from perspective of what YouTube wants to promote, with little of it being influenced by audience viewing figures.

In order to gain a better understanding of what content the audiences themselves are viewing, this investigation focused on the 'Trending Now' section of YouTube. This is the section from which viewers will be able to see which content has currently been viewed most over the previous seven days, who it was uploaded by and how many views it has received. During this process it was vitally important to make and maintain detailed field notes<sup>9</sup> that cover the researchers own thoughts and discoveries. These were what would be used to form the groundwork of the second stage, which involved interviewing content creators.

These field notes provided a number of interesting findings. For instance 25 of the 50 videos that were considered to be trending for the week had been uploaded by the YouTube channels of major television networks (HBO, CNN, Kanal 5), popular musicians or celebrities (Taylor Swift, Will Smith) or sporting leagues (Allsvenskan). While this was an unexpected finding, it was not entirely surprising. Content like this is a lot more likely to reach the trending charts, as unlike channels with one creator, or one maintained by a small team, major networks and celebrities are able to rely on whole teams dedicated to creating, editing, marketing and promoting this style of content, and with a much bigger budget than that of a small creator.

What was most surprising however, was that once the 25 uploads by established networks and celebrities had been discounted from the findings<sup>10</sup>, the remaining 25 contained 11 videos that could easily be defined as vlogs. This was surprising, as while vloggers have always used YouTube, it has only been within the last two years that they have become such a ubiquitous element of the platform.

### **Second Stage Action Research**

For the second stage of this case it was important to speak directly with those involved in the process of creating, producing and marketing content. This is so as in order to try to better understand, from their perspective, how the current YouTube landscape operates. Also to see if they believe the brand boycott has impacted upon they way they go about creating content, or if there is something deeper behind the perceived shift on the platform.

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<sup>9</sup> See appendix one for Field Notes

<sup>10</sup> These were discounted, as while the findings were surprising, they were not part relevant to the overall project.

Before any interviews could be conducted, it was first vitally important that a detailed sampling process was carried out. This was to ensure the best possible interview participants, and therefore the best possible data, could be found.

First it was necessary to decide upon which style of content to focus the sampling and interviews towards. The idea of going against random or cluster sampling was that the possible data collected could be considered too vast, and as such not a true representation of the current YouTube landscape, and so a more narrow approach was needed. As a result two subcultures of creators were chosen through a process of targeted sampling<sup>11</sup>.

The first was gaming. This would include any form of content in which a video game was the main focus, such as game plays, reviews or tutorials. This genre was selected on the basis that for years after YouTube first started, gaming was considered the most popular form of content on the platform. Many of the 'YouTube Celebrities' of today began out on the site as video game players. However, the popularity of video gaming content has experienced a sharp decline over the last two years as the new guidelines have made it harder to earn revenue from this style of content, as advertisers are less likely to pay for adverts to be placed in videos that feature age restricted games.

This has resulted in many video gaming creators either changing platforms, such as the shift to Twitch, or continue to upload on YouTube, but run it along side another genre of content, one which can be profitable, yet easy to make, with little extra time demands needed, and which can help to grow their fan base, while still maintaining their existing content. Another reason for selecting gaming content as a subgenre, comes from it also being a heavily male dominated genre, both in terms of creators and audiences. This could potentially throw up some interesting findings over the course of the following stages into gender and YouTube.

The second subgenre was determined as a result of the surprising findings of the previous stage. As mentioned previously, the large number of the weeks trending content was made up of vlogs. Vlogs have seen a rapid increase in popularity. They are often considered easier to produce, easier to edit and easier to market. As a result a vlog creator can, and often will, upload several times a day. Vloggers, unlike gamers, are also not tied into certain expectations of the content they produce. For instance a vlogger can upload various videos showcasing their everyday lives, their holidays, their eating habits or hobbies. There were two other reasons why vloggers make for an interesting

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<sup>11</sup> See Appendix two for the reasoning behind selecting this method

sampling choice. First, is that content creators of this particular genre, at face value, do not seem to value YouTube as a platform as much as creators of the previous genre. It appears as though YouTube is just a platform upon which they can facilitate the sharing of their lives to a greater degree, but often as part of a larger social media branding. Usually vlogs will end with a creator mentioning handles and usernames of their other social media sites, such as Snapchat and Twitter, suggesting they are better sites for engaging with each other.

The second is that vlogs appear to me a more female dominated genre of content. While there are many male vloggers, it is female creators that made up over half of the 11 vlogs featured under the 'Trending Now' tab. This is of great interest, as for many years YouTube has been considered something of a 'boys club', with many of the most popular creators being male, as well as a large majority of the platforms audience. However, a study conducted in 2015 showed that the gender balance in audiences terms had redressed to almost 50/50 (Digiday, 2015). In regards to creators however, finding exact figures is difficult<sup>12</sup>, but it has been widely accepted across the platform that more and more female creators are growing in popularity, and also in new account sign ups.

As well as having to meet the requirement of creating to previously aforementioned content genres, other guidelines were set. Such as the number of years a creator had been uploading to YouTube having to exceed two years. This ensured they were present on the platform before the brand boycott. Another was the regularity at which they uploaded had to exceed two videos a week. Finally the number of subscribers each participant had on their channel/s had to be above 1,000. This is the minimum amount needed to be eligible for joining any YPP. It was important their subscriber base was also below 500,000 subscribers. This second number was decided upon, by the researcher, on the basis that once a creator exceeds that number their subscriber base is considered large enough to be able to use as a source of external income through Patreon or Twitch. It was also decided upon on the basis that a content creator will often experience their quickest growth in subscribers. This often comes as they focus more attention on reaching the 1 million subscriber mark<sup>13</sup>. As such it was important to decide upon a fixed bracket in which to source creators, as the focus of this project is on the experiences of the smaller creators, and how they have been impacted since the brand boycott.

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12 YouTube does not hold demographic figures in relation to creators, as there are so many variables involved that obtaining accurate figures would be a next to impossible challenge.

13 While there are no hard figures for this, it is widely accepted trend, often referred to as the "Million Sub Push" by various creators across the platform

There were other requirements that had to be met in order to be able to take part in this process. One such requirement is to reach as close to a balanced gender representation as possible, so as to match the gender split apparent in the subcultures featured, and also to provide a balanced voice. This may not be as achievable however, as the dominance of males featured across the platform as a whole, may mean the sampling reflects that.

The ages ranged between 21 and 30. There was no restrictions on the nationalities of the participants, or any relating to education level or field of work or study. Afterwards a number of posts were made across various social media platforms, and into YouTube related forums that focused on the Malmö and Lund area, asking for interview volunteers. From this the required number of 10 participants were found, and eight interviews conducted.

### **3.2 Audience Research**

While it was important to this case study that the voices of smaller creators be heard, it was just as important to focus on the voices of the YouTube audiences. Audiences have always had a huge impact on the platform, more so it could be argued than on other social media sites. However this is something that is overlooked when studying YouTube, and so for whatever power they may hold, there is often little opportunity for them to voice themselves. This is more relevant than ever in the post-Adpocalypse landscape, as they are being appealed to on a greater scale than before, by creators who know their clicks now carry more weight. Despite this, audiences have rarely been given the opportunity to have their say on the brand boycott and their perspective on the impact it has had, outside of YouTube comment threads and social media platforms. It is important then that this case study affords them this opportunity. By doing this, this case study will add a new perspective to the answering of the overall research question.

The processes of recruiting audience members for interviews was very different to that undertaken during the creator recruitment. There was a greater degree of freedom in the sampling process, as there was no specific genre viewing requirements that had to be met, just so long as the audience member in question engaged with the platform on a regular basis<sup>14</sup> and been doing so for a period greater than two years. This was so as to have a clear definition between an active audience member and passive viewer.

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<sup>14</sup> Regular engagement in this instance involved regular viewing of more than 7 hours a week, and regular commenting and/or sharing of content (more than 4 times a week)



As with the creators 10 participants were interviewed for this project, and were found using the method of snowball sampling. This method was better suited for recruiting audience members as no two audience members shared the exact same tastes in genres. There were many overlaps in the content they did enjoy, but also many differences which opened up a greater number of perspective interviewees. This allowed for a greater knowledge base on their behalf, which in turn greatly benefited the research project, as the interviews could take advantage of their wider diversity.

### **3.3 Ethics and Interviews**

As YouTube is a keen talking point for a lot of people, even more so for those who are so deeply involved with it, it was important for the study that those taking part in interviews were allowed a greater degree of freedom to speak. For this to happen there was only minimal guidance from the researcher when necessary. As such all the interviews for this stage of the research were conducted in an informal and semi-structured manner. This was most conducive for an environment in which the participants could speak openly and with honesty which in turn, allows for a deeper level of qualitative empirical data. They were also conducted in locations that allowed for a welcoming and inviting atmosphere, such as cafes, so as the participants may feel more at ease.

It was also of great importance for a study of this nature that a pilot interviews was first conducted. While the question did not differ greatly between the two groups being interviewed, there were a small number that did, and as such two pilot interviews were conducted; one for each group. This allowed for an opportunity to try out the initial set of interview questions to determine if they allowed for the greatest amount of data to be found. It also allowed for the opportunity, should it be needed, to shape or frame the questions different, to make them more effective. This proved invaluable, as a number of questions did require re-wording, or removing completely, as during the pilot interview they were deemed to be too leading, and as such did not allow for a valid answer.

Before the conduction of any interviews all participants were given details of what the interview was being used for, an outline of the project and made aware of their right to withdraw at any time during the process, with the immediate deletion of any data collected from them (though no participant ever invoked this). They were each then asked to sign a consent form<sup>15</sup>, containing details of the above, as well as guaranteeing anonymity, both in regards to their real names and their

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<sup>15</sup> See Appendix three for consent form

online YouTube channel names. All the interviews were conducted fully and without issue.

After the completion of the interviews<sup>16</sup> and the transcription<sup>17</sup> the process of thematic coding<sup>18</sup> was started. All the data that had been gathered thus far were broken in to three separate groups; field notes, creators interviews and audience interviews. They were then separately subjected to open coding over a period of several days which allowed for several cycles of action and reflection. This proved to be vital, as with every new coding cycle that was carried out, new data was being found that had previously been missed. Once the coding of the three separate groups had been completed all the lines of data were then combined, and placed into a number of broad categories. These were then analysed with the aim of discovering a number of narrower themes into which the broader categories could be assigned and the findings could be analysed.

Throughout the entire process of Participation Action Research it is important to remember the advice of Ladkin (2009) who suggests the conduction of “cycles of action and reflection” (p. 478). This is a vital element of this method, as it allows for the opportunity to review, breakdown and better understand the findings and how they fit into the wider study, as well as allow for reflection on what these findings may produce.

## **4. Analysis**

### **4.1 Power Relations: Adpocalypse and Conflict**

If one were to look at many of the leading Web 2.0 era social media platforms, it would appear to be a very one sided relationship in which the platform itself has complete control, with users expected to understand their role and abide by the guidelines put in place. Recent events with Facebook<sup>19</sup> have shown what can happen when that power and control are abused, and while any ramifications from this, at least from the average Facebook users perspective, have been minor and fleeting it has highlighted the issue of power within social media. However, if one were to look deeper at the YouTube structure, they would see what is, in essence, four pillars that support the platform. These four pillars, each of which are reliant, in equal measure, upon the others for the

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16 See Appendix four for interview guide

17 See Appendix five for an interview transcription

18 See Appendix six for a sample of the coding process

19 The scandal revolved around users data being collected and sold, and from this users became subject of 'social media manipulation' that included pro-Donald Trump and pro-Brexit material. More information can be seen here...

<https://www.cbsnews.com/news/what-you-need-to-know-about-facebook-cambridge-analytica/>

continued growth and success of YouTube, can be labelled as Audience, Creators, Platform and Advertisers.

When one pillar tries to take a greater or lesser share of responsibility the whole platform becomes uneven, requiring more from the remaining pillars to ensure an equilibrium. Depending on which viewpoint one takes, the Adpocalypse was the result of advertisers asserting a degree of power over the other three, and by doing so throwing the whole platform out of balance. The resulting confusion and chaos led to a major shift in the landscape, with advertisers taking advantage and asserting a greater degree of pressure onto YouTube, in order to achieve their aims. Van Dijck (2013) writes that “[...] platforms like YouTube epitomize the new concentration of capital and power” (p. 128).

This imbalance brought with it a number of conflicts, in which YouTube found itself caught in the middle. On one side were the creators, who argued that without them YouTube would not be the successful platform it had become, and that they were having their creativity held hostage by overly restrictive guidelines, which in turn was repressing their creative freedom, and was detrimental to the democratic environment YouTube encouraged:

I saw one video in which the guy said the Adpocalypse, if it went as far as advertisers would have liked, then it would have turned YouTube from a democracy to more of a dictatorship, with creators being punished for not following a strict set of rules. This wasn't just some nutjob with a camera either, this guy had a couple million plus subscribers.  
(Audience. Interview Five)

Alongside this they were suggesting that the removal of advertising revenue was punishing the majority over the actions of the minority, and that YouTube needed to do more to protect the rights of the creators, and to not do so could have a wider ranging impact on other social media sites which relied so heavily on advertiser capital.

On the other side was the advertisers, who argued that the platforms automatic algorithm had not done enough to prevent incidents, such as the placing of adverts in extremist videos from happening, and as a result had become unreliable in protecting the brands image. Furthermore the brands argued that the previous guidelines needed to be tightened in order to prevent repeated incidents in future. This is an example of power as best described by Corner (2011) citing Lukes (1974; 2005) when they put forward the notion that “power needs to be thought of in relation to the

potentially positive, affirming, enabling idea of 'power to' as well as the dominative, negatively constraining idea of 'power over'." (p. 17). The action taken by the advertisers could be considered an example of one exerting 'power over' another. The removal of adverts and the revenue they bring in, hurt not only YouTube, but the creators as well. As a result, the creators needed to find a way to reclaim their share of the power.

#### **4.2 Smaller Creators and the Adpocalypse: Money vs. Creativity**

For the bigger creators there were several avenues open to them to go about this. The most common one for many was to look to external sourcing sites, with Patreon and Twitch seeing a major increase in popularity during the boycott, as it allowed those seeking income to use their fan base, and by extension it allows the creators to bypass any restrictions put in place by the new YouTube guidelines. This is an example of the aforementioned 'power to', as it allows creators, of a certain subscriber level it must be said, to continue creating content that would otherwise lose its monetization status. This does come with its own set of problems. Across the interviews a number of creators and audience members did speak of the added pressure that comes from working across multiple platforms:

Gaming is hard to make money from now, so they have to think of new ways to make money. A few of them use Twitch, which is a good way to make money, but can be quite time consuming. They do two or three streams a week, on top of what they do on YouTube, and you can just see the effect the pressure to constantly be on the go has on them.

(Gaming Creator. Interview Three)

I used to watch a couple of YouTubers who would do Twitch streams as well, and during Twitch streams they would often just complain about the stress and pressure of having to upload enough on YouTube to get promoted in the rankings, and to compete with the easier to make content that YouTube was really pushing. In the end one of them just stopped both altogether. It was quite sad to see actually.

(Audience. Interview One)

By using external fund sourcing sites, this allows the creators to bypass not only the YouTube guidelines, but also ensures the money raised goes directly to the creator. This is opposed to going through a third party from which a percentage of the money may be taken. However, this does not fully return the power back to the creators. Instead this places the YouTube audiences, knowingly or otherwise, in an interesting and, some may argue, unique situation. By being the main source of

income for many creators, it means the audience themselves have been granted an equal share of both 'power to' and 'power over'. Both of these elements result in the audience being granted access to a conversation they previously may have been excluded from. Many of the interview participants, from both sides of the camera, see this as a welcome, and necessary evolution:

Before the Adpocalypse, at least to me, it felt that we were, not ignored, but that our input was not as valid. Not in a bad way you understand, just that we were not as important to the conversation.

(Audience. Interview Two)

The thing I enjoy now most, is that there is a certain involvement from us [the viewers]. It feels as though we play a part in the creation process, whether it's through donations on Patreon, or through commenting on or sharing videos. It's not something I feel we get on other sites.

(Audience. Interview Three)

I think it's important to engage with them. Especially if you want to grow. People like to be included, and that can only be a good thing.

(Vlog Creator. Interview Two)

[...] if I do a game that a lot of people have suggested now, they know it is because of them. I think that is really important, because YouTube is a relationship between us, the YouTubers, and them the audience, and we need each other to make this work.

(Gaming Creator. Interview Seven)

This could be seen as an interesting evolutionary step in the role of audiences. Something we will look at later.

As for YouTube, who had been caught in the middle of these two factions, the situation had become even more precarious as the boycott went on. As the boycott showing little signs of slowing down it had become important that the platform was able to maintain a certain degree and equal share of 'power over', by working with the advertisers to ensure they are fairly represented, and that their brands are not associated with potentially damaging and harmful content. In return, the advertiser revenue that YouTube relies so heavily on, would continue to come in.

Conversely it had become essential to maintain an equal degree and share of 'power to' with the creators, empowering them to continue creating popular, enjoyable and profitable content. If YouTube were to stray too far to one side over another they risk alienating a large part of their business model, and while the knock on affect of this would be hard to measure, it is undeniable that it would be the platform of YouTube itself that would be hit hardest.

For those small to mid-level creators, seeking revenue from other sources was not a viable option. Instead they were left with the options of having to adapt or completely change their content to fit in with the new guidelines, or accept the possibility of making non-profitable content until such time as they were able use their fan base to source income through external sites, in-video sponsorships<sup>20</sup> or even the sale of merchandise:

A lot of them [creators] like me kept doing the stuff we did pre-Adpocalypse, but set up another, more advertiser friendly channel to try and keep some flow of money coming in.  
(Gaming Creator. Interview One)

I lost my monetization thing. I was told I could appeal it, but I don't want the hassle, so I just decided not too.  
(Gaming Creator. Interview Seven)

I've completely given up trying to make money from YouTube now. They've really cracked down on what could and could not make advertising money. As someone who not only plays games, but age restricted games, [...] I have no chance. So I just stopped trying  
(Gaming Creator. Interview Three)

I've seen a few who, haven't abandoned what they did before, but certainly changed it or added new stuff. I guess I can understand why, but for a lot of them it has impacted heavily on the stuff that made them popular.  
(Audience. Interview Five)

### **4.3 Conflict Over Content**

This has led many to question the changing nature of the YouTube landscape. As more established creators attempt to strike a balance and find their place in the new landscape, the uncertainty and confusion surrounding the boycott had paved the way for many new creators and different forms of content to raise up the ranking charts. As content based on video games, long held as the most popular genre for YouTube, dropped down the list it was instead being replaced with reaction videos, compilation videos and vlogs.

This is backed up by both the initial and deeper findings of the field notes:

This is interesting, as vlogs make up a greater share of trending videos than

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<sup>20</sup> Different from ad revenue. In-video sponsors are from companies that target specific content creators, regardless of content genre, to promote their products within their videos.

both reaction and gaming, and also how few established YouTubers are currently trending.  
(Field notes)

Interesting to see that the 2 most popular videos are from vloggers, one of which (KSI) is most famously known for being a gaming YouTuber until a couple of years ago. Also interesting to see that the remaining 3 videos are all from creators with less than a million subscribers, yet also fit under the banner of vlogs.  
(Field notes)

The popularity of vlogs was also something that had been picked up by the audience and creators interviewed:

I think vlogs are a really popular type of content. People seem really interested in other peoples lives.  
(Gaming Creator. Interview Two)

I'm seeing a lot more videos that you could class as vlogs than say, two years ago.  
(Audience. Interview Three)

Vlogs have also long been a YouTube staple, albeit one that has been over shadowed for much of YouTube's history. Yet it was not until to the restrictions put in place by the boycott and guidelines fully took hold, that this genre was able to fill the gaps. The reasons for this are many and varied. The new algorithm put in place promoted quantity of uploads, as opposed to content that could be considered of a higher quality. Therefore a creator who uploaded three or four times a week, as many of the vloggers interviewed for this project do, it would automatically give them a boost in the YouTube rankings. Much more so over a creator, such as the gamers interviewed, who given the nature of what they do, were unable to compete. Instead only being able to upload once or twice a week:

We upload a few times a week, maybe four or five. That seems like a lot, but we don't need to do a whole lot of editing [...] we can just film, upload on the computer, a few small editing things and upload.  
(Vlog Creator. Interview Two)

We do about three a week [...] A lot of ourselves is just done in front of the computer, so it isn't difficult to make.  
(Vlog Creator. Interview Five)

Another reason for the rapid success of vlogs, is that they are a flexible form of content. A vlogger can, and often does, upload on a range of topics, from food, hobbies, travel, advice and even more narrow and specific videos such as a tour of their house. For this reason they become more personal to the viewer. An entry point into the life of someone who, to all intents and purposes, are celebrities of the online community. When PewDiePie makes a 10 minute video<sup>21</sup> on how to make Swedish meatballs which has been viewed over seven million times<sup>22</sup>, it gives some indication as to, not only how simple a vlog can be to produce, or how simple a topic has to be, but the sort of attention it can garner. While PewDiePie is at the top end of the spectrum and far removed from the level of creators interviewed for this project, it does serve as an indicator as to the sort of topics and viewing numbers on offer.

With the potential now to make money from something as simple as recording yourself going about your daily life, many creators turned to this form of content to take advantage of the possibilities. This immediately created a number of problems for both creators and viewers as with a large number of creators now uploading so many videos a week, it became harder to make one video stand out over another. This led a large number of creators to adopt more extreme methods to ensure their content was more appealing to viewers, and therefore pushed higher up the rankings. Van Dijck (2013) puts forward the argument that “Rankings such as 'Most Viewed' and 'Most Popular' are prone to manipulation” (p. 125), something that is more possible now through the use of a number of tactics, many of which have now become common place across a number of social media sites. For example, thumbnail images featuring large red rings or arrows. These have been given the name 'Red Herrings', and are used to suggest something that needs to be seen closer. Another is the use of video tags that often have nothing to do with the video itself, but will cause them to show up in many more searches.

However, the most ubiquitous form of audience manipulation across YouTube, and indeed many other social media and even mainstream news sites is click baiting. The act of using a provocative, or deliberately misleading title has become an ideal tactic for many creators. As YouTube measures the number of clicks a video gets, rather than the length of time watched a creator could afford to employ some, or all, of these manipulation tactics. Knowing that even if an viewer switched away a few seconds through, the click was registered as a view. This, and similar methods, quickly became

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21 10 minutes is the minimum length of time a video has to be for a creator, who is part of the YouTube Partnership Programme, to include adverts on their content. As a result many creators, especially vloggers, will upload videos that just break over the 10 minute mark

22 The video can be viewed here. Viewing figures correct at time of writing: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4awKvTfgKfU>



unpopular amongst both creators, who felt it was disrespectful, and audiences who had grown tired of being deceived into watching content:

“You have to be pretty desperate to use click bait and stuff”  
(Creator. Interview Two)

[...] they don't really seem bothered about how they get those clicks, so you'll see a lot of click bait, a lot of stuff being used to really manipulate the viewer to click on their video. [...] it just makes me angry to see how little respect these people have for the viewers by completely misleading them.  
(Creator. Interview Three)

I actually unsubscribed from a lot of YouTubers when their click baiting got too much. Thinking on it now, it is something I mainly associate with smaller creators, and those of particular types of content.  
(Audience. Interview Two)

It's impossible these days to go on YouTube, and not be confronted with hundreds of videos with click bait titles, all in caps locks, with some thumbnail that has nothing to do with the video itself. I see a lot of vloggers use that sort of thing, but if I was to film myself talking about what I ate that day, I'd be doing whatever it took to get people watching.  
(Audience. Interview Four)

These methods are still in use today, post-Adpocalypse, as evidenced through the field notes taken in the first stage of action research:

The use of language across all 5 videos is interesting as well. Of the 5 [top trending uploads] only one didn't use a clickbait title and was the only one not to include any adverts. The two most clickbait titles come from small creators (in terms of subscriber base) and each feature a large number of adverts during their videos considering their length.  
(Field notes)

The reasoning for using such methods, beyond that of simply obtaining clicks, could pertain to the idea that creators hope to generate the idea of what Hill (2015) would class as a “did you see that' moment” in which creators aim to “grab audience attention and generate social media gossip.” (p. 69). For this to happen, a creator may often have to blur the boundaries of what Goffman (1956) coined as front and back stage self, in which creators may not be putting forward the reality of events in their videos. All of this in an effort to produce and upload content that will get viewers clicking, sharing, and ultimately, returning.

However sometimes this can be, and indeed appears to have been, taken too far. The now ubiquitous appearance of such audience manipulation methods, coupled with those in which

creators have been caught out either lying in their content or staging events for dramatic effect<sup>23</sup> have harmed the delicate trust relationship between creators and audiences . As a result, the act of the minority has had long lasting damaging effects for the majority. Dahlgren (2013) writes that for a democracy to function a “minimum degree of trust in society are necessary and assuming they are appropriate, can certainly enhance the quality of life.” but also warns that “excessive trust is unsuitable”. (p.113), and this is no different on YouTube. A minimum degree of trust is required on the part of the audience towards the creators, between the creators and the platform, the platform and the advertisers and vice versa between them all.

The boycott has seen what has happened when trust has been excessive, and now a fragile balance has to be struck in which clearer definitions of the two forms of trust, as put forward by Dahlgren (2013) citing Putnam (2000:136) can be found:

'Thick' trust, based on established personal relationships, and 'thin' trust, the generalized honesty and expectations of reciprocity that we accord people we don't know personally, but with whom we feel we can have a satisfactory exchange.  
(p. 112)

However this sort of trust maybe hard to truly recognise, especially given both the fast paced nature of digital media and how it has to be shared amongst and within the four pillars mentioned earlier, it is hard to say whether a true balance of trust can be struck again in the near future.

#### **4.4 Knowledge and Awareness**

One way in which the trust can be slowly rebuilt though is through knowledge. For many who may look at YouTube occasionally, it can appear as nothing more than people, more often than not in their teens or twenties, talking at a camera to an unseen audience, before uploading it straight to YouTube. However the reality of the matter is very different, and a lot more in-depth than many might expect. In order to become a successful creator, one needs a deep level of knowledge. Much of which is underlying and unspoken. At a base level this knowledge revolves around more technical and start up issues experienced by all creators at one point or another, such as the correct camera equipment, the right editing software or the most effective production values, if any of which are considered lacking, it places a new creator on the outside by both creators and audiences.

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<sup>23</sup> Content Creators such as Sam Pepper, Tara Mongeau and Jack Jones are just three of the biggest creators caught out as staging events to gain views. A simple search for 'YouTubers caught lying' throws up a large number of results.

By extension then, to become a successful creator one would also need a knowledge base that goes much deeper into things such as YouTube etiquette, YouTube politics and YouTube terms and conditions, however one of the more interesting findings from the interview and coding sessions, was the number of creators whose knowledge in this area could be considered lacking. When asked about their understanding of the Adpocalypse and the new guidelines, of the 10 creators interviews conducted, only half were able to go into great detail about both areas. Of the remaining five, over half again were unable to go into great detail about their understanding:

I have no idea, they are just the things we keep getting asked to read and agree too, but I never read them. Who actually does that?  
(Vlog Creator. Interview Two)

What are they? Haha. I have no idea, I'm sorry.  
(Vlog Creator. Interview Four)

That was that Adpocalypse thing, wasn't it? [...] I don't know what they are now, but the whole issue seems to be over.  
(Vlog Creator. Interview Five)

What made this all the more interesting, was that those who confessed to having very little knowledge all identified themselves as vloggers, whereas those with the most knowledge of the boycott were the gamers, presumably because they had been hit hardest. This lack of knowledge could be seen one of two ways. First is simply that, possibly barring a few exception, vlogs were not hit by the same monetization issues as other genres, and so may not have needed to pay deeper attention to the guidelines or their changes. The second is the possibly, at least in the case of the some of the participants interviewed, that YouTube is part of a more diverse social media portfolio, from which the participants can market themselves:

I use them all. [...] I like them all together, so it is all part of the same 'brand' I guess [...] I think social media is such a huge part of life now that you need to be involved in all of it, especially if you do what we do.  
(Vlog Creator. Interview Two)

This is an interesting consideration, as for many YouTube is, or at least had, always been the main outlet for them and their work. Now however it seems that, for many, a polymedia approach has seen YouTube become one of many platforms from which creators operate. The suggestion that for many YouTube is not something they truly invest themselves in, or take as seriously as others, must be considered a contributing factor to the idea of a changing landscape. As this generates further

conflict between creators of different genres, each with different ideas on what and how YouTube should be used for, it too must lead to further and wide sweeping changes to the platform.

#### **4.5 Audience Empower: The role of the audience post-Adpocalypse**

As mentioned briefly earlier, the role of the audience has changed considerably over the course of the brand boycott. While the relation between creators and audiences has always involved a strong degree of give and take, creators used to be in a position whereby they could afford to ignore a large part of audience interaction and forgo a degree of engagement. This was made possible by the freedom at which creators could operate relatively unrestricted.

Now however, the requirements needed to generate revenue has meant a stronger reliance on clicks, and more importantly, the audiences responsible for them. The new guidelines require a channel to have reached, and then to maintain, a certain number of views within a certain time frame, and while we have already discussed the methods creators go to in order to earn those clicks, it is now time to turn our attention to the audiences behind them.

Audiences have always been able to hold a certain degree of power when it comes to media. This power has usually resided in the ability to switch a channel, or turn off completely. In recent years that audience power has evolved to the ability to vote for a particular outcome, such as in the case of reality shows. Now however, the modern audience is an online one, and as such their power has evolved further.

During the brand boycott, the YouTube audience were very much relegated to the sidelines, made to watch on as creator after creator reported on how the boycott affected them personally, and what it meant for the future of the platform. Yet when the new guidelines were introduced, the audiences very quickly learnt that if creators wanted to make money, they had to earn it more. Some creators in their efforts went too far in their endeavours, and ended up turning audiences against them:

There was that one YouTuber, a British guy, I can't remember his name [Sam Pepper], but he was a YouTube “prankster” which was basically his excuse for being a sex pest and an asshole. He went too far with a couple of his “pranks” and in the end the viewers, even his own fans, had enough, and those that didn't immediately unsubscribe from his channel, left really negative comments. Eventually they drove him from the platform. I think he's back now, and does regular vlogs, but he's not nearly as popular as he

once was.  
(Audience. Interview Seven)

This is just one example from the audience interviews in which an example of audience power post-Adpocalypse was exercised. It is undoubtedly a more extreme example, but it does show how far audiences are willing to go in order to make their feelings known. More commonly though, audiences are quite happy to simply register their thoughts and opinions through the use of the 'thumbs up/down' feature, or through the comments. While in almost all contexts, creators actively encourage comments, with a key phrase mentioned in almost every YouTube video uploaded; "Let me know what you think in the comments below". This does open up the creator to the full fury of the audience:

I don't have a problem telling a YouTuber I think they're shit. Even if it's someone I'm a fan of. You make me waste 10 minutes of my life watching your shitty 'try not to laugh challenge #17' I'm going to tell you what I think.  
In detail.  
(Audience. Interview Eight)

I think it might just be because I'm British, but I will go out of my way to let it be known if I am unhappy with something. More so than if I like something. I tend to just leave a thumbs up on the stuff I like, but I'll leave a comment on the stuff I don't like. I think that has more impact, as I can express why I didn't like it, and maybe someone will read it and agree with me.  
(Audience. Interview Six)

This rather goes against the idea put forth by Ross and Nightingale (2003) when they adopt Jenkins' (2002:13) example of fan cultures as being "dialogic not disruptive, affective rather than ideological, and collaborative rather than confrontational." (p.148) though this was written on the subject of fans, as opposed to the more vague concept of audiences, it could be argued that the two terms are very much intertwined with a more digital audience. As a result, audiences on YouTube now feel more empowered to become more confrontational if they feel they are not being given the required level of entertainment. This is not a new idea, but we now live in an age in which social media carries so much more weight. It has become more important in this 'entertain me, now' age, that an instant return can be given by those unsatisfied.

The power of the comments can not be understated. While it is easy, and indeed sometimes smarter, to ignore the mass of text beneath each video, they do serve a grand purpose. Reagle Jr (2015) gives a description as to the definition and importance of audience comments:

the *intentions* and *effects* of comments are important. A comment can affect another's standing, it can help others make a decision, or it can alter a person's behaviour (for example providing feedback about someone's actions).  
(p.17)

It is this last point is playing a larger and larger role on YouTube nowadays. The weight a singular comment can carry can mean a huge difference to a creator and the way they think and act in relation to their content. The power then of several thousand comments, can really have an impact on the career of a creator. More so when considering a surprising number of creators rarely watched any form of content that was dissimilar to their own, if any at all. Whereas the audience members interviewed seemed to be open to a wider range of content, opening them up to a great range of experiences and affording them a deeper level of knowledge than many creators. The large majority of creators use this to their advantage, taking the feedback and suggestions of the audiences, and using them to enhance and better their content:

They actually have a big part in shaping my channel, in what I do, and I think that is really important.  
(Creator, Interview Seven)

There are still a few instances in which a creator who has fallen foul of disenfranchised audiences, will disable comments and ratings, yet this will often do little to curtail any negativity. Instead this may serve only as a warning to other viewers that this particular piece of content is, at the very least, questionable, and driving audiences to other platforms to register their distaste towards the creator.

The deeper takeaway from this may be that the power has always been there for the audience, but it just took an event such as the boycott for them to realise it. This has led to one major positive for the YouTube community as a whole. There is now a large degree of negotiation that takes place between creators and audiences. Creators are more open and accepting of feedback, the positive and the negative, and as a result this feeds back into the content they create. While this may have always been the case for a number of creators, it has only recently become more recognised by the whole as a way to progress.

#### **4.6 YouTube vs. Mainstream Media**

Over the course of the interviews, both creators and audience members hinted at the notion that that the relationship between YouTube and the mainstream media has also contributed heavily to the changing landscape of the platform. While it was only mentioned in passing throughout the interviews, it did correlate with the findings of the first stage of the action research. Originally these findings had been discounted from the case study, as it was felt they were not representative of the YouTube creator or audience community, yet throughout the interviews it became clearer that these findings could not be ignored:

I see a lot of stuff that isn't really grounded on YouTube, like a lot of American chat show stuff, Ellen, Jimmy Fallon, that sort of thing.  
(Gaming Creator. Interview Three)

I notice a lot more of the big British and American chat shows being promoted. I like them so I don't mind, but I can see why people might think they are taking space away from main YouTubers.  
(Audience. Interview Seven)

Of the 50 videos that were considered trending at the time, the first stage of research found that half comprised of official clips from various sports leagues, clips from official channels of celebrities, and overwhelmingly clips from chat shows belonging to major television networks:

Also surprising, but not shocking, is the amount of major television networks making up this list. It shows how much they have embraced YouTube and its audiences. [...] Of these 50 videos, 25 (major networks, music labels, sports, politics and celebrity channel) will be discounted from the study, as they do not come from YouTube content creators, instead they are videos that have been released or broadcast elsewhere, and then placed on YouTube, as opposed to being released solely on the platform.  
(Field Notes)

This trend has also not gone unnoticed in the world of media academics. Van Dijck (2013) suggests that platforms like YouTube would:

[...] not be half as effective if they had not also progressively aligned with the mechanisms of 'old media' such as television. YouTube in particular has made serious inroads on television's mass audience.  
(p. 129)

This would suggest that the choice to align with the more mainstream media was an active move taken by YouTube. While that may have been true pre-Adpocalypse, nowadays it feels very much as

if the decision is more one sided, with YouTube increasingly having to give more and more ground to accommodate the demands.

While the clips often found are small segments, interviews or opening monologues, as opposed to full shows, it still showcases that the networks responsible for producing these types of shows see the potential of YouTube for reaching a wider, more international audience. This is while also providing a greater opportunity for audience engagement with the show and other fans, and so use YouTube as an outlet for a lot of content. It also shows that these networks see the potential of making money through YouTube, as it greatly widens the number of advertisers they can receive revenue from. All content is subjected to the same rules and guidelines, regardless of the statue of the uploader. This means that clips from the channel of a major network show like *The Tonight Show Staring Jimmy Fallon*, which boasts a subscriber base of over 16 million, is treated in the same manner as clips from vlogger *Cody Ko* (970k subscribers). Both are expected to abide by the platforms Terms and Conditions, and in return are both entitled to the same advertiser revenue, in the same way, in return.

It is not uncommon then, to find that within moments of the latest episode of *Ellen* or *The Late, Late Show with James Corden* having finished airing, that clips from the show will be posted onto YouTube, and quickly finding themselves in the 'Most Viewed' lists. This could be put down to three key elements; shareability, regularity and commerciality.

The first is that this form of content lends itself ideally to what Burgess and Green (2013) would class as having “higher potential for spreadability” (p.196). It is content that is designed to be shared, talked about and to go viral. To make that water cooler “did you see that' moment” (Hill, 2015:69). Burgess and Green (2013) say that entertainment industries put in place:

technical and strategic considerations that ensure content is made available  
in forms that audiences will most likely find useful and approaches for  
understanding what motivates audiences to circulate content.  
(p.196/7)

This is manifested in what Burgess and Green (2013) later refer to as being the five key requirements for spreadability (p. 197) of content. The idea that spreadability is something that can be manufactured is not a new concept. For years reality television and talent shows have been playing on this concept. Every moment from *Big Brother* or *Britain's Got Talent* that has gone viral,



has done so because producers have been able to manipulate and manufacture content to fit the five key requirements. Content for YouTube is no different.

Second is regularity. Given the aforementioned shows and others like them, air on average five times a week, with an episode often lasting an hour, and comprised of a number of skits, interviews and segments, the number of potential clips that can come from them will far outweigh anything realistically achievable by a 15 year old vlogging about their new bike, or a 30 year old gamer playing through the latest release. As a result this content will be given greater promotion in the platform's algorithm, helping to generate larger revenue for both the platform and the channel or network.

Thirdly, commerciality. It could be suggested that it is in YouTube's best interest that content produced by the likes of *NBC* or *TBS* is seen more than that of, say, the participants interviewed. By promoting their content, it will appease the major networks. This in turn, will lead them to continue to post their content on YouTube. YouTube benefits from this, as they have a reliable source of monetizable content. The advertisers benefit from this, knowing the content will, not only fit with their expectations of advertiser-friendly content, but that each video will receive millions of views. Thus generating more potential income for them.

The triangle is completed by the long standing relationship between the advertisers and the wider mainstream media. As many brands will already have an established relationship with these networks and shows, they are more willing to place adverts across the platform again, and those brands that do not advertise directly during the actual broadcasts, will know the content meets their standard for advertising through them on YouTube. This builds a commercially viable relationship between platform, network and advertisers, ensuring a steady stream of revenue continues to flow to and between them all.

All of these factors then, tie in with the suggestion of Van Dijck (2013) that:

Google wielded technologies, governance, and business models to shape new forms of sociality and connectivity and, in the process, established a new paradigm for communication traffic. Indeed, YouTube and its owner, Google, will gain more control over users' online video-sharing experiences by giving amateur videographers less exposure, funnelling viewers towards fewer choices, and shepherding them towards TV-like channels

Indeed, while the bigger picture may have been missed by those participants interviewed, or not be directly a concern to them, there are a growing number of content creators who have begun to notice this new shift towards more mainstream media content. Long-standing creators such as Philip DeFranco and PewDiePie have both made a number of videos that have suggested the Adpocalypse was drawn out and made worse by a number of brands seeking to exploit the situation for gain. Going further to suggest it was the intention to hurt both YouTube and parent company, Google, in the process. In one video, PewDiePie, who has long been targeted as the reason for the Adpocalypse by mainstream press such as the *Wall Street Journal*<sup>24</sup> suggested that:

Companies are companies, they are not moral beings. They pulled out advertisements, not for the sake of being manipulated by the media, or having some sort of bigger moral idea about it. A lot of advertisers pulled out just so they could hurt Google in the process.  
(YouTube, 2018)

Through out the video, Felix points out that a number of the companies pulling their adverts from YouTube, did so because they were invested in, or in the case of Verizon, owned a direct competitor to Google:

Verizon own Yahoo [...] They can basically negotiate for better pricing, along with TV networks using this as an opportunity to hopefully pull more ads back to TV, which they have been losing out on for so long.  
(YouTube, 2018)

This has led to a culture of 'Us' vs 'Them' in which Van Dijck (2013) pointed out that “original YouTubers started to refer to themselves as 'us', while the 'them' designated the commercial YouTube channels deployed by media corporations.” (p.116) and the gap between the two has only widened as a result of the boycott. While there has always been this element of 'us' and 'them' on YouTube, it has generally been between the long term, more established content creators. Those who know how the platform works, and who helped set up the unspoken guidelines creators are expected to abide by. The 'them' being the newer creators. Those that see YouTube simply as a money making platform, or those that have come from other social media platforms, such as Vine<sup>25</sup>,

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24 The *WSJ* suggested the Adpocalypse was bought about as a result of this: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/disney-severs-ties-with-youtube-star-pewdiepie-after-anti-semitic-posts-1487034533>

25 Vine was a short-form video sharing site that ran from 2012 to 2017, on which users could create and upload comedy clips lasting no more than 6 seconds. Once the platform shut down, many of its users made the move to YouTube, often making vlogs. Former Viners include the Paul Brothers. Two of YouTube's most popular, but controversial creators.

and as such were not versed in the etiquette established by those who referred to themselves as original creators.

This long-standing tension between the two parties has always existed, but for a short term at least, the brand boycott did serve to bring the two disparate groups together. And so maybe the biggest battle on YouTube is not between the individual content creators, or between genres such as vloggers and gamers, or even for that matter between the creators as a whole against YouTube. It seems the real battle for the future of YouTube is set to be between the UGC and PGC, with the platform once again caught in the middle.

## **5 Conclusion**

On the 3<sup>rd</sup> of April 2018, Nasim Aghdam, a content creator who operated a number of channels covering art, music and veganism entered the YouTube headquarters in San Bruno, California, and opened fire on a number of YouTube employees, severely wounding three, before turning the gun on herself<sup>26</sup>. The event was later discovered to be the culmination of an almost 18 month campaign, in which Aghdam had accused YouTube of deliberately attempting to minimise her viewership by negatively filtering her content, and as a result limiting and reducing the amount of revenue her channels and content could make. She blamed the changes in guidelines which would not allow her to make profit from her videos highlighting animal cruelty and promoting veganism, and after posting a number of videos<sup>27</sup> bringing attention to this, she eventually took the most extreme measures.

The event, while tragic and isolated, served to reignite the discourse surrounding the boycott. For many, including those interviewed, the Adpocalypse was over, and had been for some time. Advertisers had returned, the platform had again found its feet, and the creators and audiences were quickly adapting to their new roles and surroundings. For many others however, the Adpocalypse was considered over in name only. For them the impact of the boycott was still being felt, and many creators and audiences spoke of feeling alienated from a platform for which they had laboured to help grow. The events of that April day became a catalyst for many to highlight that the effects were still being felt, and that YouTube was in the process of abandoning creative freedom in favour of profits<sup>28</sup>.

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26 The full story can be read here: <https://www.bbc.com/news/amp/world-us-canada-43638221>

27 YouTube has since removed all of her channels, and any videos of Aghdam that have appeared on other channels.

28 While a number of videos were available about this at the time of writing, they have since been taken down, with the

As a result of this, it appeared that the seeds of division were once again being sown, with creators now seemingly again turning against fellow creators. Two key camps were quickly established. One side arguing that these new guidelines were negatively shaping the platform, and to adapt content around them to make money was abandoning the core principles around which YouTube was built. The other side countered that the platform had grown as much as it could have, and that something like this was inevitable if the platform ever hoped to expand.

This raised a key question. One which, despite the data being collected and analysed before the event in California, was hinted at fleetingly during the interview and coding process. The very notion that the platform had reached as high as it could under its own terms is an potentially controversial one. The suggestion then leads to the idea that maybe the Adpocaypse was not a one off event instigated by a freak glitch in the algorithm, but rather an evolutionary step, necessary for the platform to reach the next level of success. Arguably in this case that level involves a more mainstream structure.

Which returns us to the overall research question: how have the new YouTube advertiser friendly guidelines shaped creator participation and audience engagement? To determine if that question has been answered, it is important to recap over three key points.

First, is to discover whether or not the new guidelines have indeed had an impact on the shaping of the YouTube landscape. The answer to that, quite simply, is yes. The findings from every stage of this process do support this. The empirical evidence gathered, particularly through the interviews, do weigh in favour of suggesting that the platform today is very different to that of 18 months ago as a direct result of the boycott. The initial measures taken by YouTube immediately following the boycott led to a period of confusion and chaos. It was the action taken by a number of the most popular creators during this period that made matters worse. From PewDiePie's video featuring alleged anti-Semitism<sup>29</sup>, to Logan Paul's video from the Aokigahara forest in Japan<sup>30</sup>, both in an effort to gain views, all contributed to the tightening of guidelines, which drastically and quickly forced YouTube to change the way it went about promoting content.

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creators citing the new guidelines restriction on uploading content surrounding tragedies.

29 The full story can be read here: <http://nordic.businessinsider.com/pewdiepie-anti-semitism-jokes-controversy-explained-2017-2?r=US&IR=T>

30 The full story can be read here: [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2018/01/02/the-haunting-allure-of-aokigahara-the-japanese-suicide-forest-logan-paul-captured-on-film/?noredirect=on&utm\\_term=.e8cad40ddef](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2018/01/02/the-haunting-allure-of-aokigahara-the-japanese-suicide-forest-logan-paul-captured-on-film/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.e8cad40ddef)

The second point is to what extent have these guidelines shaped participation and engagement, and the answer to this a little harder to get at. It is clear to see that the guidelines have shaped what is produced and how it is viewed, so in that regard it could be said that the extent to which these guidelines have shaped the platform is large. Yet there are very few complaints from the overwhelming majority of users. Many, even those who have been heavily impacted, continue to upload the content they, and their fans enjoy, and have learned to adapt to the changes. In that respect then, the answer would be to suggest that, in fact, the guidelines have actually had very little impact in shaping participation for the majority. Those who were driven so far as to leave the platform entirely number in the tens. The most popular creators within that few had their acts of protests noted by the majority of users, but ultimately it did nothing to change the tide

For the audiences though, it would seem as though the exact opposite has taken place. The changes in guidelines appear to have contributed to a major reshaping of audience engagement. This was most evidenced during the interviews, in which both parties recognised that the channels of dialogue, while always a big part of their relationship, were now more open and used than before. This was acknowledged by both sides as being a benefit to the future of the platform in relation to content shaping, sharing and engagement.

While there are still those creators who seek to manipulate audiences in pursuit of financial gain, they have quickly learned how ineffective they are. Audiences are now wiser to these tactics, and now are more empowered to do something to counter them when, in their eyes, a creator takes things beyond a reasonable level. Overall, it would appear upon closer inspection, that of all the parties involved in Adpocalypse, it has been audiences that have benefited most, which can only serve to benefit the rest.

While again, the long term implications of this are some way from truly being felt, the sense is that audiences, having felt overlooked for so long, will be unwilling to give ground on the power they have finally been granted. This could lead to an interesting potential future study on the influence of audiences on the creation of content for YouTube.

The third point is perhaps the most difficult aspect to attempt to answer, that of what does the future hold. The actions taken by a disenfranchised creator in April, showed that, for many, the impacts of the boycott are not over. While the rest of the platform seems keen to move forward and

put the events of the last two years behind them, there are still a dedicated number who wish, not for things to return to how they were, but to raise greater awareness for what this means for the platforms future. The stronger relationship between creators and audiences in one thing, but it is the relationship between platform and advertisers that has them concerned. The evidence gathered across this case study has found that the platform now appears to be placing a greater emphasis on both marketable and more mainstream content. The field notes taken in the first stage of research, for example, do make note of half of the trending videos coming from mainstream sources. This could certainly lend weight to the claims made by these creators. However there has also been evidence gathered to counter this. The fact that creators are still able to exercise a large amount of control in the creation, production and marketing of content, suggests that YouTube is still the creative outlet many seek. For them, the extra money that is now being generated can only be a benefit for the platform, and those involved, as a whole.

However, it still worth keeping an eye towards the future. There are still a lot of unknowns surrounding the platform, and these are not things that will become any clearer in the short term. Looking at everything that has taken place over the previous two years, it would be wise to view things cautiously. A delicate balance has been struck, and while things are progressing forward, its fragility must be noted. The actions taken by Nasim Aghdam may have bought forward an extra degree of tension, but the conversations now taking place seem, on the whole, to be less heated than before. All parties seem desperate to maintain the current order of things, and are painfully aware of how little it could take to undo. As time progresses, and the effects become more apparent, the true nature of the previous two years will be seen.

Looking forward there are a number of potential future studies that could be carried out as a result of these findings. For example, a qualitative study into the power relations between audiences and creators on a post-Adpocalypse YouTube. This could result in some interesting, even potentially conflicting results. Particularly when looking at to what extend has this shift influenced content creation. The impact of a study such as this could lead to a deeper understanding of audiences and social media. Another potential study could be a more qualitative look at the relationship between social and mainstream media. The often combative nature of the relationship is not one that often been written of academically, and as such the Adpocalypse could be used as a strong starting point to analyse that relationship in great detail. The overall aim being to discover how the Adpocalypse has changed the relationship between the social and mainstream media, and what it means for them both, as well as the users. Finally, a qualitative study into social media and political economy is

another topic that would almost certainly produce some intriguing results. Especially if one were to compare different social media platforms and their users, and look at the money involved in the platforms, how it is distributed, and the steps taken by users to earn more.

This all also comes at a time when social media is being looked at with a more critical eye. The recent actions of other social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp<sup>31</sup> have raised questions about social media and ethics in relation to its users. While YouTube are not quite in the same bracket as those listed, the platform is still one that has come under closer scrutiny over the last few months. The growing relationship with advertisers is one that will be watched very closely going forward, by both those involved in the platform, but also the wider mainstream media, who after such a long period of belittlement and derision, finally appear to have accepted the potential of the platform.

As mentioned at the opening of this thesis, YouTube is a ubiquitous aspect of modern society. It would be incredibly difficult to think of a world now in which almost every kind of content could not be accessed at the click of a button, from almost every form of media device. It has an ever growing and dedicated user base, who seek to create, view and share content that is, above all else, enjoyable, regardless of the financial aspects of creation. So while the boycott and guideline changes have impacted on the platform, and markedly changed the landscape, for many this is just the next step for YouTube, and one that was a long time in coming. Those most vocally opposed to direction the platform appear to be subsiding, resigned to the fact that only time will tell whether the events of 2016 and 2017 will be for the greater good.

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<sup>31</sup> Facebook and Twitter have both been subjects of enquires relating to the selling of users data. Most notably Cambridge Analytica. WhatsApp have also become the subject of speculation relating to the selling of users data.

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## **Appendices**

### **Appendix One: Field Notes**

To get the best possible understanding of the current YouTube landscape, it is first important to undertake an investigation into the YouTube Homepage, specifically the 'Trending Now' section.

This contains the most popular videos over the previous seven days, as determined by audience views. This is the best place to begin, as it will give the best foundation for the interview stages of this project and by showing what type of content is currently being viewed most.

For this I will make a note of how many videos are currently in the 'Trending Now' section. I will then assign them to groups based on the genre they fall under. From here I will take the five most popular videos in terms of viewing figures. I will then analyse them closely to look at how they are being marketed to the YouTube audience (Use of clickbait? Heavily edited thumbnails? Etc), the number of views they have, the length of the video (Videos are supposed to be over 10 minutes long in order to contain adverts), the amount of adverts in or around the videos and finally the number of 'likes/dislikes' a video has, as this will determine if the video is popular, or just well marketed.

Before beginning this stage, it is important to address any potential influences on the results. For this I have signed myself out of my personal YouTube account, so as to remove the possibility of having any influence of previous viewing habits tainting the findings. I have also disabled my AdBlocker, so as to remove the possibility of having any adverts blocked.

The results of the videos making up the 'Trending Now' section are as follows:

50 videos:

Vlogs – 15

Major Television Networks (HBO/CBS/Kanel 5 etc) – 15

Compilations- 7

Gaming – 2

Challenges -1

Music Labels – 6

Sports – 2

Politics – 1

Celebrity Channel – 1

*This is interesting, as vlogs make up a greater share of trending videos than both reaction and gaming, and also how few established YouTubers are currently trending.*

*Also surprising, but not shocking, is the amount of major television networks making up this list. It shows how much they have embraced YouTube and its audiences. Would be interesting to see how this list would be made up if they were not included.*

Of these 50 videos, 25 (major networks, music labels, sports, politics and celebrity channel) will be discounted from the study, as they do not come from YouTube content creators, instead they are videos that have been released or broadcast elsewhere, and then placed on YouTube, as opposed to being released solely on the platform. Of the remaining 25 I will look more closely at the five most viewed videos to look at how they are being marketed and how they are being received.

1) *WHY KSI AND DEJI WILL LOSE!*

Uploaded by Logan Paul Vlogs (17 million subscribers)

Uploaded 3 days ago. 4.9 million views, 'Likes/Dislikes' – 215k/32k

Video Length – 10.33

Adverts – One 20 second advert (unskippable) before video

Two 20 second adverts (unskippable) during video

2) *'THE FINAL DECISION!'*

Uploaded by KSI (18 million subscribers)

Uploaded 4 days ago. 4.5 million views, 'Likes/Dislikes' - 292k/12k

Video Length – 1.49

Adverts – One 20 second advert (unskippable) before video.

No adverts during or after.

The top two videos pertain to a boxing match between YouTubers KSI and Logan Paul, which has generated a lot of publicity over the past month, resulting in these two videos to further raise publicity and hype the event.

3) *Spring in Sweden*

Uploaded by Joanna Jinton (110k subscribers)

Uploaded 7 days ago. 300,000 views. 'Likes/Dislikes' - 5.5k./02 dislikes

Video Length - 0.44 secs long

Adverts – No adverts before, during or after.

4) *TRY NOT TO LAUGH MEME CHALLENGE ' #17*

Uploaded by ViSicks (11k subscribers)

Uploaded 5 days ago. 3.5 million views. 'Likes/Dislikes' – 47k/3k

Video Length – 10.12.

Adverts – One 20 second advert (unskippable) before video.

5 adverts during video (Each skippable after 10 seconds)

No advert after.

5) *SURPRISE BIRTHDAY PRANK – GONE WRONG!!*

Uploaded by Casey and Danna Vlogs ( 275k subscribers)

Uploaded 3 days ago. 2.8 million views. 'Likes/Dislikes' – 112k/65k

Video Length - 16.32

Adverts – One 20 second advert (unskippable) before video

Three 20 second adverts (unskippable) during video

No adverts after

*Interesting to see that the 2 most popular videos are from vloggers, one of which (KSI) is most known for being a gaming YouTuber until a couple of years ago. Also interesting to see that the remaining 3 videos are all from creators with less than a million subscribers, yet also fit under the banner of vlogs.*

*The use of language across all 5 videos is interesting as well. Of the 5 only one (Spring in Sweden) didn't use a clickbait title and was the only one not to include any adverts. The two most clickbait titles come from small creators (in terms of subscriber base) and each feature a large number of adverts during their videos considering their length.*

*The videos themselves, at least in cases of Logan Paul Vlogs, ViSicks and Casey and Danna, all contain a large amount of filler (dedicating time to something other than what the video title suggests, and/or having a section run longer than it needs to). This is a common tactic by creators to pad out the runtime of videos to make it over the 10 minute mark, after which the creators have a say in the number and placement of adverts in their content.*

*It will be interesting to see if any of these facts are picked up on during the interviews.*

## **Appendix Two: Sampling Guide and Reasoning**

Given this stage of the project required gathering the best available data, it was important that the right sampling method was used. For this, two methods were selected after deciding these were the most efficient, time saving and effective methods available.

### **Content Creators Sampling**

Once the genre of content creators had been decided on (Gamers and Vloggers) it was important then to find the best possible interview participants. However, given the restraints of time and the strict requirements put in place for the type of participants needed, a sampling method was required that allowed for a relative degree of freedom in this aspect. As such a balance of Convenience and Targeted Sampling was chosen.

This particular method had one key benefit that made this an ideal method for this phase of the project; time efficiency. The use of these sampling methods allowed for less time to be spent using a more restrictive method, which in turn meant it could be used elsewhere. The cons of this method however meant it would be difficult to replicate results, and it could be argued that the group of participants were not representative of the overall genre.

There were a number of requirements in place that each creator had to meet in order to be considered for interviewing. This may have gone against the convenient notion of the sampling method used, but in actuality it benefited well. The requirements were as follows:

- 1) Creators MUST fall under the genre of Gaming and/or Vlogging. (for gaming this may include reviews, tutorials and Let's Plays)
- 2) Creators MUST have been uploading on a regular basis for a minimum of two years
- 3) For regularity, it must include a minimum of TWO uploads a week
- 4) Creators MUST have a minimum of 1000 subscribers
- 5) Creators MUST have under 500,000 subscribers
- 6) Creators MUST be aged between 21 and 30
- 7) As close to a 50/50 gender split as possible

What were not strict requirements:

- 1) Nationalities
- 2) Work or Study level

Once these requirements were put in place a number of posts were made to a series of YouTube forums and social media groups. The post was as follows:

NEEDED: A number of participants who meet these requirements (posted below) for a MSc thesis study on YouTube to help answer the question:

How Have The New YouTube Advertising Friendly Guidelines  
Shaping Creator Participation and User Engagement?

Interviews can take place at a time and place convenient to you.

From these posts 10 interview participants were found from which eight interviews were conducted

## **Audience Research**

The requirements for interview participants to represent YouTube audiences was a lot less restrictive. As such it was felt that the method of Snowball Sampling would be the most effective. This was because, no two audience members are alike, and so having one participant recommend a

second would ensure that, though they may have similar tastes, there would almost certainly be a number of differences in their preferred viewing genre. It was important to get as wide a mix of genre tastes as possible from the audience perspective, so as to gain a number of different views on how, if at all, the YouTube landscape had changed over the past two years. One requirement was that they at least included vlogs and/or gaming in their viewing habits.

To ensure that the participants selected fell into the category of active, rather than passive, audience it was important that they at least met the following:

- 1) MUST have been watching YouTube regularly for a minimum of TWO years
- 2) MUST engage with the platform on a regular basis through commenting on or sharing YouTube videos at least TWICE a week.
- 3) MUST be as close to a 50/50 gender split as possible

There were no requirements on age, education or work level or nationalities.

As with steps taken to recruit content creators the same post (only with the audience participant requirements) was made to one YouTube related forum. This drew in a number of willing participants, who each in turn recommend a friend to take part. As such 10 interviews were conducted.

### **Appendix Three: Consent Form**

Before each interview, the participants were asked to sign this consent form:



**LUND**  
UNIVERSITY

By signing below, I accept that I am taking part in a recorded interview for the purposes of a thesis project being undertaken for the MSc Media and Communication Thesis Module 2018 at Lund University. Specifically relating to the research project:

YouTube and the Adpocalypse:  
How Have The New YouTube Advertising Friendly Guidelines  
Shaped Creator Participation and Audience Engagement?

It has been made aware to me that I have the right to remain anonymous, that I can stop the interview and request the recording is deleted at any time, and that I am under no obligation to answer any question/s I don't feel comfortable with.

I wish to remain anonymous \_\_\_\_\_

I, \_\_\_\_\_, accept the above and wish to take part in the interview

## **Appendix Four: Interview Guide**

### **Creators:**

### **Context Questions:**

How long have you been actively involved in YouTube?

What type of content do you upload? (e.g. Gaming, Vlogs, Reactions etc)

What type of content do you watch most?

How often do you upload?

### **Main Questions:**

What is the most common type of content you see being promoted or uploaded to YouTube?

What is your understanding of the current advertising guidelines?

In what way, if at all, have they impacted you?

Have you noticed any shift or change in the overall YouTube landscape over the last 18 months?

How do you predict the landscape will, if at all, change further?

Do you feel any level of pressure as a content creator?

Do you actively engage, on any level, with the audience of YouTube?

Do you use other social media sites for this?

### **Audience:**

#### **Context Questions:**

How long have you been actively watching YouTube?

How often do you watch it compared to Netflix, or regular TV?

What type of content do you watch most?

How often do you 'Like/Dislike, share or comment on videos?

#### **Main Questions:**

What is the most common type of content you see being promoted or uploaded to YouTube?

What is your understanding of the current advertising guidelines?

In what way, if at all, have they impacted your viewing habits?



Have you noticed any shift or change in the overall YouTube landscape over the last 18 months?

How do you predict the landscape will, if at all, change further?

Do you feel any level of pressure as an audience member?

Do you actively engage, on any level, with the creators on YouTube?

Do you use other social media sites for this?

## **Appendix Five: Transcription**

### **Context Questions:**

How long have you been actively involved in YouTube?

A: Erm, about 2 years I think?

What type of content do you upload? (e.g. Gaming, Vlogs, Reactions etc)

A: I do a travel channel, so I would probably put that under vlogs.

What type of content do you watch most?

A: I watch a lot of gaming stuff, and a lot of Swedish comedy stuff too

How often do you upload?

A: It depends on how often I have stuff to upload. If I'm away travelling then I tend to upload more, but at times like this, when I'm working to save for the next trip I tend to not upload as much, but maybe two times a week, one of local travel and one of me doing whatever.

### **Main Questions:**

What is the most common type of content you see being promoted or uploaded to YouTube?

A: I would say vlogs, definitely. I see a lot of Swedish one, ones that are all in Swedish, so I don't know if that is something we Swedes do, or if it is the same everywhere. Not in Swedish obviously haha.

What is your understanding of the current advertising guidelines?

A: What are they? Haha. I have no idea, I'm sorry. I watch a few Youtubers who said they were losing money over it, but I knew it didn't affect me, so it wasn't really something I looked into.

In what way, if at all, have they impacted you?

A: Erm, haha. Like I said, I don't think they have. I'm sure I would know if I was breaking them in anyway, but I don't think my stuff is the kind to get into any trouble

Have you noticed any shift or change in the overall YouTube landscape over the last 18 months?

A: Yes, actually. I see a lot less gaming stuff being promoted, compared to how it used to be. I tend now to have to find new YouTubers through videos of ones I already watch. Some of the big ones like PewDiePie and Vanoss still show up sometimes, but I can't remember the last time I found a new, smaller gaming YouTuber because YouTube promoted them. I think the sort of stuff that gets promoted now and going to be compilations, I see a lot of them, I think because they're not stuck to one type of thing, I see them for scares pranks, for fails, for all sorts, so they can appeal to a lot more people. Also, they just seem to be videos for other videos, you know what I mean? Like they just take other videos, edit them together and upload. I'm actually surprised YouTube allows it, there must be something about copyright involved?

How do you predict the landscape will, if at all, change further?

A: I would hope it would go back to how it was actually. I don't like a lot of what I see being promoted, and thing YouTube needs to go back to helping YouTubers, rather than individual content. I think a lot of, like me, smaller creators must be struggling to get noticed because it can be hard to do this sort of thing alone and put out a lot of videos.

Do you feel any level of pressure as a content creator?

A: Erm, good question. I don't think so, but then what I do isn't really ever going to appeal to a lot of people. It's quite a niche thing that I do, and so only a certain type of person will want to watch it. I guess I feel a little pressure to make sure they are happy with what I do, it's not something I ever really focus on too much, otherwise it would stop being fun, and I don't want to do a travel vlog where I'm not having fun, who would ever watch that? Haha. To me it is most important that I enjoy doing it. I started doing this for me more than anyone else, and I like to think that is still the same now. People enjoy what I do, and that makes me really happy, that people see it and feel happy or inspired to do something for themselves too, but if nobody was watching I would still keep doing it.

Do you actively engage, on any level, with the audience of YouTube?

A: Yeah, I really like that. I think the sort of stuff I make really opens up for engagement with people. If someone comments on a video with a question about the place I'm in I love answering it and starting a conversation with them. Or helping to promote a place so people will go themselves. When I'm not doing a travel vlog abroad I do them here in Sweden which I really love, so this Saturday I'm going hiking and I'm going to do a vlog about that and look to promote Sweden more haha. But I like talking to people, very un-Swedish I know haha, but what's the point on being in YouTube if you're not going to talk to anyone.

Do you use other social media sites for this?

A: Erm, Twitter sometimes, but I prefer to keep it all separate, so I do it all though YouTube comments, or actually, sometimes I will do a Q and A video, so I will have people send me Tweets with a certain hashtag, and then do a video or two with all their questions. That is so much easier, a lot of them want to know the same things, so it's easier that way, so it's like a one sided conversation haha, but it allows me to keep YouTube separate so I can still enjoy it

## **Appendix Six: Sample of Coding Process**

This sample comes from the transcript of Creator Interview One. For the benefit of space, it is not the full transcript.

What is your understanding of the current advertising guidelines?

A: I know they changed them recently, and I think they are pretty restrictive compared to what they used to be like. Certain forms of content are now impossible to monetize, and so a lot of YouTubers need to be flexible in what they make and how often they make it. If you don't upload regularly, like a couple times a week you could see yourself getting left behind. Erm, I can't remember how it used to be, but now I know you need a certain number of subscribers on your channel and to be hitting a certain number of views a week or month, and so that has made certain YouTubers, in my opinion anyway, slack a bit in their content. They would rather put out something sub-par a few times a week, than put something great out once a week, you know? And I think YouTube is massively to blame for that. People just go where the money is.

### Coding:

“I know they changed them recently”. Signs of knowledge to the surroundings

“Certain forms of content are impossible to monetize” Awareness to financial situation/political economy

“If you don't upload regularly, like a couple times a week you could see yourself getting left behind.” Pressure to upload. Barrier to participation.

“hitting a certain number of views a week or month” Pressure to upload. Barrier to participation

“certain YouTubers, in my opinion anyway, slack a bit in their content.” Speaks of conflict.

“They would rather put out something sub-par a few times a week, than put something great out once a week” Awareness of requirements for revenue