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Advertising as governance: The digital commodity audience and platform advertising dependency

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Abstract

This article draws from an ethnographic investigation of YouTube to argue the significant and specific role of advertising in the governance of platformised cultural production. We pursue this investigation in a critical dialog with theoretical approaches drawn from platform governance, platformisation and political economy communications, foregrounding the concept of the *audience commodity*. In our analysis of official and unofficial YouTube content, the role and desires of advertisers were discussed in depth. Community commentary videos publicly argued that YouTube cared about advertisers more than a content creating community; marketing-orientated entrepreneurial growth content advised creators to pursue a ‘buying audience’; and YouTube’s official communications painstakingly reminded creators to ‘put themselves in advertisers’ shoes’. Each of these perspectives contributes an understanding of the ways advertising structurally shapes the governance of cultural production in practice.

Keywords

advertising, platform governance, platform studies, political economy of communication, YouTube

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YouTube's 2007 creation of the YouTube Partner Programme (YPP) aligned online video production directly with advertiser interests. The YPP pays eligible creators 55% of advertising revenue generated by their videos, making it one of the most generous forms of monetisation in platformised cultural production. Now, YouTube's competitors such as Snapchat (2023), Twitch (2023) and TikTok (2022) have followed suit with their own revenue sharing schemes, each offering a clear example of the role of the social media platform as a 'multi-sided market' managing relationships with different 'complementors' (Poell et al., 2022). On one side, marketing and advertising teams are provided with a portal that allows them to bid on, and purchase, ad spots across creators' videos and channels. On the other side, platforms verify creators, assess the content's 'suitability' for advertising and pay creators. Revenue sharing schemes thus exact a form of governance which is shaped by the motivations of advertisers and mediated by social media platforms.

This paper complements a growing body of platform governance literature (Gorwa, 2019a, 2019b) studying the way users are *governed by* platforms (Caplan and Gillespie, 2020; Cunningham and Craig, 2019). We augment this work with scholarship on the political economy of communication, which analyses the ways that 'media companies, audiences and advertisers' are linked in a 'set of reciprocal relationships' (Mosco, 2009: 137). We are inspired by the tradition of thought shared by scholars of political economy of communication (Meehan, 2006; Mosco, 2009; Smythe, 1977). These historical studies of media companies show that the commercial logics of platforms are reactive to their main function as 'hunter-gatherers' of an audience that is to be sold to advertisers (Meehan, 2006: 313). We argue the pursuit of audiences by advertisers shapes the platform culture and governance decisions for 'platformised' cultural production (Helmond, 2015; Nieborg and Poell, 2018). Our empirical research compares the ways that monetisation is framed across YouTube by professional content creators and the platform itself. Our research shows how long-standing perspectives from media studies on the relationship between advertising and media can contribute to emerging theoretical debates on platformised governance and cultural production, with wide-ranging implications about advertiser-dependent social media platforms.

We have chosen the YPP for three reasons. Firstly, it is a foundational monetisation model that, (as discussed above), is now being replicated across the platform economy. Secondly, the YPP is one of the clearest *ways in* to functionally understand how a social media platform mediates between creators and the advertisers who fund the platform economy. In Q2 2023, Alphabet reported \$7.67 billion in revenue from YouTube – all from advertising. Partners are paid according to a 'CPM' or cost per 1000 views, which fluctuates based on revenue from advertisers. The YPP thus offers creators an explicit and visible monetary valuation of creator audiences based on advertiser demand. Lastly, we have chosen the YPP as it offers a central discursive function for content creators, platforms and advertisers. Fluctuations in YPP revenue makes visible the motivations, priorities and demands of a proprietary platform which would otherwise be inscrutable or black boxed.

This article opens by overviewing how literature on YouTube monetisation, platform governance, and political economy can contribute to the study of platformised advertising dependance and governance. We build our contribution by showing how

advertising is a key and under-studied form of governance in the platform economy of platformisation. To explore the material implications of advertising as governance further, the second half of this paper turns to our case study. We outline our methodology, an ethnographically-informed content analysis of YouTube videos that discuss the YPP. Three genres of channels ‘emerged’ as central to our research questions during our data collection. Firstly the *community commentariat* represents a successful class of professional YouTubers across political stripes producing entertainment videos about YouTube culture and news from a creator standpoint. Secondly, *entrepreneurial growth content* offers instructional content aimed at aspiring creators about growing an audience and monetising through the YPP. Lastly, we consider ‘official’ YouTube aligned content, primarily involving two channels: Creator Insider, a channel produced by YouTube employees designed to ‘open up’ how YouTube makes decisions, and YouTube Creators, the official YouTube Creator channel. We ask three questions of our video corpus:

1. How do videos characterise YouTube as a platform and content creators’ relationship to YouTube?
2. How do videos discuss the motivations of advertisers?
3. How do videos present the relationship between the platform partner programme and audience value?

Animated by these questions our data analysis focusses on two primary elements; YouTube’s characterisations of advertiser motivations, and the ways advertiser motivations are perceived by creators.

The YouTube partner programme

The YouTube partner programme (YPP) was established in 2007 as part of a suite of professionalisation efforts intended to appease advertiser concerns about amateur video quality, sophomoric video themes, and to prevent copyright violations. Scholarship has shown how the YPP incentivises creators producing commercially viable content, and pushes others towards working with the themes and behaviour that meet the requirements of advertisers. For example, Lobato (2016) suggests the YPP was designed to reward ‘popular channels that align with specific consumer ‘verticals’ with a ‘clear link to consumer markets’ (Lobato, 2016: 357–358). Andrejevic (2009) argues the early YPP was intended to bolster attractiveness to commercial partners by ‘ceding the type of control over content to which advertisers have grown accustomed’ (p. 413). For Burgess and Green (2018) the YPP is an endeavour in using ‘selective monetisation’ to ‘manage’ the community and institute more social norms that are palatable to the public and the advertisers’ (Burgess and Green, 2018: 111).

The YPP initially required personal invitation. After being opened up, entry conditions for YouTube ‘partnership’ have been tightened iteratively over the last 15 years. In 2023, eligibility requires 1000 subscribers and 4000 hours of channel watch time (or 10 million views on YouTube ‘Shorts’). Creators must also adhere to comprehensive behavioural requirements (Caplan and Gillespie, 2020) and Advertiser Friendly Community Guidelines, which critics have suggested are ‘vague and broadly definable’

(Bucher, 2018: 8). Creators must also avoid YouTube moderation policies and practices such as user-reported ‘community strikes’ against their channel. This policy exacts undue harm to ‘marginalised creator communities’, who are vulnerable to malicious flagging (Duffy and Meisner, 2023). YouTube can levy penalties for policy violations such as withholding payment, offsetting payment against future earnings, limit advertising revenue, permanently disabling monetisation, or closing an individual’s YouTube account.

The fraught relationship between advertisers, YouTube and its community came to a head in 2017 when 250 advertisers, including Coca Cola and Amazon, exited the platform after finding their ads recommended alongside extremist content (Alexander, 2019). YouTube reassured advertisers by aggressively demonetising creator content using sweeping automated systems – causing a widespread depression in creator revenue termed by creators as the Adpocolypse (Caplan and Gillespie, 2020; Cunningham and Craig, 2019; Glatt, 2022). YouTube (2018) claimed their actions were intended to ‘prevent bad actors from harming the inspiring and original creators around the world who make their living on YouTube’. A second Adpocalypse occurred in 2019, as advertisers again exited the platform following reports of YouTube’s algorithmic facilitation of paedophile comment rings. Again, creators experienced the brunt of sudden and widespread demonetisation. As tech journalist Julia Alexander wrote after the second Apocalypse the ‘company is shifting toward more commercial, advertiser-friendly content at a speed its creator community hasn’t seen before’ leaving creators with a ‘distrust of the platform and “questions about their own self worth”’ (Alexander, 2019). Unsurprisingly many creators have described their experiences of the YPP as challenging and inconsistent. Even with the ‘generous’ 55% cut of revenue, YouTube maintains a unique position of power over creators, able to determine the shape of the terms and conditions of their business model at any time. Platform governance perspectives, combined with a political economic approach can help us understand why.

Platform governance perspectives

Platform governance literature broadly falls into two areas. Firstly, works study the governance of platforms by policymakers (Flew et al., 2019; Helberger et al., 2018), examining how stakeholders strive to regulate social media companies in areas such as ‘privacy, free expression, safety and other important democratic values’ (Gorwa, 2019a: 15). Secondly, literature has focussed on governance by or ‘through platforms’ – documenting ‘the myriad ways platforms govern their users’ either through usage policies and terms of service, and ‘content moderation and management’ (Caplan, 2023: 3454). This scholarship examines the challenges of undertaking content moderation at scale (eg. Gillespie, 2018; Zeng & Kaye, 2022), and the harms engendered to marginalised users, particularly based on gender, sexuality, and/or race (eg. Duffy and Meisner, 2023; Tiidenberg, 2021).

We are particularly concerned with the latter area of governance scholarship: how platform governance is shaped by platforms’ external relationships (van der Vlist and Helmond, 2021) and internal organisational politics, algorithmic visibility, affordances and design (Gorwa, 2019b). In this sense, we recognise that ‘platforms are fundamentally political actors that make important political decisions while engineering what has

become the global infrastructure of free expression' (Gorwa, 2019b: 4). While work highlighting the moderation of free expression on platforms remain vitally important, we wish to expand on it in two ways. Firstly, we draw attention to the role of advertisers as key stakeholders within 'networked governance', contributing to platform policy and practices (Caplan, 2023). Secondly, we argue that by tracing the (perceived) governance preferences of advertisers, scholars can study the impact of governance on cultural producers. We are inspired by the work of Caplan and Gillespie (2020: 6), who frame the YPP as a form of 'tiered governance' enacting 'different standards in different ways' for different creators. Caplan and Gillespie show how creators with top-tier classification are afforded resources, support and access to proprietary information. On the other hand, small YouTubers experience loss of visibility and revenue, or are even ejected from the programme, with little support, explanation or recourse (Glatt, 2022). We seek to augment this valuable work by examining why certain creators are prioritised by platforms within the growing creator economy.

Political economy of communication

Platform governance scholars have attended to the role of platform companies *as companies*: for example, by drawing comparisons with lobbying efforts by oil multinationals (Gorwa, 2019b). In a review of platform governance literature, Gorwa shows that the root interests of platforms are not inscrutable: they are driven by profit and take appropriate political measures to secure it. We agree with this assessment, but emphasise the important historical context published within the existing body of research on the *political economy of communication* which has set a precedent for examining companies approximate to platforms (namely – media companies) that structure the mediation of information while dependent on advertising revenue.

The core project of the political economy of communication is to 'uncover connections between ownership, corporate structure, finance capital, and market structures to show how economics affects technologies, politics, cultures, and information' (Meehan et al., 1993: 105). One of the field's key figures, Smythe (1977), argued that in the context of ad-funded media and communications, the commodity that advertisers are paying for is the 'services of audiences' (p. 3). Moreover, audiences must be amenable to these messages 'with predictable specifications who will pay attention in predictable numbers and at particular times to particular means of communication' and who will be interested in buying what is advertised (Smythe, 1977: 4). For Smythe, media programming is simply a 'free lunch', designed to attract audiences and keep them in a mood amenable to receiving advertising messages. They then buy the products marketed to them, completing the circuit of capital accumulation and ensuring social reproduction.

Within platform and media studies, Smythe's work has stoked an argument about whether social media users represent an alienated and exploited class of workers, what Fuchs (2020: 706) calls the 'Internet prosumer commodity'. A debate about whether the classification of watching, posting and clicking on 'memes' as labour is ongoing (Rigi & Prey, 2015; Srnicek, 2021). While we wish those critics the best, we wish to side-step this argument, to redirect attention towards another highly original and important contribution at the heart of Smythe's work: the examination of the role of audiences, and how

they are constructed and sold to advertisers as a commodity that helps realise sales, rather than as a labour force. As Mosco (2009: 137) helpfully summarises, we are interested in the ways that ‘the process of commodification thoroughly integrates the media industries into the total capitalist economy not primarily by creating ideologically saturated products but by producing audiences *en masse* and in specifically demographically desirable forms, for advertisers’. In this sense, audiences are categorised, valued and pursued based on advertiser specified desirability.

We are especially inspired by the qualification of Smythe’s work by feminist political economist Meehan (2002, 2006). Firstly, Meehan (2006: 315) shows how audiences do not exist in the abstract: television watchers are measured, constructed and represented by ratings companies, which are subjectively moulded and shaped based on ‘corporate rivalries, alliances, and manipulations’. Meehan’s second key contribution is the most central to our argument; that not all audiences are valued equally by advertisers, and therefore by media companies. She argues that ‘because of their perceived income and purchasing power’ ‘the white male commodity audience had a “higher quality” for which advertisers willingly paid’ (Meehan, 2002: 216). The pursuit of this lucrative ‘bona-fide’ audience (structured by the relationship between patriarchy and capital) ultimately ‘shaped decisions about contracts for new series and employment, about casting and plots, about routine and innovative representations’ within television (Meehan, 2002: 215). Media industries perspectives grounded in political economy also show how content producers walk a precarious tightrope between attracting the audiences that advertisers care about while attempting to avoid alienating a core audience (Hamilton, 2004; Lotz, 2004). In this vein, key decisions about the culture, information and messages are based on audience valuation.

The political economy of communication continues to inspire research on the intersection of advertising and platforms. For example, McGuigan’s (2023: 7) work takes a political economic perspective to make sense of the US marketing industry’s long pursuit of perfect information and how this ‘contributed decisively to ongoing schemes for monitoring and managing individuals, populations, marketplaces, and more’. While recent critiques have been levied towards digital marketing’s capabilities for surveillance or datafication, such capabilities are *not new*. They have been ‘constructed over half a century and attached repeatedly to new information technologies’ (McGuigan’s, 2023: 214). In this regard, what constitutes the ‘truth’ of the audience has long been contested, based on competing discourses of what *empirically* constitutes the audience that is sold (Ang, 1991). While the commercial audience thus remains ‘unknowable’, the pursuit and sale of this audience results in value capture. To understand this phenomenon in the case of the YPP, we have approached this research project by focussing on available representations of the value of this audience by creators, marketing ‘experts’ and YouTube itself.

Political economy has also been at the forefront of scholarship that has foregrounded the concept of platform power. Helmond’s (2015) concept of platformisation analysed how platforms *extended* themselves, modularly, into the web. Through the concept of the ‘advertising economy’, van der Vlist and Helmond (2021) argue that ‘platform power is not just held by a single platform but is in part mediated by partners and dispersed within the platform ecosystem, where governance and control are exercised

through infrastructure and partnership agreements’ (van der Vlist and Helmond, 2021: 13). In this sense, power becomes meaningfully mediated and distributed through YouTube’s partnerships with both advertisers and creators enmeshed within this complex sociotechnical system. Nieborg and Poell (2018) discussed how this process has led to platforms leveraging network effects and global reach to accumulate power, shaping cultural production in distinct ways via their *scale* and *velocity*, making producers platform dependent. All of this is done in line ‘with their capitalist business logics’ (Poell et al., 2021: 92).

Political economy reveals that advertising’s role in the platformised ecosystem affects whole swaths of platform design and governance (Crain, 2021; McGuigan, 2023). By bringing this insight into dialog with existing platform governance literature we can move beyond governance questions that have (so far) focussed on content moderation and product management. Instead, we focus on the structural conditions that give rise to the unequal distribution of power in platformised cultural production: the *extraction* and *capture* of value from both creators and consumers.

Method

To investigate the impact of advertising on platformised creative work we conducted a qualitative analysis of YouTube videos about monetisation and the YouTube Partner Programme. We draw inspiration from Corrigan’s (2018: 2752) techniques for navigating the ‘vexing methodological hurdles’ faced by political economy researchers – namely, an inability to access informants with privileged commercial knowledge. Corrigan (2018) advocates two strategies – firstly ‘burrowing down’ into the available data produced by media companies as a ‘paper trail’ of bureaucracy and fine print – including published documents, annual reports, user guides and trade press (p. 2757). Secondly, Corrigan (2018) advocates for ‘listening in’ to these documents as ‘conversations’ about ‘business practices and industry conditions’ (p. 2757). Inspired by this approach we have sourced content by elite creators on YouTube, by marketing specialists who share pedagogical approximations and assumptions about YouTube and lastly YouTube’s corporate channels, representing hours of ‘official’ content produced by the platform. Each of these sources present their own valuable ‘highly specialised industry and policy coverage’ and facilitate ‘insider discussion’ from their own expert standpoint (Corrigan, 2018: 2765). Together, we argue these perspectives present a valuable and expansive picture about the impact of advertising within YouTube’s creator culture.

To identify and collect our corpus we used a two-pronged approach. Firstly, we were guided by the ‘walkthrough method’, engaging with YouTube by ‘[assuming] a user’s position while applying an analytical eye’ on several desktop and laptop computers (Light et al., 2018: 891). This meant watching relevant videos posted by a number of top-tier channels identified in our wider ethnographic work on the influencer economy (Bishop, 2018) for example starting with posts by Hank Green, Phillip DeFranco and the YouTube Creator Studio. We were then able to ‘follow’ videos recommended to us which were about the YouTube Partner Programme, demonetisation or advertiser safety. Videos were suggested on our homepages, through playlists, creator-recommended videos within a video or video descriptions. Secondly, we identified relevant videos on this topic

using ‘search strings’ based on words associated with our research questions – examples include ‘YouTube Partner Programme’, ‘advertiser friendly content’, ‘monetisation’ and ‘adpocalypse’.

In total we collected 32 relevant videos published across 12 YouTube channels between the years of 2017 and 2023. Videos ranged in duration from 5 minutes to around 70 minutes. Videos had between 7800 and 4.7 million views. We assigned videos into one of three categories: community commentariat ($n=10$), entrepreneurial growth content ($n=7$) or YouTube aligned content ($n=16$). We then engaged in qualitative analysis animated by our research questions. Through our analysis we developed key concepts which ‘gave explanatory power’ to the complex accounts that emerged throughout the videos (Gray, 2002: 135). These concepts worked as important themes, through which we orientated our analysis. Examples of these themes include ‘audience value’, ‘value proposition’ or ‘brand comfort’.

Our methodology has a number of limitations. Firstly, videos were likely served to us based on our location (the UK) and only searched for, and collected, in English. Secondly, we chose to ‘follow’ the YouTube algorithm, which has been found to show a highly limited range of videos skewed towards white, male, Western creators (Bishop, 2018; Noble, 2018). In this sense our corpus skews towards hegemonic, or dominant, discourse on YouTube. Therefore, while we recognise that this project only captures a small snapshot of videos related to these topics on YouTube, we believe these videos do have an outsized influence on the culture of the platform and beyond.

The community commentariat

We define the *community commentariat* as a small number of ‘top tier’ (Caplan and Gillespie, 2020) creators who regularly publish entertainment videos about YouTube culture. This genre is lucrative but niche: 6 out of 10 videos are published by Hank Green. We argue it is important to recognise the significance of Green within this genre (and our analysis), as he is a dominant voice in this space, with videos frequently surpassing 1 million views.

Community commentariat videos consistently shared a positive, or even grateful, sentiment towards YouTube, while evidencing a clear awareness of the structural inequality inherent in this relationship. For example, prominent YouTuber Casey Neistat stressed the importance of YouTube in creating community and allowing creators to build their own audiences; ‘I’m a huge fan of YouTube. . . I owe so much of my career to YouTube, I travel the world evangelising YouTube, I want this platform to succeed’ (CaseyNeistat, 2017). Hank Green also emphasised that YouTube allowed him to start his business, in addition to the larger significance of the YPP as a monetisation strategy. Green described the YPP as ‘the one decision in the history of online media that has changed things more than anything else. . . it remains an extremely impactful thing, it is an extremely large amount of money’ (Hankschannel, 2022).

Yet, despite these positive feelings, the community commentariat unfavourably compared their position in the YouTube ecology to that of advertisers. Casey Neistat (2017) said, ‘from the community’s perspective it’s that advertisers are a bigger priority to this platform than the community’. A video by Green entitled ‘35 minutes on YouTube

demonetisation’ echoed this sentiment (Hankschannel, 2017). The video engages in a longer form breakdown of the platform’s funding model with a strong focus on the unequal relationship that creators have with YouTube. He said [YouTube] ‘is a bridge between creators who want to make stuff and advertisers who want to make money. . . [YouTube] has to keep both of these groups happy but maybe isn’t so worried about creators because, where are they gonna go?’ (Hankschannel, 2017). In describing the history of YouTube monetisation, Green says advertisers set the agenda, and creators are forced to accept their terms. Green also reflects on how this shapes inequalities on YouTube: he gives an example that creators get a higher revenue split if they net higher value audiences in English-speaking countries.

Instead of *audience* value, community commentary videos focussed on the value of YouTube ‘community’. As we will see, this is in stark contrast to both entrepreneurial growth content and YouTube aligned content, the former of which focusses very transparently on the monetary value attached to specific audience niches and the latter on audiences. For community videos community value is entirely distinct from advertising revenue. In this sense creators reaffirm their own power and contribution arguing that it is creators on YouTube that provide the special sauce that allows the platform to monetise (Cunningham and Craig, 2018). In a video on the ‘vlogbrothers’ channel Hank Green describes YouTube as ‘an amazing ecosystem of people doing cool things’ and forewarning that ‘YouTube and advertisers are going to need to be careful because eventually, they’re gonna need our [audiences’] eyeballs more than we need their pennies’ (Vlogbrothers, 2017).

Community videos tended to discuss the motivations of advertisers as self-evident: as powerful, competitive organisations advertisers are simply protecting their own business. For example, Pewdiepie (gaming YouTuber Felix Kjellberg) argued that corporate competition between media companies and YouTube was a key factor in the Adpocalypse (PewDiePie, 2018). For Kjelberg, brands such as Pepsi did not pull out of advertising on YouTube because they are ‘moral beings’ but rather because they sought to negotiate advertising rates with Google (PewDiePie, 2018). He implied that Verizon, which had also pulled advertising during the apocalypse, were also interested in undermining YouTube’s business because they owned Yahoo! and wanted to absorb YouTube’s lapsed advertisers. Similarly, Hank Green presented advertisers as prioritising control: ‘advertisers control what content exists. . . advertisers care what state of mind you’re in when you see their advertisement. . . they want you to be happy, they want you to be sort of docile’ (Hankschannel, 2017).

Entrepreneurial growth content

Entrepreneurial growth creators build YouTube channels focussed on how to launch, monetise and gain visibility on YouTube. Videos in our sample took audiences through platforms’ requirements in step-by-step tutorials on how to achieve the YPP minimum follower count and watch-time, fill out tax information and link AdSense to a bank account. Hours and hours of growth content painstakingly guides viewers through YouTube bureaucracy, despite having no official relationship with YouTube. In a typical video YouTuber Roberto Blake (2023) advised ‘new monetisation rules for 2023’

by letting viewers know the contracts that they need to sign with YouTube alongside relevant dates. Although many of these videos recommend creators avoid reliance on the YPP (promoting ‘income diversification’), they positioned YouTube success as achievable and meritocratic. Creator Erin on Demand (2019) opened one video by sarcastically quoting her naysayers ‘you always hear people saying, oh don’t start YouTube for the pay. . . if you’re doing it for money you’re doing it for the wrong reasons’. Dismissing these concerns she said; ‘OK sis I still want my coin’.

Throughout our platform walkthrough we did not identify any entrepreneurial growth videos that critically engaged in a reflection on the role that advertisers play in the YouTube community. Rather, creators reflected on the value that the creator community could bring to advertisers, suggesting that YouTube creators’ content should be good enough to ‘have more ads in a video justifiably’ (Blake, 2022a). In other words – entrepreneurial growth content suggests that to be monetised, content must be *good enough* for audiences to watch but also needs to be good enough for audiences to view advertisements placed upon it. Here we see a dialectic develop: YouTube’s ad-friendly guidelines give general information about what content can be monetised. Entrepreneurial growth content then communicates this with more granular speculation augmented by personal experience.

Creators follow YouTube by representing audience value through the acronym ‘CPM’, a shorthand originated by the advertising industry meaning ‘cost per one thousand views’. CPM is important as it is a unique symbol of the relationship between YouTube and advertising: it is a variable cost representing advertisers’ valuation of a given audience, translated by YouTube. In this sense, certain niches are discussed as having ‘higher CPMs’ both explicitly and implicitly driving viewers to create content in these directions; higher CPMs mean a valuable commodity audience. Growth content recommended that creators develop expertise in targeting niches with high CPMs. In one video Roberto Blake (2022b) summarises; ‘not all views on YouTube are valued equally and paid equally’; following up, he advises that – ‘there’s either a buying audience or a broke audience’. Erin on Demand (2022) recommends that creators address a ‘refined audience’, or people who ‘have money’ and are ‘probably looking to buy something’.

Hierarchies of audience value were often explicitly tied to inequalities related to race, gender and location. Erin on Demand (2019) cites male-coded genres such as ‘entrepreneurial’ content or ‘tech gadgets’ as high value, citing ‘female’ gendered-niches ‘lifestyle, travel and beauty’ as having lower CPMs. In reflecting on the value of different countries and languages Roberto Blake (2022b) suggests advertisers want audiences in locations that they want to sell in; ‘most of the profitable advertising is done in English-speaking countries. . . what we would call ‘first world countries’’. These creators discuss this without judgement or opinion, rather, they frame this as simply providing information and advice to their audiences.

YouTube aligned content

We collected YouTube aligned content from two officially recognised YouTube channels. Firstly, the YouTube Creators page, which provides updates and instructs viewers on how to interact with the platform. Secondly, we collected content from the Creator

Insider YouTube channel. Although Creator Insider is ‘official’, it is tonally more relaxed. It features YouTube team members giving news updates or answering creator questions: videos are designed to update and reassure. Both YouTube Aligned channels primarily articulate YouTube policy related to two categories of content governance. Videos talk creators through community guidelines, which set the bar for all allowable content on the platform, and then give detail on YPP requirements and monetisable content.

YouTube aligned content impels creators to understand the logic behind what content is suitable for monetisation in macro and micro detail. In the macro sense, videos frame advertisers and brands as generally highly sensitive to the content that their ads are associated with. In one Creator Insider (2022) video, Louis from the ad policy team says ‘for advertisers, it’s important that their advertisements only show on content suitable for the brand’. Advertisers are discussed as motivated by a desire to pursue the largest audience possible and avoid any controversy. For example, another Creator Insider (2019) video includes the sentiment ‘most advertisers tend to choose the cleanest and safest content out there’. Here advertisers are framed as conservative and seeking ‘brand comfort’ and to ‘feel safe’ (Creator Insider, 2021). Brand safety is framed as a *general sensibility* to understand and maintain awareness of.

Videos also delved into micro-requirements that were dictated by advertisers. In one video titled ‘Profanity Update’ a member of the ad policy team painstakingly walks the audience through the difference between YouTube’s assessment of ‘strong profanity’ (fuck) and ‘moderate profanity’ (douchebag or bitch) (Creator Insider, 2023). In another video, a member of the ad policy team discusses which kinds of sex education videos are eligible for monetisation. He describes what is allowable from an advertisers’ perspective; ‘it’s when you go into more graphic detail. . . sexual experiences, sexual positions, that’s when we get feedback from advertisers that they don’t want to run ads on that type of content’ (Creator Insider, 2018). Creator Insider regularly emphasised the resources available, implying a responsibility—in addition to a time and labour requirement—for creators to keep up with YouTube policy changes. While they are speaking from an ‘insider’ place of expertise, the ad policy team often struggle to unpack the ‘grey areas’ related to monetisation. In one video a member of the policy team stumbles when answering a question about whether the use of ‘f***’ (instead of ‘fuck’) is monetisable in a video title. Here they demure and (contrary to the detailed answer of other questions) avoid direct advice stating ‘there is no specific formula’ (Creator Insider, 2018). Instead of a workplace directive that leaves lots of wiggle room for performance management that shapes everyday labour conditions, what this illustrates is a structural relationship to the mercurial world of ‘optimisation’ that stems from platform dependency (Poell et al., 2022). The issue of old videos getting retroactively demonetised also reflects the perpetual contingency of the platformised audience commodity: where old content once was appropriate and qualified, later policy changes will affect the bottom line of creator ad revenue cuts.

YouTube aligned videos presented the YPP as requiring creators to put themselves in ‘advertisers shoes’ (Creator Insider, 2018). Governance choices about what constitutes monetisable content were there to keep advertisers happy and safe. An interesting instantiation of this was the introduction of creator ‘self-assessment’ of advertiser friendly content. If creators consistently self-assess their ‘brand safety’ level correctly – in line

with YouTube's automatic algorithmic content analysis – they are rewarded by swifter reviews and lighter automated moderation (YouTube Creators, 2022a, 2022b). Here we see how advertisers' search for a safe, buying audience shapes platform policy, algorithmic assessment, and corporate communications with creators. Lastly, it is notable that there was little to no discussion of the value of CPMs or the implicit value for advertisers to reach certain *audiences*. While the popularity of entrepreneurial growth content implies that creators are interested in these details, YouTube's content oriented communications encourage the creation of content that can be monetised, but the specific economic value of those audiences (and their interests) is left for creators to figure out for themselves.

Discussion

In this discussion section we will consider advertising's governance role in the political economy of content production on YouTube for each of our studied genres. Our analysis found that community videos critically discussed the role of advertisers as antithetical or disruptive to the YouTube community. They accepted the necessity of advertising, but suggested that the independence and freedom of YouTubers makes up the core value of the platform; an essential source of value for YouTube. They functioned as self-styled spokespeople for the value of this creative community. For example, Hank Green frequently stated that YouTube *needs* creators uploading on YouTube to maintain the relevance of their product. Indeed, this speaks to wider-held mythologies about the content creation economy as uniquely authentic and noncommercial (Cunningham and Craig, 2018). It also speaks to the ongoing confirmation of Smythe's (1977) larger theoretical concern around commodification as a *contradictory* process. People resist the commodification of both their time and their consciousness.

The community commentariat offered a particularly sharp critique of YouTube when they felt that advertisers were being overvalued. Community videos cited a responsibility to speak out on emerging creators; Phlip DeFranco stated the following – 'while it does suck for me. . . who it really trashes is the small creator' (DeFranco, 2017). Community videos critiqued YouTube as a non-neutral stakeholder who was *beholden* to advertisers. Creators published these critiques in significant volume. We collected seven videos published by Hank Green on this topic, who also published a Substack newsletter on content creation called 'pay attention'. Videos published by community commentariat like Hank Green, Casey Neistat or Phillip DeFranco were reported on by mainstream media such as *Time Magazine*, *The BBC*, *The Guardian* and *New York Magazine*, in which creator quotes are given equal weighting with YouTube response. The community commentariat's critical reflections on the role of advertising point back to the distributed, networked ways media industries have historically mediated between creative decisions and advertisers (Meehan, 2002; Wasko and Meehan, 2013). Herein, top tier community commentariat create public content about their relationships with YouTube as part of their personal and professional negotiation with the platform. They are aware that they can shape representation of YouTube in the press, which contributes to a making and remaking of policy in a push-pull between creatives, press, media companies and advertisers (Lotz, 2004; Mosco, 2009). Because of their influence, we argue that the content

produced by top tier creators on YouTube signposts the importance of advertisers as key stakeholders within ‘networked governance’; the imagination and representation of advertiser demand by these actors does influence and reshape platform priorities, policy and practices (Caplan, 2023). Similarly this reinforces van der Vlist and Helmond’s (2021) argument that power is not solely held by platforms, but rather unequally distributed through the industry.

Entrepreneurial growth content was important to our investigation in two ways. Firstly, creators explicitly discuss information that is often kept private (or shared with talent intermediaries and brands) on mainstream YouTube. In particular, they give insight into their YouTube AdSense dashboard. While the elite-tier community commentariat are often reluctant to discuss financial sums, Erin on Demand (2019) excitedly discussed her AdSense payout, which she directly connected to a pursuit of an audience suitable for advertising: audiences interested in entrepreneurship and tech. She said ‘[last month] I made \$2700, which is really good you guys – like I told you, this is good money for me’. While we acknowledge that this content paints a selective picture of how monetisation works on the platform, it represents an important slice of data that can be brought into conversation with our wider corpus. Indeed, entrepreneurial growth content is designed to educate aspiring creators and therefore both articulates and shapes the experiences of creators across the platform. In our data collection, such content was seamlessly recommended alongside official YouTube-published content.

A significant finding within our analysis is that entrepreneurial growth content directly extolled *the value of the commodity audience*. Reflecting on their own experiences, creators suggest that advertisers seek what Meehan (2002) describes as the ‘bone fide consumer’, an audience with money to spend. These creators suggest that YouTube production should meet the perceived needs of a ‘buying’ audience, one that is interested in traditionally male-aligned niches (technology, entrepreneurship), located in English-speaking economies in the Global North. By making these value hierarchies explicit, entrepreneurial growth content therefore allows us to track the ways that the governance preferences of advertisers impact the priorities of cultural producers through a form of structural incentives that skews pay rates in favour of those able to avoid a ‘broke’ audience.

As Lotz (2004: 39) argues ‘an audience niche must achieve a size deemed ‘substantial’ and possess attributes valued by advertisers in order to be served’. Growth content positions advertiser preference as reaching an ideal male consumer with disposable income. Entrepreneurial growth videos provide a snapshot into the ways that advertiser preference is parsed and represented on YouTube, which is arguably given additional weight when algorithmically surfaced alongside ‘official’ pedagogical content on the platform. Advertiser preference for high-value audiences gathered by certain content niches represents a form of governance that functions alongside the more explicit moderation of marginalised creators accounted for in governance literature. Videos confirmed that advertisers are not always seeking the largest audience. Entrepreneurial growth creators, contrary to YouTube’s own communications, confirm that value is found in the niche, not the somewhat bland space of brand safety. Large, less niche audiences will cost more and waste more ad spend if not every member of that audience is the intended one.

Lastly, YouTube aligned content showed the explicit ways that *governance choices are shaped by advertisers*. Videos specifically articulated the role of YouTube in negotiating the desires of advertisers, particularly focussing on how ad friendly guidelines have been developed in partnership with advertisers. This positioned YouTube's role as an intermediary in navigating advertiser feedback. These videos differed from entrepreneurial growth content, as they did not promote content in specific niches. Rather, they focussed brand safety as a general sensibility, which was couched in recommendations for video on 'quality'.

In this sense, we argue that YouTube aligned content works to mitigate fluctuations in ad spend related to genre by ensuring a wide variety of content for high and low value audiences to cater to as many niches as possible. Videos hedge against the overproduction of low quality, spam-like content designed to capture high value audiences. In videos, YouTube policy employees repeatedly discussed the ways that content and monetisation governance choices are made directly in consultation with advertisers to ensure 'brand comfort'. These videos frequently promoted the kind of structural incentives we discussed above: encouraging creators to consider the desires of advertisers at every point in the production process. Videos also revealed the ways that ambient concerns about advertiser comfort dictated a chilling effect related to content grey areas (for example profanity, sexuality or news items that may be sensitive). Videos confirmed that when YouTube policymakers and moderators were *unsure* about advertiser opinion on a topic, that they tended to overreach. Here, advertisers loom large in platform imaginaries, and caution about potential advertiser concerns animates policy decisions and platform governance.

Conclusion

Our analysis above has focussed on how creators on YouTube, as well as YouTube itself, frame governance decisions related to monetisation. In each of the video themes we collected the role and desires of advertisers was discussed in depth. For example, the community commentariat publicly argued that YouTube cared about advertisers more than a content creating community; entrepreneurial growth content advised creators to pursue a 'buying audience', and YouTube aligned content painstakingly recommended creators to 'put themselves in advertisers' shoes' when producing content for monetisation. By examining the orientation of relevant stakeholders towards advertisers we can piece together the ways that the political economy of YouTube monetisation affects the cultural production economy in practice.

Gorwa's (2019: 857) survey of platform governance literature argued that 'platforms govern, platforms are governed, and platform companies are companies'. YouTube's business model is *governed* by advertisers' (who keep the platform's lights on) who seek valuable audiences to realise their capital investments. In dialog with advertisers preferences, YouTube *governs* content through monetisation guidelines which also spill outwards to their algorithmic content moderation practices. All of this takes place in the service of a very clear business model oriented towards the capture of audiences for sale to advertisers. We have identified how the *structural conditions* of advertising's role play out in content concerning governance. If a creator wants to make a sustainable income,

they are directly and indirectly impelled by YouTube to consider the realities of what advertisers want, mediated through YouTube's expectations and policies. While non-monetised content that escapes from the desires of advertisers on YouTube and other platforms certainly exists, it's very easy to see how the content that builds any sizable audience will be directed down well worn grooves, in part by the objective conditions of the governance systems set in place to capture audiences. Future research on the governance of platforms, both *how they are governed* but also in terms of *how they govern*, should therefore take seriously the desires, actions and mediation of advertisers.

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