Youtube's Terms of Service: Posthumanism, Algorithms, and Professional Writing

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ABSTRACT

YOUTUBE’S TERMS OF SERVICE: POSTHUMANISM, ALGORITHMS, AND PROFESSIONAL WRITING

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Department of English
Northern Illinois University, 2019
Dr. Michael Day and Dr. Bonnie Lenore Kyburz, Co-Directors

This thesis aims to examine YouTube’s Terms of Service as it applies to content creators (known as YouTubers) who use the platform as a means of financial gain and how YouTube’s demonetization policy via an algorithm is negatively affecting them. I conducted a case study featuring one creator, Michelle Guido, and attempted to determine why some of her content is demonetized when it fulfills YouTube’s content standards for monetization. This study is meant as an examination through the lens of Dr. N. Katherine Hayles’s theory of posthumanism as stated in her book, *How We Became Posthuman*, and will offer insight into the disembodied algorithm and how it may be combatted for a more democratic usage.
YOUTUBE’S TERMS OF SERVICE: POSTHUMANISM, ALGORITHMS, AND PROFESSIONAL WRITING

BY

SARAH BRESNAHAN
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A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE
MASTER OF ARTS

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

Thesis Co-Directors:
Dr. Michael Day and Dr. Bonnie Lenore Kyburz
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, I thank my partner, Pete Marzullo, for encouraging me to go back to school. None of this would have been possible without your unwavering support.

Of course, I thank Dr. Michael Day and Dr. Bonnie Lenore Kyburz for their support through this process and for agreeing to co-direct my thesis. I also thank Dr. Jessica Reyman for directing me to work with Dr. Kyburz in this endeavor—as always, your intuition was spot-on in believing Dr. Kyburz and I would work well together. In addition, I thank Dr. Scott Balcerzak for agreeing to join my committee as a reader.

This research would not have been possible without the tireless volition of YouTubers like Phil DeFranco, JenLuvsReviews, RawBeautyKristi, Qcknd, Michelle Guido, and thousands of others who never stopped questioning the system. Your passion is more powerful than any paycheck.

Finally, I thank the Northern Illinois University English Department as a whole. Each person I spoke to, whether a close friend or an acquainted faculty member, gave me the positive reinforcement I needed during times when I doubted myself most. You are all my personal superheroes.
DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my grandmothers: Angeline, Maria, and Mary.
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INTRODUCTION

In early January 2018, YouTube content creator Logan Paul released a video of himself and his film crew in Aokigahara, commonly known as Japan’s “suicide forest.” Paul was on vacation in Japan and intended to go camping in the forest area. While filming, Paul and his crew stumbled upon the body of a recent suicide victim. Paul decided to keep the footage of the victim in his video, showing not only the victim’s body but his reaction and that of his filming crew, who were shocked but nonetheless made crude jokes. The video ended with Paul sitting down on a street curb discussing suicide prevention. Paul said in an interview with Michael Strahan on Good Morning America that he believed he was acting in a manner not only in conjunction with his typical videos but also in keeping with what he had previously seen as “educational” footage on the YouTube platform regarding suicide prevention.

Unbeknownst to Paul at the time, the video (including the footage of the body) appeared on YouTube’s Trending Page quickly after he uploaded it. The video's trending status meant that millions of YouTube watchers saw the video, and it triggered the platform's algorithm to begin accrual of advertising revenue by monetization, or the accrual of financial profit by having advertisements on a channel and/or video upload.

At the time of the video’s release, Paul had more than 15 million subscribers on his YouTube channel, making him one of the most watched people on the platform (Ohlheiser, 2018). Critics, parents of underaged viewers, and numerous media outlets were outraged not only by Paul’s video but also that that YouTube’s monetization algorithm seemed to trigger his financial gain despite the extremity of the content. Paul removed the video and created an
apology video, stating that he made a poor judgment call regarding the upload and asked his fans not to stand up for him in online forums criticizing the YouTube star.

Viewers’ concerns caused the already-controversial Paul (known for outrageous antics involving extreme pranks, bodily harm framed in comedy, etc.) to be dropped by Google Preferred, which is a program that “offers brand advertisers access to the most popular YouTube channels among U.S. 18- to 34-year-olds [as Google owns YouTube]” (Google Preferred). According to Darrell Etherington, a writer for the online magazine TechCrunch, Google Preferred was designed to direct advertisers to trustworthy channels that produce high-quality content. Etherington noted that although Paul was removed from Google Preferred, his channel can still receive advertisement revenue through YouTube’s Partner Program (YPP), which is a separate entity that any creator can sign up for on a more fundamental level (Etherington, 2018). Although he lost his preferred status, Paul still made a significant amount of money from the video's advertisement revenue through YPP.

Paul’s video violated YouTube’s Community Guidelines under Violent or Graphic Content Policies, which states, “It is not okay to post violent or gory content that’s primarily intended to be shocking, sensational, or gratuitous. If a video is particularly graphic or disturbing, it should be balanced with additional context and information” (YouTube Violence or Graphic Content Policies). This policy, however, does not state whether a video will be demonetized, or marked “not advertiser-friendly,” by the YouTube algorithm. Paul’s addition of suicide prevention awareness information at the end of the video was, one can assume, enough to keep his video from being “flagged” by the algorithm.
Meanwhile, a Philadelphia YouTuber who goes by Qcknd (or @quietcoolkid, depending on the social media platform) is outwardly confused and disheartened by the treatment of her content by YouTube. Although Qcknd herself appears as a heavily tattooed alternative rocker and working hair stylist, her content is relatively tame, focusing on subject matter such as informational content on veganism, DIY, and a regular segment called “Tattoo Talk Tuesday,” where the body art collector answers questions from viewers about tattoo culture and how to stay safe and healthy while getting tattooed.

In a video posted January 8, 2018, Qcknd discusses how her ability to earn money from her videos had been in limbo since October 2017 (Qcknd, 2018). One video in particular, “Last Freaking Minute House Cat Costume,” was demonetized and marked not advertiser-friendly. The video shows Qcknd creating a last-minute Halloween costume using makeup and a white long-sleeved shirt and then holding up her cat to the camera so viewers can see how she copied the markings of her cat onto her shirt and face. As the video was Halloween related and, thus, uploaded on Halloween, its demonetized status meant Qcknd was unable to receive revenue from the video until it was released days later—too late for viewers to want to create last-minute Halloween costumes.

The demonetization algorithm has been under fire by the YouTube content creator community since 2017, and the Paul incident only added more fuel. How is it that a significant creator can do something so controversial and against policy and retain monetization while smaller creators like Qcknd are flagged for instances such as cursing by accident or showing how to make a last-minute Halloween costume? Is the reliance on algorithms helping or harming policy enforcement on social media platforms? Moreover, is YouTube’s reliance on the
demonetization algorithm harming creators who wish to use their YouTube channels as their primary means of employment, as many larger creators do?

My intent for this study is to research how the demonetization algorithm is affecting YouTubers as they use their channels as a means of professional writing. I aim to discover (as I already suspect) whether the algorithm is favoring larger creators due to subscriber numbers and viewershop statistics. I will frame my research using Dr. N. Katherine Hayles’s theory of posthumanism, which implies in part that algorithms are ideological, as subjective human belief systems create them, and thus are rhetorically determined. Hayles’s theory creates an implication that when an individual participates on the YouTube platform, they are willing to bypass ordinary owner/worker logics that inform how a YouTuber should participate in the space. These decisions by YouTube are murky because the monetization transactions are intangible, existing in digital binary code instead of through solid evidence (like a contract) in a typical owner/worker relationship. Given that YouTube is favoring these larger Youtubers with the demonetization algorithm, why do smaller creators choose to stay on the platform when their content is frequently flagged? Hayles’s theory may provide clues as to the thought processes behind these transactions and may help give voice to what seems like a naive buy-in because of the promise of one day becoming like these larger YouTubers.

Posthuman Defined

In the prologue to her 1999 text, How We Became PostHuman, Hayles describes how a version of the Turing test she calls the Moravec test (after Dr. Hans Moravec’s publication, Mind Children: The Future of Robot and Human Intelligence) shows “that machines can become the repository of human consciousness—that machines can, for all practical purposes, become
human beings.” (Hayles, prologue) While the concept seems to be something straight out of science fiction, it is part of our contemporary culture. For centuries, humans have been using machines to perpetuate values, guides, and laws they deem appropriate. As these humans put their values into formulae, these values become part of the machine that enforces said formulae, meaning the machine has, on some level, a type of “moral code.” This moral code (or, as I like to refer to it, coding) allows for a removal of the value judgments from the human creator and places them in the disembodied hands of the machine (or algorithm), thus creating a type of mystical, bodiless law enforcement system, which can then be praised or blamed as it fulfills its coded destiny. Hayles’ theory regarding the third wave of cybernetics confirms this:

...self-organization began to be understood not merely as the (re)production of internal organization but as the springboard to emergence. In the rapidly emerging field of artificial life, computer programs are designed to allow ‘creatures’ (that is, discrete packets of computer codes) to evolve spontaneously in directions the programmer may not have anticipated. The intent is to evolve the capacity to evolve. Some researchers have argued that such self-evolving programs are not merely models of life but are themselves alive… If one sees the universe as composed essentially of information, it makes sense that these ‘creatures’ are life forms because they have the form of life, that is, an informational code. (11)

So, these algorithms, these living artificial creatures, are not just products of human manipulation; they have become entities unto themselves, creating laws and rules as they see fit based on the information they are given at inception. As Hayles states:

When information loses its body, equating humans and computers is especially easy, for the materiality in which the thinking mind is instantiated appears incidental to its essential nature. Moreover, the idea of the feedback loop implies that the boundaries of autonomous subjects are up for grabs, since feedback loops can flow not only within the subject but also between the subject and the environment. (2)

What is unknown is whether the algorithm’s creator is allowing these new changes to happen because it follows their personal belief system (or, in YouTube’s case, the company’s beliefs and
values about what content it wants on the platform), or is the algorithm’s creator just following
the algorithm’s evolution and adjusting accordingly? According to Hayles, “The posthuman
subject is an amalgam, a collection of heterogeneous components, a material-informational entity
whose boundaries undergo continuous construction and reconstruction” (3). Because the
boundary between YouTube and the demonetization algorithm is ever changing and does not
allow for substantial separation between platform and algorithm in the mind of the
viewer/consumer/worker, the supposed dissociation as claimed by YouTube is illusory. YouTube
is the algorithm; the algorithm is YouTube.

The Algorithm as a Scapegoat

The supposed removal of humans from the moral coding allows for an assumed severing
of emotional connection from the algorithm, allowing it to be used as a reason or excuse when a
company (such as YouTube) is confronted with questions regarding the understanding of
systemic operations. In his article, “Algorithms as Culture: Some Tactics for the Ethnography of
Algorithmic Systems,” Nick Seaver discusses responses he received when interviewing
employees at a digital recommender company (like Spotify or Netflix). During his interviews,
Seaver asked employees to identify the algorithms they worked on as part of their daily job tasks:

They typically balked at this question, and even people in the most “algorithmic” roles in
the company, working on machine learning infrastructure or playlist personalization,
located “the algorithm” just outside the scope of their work, somewhere in the company’s
code. One, a senior software engineer with a prestigious undergraduate degree in
computer science, told me that her training on algorithms in theory was irrelevant to her
work on algorithms in practice because algorithms in practice were harder to precisely
locate...The “algorithm” here was a collective product, and consequently everyone felt
like an outsider to it.

Interestingly, Seaver hints at the use of the word “algorithm” as an excuse for when an engineer
or someone wishes to stop another person from asking questions. He writes:
If an ethnographer encountering these technical people...did not know what an algorithm was supposed to be, she would have to suss it out from how they speak and act. “These people say algorithm whenever they want those people to stop talking.” “Those people talk about algorithms like precious intellectual property, while these people talk about them like plumbing.”

Algorithms Defined

As contemporary media consumers already know in some fashion or another, the purpose of an algorithm is to be an automated sorting system for digital content. Algorithms tell us everything from what broke a rule to what items are recommended based on previous purchases or topics of interest. The algorithm itself does not place value on words, phrases, images, etc., but instead flags what it is programmed to flag and, thus, sort accordingly.

In 2010, a group of Google Inc. employees published a study, “The YouTube Video Recommendation System,” to help others understand the creation of personalized video recommendations, which they named an unarticulated want (as opposed to direct navigation via a link or search and goal-oriented browsing through topic and title search terms). The researchers considered two classes of data: 1. content data and 2. user activity data. The researchers noted that the mapping of data was difficult due to the wide array of video metadata available; some was incorrect or incomplete. The group came up with the following formula for determining recommendations:

\[ R(v_i, v_j) = \frac{c_{ij}}{f(v_i, v_j)} \]

They explain:

One of the building blocks of the recommendation system is the construction of a mapping from a video \(v_i\) to a set of similar or related videos \(R_i\). In this context, we define similar videos like those that a user is likely to watch after having watched the given seed video \(v\). In order to compute the mapping, we make use of a well-known technique known as association rule mining or co-visitation counts...For a given time period (usually 24 hours), we count for each pair of videos \((v_i, v_j)\) how often they were co-watched within sessions. Denoting this co-visitation count by \(c_{ij}\), we define the
relatedness score of video vj, to base video vi, where ci and cj are the total occurrence counts across all sessions for videos vi and vj, respectively. F(vi, vj) is a normalization function that takes the global popularity of both the seed video and the candidate video into account. (Davidson et al.)

The result of the study was that recommendations created approximately 60 percent of all video clicks from the YouTube home page. After a period of three weeks, the researchers determined that co-visitation based on the recommendation algorithm performed vastly higher than before at 207 percent of the baseline Most Viewed page (Davidson et al., 2010).

Google employees published another paper in 2016, “Deep Neural Networks for YouTube Recommendations,” focusing on what they deemed “deep learning,” or the ability of an algorithm to evolve. This study noted the three most important and challenging factors when creating an algorithm for a platform of YouTube’s magnitude: scale, freshness, and noise. The researchers note, “In conjugation with other product areas across Google, YouTube has undergone a fundamental paradigm shift towards using deep learning as a general-purpose solution for nearly all learning problems…Our models learn approximately one billion parameters and are trained on hundreds of billions of examples” (Covington et al., 4). After examining watch times, features, depth, etc., the researchers concluded that:

There is more art than science in selecting the surrogate problem for recommendations… ranking is a more classical machine learning problem, yet our deep learning approach outperformed previous linear and tree-based methods for watch time prediction. Recommendation systems in particular benefit from specialized features describing past user behavior with items. Deep neural networks require special representations of categorical and continuous features which we transform with embeddings and quantile normalization, respectively. Layers of depth were shown to effectively model non-linear interactions between hundreds of features. (Covington et al.)

Essentially, the study determined that this newer approach to algorithmic creation was responsible for improving watch times on recommended videos, rather than the traditional
methods. As the newer method was reliant on more information than simple word tags, it leaves the question of whether creators are responsible for their recommendations if the data measuring recommendability is not in their control.

**Terms of Service and Community Guidelines**

When one first decides to make a YouTube channel, that creator must follow a series of agreements, including and most importantly the agreement to follow YouTube’s Community Guidelines. YouTubers are given the URL for the guidelines so they may refer to them at any time.

The Community Guidelines landing page leads to policy pages covering subjects like hate speech; content featuring firearms, sexual content, violent or graphic content; etc. YouTube places the phrase “The importance of context” on the very top of the list, stating that YouTube is a place to “share your story”; however, if your story includes a controversial issue, you must provide context that explains how the video is informational/educational to viewers:

> YouTube is also an important global platform for news and information, and we realize that sometimes graphic material is vital to our understanding of the world. It can document wars and revolutions, explore human sexuality through artistic expression, expose an injustice, or foster debate about important events. Because of this, we take great care when reviewing flagged videos, and allow controversial videos that have educational, documentary, scientific or artistic intent. (Community Guidelines)

The language here is evident in that the company understands the desire to post controversial subject matter, but nowhere on the page does it say anything about videos losing monetization for posting controversial content. The term “demonetization” only appears once in YouTube’s Community Guidelines, in a small section, “Repercussions for Harm to the YouTube Community,” which states:
If a creator uploads content that severely violates our Community Guidelines, it may result in ads being suspended, losing access to creator program, and becoming ineligible for Trending for a period of time. However, if the action is egregious, repeated, or coupled with malicious intent, it may result in stricter or longer repercussions.

Under this, a single bullet item states:

- Monetization and creator support privileges: Creator channels may lose the ability to serve ads, earn revenue, and potentially be removed from the YouTube Partner Program, including access to support and YouTube Spaces.

At the bottom of that web page is a link to the Partner Program Policies page. This page includes nine lines of text, all of which discuss the repercussions of violating partner policies, with links that circle back to the Community Guidelines page, the Terms of Service page, and Google AdSense program policies.

**YouTubers as Professional Writers**

Through watching countless videos on the demonetization situation and various theories behind it, I determined that while competition (logically) seems to be the primary driver for the YouTuber community uproar, issue may be more one of transparency and connectivity—which, some may argue, are subsets of competition. In discussing the shift from passive interaction during the age of television to active participation via social media, Douglas Eyman states:

> The competition between user/producer (the computer) and receiver/watcher (the television) foreshadowed the perceptual split between interactive and mass media approaches to entertainment and connectivity during the 1990s and most of the first decade of the current century. (3)

The user/producer gap no longer exists in the traditional context of producer and consumer as separate societal estates (hence the term *prosumer*, coined by Alvin Toffler), which leads many to consider their level of participation in the YouTube generation. Active participation in such a relationship causes a shift in power, and the corporation losing the power must try to get it back.
in whatever way it can to assert its dominance over the consumer in the market. In comparing YouTube to the regulated free market we know today, we could say that YouTube is like Standard Oil post-Civil War. As historian Ron Chernow states in his book, *Titan: The Life of John D. Rockefeller Sr.*, “Standard Oil has taught the American public an important but paradoxical lesson: Free markets, if left completely to their own devices, can wind up terribly unfree” (297).

Historically, the progressive movement allowed for corporations and the government to join forces and follow Frederick Winslow Taylor’s scientific method technique. Taylor, a mechanical engineer, wanted to improve corporate profitability by creating “absolute uniformity” in the workforce. Taylor writes:

The managers assume new burdens, new duties, and responsibilities never dreamed of in the past. The managers assume, for instance, the burden of gathering together all of the traditional knowledge which in the past has been possessed by the workmen and then of classifying, tabulating, and reducing this knowledge to rules, laws, and formulae which are immensely helpful to the workmen in doing their daily work. (36)

David S. Allen interprets Taylor’s writing in *Democracy, Inc.*, by stating that Taylor's theory allows managers to take away the judgment of individual workers by allowing managers to make decisions.

Another perspective on the prosumer situation is Dr. Joseph Moxley’s 2008 distinction between the Community of Power and the Community of Learning. Moxley states that the Community of Power “assumes that knowledge and justice are achieved by pioneering leaders (as opposed to crowds) who follow their self-interest” (p. 186), while the Community of Learning “is characterized by an emphasis on collaboration...where individuals are more concerned...with helping people develop, interpret, and share ideas” (p. 191). These communities
shape how platforms are designed. In Elise Verzosa Hurley and Amy C. Kimme Hea’s 2014 interpretation of Moxley's theory, “...the community is not entirely democratic as evidenced by the fact that only a select few...have the power to elevate [a project] to Featured status, thus enforcing the authoritative function Moxley describes in Communities of Power” (Verzosa Hurley and Kimme Hea, The Rhetoric of Reach).

So, how does this discussion of prosumers tie into the relationship between YouTube and its creators? Although YouTube is a public platform, it is also a company under the Google umbrella (which is now owned under the company Alphabet) and is publicly traded and for-profit. YouTube has its own employees; however, these employees do not create most content on the platform. In applying the worker/manager relationship, the creators are the workers and YouTube’s Community Guidelines (and, subsequently, their algorithm) act as the manager’s decision-making ability. The agency creators believe themselves to have is really under the approval of this algorithm, which may not allow for certain freedoms of expression that one could assume are the right of a content creator.

**How the Algorithms Complicate Professional Writing Practices**

In our current digital age, professional writing has become more than just text on a web page; anyone who generates content in any media for a broad audience (and a paycheck) can be considered a professional writer, including and especially YouTube content creators. As more and more influencers emerge in their various communities, an age-old question arises—*How can I do this full time?* As previously posited, the demonetization algorithm directly and negatively affects newer influencers as they try to expand their reach. Influencers, then, need to not only create for their traditional audience (the viewer) but also the platform owner and, by proxy, the
demonetization algorithm. Gallagher (2017) concurs, stating, “…to write for algorithmic audiences means to consider the people who design and program an algorithm” (p. 26). This implies that it is not just the content of the video itself that is up for scrutiny, but also the content’s metadata, or keywords found in a video's title, description box, and tags. The metadata is a significant factor in how the algorithm sorts videos, but the algorithm uses more than metadata to determine monetization.

Metadata can be viewed from a linguistic standpoint using Michael J. Reddy's 1979 conduit metaphor. Reddy’s theory suggests that language is a mechanical conduit and words with their following meaning are containers that are passed from one being to another. Reddy asserts that no one truly receives another person's thoughts via language; instead, a common discourse allows both speaker and listener to extract the same meaning from an utterance.

A person who speaks poorly does not know how to use language to send people his thoughts; and, conversely, a good speaker knows how to transfer his thoughts perfectly via language. If we were to follow this viewpoint, the next question would be: What must the poor speaker do with his thoughts if he is to transfer them more accurately by means of language? The surprising thing is that, whether we like it or not, the English language does follow this viewpoint. It provides, in the form of a wealth of metaphorical expressions, answers to this and other questions, all of which answers are perfectly coherent with the assumption that human communication achieves the physical transfer of thoughts and feelings. (287)

Using this example, then, let us presuppose that the YouTuber is the poor speaker and the algorithm is the good speaker. The YouTuber is using a language they believe is coherent enough for the algorithm to understand pragmatically (with implied context); however, the algorithm is accepting the language semantically (without any context). The algorithm does not understand the practical meaning; therefore, it places language it receives via metadata into check-marked boxes to determine whether or not a video can be monetized.
An example of this is a comparison between two videos posted on the same day (March 11, 2019) by two YouTubers, Phil DeFranco and Michelle Guido. DeFranco’s video, titled “Wow...Woman Attacked By Jaguar Apologizes, Captain Marvel Controversy, Boeing 737 Max 8 Fears Spread,” uses demonetization-triggering words such as “attack,” “controversy,” and “fear” in the title. The categorization tags for this video are #DeFranco #Jaguar #BrieLarson, and the YouTube category is News & Politics. Guido’s video for the same date, called “‘Christian Cringe’: Christians Thoughts on Relationships: Girl Defined,” uses triggering words such as “Christian” and “relationships.” The video uses no categorization tags but uses the YouTube category Entertainment. Both users are within set non-algorithmic parameters to receive monetization: DeFranco has a subscriber count of 6.3 million; Guido has a subscriber count of 4.7 thousand. DeFranco’s video was monetized and Guido’s was not, even though DeFranco had more “controversial” metadata triggers than Guido. Why? DeFranco used the category News & Politics, which allows for monetization because his video is seen as public education and therefore a higher value, whereas Guido’s is categorized as Entertainment, meaning it has less value. This fact, added to DeFranco’s significantly higher subscriber count, allows for his video to be monetized. (We will later see Guido’s monetization in detail in my case study research.)

Avoiding Skynet

In a Columbia Journalism Review article published April 14, 2016, journalist Chava Gourarie writes that algorithms are inherently biased because they contain human-encoded values. “This happens by using historical data or classifiers that reflect bias. This is especially true for machine-learning algorithms that learn from users’ input,” Gourarie states. The writer also points to a Medium post, saying, “...since algorithms look for patterns, and minorities by
definition don’t fit the same patterns as the majority, the results will be different for members of the minority group.” Hayles also notes the predominance of a historical pattern: “Information is increasingly perceived as interpenetrating material forms. Especially for users who may not know the material processes involved, the impression is created that pattern is predominant over presence” (19). If smaller YouTubers then already have the odds stacked against them, and the algorithm is using historical data to continue to hold these smaller YouTubers to a certain level of monetization, how can anyone expect to make a living through YouTube? In other words, how can smaller YouTubers break the pattern and have their presence on the platform gain more traction? Does the answer lie solely in video metadata or subscriber count? Alternatively, is the algorithmic black box code just too dense to crack?

As contemporary culture moves more towards the “set it and forget it” ideals of artificial intelligence, we cannot forget that evolving technologies need human oversight in order to allow our techno-culture to flourish. When we allow these technologies to evolve on their own, without oversight, we allow for a potential shift towards an overprotective state of existence. As Hayles so astutely puts it:

The contemporary pressure toward dematerialization, understood as an epistemic shift toward pattern/randomness and away from presence/absence, affects human and textual bodies on two levels at once, as a change in the body (the material substrate) and as a change in the message (the code of representation). (29)

In other words, the need to shift from human operation to computerized automation creates a bivalent (true/false) code that does not allow for context or lexical understanding.
RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

To more fully understand the impact of these algorithms on YouTubers, I interviewed a YouTuber named Michelle Guido from Bloomington, Illinois. Guido uses her channel to discuss issues in politics, more specifically, issues surrounding feminism. She does not use YouTube as her only source of income.

With help from my co-directors, I created a set of questions regarding how YouTubers are informed of demonetization, whether they can communicate with the platform regarding demonetization issues, and whether they agree that the reason the algorithm has flagged the video is, in fact, a violation of the Community Guidelines. The questions (see Appendix) were approved by the NIU Institutional Review Board in October 2018 and were sent to a few YouTubers I contacted through my personal Twitter account. Guido was the only eligible recipient to respond according to my requirements of being over 18 and currently receiving monetization.

Through the interview, I created a rhetorical analysis of interactions between YouTubers and YouTube’s moderators. I learned:

- How the term “algorithm” used by YouTubers and YouTube customer service representatives and/or guideline language.
- To what extent YouTube removes human agency by referring to the algorithm.
- What rhetorical effects the decisions of the algorithms themselves have on YouTubers who use their channels to earn a living.
- How human creators can change their content to fulfill the requirements of the algorithm’s parameters (if they are currently not met).
In addition to the interview, I asked Guido to send me links to three videos that were
demonetized and three videos that were not demonetized so I could attempt a comparison using
knowledge I obtained from YouTube’s terms of service policies.

I knew that I would need a personal view of how the algorithm works, so I created my
own YouTube channel in January 2018. I hoped to get a sense of the process that these
YouTubers participate in when trying to receive advertisement revenue. Since I do not have the
required 4,000 hours of watch time and 1,000 subscribers, I was not be able to receive any kind
of monetization; however, I was able to view internal YouTuber policies, agreements, and
communications.

I have also provided supplemental information with first-hand accounts of other
YouTubers via their published video content. I reviewed videos by YouTubers/channels such as
Phil DeFranco, JenLuvsReviews, Qcknd, RawBeautyKristi, Hank Green, Rhetorical
Entertainment, and the Jenna and Julien Podcast by Jenna Marbles and Julien Solomita. These
videos are part of a playlist I created during my research as a reference to explain issues and
terminology I came across.¹

Finally, I found a third-party site, Social Blade, that gives ballpark estimates of social
media influencer income on a given day. This information allows a cross-referencing between
assumed demonetization and income estimates, which helped me determine approximately how
much a YouTuber can make on a given video.

¹ Visit my YouTube Channel, Studious Strawberry, and view the Master’s Thesis playlist.
RESULTS

Video Analysis Results

Of the six videos Guido sent, three were demonetized and three were not. Table 1 shows the results for the demonetized videos; Table 2 shows the results for the monetized videos. It is interesting to note that none of the six videos included triggering language in the video description, nor did they include triggering language in the YouTube tags. All but one of the six videos were categorized as Education; the only other categorization used was Entertainment. All video data was collected and coded on February 16, 2019, as to avoid time-skewed results.

Guido Interview

Guido completed and returned my interview questions on November 16, 2018. Guido's channel had been demonetized due to the September 2018 changes in YouTube's Terms of Service. She noted that her channel had been re-monetized on September 18, 2018. Guido said she makes approximately $2-3 a video and attributes the minimal income to her small viewership. When asked how often her videos are flagged, she said: “So far almost everything I put up gets demonetized.” I asked Guido if she had been in contact with anyone from YouTube regarding the demonetization of her videos. She said regarding her demonetized videos:

If it is not too sexual I will [request an appeal] for them to re-look at it, but you can only do this on videos that have over 1,000 views. So, once I hit 1,000 on a video I think was unfairly demonetized they either monetize it or tell me no. So far, they have all gone through when I do that.
### Table 1: Guido’s Demonetized Video Results Encoded

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Demonetized Videos</th>
<th>Date Posted</th>
<th>Video Length</th>
<th>Triggering Language (with appearance count)</th>
<th>Categorization</th>
<th>Video Description</th>
<th>Comments</th>
<th>Likes</th>
<th>Dislikes</th>
<th>Views</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Trans Woman: Are They &quot;Male&quot;? (True Breakdown)</td>
<td>Your Virginity Isn't Real</td>
<td>Oct. 17, 2018</td>
<td>5:14</td>
<td>biology; intersex, xy, xx, chromosomes, shitt-on, assume female; fuck(ing) [14]; bitch(es) [2]</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>no inappropriate or triggering language in video description</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>280</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>9,694</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dear Male Sexual Assault Survivors!</td>
<td></td>
<td>Oct. 1, 2018</td>
<td>8:34</td>
<td>virgin(ity); social construct; hell; hymen; fuck(ed)(ing) [6]; pop the cherry; sexual act; murdered; die; penis, vagina; heteronormative; LGBTQ; cisgender; sexist; sex; killed; slut shamed; first time; fantasy; lesbians; religious</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>no inappropriate or triggering language in video description</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>596</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Sept. 12, 2018</td>
<td>1:04</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>no inappropriate or triggering language in video description</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>1,811</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Title</td>
<td>Monetized Videos</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading My DMs! It goes down in the DMs!</td>
<td>Easy Ways To Make Cash in the Next 48 Hours: The Successful Woman Series</td>
<td>Your Favorite Feminist Answers Your Random Questions!</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>date posted</th>
<th>Nov. 14, 2018</th>
<th>Oct. 15, 2018</th>
<th>Sept. 4, 2018</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>video length</th>
<th>10:48</th>
<th>5:25</th>
<th>12:29</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

| Triggering Language (with appearance count) | shit [3]; ass; fuck(ing) [11]; grind; dick [4]; hell, snatch, cunt, asshole, masturbate, sex | shit ton | circumcision; pit bulls; pleasure; bitch; ass [2]; sex; sexuality; sex-ed; shitting; fuck(ing) [4]; Satan, kill myself |
|-------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|------------------|

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categorization</th>
<th>Entertainment</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Education</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Video Description</td>
<td>no inappropriate or triggering language in video description</td>
<td>no inappropriate or triggering language in video description</td>
<td>no inappropriate or triggering language in video description</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Comments</th>
<th>16</th>
<th>9</th>
<th>32</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Likes</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dislikes</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Views</td>
<td>135</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>236</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Guido said that she had seen many changes on the platform since starting her channel in 2014, from how revenue is disbursed to what kinds of advertisement appears on content. I asked if she has taken any steps to avoid being demonetized, and to my surprise, she said no. “I probably would if I was smart, but I just like creating content that I love.” Guido said that she is highly affected by YouTube’s demonetization algorithm because the majority of her content is demonetized. “I put a lot of effort into my channel and get very little revenue out of it. Still, I have not adjusted my content type because I think it's important.”

My final question to Guido was whether she had any suggestions for the platform on how it could improve the demonetization algorithm and policy to help smaller creators in the future. She said, “Stop automatically flagging things just because they are for women’s rights or LGBTQ rights.”

**Social Blade Statistics**

As I am unable to see actual net income for any YouTuber except myself, I went to the third-party analytics site Social Blade to see how much of a difference there is between Guido’s statistics and Logan Paul’s. Figure 3 shows the statistics for both YouTubers on March 13, 2019, collected at 3:15 p.m. PST. As the results change approximately every 10 seconds, I used a time increment closest to the actual I could determine.
Table 3 Social Blade Statistics for Michelle Guido and Logan Paul

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Guido Social Blade Statistics</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Uploads</td>
<td>165</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subscribers</td>
<td>4,812</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Video Views</td>
<td>355,437</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>User Created</td>
<td>26-Jul-14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Blade Grade</td>
<td>C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subscriber Rank</td>
<td>1208211th</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Video View Rank</td>
<td>3463430th</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Blade Rank</td>
<td>2235029th</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Estimated Monthly Earnings</td>
<td>$4-$66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Estimated Yearly Earnings</td>
<td>$50-$793</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Logan Paul Social Blade Statistics</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Uploads</td>
<td>604</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subscribers</td>
<td>18,834,799</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Video Views</td>
<td>4,296,751,798</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>User Created</td>
<td>29-Aug-15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Blade Grade</td>
<td>A-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subscriber Rank</td>
<td>99th</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Video View Rank</td>
<td>293rd</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Blade Rank</td>
<td>1,649th</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Estimated Monthly Earnings</td>
<td>$16.1K-$256.9K</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Estimated Yearly Earnings</td>
<td>$192.7K-$3.1M</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
DISCUSSION

I was quite shocked by the results I collected from coding Guido’s videos. The foul language used verbally in her videos had nothing to do with whether or not her videos were monetized, which is a common misconception. In reality, YouTube’s vulgar language policy states, “Some language is not appropriate for younger audiences. Use of sexually explicit language or excessive profanity in your video or associated metadata may lead to the age-restriction of your video” (Community Guidelines). Any vulgar language Guido used would not lead to a change in monetization. So, what really caused those videos to be flagged?

After rereading YouTube’s Community Guidelines a few more times and reviewing the metadata for Guido’s demonetized videos, I found that the only time YouTube would flag any sex-related content is when the content itself was visually sexual in nature. When that is the case, YouTube removes the video from circulation; flagging for demonetization is not part of the process. YouTube’s Community Guidelines for nudity and sexual content states:

If your content violates this policy, we’ll remove the content and send you an email to let you know. If this is the first time you’ve posted content that violates our Community Guidelines, you’ll get a warning with no penalty to your channel. If it’s not, we’ll issue a strike against your channel. Your channel will be terminated if you receive 3 strikes. (Community Guidelines)

And, as previously noted, a YouTuber only knows if a video is demonetized when they visit their own channel’s Creator Studio or by using the YouTube Creator application, YT Studio. So, if Guido’s content does not violate the Community Guidelines but is tagged as educational content, why was it demonetized?
I posit that smaller YouTubers who use somewhat controversial (i.e., politically charged) language in their metadata are automatically added to the demonetization pool despite being marked as educational content because they do not possess the “clout” that larger YouTubers who upload the same type of content do. In essence, larger YouTubers are bypassed because they are larger YouTubers, and the demonetization is not because of the content itself, but instead because of whose content the advertisers will want to be seen with. From a marketing standpoint, I can see their perspective. The target customer demographic watches larger YouTubers because they recognize the name, so the advertisers would instead attach their finite resources to these larger YouTubers rather than spreading the advertisement cost evenly throughout the platform. So, is the demonetization algorithm targeting content, or is it targeting subscriber size? Moreover, it appears that the easiest way to distinguish who gets advertising is by claiming the content is not advertiser-friendly because of specific metadata language parameters.

Alternative Modes of Income

From Guido’s interview, it seems that small YouTubers stay on the platform despite the unfairness of the demonetization algorithm because they feel it is more important to get the content out there than to alter their content. In the long run, it makes sense--if YouTubers continue to create and upload content that appeals to audiences despite not receiving financial gain, it is possible to gain enough traction to be noticed by brands who will sponsor YouTubers, thus creating an alternate means to make money.

One beauty YouTuber, RawBeautyKristi, uploaded a video on January 23, 2019, titled “The Truth About Sponsored Videos,” discussing her interactions with companies who wish to sponsor her content and how YouTube (and other social media) sponsorships work. While
Kristi’s video is tailored to the beauty community, much of what she says applies to content creators as a whole. In preparation for the video, Kristi asked her Twitter followers to submit questions regarding sponsorship, so her video was in Q&A format. At the start of the video, Kristi clarified that the discussion would revolve around her personal dealings with companies and sponsorship deals, and although there are FCC standards, every YouTuber handles sponsorships differently.

Kristi noted that she had been uploading content to YouTube for six years but didn’t begin receiving sponsorship until two years ago. She says:

Things are a lot different now. I see a lot of ‘micro-influencers’ getting a lot more sponsored content now, and that’s because first of all, they are a lot less expensive [regarding payout per sponsorship as opposed to larger influencers] and second of all, [brands] see the value because people have influence. (YouTube Video)

Kristi now has a management team who handles communication regarding sponsorships, but she emphasized that this was a recent change and had previously handled all communication between herself and brands on her own. She also noted that a YouTuber should try to determine their “worth” before negotiating brand deals. The website she suggested was Social Bluebook, a subscription service that determines what a social media influencer can ask for regarding sponsorship payouts based on their engagement across multiple social media platforms.

Conclusion

From the information I gathered and reviewed, and from what we generally know about the advertising industry, it is reasonably safe to assume that the demonetization issue is not one of social propriety or safety; it is a question of advertising vs. politics. Politically-charged rhetoric, when coupled with low subscriber counts and views, triggers disembodied, context-free algorithm to flag a YouTuber’s video. When Hayles refers to a disembodied information, then,
we can connect her theory to the algorithm by making “context” the body in which the algorithm is severely lacking. The demonetization algorithm is the epitome of Reddy's conduit metaphor of packaged meaning and, coincidentally, Hayles’s own image of the autonomous, disembodied cybernetic artificial intelligence that science fiction has predestined us for. As Hayles states, “When information loses its body, equating humans and computers is especially easy” (2). The disembodied demonetization algorithm affirms our highly rational fear that the reliance on technology removes the humanity from human beings, leaving a disembodied entity who only knows $a + b = c$. For professional writers, this means either learning how to work with this artificial intelligence and assimilating to the dehumanization of its purpose or fight against it by demanding research into how to add the human element in the form of context to cybernetic processes. Artificial intelligence has no intention, ill or otherwise, except to follow the moral coding given to it by its creator; if the creator’s value system is skewed by something (like capitalistic gain) then it cannot be the fault of the algorithmic enforcer but rather the fault of the platform.
REFERENCES


DeFranco, Phil. (2019, March 11). Wow...Woman Attacked By Jaguar Apologizes, Captain Marvel Controversy, Boeing 737 Max 8 Fears Spread. Retrieved from https://youtu.be/QAOLLVCzq-0.


APPENDIX

Questions for YouTubers

Name:

Today’s Date:

Name of Channel:

Months/Years on YouTube:

1. How long has your channel been monetized?

2. What app(s) or methods do you use to track your monetization, views, etc.?

3. Approximately how much do you make per video? (can be a generalized number, non-specific)

4. In the last six months, how many of your videos have been demonetized?

5. Have you been in contact with anyone from YouTube regarding demonetization? What was the result of that communication? Did you agree with the reasons you were given?

6. Have you noticed a significant change on your advertising revenue since January 2018?

7. What steps have you taken to prevent your videos from being demonetized?

8. In your own words, what is YouTube’s demonetization policy?

9. Overall, how has the new demonetization policy affected you as a creator? (Do you avoid subject matter, watch your language, etc.?)

10. What suggestions do you have for YouTube to improve the demonetization policy?

11. Please include any other comments here:
12. If you have any documentation regarding the policy that you’d like to share, including communications between yourself and YouTube, please feel free to include them.

Please include links to three of your videos that have been demonetized in the last six months.
1. 
2. 
3. 

Please include links to three of your videos that have NOT been demonetized in the last six months that share themes with those videos that were demonetized.
1. 
2. 
3.