

Post-Genre, Post-Utopia: Contemporary YouTube Production Cultures

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Abstract

Post-Genre, Post-Utopia: Contemporary YouTube Production Cultures

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“Post-Genre, Post-Utopia: Contemporary YouTube Production Cultures” draws upon media studies, labor studies, and political theory to investigate how social media platforms engage U.S. free speech ideology in their governance practices, creator labor cultures, and economies. While legacy media presently face increasing political pressure to prioritize speech’s financial consequences over the freedom of its expression, social media platforms have taken it upon themselves to embed this logic directly into their documents of governance and algorithmic architecture. I argue that YouTube reconfigures the right to free speech through its advertiser-driven economy into the right to profit, prompting accusations from creators that the demonetization of their content constitutes a new form of censorship. This conception of democracy, which associates the freedom of speech with its profitability, derives from a neoliberal ethos of self-regulation and financial independence which YouTube builds into its policies to justify flexible governance decisions that maximize advertiser revenue. I trace how YouTube positions itself as having state-like authority to monetize the activity of its users and

examine how creators navigate this relationship through an affective economy of negative feeling built on a conflation between moral and economic value.

To describe the relationship between democratic ideology, platform economies and creator labor, I engage several theoretical frameworks and objects of analysis. In my discussion of the conflation between economic and moral value and its affective dimensions, I turn to German philosopher Max Scheler's (1874-1928) concept of Ressentiment. Scheler's concept serves as an interpretative framework for my interviews with True Crime content creators, who frequently encounter demonetization. I also perform a comparative rhetorical analysis of YouTube's user agreements and foundational documents of U.S. governance to assess how the platform positions itself as a democratic governing authority. This project, therefore, moves beyond platform studies to attend to the increasing presence of media technology corporations in U.S. political life.

Dedication

To my sister, Alyssa, for our shared love of YouTube.

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There are several people to thank, without whom this project would not be possible. I would like to thank my committee members, Stephen Groening, Mal Ahern, and James Tweedie. James, our conversations about democracy, protest and academia continue to inspire me to be a scholar rigorously engaged in the world. Mal, thank you for being a big sister, a friend and a mentor on this incredible journey. I will never forget the words you said to me during my qualifying exams. They remain posted on my fridge and will travel with me wherever this career takes me: *don't look down*. Steve, my immense gratitude cannot possibly be contained within these pages, so I will have to settle for naming just a few of the reasons that I could not have done this without you. Thank you for making me coffee every morning at the office (even when I complained that you did not brew it strong enough), for letting me bother you with endless questions when I did not yet have conviction in my ideas, for seeing me for who I really am—philosophy, literature, YouTube, and all— and for always believing in me. Your support means more than I will ever be able to express.

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would not have written an entire dissertation about YouTube. Thank you for reminding me of my love for YouTube when I needed it most. Without your recommendation that I watch Dan and Phil during my lonely nights of study abroad I never would have been inspired to uplift the creators who uplifted me.

To my friends in Seattle, in New York and in Paris, who supported me unconditionally whether we were 1 mile or 5,000 miles away from each other. Yijin Yang, I would not have survived this journey without our daily phone calls and check-ins. Thank you for cheering me on from the side of the pool, the high school newsroom, to now. I love you always. Asha Culhane-Husain, thank you for calling me no matter where in the world you were, for understanding the strangeness of re-becoming an American after Paris, and for cheering me on every step of the way. Jude Velez, thank you for the laughter and love even in the darkest moments. Dan Benson and Elizabeth Brasseale, for feeding me and sharing your beautiful family with me every week. And to Doug Anderson, our conversations have inspired me endlessly to be brave enough to say what I have always wanted to say. Thank you for giving me the courage to speak from my heart in this project and in the classroom. To all of you, I am eternally grateful.

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Introduction—Free Speech and The Right to Profit: Democracy in Crisis

In October 2025, one month after right-wing media personality and Turning Point USA co-founder Charlie Kirk was publicly assassinated, the multi-university coalition of political scientists at Bright Line Watch released their overall evaluation of United States democracy. Seven hundred and three political scientists across the country evaluated the country's performance upholding thirty-five key democratic principles, including toleration of peaceful protest, fair electoral district boundaries, neutral law enforcement, no interference with press, and free speech. They scored the U.S. 54/100, with governance practices that resemble that of mixed or illiberal democracy as compared with the full democracies of Canada (88) and Great Britain (83). Established in 2016 following President Donald Trump's first election, Bright Line Watch described ratings as a whole as "lower since President Trump returned to office" and noted that "expectations for 2027 remain pessimistic among experts."¹

In 2025 alone, the U.S. experienced many events that the coalition pointed to directly in their report as potential threats to democracy. On the same day he entered office for his second term, Trump established the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) and announced his intention to execute massive layoffs, resulting in cuts to nearly 400,000 government employees with the Department of Health and Human Services and the Department of Education among some of the most affected agencies.² Several months later on June 7, he deployed more than

¹ "Bright Line Watch September 2025 Survey." *Bright Line Watch*, 2025, <https://brightlinewatch.org/violence-redistricting-and-democratic-norms-in-trumps-america/>. Accessed 24 May 2026. The survey of experts was conducted from Sept. 5-17, 2025. A survey of the public was also conducted as part of the report from Sept. 5-16.

² Rogers, Kate. "One year after DOGE cuts, former federal workers find new roles." *CNBC*, 12 Feb 2026, <https://www.cnbc.com/2026/02/12/after-doge-cuts-federal-workers-new-roles.html>. Accessed 24 May 2026. My childhood best friend, Yijin Yang, who supported me on an infinite number of long-distance phone calls during the years I spent working on this project, was among one of the 352,000 government employees who lost their jobs as a result of DOGE's cuts.

2,000 National Guard forces and 700 Marines to Los Angeles, CA, treating public protests to the increased presence of Immigrations and Customs Enforcement (ICE) in the city and in several other sanctuary cities around the country as acts of insurrection, a decision that would ultimately foreshadow the murders of U.S. citizens Renee Good and Alex Pretti by ICE agents the following year in January 2026.³ That September, the same month that Bright Line Watch conducted their survey, U.S. District Judge Charles Breyer ruled that Trump had violated the Posse Comitatus Act prohibiting the exercise of military power in civilian law enforcement without approval from Congress.⁴ Little more than a week after Breyer's ruling, Kirk was assassinated at a debate staged by Turning Point USA at Utah Valley University. Anti-trans vitriol reached an apex online, fueled by major news outlets' obsessive coverage of the messages the shooter exchanged with his "trans lover" and the continued circulation of footage of the assassination on social media platforms.⁵ The results of a study by Johns Hopkins University's SNF Agora Institute released that November found that most Americans shared the sentiments of the Bright Line Watch report: U.S. democracy is in crisis.⁶

³ United States, Office of the President Donald Trump. "Memorandum on Department of Defense Security for the Protection of Department of Homeland Security Functions." *The White House*, 7 June 2025, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/06/department-of-defense-security-for-the-protection-of-department-of-homeland-security-functions/>. Accessed 24 May 2026.

⁴ Zinshteyn, Mikhail. "Trump Broke the law by sending National Guard to L.A., federal judge rules." *CalMatters*. 2 Sept. 2025, <https://calmatters.org/justice/2025/09/trump-national-guard-posse-comitatus/>. Accessed 24 May 2026.

⁵ An article published as recently as April 2026 by the Fox owned publication the New York Post continues to stoke anti-trans sentiment related to Kirk's assassination. For more, see Worrell, Georgia. "Accused Charlie Kirk killer Tyler Robinson's note to trans lover reveals just how twisted plot was." *New York Post*. 10 April 2026, <https://nypost.com/2026/04/10/us-news/accused-charlie-kirk-killer-tyler-robinsons-note-reveals-twisted-plot/>. Accessed 24 May 2026. For a discussion of how footage of the assassination circulated online, see "Graphic videos of the deadly shooting of Charlie Kirk quickly spread online." *YouTube*, uploaded by CBS News, 17 Sept. 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eRgSyTidepc>. Accessed 25 May 2026. At the time of writing, an age-restricted video showing Kirk's assassination uploaded by the Indian English-language news channel Republic World is still available to watch on YouTube.

⁶ Lentini, Andrew. "New Research Finds Americans Deeply Concerned with U.S. Democracy." *The Hub*, Johns Hopkins University, 23 Nov. 2025, <https://hub.jhu.edu/2025/11/23/agora-survey-democracy-concerns/>. Accessed 24 May 2026. According to the survey, 84% of 4,500 participants say that "democracy is in crisis or facing serious challenges."

In Bright Line Watch's assessment of Kirk's assassination, little was made of the role social media platforms played in this and other events evaluated as potential threats to democracy. The report notes only that videos of the assassination "circulated widely on social media" and that numerous people were fired or sanctioned by their employers as "backlash against reactions to Kirk's death that were seen as inappropriate."⁷ Urgent questions about the relationship between free speech and market incentives emerged with the wave of retaliatory firings of both private individuals and public figures like Jimmy Kimmel, whose late-night show was temporarily suspended by ABC after facing pressure from the Federal Communications Commission for suggesting on-air that Kirk's killer was a MAGA conservative. On the one hand, the economic retribution private individuals faced for expressing opinions, often on social media, that were deemed unpopular or "inappropriate" by supporters of the current administration indicates that employers have broad concern over how their workers' exercise of the right to free speech affects the profitability of their businesses.

On the other hand, ABC's submission to FCC pressure raises questions about the current relationship between media industries and the state, as media corporations with excessive financial influence increasingly align themselves with state authority. Can the media, whether press or otherwise, speak freely when their owners appease the state to protect their future profits? Most recently, CBS made the decision to cancel Stephen Colbert's *The Late Show* after 11 years, long known for his open criticism of Trump and the Republican Party. Although the network cited "financial reasons" as motivation for the cancellation, many believe that CBS, like ABC, chose to bow to political pressure.⁸ The show's cancellation also corresponds with the

⁷ "Bright Line Watch September 2025 Survey."

⁸ Del Barco, Mandalit. "Stephen Colbert and his late night hosts strike again as his show nears finale." *NPR*, 12 May 2026, <https://www.npr.org/2026/05/12/nx-s1-5819155/colbert-late-night-hosts-strike-again>. Accessed 27 May 2026. Colbert's last episode of *The Late Show* aired on 21 May 2026, although the CBS announced plans for the show's

acquisition of CBS's parent company Paramount by Skydance Media shortly after settling a lawsuit brought against them by Trump for \$16 million. The settlement, which also included FCC provisions such as dismantling DEI hiring practices, raised warranted suspicion that Paramount had essentially paid for federal approval for the merger. FCC Chairman Brendan Carr said of Trump's lawsuit and the merger that "For years, government officials just allowed those entities with execs sitting in Hollywood in New York to dictate the political narrative. And he has fundamentally changed the game. And you see that really having consequences that are just rushing all through media."⁹ Carr's statement that there exists a capital-T true "political narrative" that media corporations and their products, like CBS's *Late Show* or ABC's *Jimmy Kimmel Live*, distort and which the state must defend undermines the very same free speech principles that right-wing activists like Charlie Kirk claim are under attack by the Left. He suggests that the state has a right to protect the integrity of its "political narrative" (which really stands in for its unquestioned authority) by exerting financial pressure on those who host oppositional speech. For media industries, this designates that their speech is only free so long as it protects the conditions of their future profits. Byron Allen confirmed he understood this "change in the game" when asked by CBS Mornings about his plans for the show *Comics Unleashed* that will run in Colbert's spot. Allen responded definitively that there will be "no politics."¹⁰

Under the current conditions, speech's economic consequences—its potential to alienate certain customers and investors or to invite state or federal reprisal—supersede the protection of

cancellation back in June 2025. In his interview with NPR, Colbert called Jon Stewart, frequent host of Comedy Central's *The Daily Show*, the "designated survivor. Someone has to survive for the president to be mad at."

⁹ Bennett, Geoff and Courtney Norris. "The politics behind the \$8B Paramount-Skydance merger." *PBS News*, 25 July 2025, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/the-politics-behind-the-8b-paramount-skydance-merger>. Accessed 27 May 2026.

¹⁰ "Byron Allen on bringing 'Comics Unleashed' to the CBS late-night spot." *YouTube*. Uploaded by CBS Mornings 20 May 2026, <http://youtube.com/watch?v=zhQZiEYlXl0&t=137s>. Accessed 27 May 2026.

its right to expression. In other words, free speech's political value has been reconfigured around its economic value. In Chapter 2, I elaborate on this reconfiguration in the context of social media platforms as a conflation between free speech and monetized speech. The consequence "rushing all through media" that Carr fails to recognize is that the democratic values we take to be fundamental and inalienable are being reworked and redefined by the close alignment of state and corporate power. As Wendy Brown explains of the current alt-right upswing in her book *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism: The Rise of Anti-democratic Politics in the West* (2019), "Failure to predict, understand, or effectively contest these developments is due partly to blinding assumptions about perduring Western values and institutions, especially progress and Enlightenment and liberal democracy."¹¹ In addition to misleading assumptions about liberal democratic values and the institutions which uphold them, incomplete and even fallacious beliefs about the relationship between media and politics vastly limit our ability to comprehend and successfully confront the ongoing crisis of democracy. While Bright Line Watch's September 2025 survey did report a decline in expert's evaluations of free speech and free press, they provide no analysis of how this decline might indicate that concept of free speech itself has shifted with the merging of democratic and economic values. For Kirk's assassination, which Bright Line Watch acknowledged prompted nationwide debates over free speech, experts only evaluated the event in terms of the performance of the democratic principle "Government effectively prevents private actors from engaging in politically-motivated violence or intimidation," and likewise only had members of the public who participated in the study

¹¹ Brown, Wendy. *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism: The Rise of Anti-democratic Politics in the West*. Columbia University Press, 2019, pp. 2.

respond to the question of whether or not they approved of the shooting.¹² Left unevaluated was the immediate and intense memeification of Kirk and his assassination by online users.

The trending AI-generated song, “we are Charlie Kirk, we carry the flame, we’ll fight for the Gospel, we’ll honor his name,” its recent remix into a dance to be performed alongside the claim of being the first person to “Kirk” in a given location or scenario, and Internet slang terms like “lowkirkenuinely” carry little to no political message.¹³ Inclusion of the song, dance, or slang in a post does not reject anti-trans rhetoric or express a stance on rising concerns over free speech and politically motivated violence.¹⁴ Although to a certain extent these memes can be regarded as acts of online resistance to rising alt-right conservatism (as indicated by the frequency of the comment “protect queer art” on such posts), above all, they flatten Charlie Kirk and the implications of his assassination into content designed to generate views and ad-revenue. As Kate Eichhorn notes of the infamous “Instagram egg” stock photo that accrued over 50 million likes in 2019, what makes something “content” is its deemphasis of what it has “to communicate or to whom,” in place of the fact “that it was circulating at all.”¹⁵ If the medium is indeed the message, then the message is that political affect has collapsed into social media platforms and their economies of circulation.

¹² “Bright Line Watch September 2025 Survey.”

¹³ The song, simply known as “We are Charlie Kirk” is attributed to Spalexma, presumed to be an AI-generated act who has released other AI-generated Christian-themed music. The song appears as the last track on the album titled, *Charlie Kirk Forever Alive* released 18 Sept. 2025, though the song itself was released two days earlier. At the time of writing, “We are Charlie Kirk” has over 10 million streams on Spotify. For more, see Murray, Conor. “AI-Generated ‘We are Charlie Kirk’ Song tops Spotify Chart After Going Viral on TikTok.” *Forbes*, 20 Nov. 2025, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/conormurray/2025/11/20/apparently-ai-generated-song-honoring-charlie-kirk-goes-viral-but-its-far-from-the-first/>. Accessed 27 May 2026.

¹⁴ Some of the top search results for “Charlie Kirk dance” using my TikTok account at the time of writing include phrases such as “First to Kirk in a Japanese Yukata,” “first person to do the charlie kirk dance on their period in 2026,” “First to Kirk at my local gym while holding weights” and “first person to do the Charlie Kirk at Charlie Kirk’s last known location.” This last post, perhaps the most politically inclined of the four, has 44.9K likes at the time of writing. See, aela [@bbdollbbface]. “paying my disrespects.” *TikTok*, 2026, https://www.tiktok.com/@bbdollbbface/video/7641078977276218637?_r=1&_t=ZT-96fGYF4eeJp. Accessed 25 May 2026.

¹⁵ Eichhorn, Katie. *Content*. MIT Press, 2022, pp. 4.

While, undeniably, reducing Charlie Kirk to a song and dance trend that mocks his death does something to discredit his politics, the subsumption of feelings, reactions and perceptions about U.S. political life into social media content suggests that these platforms and their corporate owners/operators do more to shape our relationship to politics than just providing the tools for accelerating communication and access to information. That the technical affordances of these networks allow fallacious or harmful speech to spread receives sizable attention in both popular discourse and in academic inquiry. Much has been said, for example, of Trump's use of Twitter (now X) to incite the January 6 attack on the U.S. Capitol building in 2021. Reflecting on the attack a year later, an NPR article with the headline, "How Trump's 'will be wild!' tweet drew rioters to the Capitol on Jan. 6," boiled down the platform's role in the insurrection to the testimony of one of the rioters, Stephen Ayres: "He basically put out, you know, come to the 'Stop the Steal' rally, you know, and I felt like I needed to be down here." Ayres felt politically galvanized after seeing Trump's call to action online. Without Twitter's ability to provide Trump with a massive built-in audience for his false claims of election fraud, the attacks would not have taken place on the scale that they did. Twitter's termination of Trump's account reveals that the platform itself regards its relationship to democratic responsibility in much of the same way. In their public statement regarding the termination of his account, Twitter explained that Trump violated the platform's policy against the Glorification of Violence, stating that two of his tweets "are likely to inspire others to replicate the violent acts that took place on January 6, 2021, and that there are multiple indicators that they are being received and understood as encouragement to do so."¹⁶ Twitter's statement frames social media's part to play in potential threats to democracy as a problem of content moderation. Trump's account had to

¹⁶ X Blog. "Permanent suspension of @realDonaldTrump." X, 8 Jan. 2021, https://blog.x.com/en_us/topics/company/2020/suspension. Accessed 27 May 2026.

be terminated because the content of his speech violated the platform's community guidelines. The threat to democracy, therefore, and Twitter's liability in the matter, would be resolved so long as Trump no longer had access to the platform. Removing Trump from Twitter and other major platforms, however, has done nothing to abate his political influence or diminish the power of the alt-right.¹⁷ If anything, it has emboldened his supporters' claims that Trump's right to free speech was being unjustly denied.

Similarly, in academic circles, questions about free speech online often concentrate on the problem of how platforms accelerate the spread of mis- and disinformation. At the University of Washington, where I conducted this research, the Center for an Informed Public (CIP), describes its interdisciplinary initiative as translating "research about misinformation and disinformation into policy, technology design, curriculum development, and public engagement."¹⁸ CIP co-founder Kate Starbird, who along with her colleagues working under the Election Integrity Partnership (EIP) was the target of a 2023 Louisiana federal suit filed by those their study had identified as spreading politically motivated disinformation, primarily positions platforms as a tool which those with political power use to strategically frame information in a way that supports their aims. In 2023 article, Starbird argues that "we are more often misled not by false evidence but by misinterpretations and mischaracterizations" of information online, leading to "participatory disinformation." She points to "SharpieGate," a voter-fraud conspiracy that went viral after voters in the 2020 presidential election were concerned that ballots which they had filled out with sharpie pens would not be counted, as an

¹⁷ Following his permanent termination from Twitter, Snapchat, and Twitch and temporary suspensions from YouTube and Meta's Facebook and Instagram, he launched his own social media platform Truth Social in February 2022 funded by his own Trump Media and Technology Group. For more, see Clayton, James. "Trump to launch new social media platform TRUTH social." *BBC*, 20 Oct. 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-58990330>. Accessed 27 May 2026.

¹⁸ Center for an Informed Public. "What We Do." University of Washington, <https://www.cip.uw.edu/about/>. Accessed 28 May 2026.

example of how of mis- and disinformation stems not only from the communication of falsehoods from elites to their audiences, but also “from a motivated crowd who was willing (and in some cases eager) to misperceive the world through the ‘rigged election’ frame.”¹⁹ While Starbird’s research nuances the typical narrative about social media platforms as the hosts of false or dangerous speech by drawing attention to how audiences and politicians alike engage conspiratorial or fallacious narrative frames, her critical emphasis still centers speech content as the primary concern for democracy. Although the U.S. Supreme Court eventually ruled that Louisiana had no legal standing to bring the suit, which had accused EIP of participating in “the largest mass surveillance and mass-censorship program in American history” to violate the First Amendment rights of those with “disfavored viewpoints on social media,” its filing in connection with Starbird’s work highlights a fundamental assumption about free speech and social media platforms across party lines.²⁰

Protecting free speech is frequently regarded as a battle over speech’s content where social media platforms play gatekeeper. These gatekeepers are motivated by economic concerns not unlike those by CBS and NBC. I argue, however, that the power dynamics have flipped in emerging social media industries. Whereas legacy media increasingly face political pressure that encourages them to prioritize speech’s financial consequences over the freedom of its expression, social media platforms have taken it upon themselves to embed the equation of free speech with profitable speech into the organizing principle of their production cultures and their economies.

Inspired by Jennifer Holt’s most recent publication *Cloud Policy: A History of Regulating*

¹⁹ Starbird, Kate. “Facts, frames, and (mis)interpretations: Understanding rumors as collective sensemaking.” *Center for an Informed Public*, University of Washington, 6 Dec 2023, <https://www.cip.uw.edu/2023/12/06/rumors-collective-sensemaking-kate-starbird/>. Accessed 28 May 2026.

²⁰ United States, Western District of Louisiana, Monroe Division. *Jill Hines et. al. v. Alex Stamos et. al.* Case no. 3:23-CV-00571, 2 May 2023, DocumentCloud, https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/23854123-show_multidocs5/#document/p56/a2352173. Accessed 28 May 2026.

Pipelines, Platforms, and Data (2024), I examine how platform regulation practices, particularly the management and monetization of user speech, shape how we understand democratic governance. I not only share in her efforts to bring together often siloed histories and disciplinary perspectives from media studies, legal studies and political economy, but share in her critical emphasis on digital infrastructures as “a primary locus of governance [...] where sovereignty is being reasserted and redefined.”²¹ In tracing the regulatory histories of telecommunications and Internet infrastructure, digital platforms and data storage (collectively, “the cloud”) Holt demonstrates how much of the original promise of the Internet has been eclipsed by the forces of monopoly capital which organize policymaking around profit above all else. I focus closely on how these original promises, which position the Internet as a technology of democracy, are strategically invoked by social media platforms like YouTube to both encourage users to continue creating speech which can be advertised upon and to justify their flexible governance decisions that unevenly manage user speech to maximize corporate profits. YouTube, which sets the standard for platform economies that advertise on user-generated content, integrates the democratic rhetoric of self-regulation and individual responsibility into their monetization guidelines.

Drawing on Tung-Hui Hu’s *Prehistory of the Cloud* (2015), which Holt also cites as an influence on her work, I consider how the language media technology corporations use to describe their products and services evokes powerful cultural beliefs that obfuscate their motives.²² In the spirit of Hu’s analysis of the term “cloud,” I argue that YouTube uses the language of democracy in its Terms and Conditions and Community Guidelines to place the platform within the same genealogy as American techno-utopianism which conceived of the

²¹ Holt, Jennifer. *Cloud Policy: A History of Regulating Pipelines, Platforms, and Data*. MIT Press, 2024, pp. 1.

²² Hu, Tung-Hui. *A Prehistory of the Cloud*. MIT Press, 2015.

Internet as a user-driven space of free expression outside the reaches of corporate and state authority. In particular, I analyze how the Terms and Guidelines draw upon the language of the founding documents of American governance to position the platform's authority as functioning like that of a neoliberal state, which associates the freedom of capital with the freedom of individuals.

As the users which most regularly engage with these documents of governance, content creators and their labor cultures which emerge around navigating the profitability of their speech, serve as an important site for studying how social media platforms shape how people understand democracy and philosophies of governance. Most central to this project, therefore, is the work of John Caldwell, whose studies of Hollywood film and television production culture (2008) and more recently of emerging creator industries (2023) provide my methodological framework for examining YouTube content creator labor.²³ I model his integration of ethnographic interviews with media laborers and close textual analysis of trade artifacts—in my case, public statements made by platform operators and documents of platform governance—to demonstrate how content creators internalize the democratic language found in YouTube's guidelines as a strategy for dealing with the emotional and material consequences of demonetization. My study of YouTube creator production cultures also builds on the wealth of scholarship of online creator labor that responds to the development of the platform internet, including Theresa Senft's study of camgirls (2008), Brooke Erin Duffy's work on women's aspirational labor on Twitter and blogging platforms (2017) and T.L. Taylor's study of Twitch and livestream gaming cultures

²³ Caldwell, John. *Production Culture: Industrial Reflexivity and Critical Practice in Film and Television*. Duke University Press, 2008.

Caldwell, John. *Specworld: Folds, Faults, and Fractures in Embedded Creator Industries*. University of California Press, 2023.

(2018).²⁴ With a multidisciplinary approach that draws upon theories of governance, media industry regulation and an ethnography of content creator labor, I aim to move beyond platform studies to argue that social media platforms shapes how people understand democracy in the U.S. by creating economies of negative feeling that equate free speech with profitable speech which can be sustained by the persistence of a techno-utopian democratic imaginary.

In *Chapter 1—Social Media in the Age of Ressentiment*, I revive the work of much overlooked German philosopher Max Scheler (1912) to argue that Ressentiment is the dominant affect of social media. Scheler's description of Ressentiment as an emotion that arises from value delusions and his analysis of how capitalism provides the conditions for conflation between moral and economic value contextualizes my discussion of how this affect drives social media economies under the conditions of networked late capital. I examine public statements made by YouTube content creators in response to the launch of the Advertiser-Friendly Content Guidelines in 2016 to uncover how feelings of Ressentiment are connected to the conflation between moral and economic value, whereby a platform is considered good and democratic to the extent that it allows its creators to earn ad-revenue on their speech. I demonstrate how creators' beliefs that platforms can and ought to be regarded as democratic spaces is connected to long-standing techno-utopian narratives about the Internet and as a public space of free expression found in public statements made by platform operators.

In *Chapter 2—Americans Dream of Techno-utopian Sheep: The Internet as Technology of Democracy*, I address how this techno-utopian imaginary that considers platforms as public

²⁴ Senft, Theresa M. *Camgirls: Celebrity and Community in the Age of Social Networks*. Peter Lang, 2008.
Erin Duffy, Brooke. *(Not) Getting Paid to do What You Love: Gender, Social Media, and Aspirational Work*. Yale University Press, 2017.

Taylor, TL. *Watch Me Play: Twitch and the Rise of Game Live Streaming*. Princeton University Press, 2018.

spaces of free expression presumes an analogy between the democratic state and the social media platform. Through a comparative rhetorical analysis of YouTube's documents of platform governance and founding documents of U.S. governance inspired by the work of Tarleton Gillespie, I argue that the analogy between the state and the platform draws upon a conflation between free speech and monetized speech.²⁵ The central role the conflation between free speech and monetized speech plays in arguing for the legitimacy of the authority platforms exercise over their users reveals that the version of the state to which the state-platform analogy refers to is decidedly neoliberal in nature, thus positioning the freedom for the corporate platform to profit as a democratic good. I assess the strength of the analogy between the neoliberal state and the corporate platform in addition to the related analogies between the citizen-user and the law-guideline by comparing the language found in the Constitution, Bill of Rights, and Declaration of Independence with the language of YouTube's Terms of Service and Community Guidelines. I then turn to John Perry Barlowe's 1996 "Declaration of Independence of Cyberspace" as an example of how the logic of the state-platform analogy which centers upon free speech ideology has origins before the platform internet.

While the state-platform analogy allows YouTube to rhetorically and ideologically justify the inconsistent management of speech to maximize advertiser-revenue, the following two chapters are dedicated to examining how YouTube content creators engage the techno-utopian assumptions of the analogy and its conflation between free and monetized speech to continue laboring under precarious conditions. My case studies focus on the creators within the True Crime content community and their experiences of monetizing their videos through of Self-Certification, which asks creators to pre-flag their content according to the Advertiser-Friendly

²⁵ Gillespie, Tarleton. "The Politics of 'Platforms.'" *New Media & Society*, vol. 12, no. 3, 2010, pp. 347-364.

Content Guidelines. The experiences of those laboring in the True Crime content community provides relevant insights to the question of how social media platforms shape our relationship to democracy for two reasons: First, they experience significant barriers to monetization due to the potential sensitivity of the subjects they discuss. The frequency with which they encounter demonetization suggests that they also frequently interface with YouTube's documents of governance in contesting decisions that result in revenue loss. True Crime content creators, therefore, provide a clear example of how the language of the Terms of Service and Community Guidelines shape how they relate to the ideas of censorship, free speech and democratic responsibility. Second, the topic True Crime content creators produce videos about directly addresses questions of state authority, mechanisms of governance and law enforcement, suggesting that they may be more attuned to the effect that online speech has on the lives of individuals offline than the average YouTube creator.

In *Chapter 3—Welcome to the True Crime Content Community*, I provide an overview of the True Crime content community by describing its history and its relationship to and legacy media industries. Drawing on my field observations from CrimeCon 2023 in Orlando, FL and 2025 in Denver, CO, I describe how YouTube True Crime content creation exists in competition with legacy media production of true crime media, the latter of which is keenly invested in trying to find ways to capitalize on the emerging industries of social media and streaming video on-demand (SVOD) and free ad-supported streaming television (FAST) platforms. I examine the case studies of three content creators who transitioned from their roles in legacy media industries to YouTube content production in search of more creative freedom. I center the experiences of two of these interlocutors who bucked the trend of social media content creators aiming to break into legacy media in their choice to leave behind stable and successful careers in filmmaking and

news media to pursue independent content creation. I suggest that this flipped industry trajectory is particular to true crime media in the way that those who labor around this topic may have broader distrust for legacy media's alignment with state power.

In *Chapter 4—Monetizing Ressentiment: YouTube Self-Certification* I present the case studies of two True Crime content creators who have encountered significant instances of demonetization and subsequently communicate negative feelings about monetization labor. By analyzing the differences and similarities in their career trajectories in relationship to monetization, I demonstrate how the language of YouTube's Self-Certification and Advertiser-Friendly Content Guidelines shape their relationships to earning compensation around the feeling of Ressentiment. Selections from my ethnographic interviews reveal that the negative feelings my interlocutors express towards the platform become inwardly directed, whereby demonetization denotes that you are a "bad creator" and earning ad-revenue means that you are a "good creator" in YouTube's cultural economy. I unpack how the democratic rhetoric deployed in YouTube's documents of platform governance inform their descriptions of what it means to be a good or bad creator. The fact Ressentiment reappears in conjunction with creators' own conflations between free and monetized speech suggests that negative feelings are an essential component of YouTube's platform infrastructure. In *Chapter 5—Conclusions: Free Speech Beyond Ressentiment, Beyond YouTube*, I articulate future directions for thinking about the relationship between social media and democracy and suggest new ways of thinking about what constitutes the political and political action. I also provide insight into how thinking about audiences as a form of platform authority can uplift creator agency.

Although this study poses a critique of one of the many infrastructures of neoliberal late capitalism, it is important to note that not everyone experiences the effects of the Network

Society equally. While my research examines a particularly privileged subset of digital users, whose participation in YouTube's digital network serves either as a form of casual entertainment, revenue, or both, not everyone is *in-network*, even if the network is the current dominant structural and organizational mode. As Manuel Castells argues, the digital networked communications technologies that drive global economic, social and political flows do not necessarily create the same conditions for all who exist within the scope of contemporary capital.²⁶ Those who are *out-of-network* include but are not limited to those who do not have access to digital telecommunications, those whose manual wage labor, often treated as flexible and disposable, drive manufacturing segments of the economy (even those responsible for piecing together such technologies may not have equal access to "The Network"), and those whose sociocultural position is regarded as undesirable to a digitally networked society. Being *in-* or *out-of-network*, therefore, is not simply a matter of choosing to be an active Internet user or not. It is a relational position of privilege within society which, like the protocols which hierarchically structure our networked communication activities, place certain individuals, users or otherwise, in a position of power over others.

²⁶ Castells, Manuel. *The Rise of the Network Society*. Blackwell Publishers, 1996.

Chapter 1: Social Media in the Age of Ressentiment

At the beginning of the undergraduate course I teach on YouTube and social media analysis, I ask my students to reflect generally upon their experiences with social media. In response to what I imagine be a topic that most students would be excited to talk about, I am always surprised by how many of them report in these opening reflections that their experiences online are largely negative. Despite their prolonged feelings of dissatisfaction, insecurity and unhappiness, many of my students concede that they do not really envision a world which does not demand their constant attention online. While I do receive several comments that replicate the discourse of digital utopianism, (“I feel that social media is a blessing...”), I also frequently receive comments like these:

Student A: I use many different platforms, but my experience on them is mostly the same—it’s really fun until it isn’t. It’s a love-hate relationship for me. And even though I don’t spend as much time on social media as I used to, I don’t see myself ever stepping away from it entirely. It gives me too much information and entertainment for me to stop using it.

Student B: My relationship with social media is toxic. Although it provides me with a mindless outlet, it also contributes significantly to my issues with self-confidence. Although I’d like to step away from it, I know I would feel like I’m missing out if I did. I feel very conflicted about it.

Student C: I think I’ve become very dependent on my devices. They’re like an accessory to me and who I am. In an extreme way, social media is like water: humans can’t live without water. I can’t live without my phone.²⁷

Even at the end of the course, when I ask students to revisit their initial reflections and assess what they’ve learned, several of them conclude that the overwhelming tone of the course is

²⁷ *YouTube in Focus* is an all-levels elective course open to students of all majors. These anonymized comments have been paraphrased from the responses of three different students who completed the course in Autumn 2023.

pessimistic—that they have a lot less agency online than they once assumed, and that alternative solutions to the unjust systems of algorithmic bias/harm, E-waste, and ghost work are not clear.²⁸

The goals of my pedagogy are not to dishearten this generation of digital natives, but rather to nuance their understanding of the relationships between technology, society and the self. Does nuance equate to pessimism? Or is it a simple case, diagnosed by Henry James in *Portrait of a Lady*, of, “the more you know, the more unhappy you are”?

This chapter examines how economic conditions give rise to affective patterns which shape systems of political value. I argue that social media platforms reward and reenforce the negative emotions that arise from their use. Drawing on the philosophy of Max Scheler (1874-1928), I diagnose Ressentiment as the affect which dominates present experiences with social media platforms. The ubiquity of social media platforms not only normalizes the experience of Ressentiment but also positions these technologies as major actors in shaping the perceived relationship between the value of their economies and the values embedded in the political contexts in which they operate. I argue that the conditions of the “Network Society,” described by Manuel Castells as the confluence of neoliberal capitalism and digital networked communications technologies, both accelerate and reward Ressentiment’s conflations between economic and moral value. In the context of the United States, these value conflations

²⁸ You don’t have to look far to find a mountain of contemporary examples of Internet negativity. For instance, while writing this chapter, the infamous “Elmo trauma dump” incident occurred when the beloved Sesame Street puppet posted on X (formerly Twitter), “Elmo is just checking in! How is everybody doing?” The post elicited a digital wave of existential dread in the form of more than 13,000 replies, where users voiced their despair with responses like, “I’m at my lowest. Thanks for asking,” “The world is burning around us, Elmo. No amount of tickles can fix this,” and “I feel like we all died in 2020.” The incident led several media outlets to publish articles or air segments briefly addressing the notion of a public mental health crisis, but the traction generated from the outcry from Internet users begins and ends with the meme-ification of affect. Depression, suffering and general existential horror continue to be packaged into consumable media bites that keep Internet users using social media platforms (and viewing advertising, while they’re at it). See, @Elmo. “Elmo is just checking in! How is everybody doing?” X, 29 Jan 2024, https://x.com/elmo/status/1751995117366296904?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw. Accessed 12 Feb 2024.

reconfigure current discourse about the wellbeing of democracy around how the freedom of speech can be secured by technologies of the free market.

I turn to YouTube and its platform economy as a critical site for examining how neoliberal markets structured by digital communications networks reward the conflation between speech's democratic and economic value. In particular, I analyze the launch of the Advertiser-Friendly Content Guidelines in 2016 as an economic restructuring that contributed to creator feelings of Ressentiment, which gave rise to frequent associations between censorship and the demonetization of their content. I frame the launch of Self-Certification in 2019, which shifted the labor of content monetization onto creators, as a governance strategy that amplified existing feelings of Ressentiment into YouTube's economy and, therefore, reinforced creators' negative feelings as an essential component of the platform's infrastructure. Taken together, the reconfiguration of content's monetizability around advertiser expectations and its designation as a creator responsibility institutionalized Ressentiment's conflations between economic and moral value, whereby creators regard the degree of their freedom of speech on the platform with the degree to which they can profit. By concretizing this affective pattern in their economy and governance practices, YouTube not only creates a flexible system for maximizing platform revenues but also reinforces the broader perception that the status of speech on social media platforms speaks for the condition of U.S. democracy.

As a rarely cited figure in studies of political economy, I provide background into Scheler's intellectual biography and outline his formulation of Ressentiment as an affect that arises from conflations of value. I distinguish his interpretation of the concept from Nietzsche's, with whom Ressentiment is more frequently associated, to demonstrate that Schler places stronger critical emphasis on the role of economic conditions in contributing to affective

patterns. My claims about Ressentiment as the dominant affect of digital platform media refer to Raymond Williams' concept of "structures of feeling" to argue for the important role that affect has in structuring perceptions and experiences at a cultural scale. I refer to Castell's definition of the Network Society to describe how the economic, political and technological context of social media platforms amplifies and accelerates the affect which Scheler had initially ascribed to industrial capital. Next, I turn to YouTube as the primary case study for how platform economies structure and reinforce the affective patterns of Ressentiment and its conflation between moral and economic value. Within the context of YouTube's operation in the U.S., Ressentiment's value conflations associate the democratic value of the platform with the profitability the speech it hosts. To explain how YouTube built an economy that creates feelings of Ressentiment, I provide a brief history of the creation of the platform's Advertiser-Friendly Content Guidelines in 2016, and the subsequent reactions expressed by top creators. I frame the launch of the Self-Certification program three years later as a governance practice which financially rewarded creators' feelings of Ressentiment by making the advertiser-suitability (and therefore the monetization decisions) of content each individual creator's responsibility. I read the public statements made by creators in response to the launch of the guidelines alongside the statements of corporate platform operators about social media platforms as public spaces to assess how popular discourse in the U.S. positions social media platforms as democratic microcosms of free speech. I close by suggesting that the broad assumption that social media platforms are public spaces of free expression can be further understood as a presumed analogy between the state and the platform, which I explore in the next chapter.

The secondary literature on Scheler's concept of Ressentiment is scant.²⁹ The most contemporaneous discussion of Ressentiment can be found in Wendy Brown's *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism: The Rise of Anti-democratic Politics in the West* (2019), although she draws upon Nietzsche's rather than Scheler's formulation. Brown positions Ressentiment as an emotion of the right-wing populist political turn in the United States, whose advocates justify inhibiting the freedom of others and dismantling democracy with the very same neoliberal logics which, in flattening everyone into "human capital all the way down and all the way in," diminish the historic privilege of male whiteness.³⁰ Referring to Nietzsche allows Brown to align Ressentiment with his concept of nihilism as a crisis of values. She diagnoses this crisis of values as directly tied to the fact that market capital has become "both reality principle and moral truth," therefore legitimizing economic inequalities as *real*, fundamental moral inequalities.³¹ To reject this organizing principle, Brown argues that white, male, right-wing subjects who feel Ressentiment and its associated emotions of "rancor, rage, reaction to humiliation and suffering" at their ebbing dominance, double down on nihilism as the freedom to attack, dismantle and deride the social and the political—what Nietzsche would characterize as the will to power.³² She suggests that the emotional politics of Ressentiment have created their own distinctly anti-

²⁹ A quick search for secondary literature accessible through the University of Washington libraries' online database using the search term "Scheler Ressentiment" produces fewer than 100 results at the time of writing, with a majority of texts written in a language other than English. For example, the first recommended result entitled, "Concept of Ressentiment by Max Scheler and its Contemporary Relevance" was published in a Ukrainian journal of philosophy. A significant portion the results are reviews of Scheler's original text, and many of the peer-reviewed articles appear in sociological or theological journals, due primarily to Ressentiment's origins in Nietzsche's writings on Christianity. The only result situated directly within the field of Cinema and Media Studies is an article published in the UK-based Journal of Popular Television about the popular American TV show *Better Call Saul* (2015-2022). See Peirson, David. "Resentment and Ressentiment as Motivating Forces in *Better Call Saul*," *Journal of Popular Television*, vol. 10, no. 3, 2022, pp. 269-283, and Vakhtang, Kebuldaze. "Concept of Ressentiment by Max Scheler and its Contemporary Relevance." *Philosophical Thought*, vol. 2, 2024, pp. 105-116.

³⁰ Brown, Wendy. *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism: The Rise of Anti-democratic Politics in the West*. Columbia University Press, 2019, pp. 163.

³¹ Ibid 168.

³² Ibid 175.

democratic system of values, which relies on historically justified claims of supremacy and entitlement.

While I share Brown's analysis that neoliberalism's rejection of democratic politics and social wellbeing in exchange for market logics has created a crisis of values which can be emotionally tracked through Ressentiment, I examine a set of subjects who experience these feelings other than those sympathetic to the alt-right. Although I did not ask my interlocutors to identify themselves politically, none of them expressed views which aligned them with the anti-establishment, religious-radical, male white-supremacists described by Brown. The disempowerment experienced by my interlocutors is not directly tied to their race, gender and class identities, but rather their status as creative laborers in a platform economy built on user-generated content. Furthermore, I turn to Scheler's formulation of the affect to emphasize the political-economic context of Ressentiment, whereas Nietzsche addresses the affect strictly in terms of its context within Judeo-Christian morality.

Moira Weigel examines the psychology of the same political group of interest to Brown. Rather than Scheler's or Nietzsche's Ressentiment, Weigel revisits Theodor Adorno et. al.'s *The Authoritarian Personality* (1950) to describe the fascist personality type associated with members of the contemporary right-wing movement in the United States. Noting the fact that the mass cultural context of industrial capital in which Adorno conceived of the concept has transformed into the digitally networked context of post-industrial capital, Weigel suggests that, like Wendy Hui Kyong Chun's analysis of software, the authoritarian personality "must have been *updated to remain the same*."³³ She characterizes these changes under the moniker of the "authoritarian personality 2.0," which reorders the 20th century fascist's conflict between

³³ Weigel, Moira. "The Authoritarian Personality 2.0." *Polity*, vol. 54, no. 1, 2022, pp. 153.

“surface conventionality and underlying rebelliousness” into a celebration of “familiar forms of prejudice, which correspond to deeply entrenched forms of inequality, as countercultural.”³⁴ Like Brown’s proposition that Ressentiment creates its own system of values built on historical claims to the supremacy and entitlement of white maleness, Weigel’s authoritarian personality 2.0 draws its sense of superiority from historically institutionalized power differentials. Although she acknowledges neoliberalism’s broad transformations in its “commodification of social life” and its replacement of “society by network, democracy by markets,” she centers the algorithmic logics of personalization built into digital platforms as a key factor in amplifying fascist radicalization, noting “that there were white supremacists in the United States before YouTube does not mean that YouTube has done nothing to and for white supremacy.”³⁵ For Weigel, the language of software is an explanatory tool for the contemporary evolution of fascist personalities, whereas for Brown it is the ideological underpinnings of neoliberalism. For this project, I aim to walk between the two.

Weigel’s and Brown’s writings on the psychological and emotional qualities of contemporary right-wing politics benefits from adjacent studies of affect, which examine feelings, typically regarded as individual subjective experiences, as historically culturally, socially and materially situated. Although he does not use the term affect in his writings, Raymond Williams provides the foundations for media and cultural studies’ critical interest in affect. His concept “structures of feeling,” whose idiosyncrasies I elaborate on in greater detail later in the chapter, describes the emotional patterns which dominate a society and culture in a particular moment in time. Often named retrospectively, Williams suggests that art provides unique access to historical structures of feeling to the extent that artists transcribe “the deepest

³⁴ Weigel 151.

³⁵ Ibid 177-178.

feelings in the lived experiences of the time.”³⁶ In his writings on the English novel, Williams argues that artistic modes of expression dramatize the values of the moment in which the artist lived, and therefore records “the pressure and structure of active experience, creating forms, creating life” that communicates something about his or her lived experience which has “not yet [been] quite arranged as institutions or ideas.”³⁷ The vagueness of his definition (or perhaps his resistance to outlining a stable, concrete definition of the concept) of structures of feeling speaks to their emergent quality. In other words, Williams’ contribution to the study of affect notes the intellectual slipperiness of ascribing a set of feelings to an entire population who did not all equally create cultural expressions to be publicly accessed by the scholar.

Lauren Berlant’s (2011) concept of “cruel optimism” more squarely falls into media studies’ contemporary interest in affect. Like Williams’ attention to the English novel as indicative of structures of feeling, Berlant draws on selected poetry from U.S. writers John Ashbury and Charles Johnson and Canadian poet Geoff Ryman to evidence the cruel optimism that structures the attachments normative to contemporary desire. Berlant defines cruel optimism as “a relation of attachment whose realization is discovered either to be *impossible*, sheer fantasy, or too possible, and toxic...[it] is the condition of maintaining an attachment to a problematic object *in advance* of its loss.”³⁸ Without building her analytical framework on the political-economic conditions of neoliberalism or market capitalism, she situates this toxic form of attachment which maintains desire for the unattainable object at a significant emotional cost to “the contemporary world of even of relative wealth, as in the United States,” in which “the labor

³⁶ Williams, Raymond. *The Long Revolution*. 1961. Penguin Books, 1965, pp. 84. Also quoted in Simpson, David. “Feelings for Structures, Voicing ‘History.’” *Cultural Materialism: On Raymond Williams*, edited by Christopher Prendergast. University of Minnesota Press, 1995, 29-50.

³⁷ Williams, Raymond. *The English Novel from Dickens to Lawrence*. Oxford University Press, 1970. pp. 138, 192. Also quoted in Simpson

³⁸ Berlant, Lauren. “Cruel Optimism.” *The Affect Theory Reader*, edited by Gregg, Melissa and Gregory Siegworth. Duke University Press, pp. 94.

of reproducing life in the contemporary world is also the activity of being worn out by it.”³⁹ In her analysis of Ashbury’s untitled poem, Berlant associates the affect of cruel optimism with the unsatisfying, unfulfilling nature of the American Dream, whose pursuit not only does not allow for the space and time to be curious about other conceptions of success and happiness which might be more feasibly achieved, but also reflects the choice to be “deadened citizens, happy to be the color someone else has placed inside of the lines.”⁴⁰ Although Berlant’s concept of cruel optimism in some ways describes YouTube content creators who continue to labor under the precarious conditions of an exploitative industry with the hope that they may eventually gain control over their own labor and revenue, I favor Scheler’s approach for his consideration of political and economic conditions in his study of Ressentiment. A precise and thorough analysis of the political and economic conditions of cruel optimism is noticeably lacking in Berlant’s work. In addition, I prefer Ressentiment over the concept of cruel optimism for Scheler’s attention to how emotional patterns engage systems of moral value.

Contemporary philosopher Byung-Chul Han better exemplifies analyses of affect in the discipline of media studies that emphasize the political and economic context of emotions. While his earlier works such as *The Burnout Society* (2010) and *The Transparency Society* (2012) describe the emotional demands of living and laboring with digital networked communications technologies, primarily focusing on feelings of exhaustion related to obsessive productivity, self-betterment and demands for constant self-disclosure, Han fully articulates how neoliberal political-economic conditions shape affect which, in turn, shape conceptions of freedom in *Psychopolitics: Neoliberalism and New Technologies of Power* (2014).⁴¹ Han characterizes the

³⁹ Berlant 97.

⁴⁰ Ibid 99.

⁴¹ Media scholar Tung-Hui Hu also discusses the overwhelming sense of exhaustion felt by those who are constantly engaging digital networked communications technologies in his most recent publication *Digital Lethargy* (2022). He

function of emotions in politics as twofold: on the one hand, the material and ideological conditions of neoliberal market capital give rise to an emotional landscape, much like Williams' structures of feeling. On the other hand, the emotions which arise from these conditions reinforce the power of these conditions, ultimately trapping the neoliberal subject in a cycle of constant production and consumption of capital. I discuss this cycle in more detail later in the chapter to the extent that Ressentiment operates within a similar affective dynamic, whose negative emotions ultimately keep the subject trapped within the economic conditions which give rise to them. Han poses idiocy as a meaningful form of resistance to neoliberalism's psychopolitics, where "the idiot is a modern-day heretic. Etymologically, heresy means 'choice.' Thus, the heretic is one who commands free choice."⁴² The way out of neoliberalism's false conceptions of freedom is to exercise the freedom to refuse the "violence of consensus."⁴³ I draw substantially on Han's depiction of neoliberal psychopolitics to describe the power that feelings of Ressentiment have in keeping YouTube creators trapped in a political framework which results in their being disempowered and unfree.

Negative Affect on the Network: Max's Scheler's Ressentiment

Negative feelings like the ones reported by my students are essential components of platform infrastructure. I argue that Ressentiment serves as the primary affective premise for YouTube's platform governance, policies, and practices which keep users and creators trapped in an endless cycle of content production and consumption. Reviving the work of Max Scheler provides powerful insight into the conditions under which Ressentiment flourishes to challenge

positions the inaction associated with exhaustion as a potential form of resistance to digital capitalism, as opposed to an apathy to its exploitation. For more, see Hu, Tung-Hui. *Digital Lethargy: Dispatches from an Age of Disconnection*. MIT Press, 2022.

⁴² Han, Byung-Chul. *Psychopolitics: Neoliberalism and New Technologies of Power*. Verso, 2014. pp. 83

⁴³ Ibid.

the perceived naturalness of negative emotions associated with online experiences. Scheler describes Ressentiment as a “*unit of experience*” or “lasting mental attitude” that produces “value delusions” through “the systematic repression of certain emotions and affects which, as such are normal components of human nature.”⁴⁴ He modifies Nietzsche’s original position on the concept as an expression of the Will to Power in favor of a framing that, much like Sartrean bad faith, understands Ressentiment as a “a self-poisoning of the mind” that plagues the social and individual psyche.⁴⁵

Scheler grounds the rise of this particular affect within the emergent political, social, cultural and economic conditions of industrial capital.⁴⁶ He notes that, “...a potent charge of ressentiment is here accumulated by the very structure of society” where equal rights under democratic governments are publicly recognized, but “go hand in hand with wide factual differences in power, property, and education.”⁴⁷ The dissonance between a material reality of growing class disparities, and an ideological commitment to the rhetoric of democracy creates

⁴⁴ Scheler, Max. *Ressentiment*. 1912. Translated by William Holdheim, Free Press of Glencoe, 1961. pp. 45-46. Scheler originally published *Ressentiment and Moral Value Judgement* in 1912, and later published an expanded edition of the work in 1915 as *The Role of Ressentiment in the Make-Up of Morals*. Nietzsche’s earlier account of Ressentiment appears in Part I of *Genealogy of Morals* (1887) in his discussion of Slave morality. Nietzsche attributes the production of the ill-fated Good/Evil value structure to the Slave, driven by Ressentiment, who seeks to exact imaginary revenge upon those who have wronged him. Ressentiment as a drive that reverses valuation patterns, such that value is determined through negation, or “through the outside rather than by oneself” (Part I, Section 10). Nietzsche scholar Guy Elgat’s indictment that, “it is the man of Ressentiment who has the invention of bad conscience on his conscience,” raises the concept’s existential consequences (Elgat 9). Sartre’s notion of bad faith, like Ressentiment, refers to a pattern of self-deception that leads one further from reality, which in this case refers to a misperception of the relationship between existence and freedom, and a false disempowerment of the individual as the agent of action and meaning. Sartre calls this consequence inauthenticity—a condemnation of an incorrectly lived existence, or a life not well lived. A mis-valuation of values, therefore, produces what we might call today an unsustainable existence, or an undesirable life of self-inflicted misery, whether that be from the false apprehension of external adversaries, or the defeatist’s denial of free will. The consequences of Sartrean “bad faith” and Nietzschean Ressentiment are not only morally reprehensible, they are existentially contemptuous. For more on Nietzschean Ressentiment, see Elgat, Guy. *Nietzsche’s Psychology of Ressentiment: Revenge and Justice in “On the Genealogy of Morals.”* Routledge, 2017.

⁴⁵ Scheler 45. For more on bad faith, see Sartre, Jean-Paul. “Bad Faith.” *Being and Nothingness*. Gallimard, 1943. pp. 86-117.

⁴⁶ Alternatively, Nietzsche grounds Ressentiment within Christianity’s predominance in the Western world.

⁴⁷ Scheler 50.

strong structural prerequisites for Ressentiment to flourish. This stratification naturalizes a particular social character, or “common man,” whose attitude is motivated either by feelings of strength and power (the *arriviste*), or by feelings of weakness and impotence (the *man of ressentiment*). Capitalism, according to Scheler, celebrates the *arriviste*’s avenue for relieving the psychic tension of democracy’s political economy by normalizing of the use of “things” to “overcome inferiority.”⁴⁸ “Things” become a site of comparison to others, whereby comparison serves as the basis for value judgements regarding a personal sense of superiority. When this kind of value experience becomes hegemonic, we get what Scheler terms a “system of free competition,”—a phrasing which bears noticeable resemblance to the rhetoric of contemporary neoliberalism. Individuals are free to compete with one another through their possession of and relationship to “things,” whose value is a transitive for self-worth and moral, cultural, and social value. Value under capitalism is derived from a desire to surpass others and, therefore, is supported by the emotional patterns of Ressentiment, namely a perceived sense of inferiority, impotence, and inability.⁴⁹

As a self-proclaimed Marxist, Scheler borrows much of his diagnosis of capitalism from Marx. His intervention, however, proposes that this “system of free competition” conflates the motivation structure for moral value with the motivation structure for economic value. Therefore, the “things” that serve as the basis for the common man’s moral value comparisons are “commodit[ies] destined for exchange and defined by their monetary value.”⁵⁰ His goal becomes to obtain a “quantity of monetary value,” rather than a quantity of quality objects, in order to

⁴⁸ Scheler 56.

⁴⁹ Scheler’s occasional choice to replace “inferiority” with “impotence” and “inability” draws a strong conceptual connection between Ressentiment and bad faith in terms of the way they represent a misperception of human agency.

⁵⁰ Ibid 57.

establish a sense of superiority.⁵¹ Scheler cites Marx's formula for capital, which designates value through circulation pattern "money-commodity-money" as opposed to "commodity-money-commodity," to demonstrate the boundless potential of value, moral or capital, under a "system of free competition."⁵² The potential for judgments of moral value (or lack thereof) becomes boundless at the behest of the emotional patterns of Ressentiment, whose sense of inferiority does not reflect any intrinsic quality of the person experiencing this affect, nor the people they condemn, but rather reflects powerful feelings of inadequacy that "must be suppressed because they are coupled with feelings that one is unable to act on them."⁵³

As a rarely cited thinker in contemporary studies of capitalism's political economy, it is worth noting that Scheler encountered a diverse set of intellectual traditions to draw from, namely philosophy, sociology and psychology. His education and early academic career at the cusp of the twentieth century took him to several universities throughout Germany, such as the University of Berlin where he attended the lectures of Georg Simmel; the University of Heidelberg where he met Max Weber; and the University of Jena where he studied under literary Nobel Prize-winner Rudolf Eucken, and made the acquaintance of Edmund Husserl, whose work

⁵¹ Scheler 57.

⁵² Engels, Friedrich and Karl Marx. *The Marx-Engels Reader*, edited by Robert C. Tucker. W. W. Norton and Company, 1978.

Scheler cites Part II, Chapter 4 of Vol. 1 of *Capital* in which Marx presents "The general formula for capital":

What, however, first and foremost distinguishes the circuit C—M—C from the circuit M—C—M, is the Inverted order of succession of the two phases. The simple circulation of commodities begins with a sale and ends with a purchase, while the circulation of money as capital begins with a purchase and ends with a sale. In the one case both the starting-point and the goal are commodities, in the other they are money. In the first form the movement is brought about by the intervention of money, in the second by that of a commodity.

In the circulation C—M—C, the money is in the end converted into a commodity, that serves as a use-value; it is spent once for all. In the inverted form, M—C—M, on the contrary, the buyer lays out money in order that, as a seller, he may recover money. By the purchase of his commodity he throws money into circulation, in order to withdraw it again by the sale of the same commodity. He lets the money go, but only with the sly intention of getting it back again. The money, therefore, is not spent, it is merely advanced (Engels-Marx, 330-33).

⁵³ Scheler 48.

inspired him to form the “Munich Phenomenologists” circle with Theodor Lipps, the scholar who developed the framework for the concept of empathy. Though he lost his teaching position at the University of Munich from 1910-1919 for reportedly conducting affairs with his students, Scheler continued to work as a private scholar, participating in the Göttingen circle of phenomenology with Husserl, giving lectures organized by his friend and fellow philosophical anthropologist Dietrich von Hildebrand, and serving as co-editor of the journal *Yearbook for Philosophy and Phenomenology Research*. His return to academia in 1919 as a professor with the Research Institute for Social Sciences at the newly founded University of Cologne, and his 1924 publication of *The Forms of Knowledge and Society* placed Scheler at the forefront of the then nascent discipline of the sociology of knowledge. Although he never had the chance to fulfill the post offered to him at the University of Frankfurt before he died from heart attacks likely brought on by the 60-80 cigarettes he smoked per day, Scheler would have found an affinity for the ideas of Theodore Adorno and others credited with the Frankfurt School.⁵⁴

What sets Scheler apart from his Marxist contemporaries is his emphasis on the affective dimensions of capitalism. Phenomenology, which featured prominently in his scholarly activities, grounds his assessment of Ressentiment within the relationships between objects and their perception, and the sociological disciplines, to which so many of his colleagues belonged, situates these relationships as patterns structured around the material and ideological contexts of capital. Perhaps we could call Scheler a non-Marxist Marxist, or rather a non-materialist Marxist. Scheler would not dispute the significance of materialisms to understanding the systems of and

⁵⁴ Davis, Zachary and Anthony Steinbock. “Max Scheler,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Spring 2024, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2024/entries/scheler/>. Accessed 26 Feb 2024.

For more on Scheler’s biography, see Schilpp, Paul Arthur. “Max Scheler 1874-1928,” *The Philosophical Review*, vol. 38, no. 6, Nov. 1929, pp. 574-588, and Staude, John Raphael. *Max Scheler 1874-1928: An Intellectual Portrait*. Free Press, 1967.

surrounding capital—in fact, he cites them as conditions which can bring an affect into prominence. Scheler would dispute, however, the notion that material conditions are the sole necessary conditions for the rise of affect. The inequities at the heart of capitalism’s materialism and ideology provide a concrete basis for certain individuals and groups to develop an increased tendency towards Ressentiment, but only in relation to psychological patterns that cannot purely be attributed to material conditions. Ressentiment is latent in human psychology, thus making it possible to experience its affect under a variety of different circumstances which do not necessarily relate to capitalism. For example, I can experience Ressentiment in relation to my colleague whose continued recognition for their achievements makes me feel inferior. If one chooses to argue that capitalism is ultimately the pretext for my academic endeavors, then take the example of a medieval peasant who experiences Ressentiment in relation to his pious neighbor, whose faith he sees as a direct affront to his own wavering belief in God. In other words, capitalism is not a necessary precondition for Ressentiment to manifest, though its paradoxical emphasis on equality, competition and inequity ignites Ressentiment’s latent possibilities. To this extent, Scheler’s contributions to early twentieth century critiques of capital participated in the burgeoning discourse of the sociology of culture, which we now associate with the latter half of the twentieth century with figures like Pierre Bourdieu, Raymond Williams, Manuel Castells, and members of the Frankfurt School, which Scheler missed the opportunity to join due to his untimely death.⁵⁵ This discourse, as Scheler’s biography

⁵⁵ There is a historical and disciplinary difference between the fields of “sociology and culture” and “cultural sociology.” I employ the former to describe Scheler’s work, perhaps erroneously, to emphasize the primacy of culture the object of study to which he applies several critical lenses, including but not limited to sociology. Alternatively, the latter would seem to frame Scheler as primarily a sociologist by trade whose object is culture. See Williams, Raymond. *The Sociology of Culture*. University of Chicago Press, 1995 for more on the disambiguation of these terms.

demonstrates, draws from several disciplinary backgrounds to examine the intersections of individuals, culture and society at material, ideological, and psychological registers.

Scheler's positioning of affect in relation to ideological, cultural, and material conditions bears strong resemblance to Williams' notion of "structures of feeling." While David Simpson criticizes the vagueness of the concept, "functioning at times loosely and on other occasions subject to attempts at a more exact definition," he also commends it as a part of Williams' "later efforts to confront Marxist theory on something of its own terms,"—a description applicable to Scheler's own attempts to interpolate Marxism into his web of theories surrounding Ressentiment.⁵⁶ Williams' first account put forward in *Culture and Society* (1958) describes the capability of piece of writing to have "captured 'that structure of contemporary feeling which is only ever apprehended directly,' and which is not to be identified with formal systems or doctrines."⁵⁷ Williams' attribution of "structures of feeling" to the present, accessible only through direct apprehension, shares the language of phenomenology which shapes Scheler's writing on affect, although Williams would not describe himself as a phenomenologist. Recall that Scheler describes Ressentiment as a "unit of experience" of the human psyche, as opposed to a material or ideological structure, or what Simpson paraphrases Williams to call "certain systems or doctrines." Later, in *The Long Revolution* (1961), Williams names one of the "basic problems in cultural history the task of recovering from the past a 'felt sense of the quality of life at a particular place and time,'" thus making "structures of feeling" an object of cultural analysis, much like affect is to Scheler's sociology of culture.⁵⁸ Williams is ultimately ambiguous in his stance on the conceptual relationship between emotion and ideology, to the extent that he

⁵⁶ Simpson, David. "Feelings for Structures, Voicing 'History.'" *Cultural Materialism: On Raymond Williams*, edited by Christopher Prendergast. University of Minnesota Press, 1995, pp. 29-50.

⁵⁷ Ibid 36-37.

⁵⁸ Ibid 37.

occasionally refers to “structures of feeling” as “correspond[ing]” to the “dominant social character” of the “dominant social group.”⁵⁹ This ambiguity likewise exists in Scheler’s work on Ressentiment. The value “system of free competition” created by the predominance of Ressentiment corresponds to capitalism, and yet is not described by Scheler as an ideological determinant. For both Williams and Scheler, there is a relationship between culture, ideology, materialism and emotions, however neither definitively state how these relationships are structured, or how one may be a necessary condition for the other.

The sociopolitical-economic system in question for Scheler and Williams is industrial capitalism, whether one locates that “system of free competition” in interwar Germany or postwar Great Britain. Though Scheler understood Ressentiment’s acceleration towards a dominant structure of feeling as tied to industrial production and the massification of society, it is clear that Ressentiment today thrives in a different milieu. Manuel Castells labels this present iteration of capitalism “informational capitalism,” whose dependence on “knowledge, information, and the technology of their processing” gives rise to the “network society.”⁶⁰ The laboring subject of industrial capitalism belonged to the masses, a theoretical collective of individuals whose dominant mode of existence was governed by hourly wages, assembly line-style production and centralized managerial hierarchies, and distinct boundaries between public and private life. The laboring subject of informational capitalism, however, belongs to the network, whereby the shape of the network subsumes all social, economic, and political activity. Castells attributes this “restructuring of capitalism” to the convergence of the Information Technology Revolution of the 1970s and processes of globalization taking place in the latter half of the twentieth century. Powered by digital technologies, decentralized and distributed models

⁵⁹ Simpson 38.

⁶⁰ Castells, Manuel. “An Introduction to the Information Age.” *City*, vol. 2, no. 7, 1997, pp. 6-16.

of communication liberate labor from the confines of a defined time and space. Work becomes flexible, piecemeal, do anytime anywhere, thus transforming “power relationships between capital and labour in favor of capital.”⁶¹ If value can be added to the network on a 24/7 basis, so long as the information laborer can access the network, then capital accumulation has no limits. The worker’s body becomes fungible and forgotten, only valuable as a vessel for the information it carries like the fiber optic cables of our Internet networks hidden beneath the ground.⁶²

Although the Network Society does not resemble that which inspired Scheler, we can still identify a meaningful continuity of affect for the subjects of industrial and post-industrial capital. Turning to Scheler’s study of Ressentiment and the socioeconomic structures which accompany it provides a critical historical basis for the assessment of affect today under informational capitalism and neoliberal ideology. I take a similar approach to that of Moira Weigel in her recent article “The Authoritarian Personality 2.0,” which explores how Adorno’s concept of the “Authoritarian Personality” (whose affect is not wholly unrelated to that of Ressentiment) manifests today in a sociopolitical climate of alt-right fascism catalyzed by digital media. Weigel’s update of the Authoritarian Personality that situates this psychology within “not mass, but networked movements [...] taking place not in a mass society, but within a networked one [...] ruled not by monopoly capital, but by surveillance capital; its work rhythms are not Taylorist but agile; its cultural logic is not standardization, but personalization,” serves as a model for how Frankfurtian concepts can be updated to contemporary conditions of post-

⁶¹ Castells 9.

⁶² For more on the relationship between the Informational Capitalism and exploitive labor, see Terranova, Tiziana. “Free Labor: Producing Culture for the Digital Economy.” *Social Text*, vol. 18, no. 2, 2000, pp. 33-58. The rise of the Digital Economy for Terranova signals a broader transformation in the economic identity of “generations of workers who have been repeatedly addressed as active consumers of meaningful commodities. Free labor is the moment where this knowledgeable consumption of culture is translated into productive activities that are pleasurably embraced and at the same time often shamelessly exploited” (Terranova 37).

industrial capital.⁶³ Although Scheler has never been formally recognized as a member of the Frankfurt School, his (unfulfilled) invitation to teach at the University of Frankfurt during Adorno's tenure, and his affinity for social philosophy and Marxism allows us to place him in conversation with this school of thought. Furthermore, the Authoritarian Personality shares Ressentiment's tendency towards negative structures of valuation, or what Weigel describes as the "timeless human drive towards domination and self-subjugation."⁶⁴ Both the Authoritarian Personality and *the man of ressentiment* turn inward negative feelings outwards upon others in expressions of superiority. If the Network Society, governed by surveillance and informational capital, which creates personalized and customizable immaterial commodities, is the present context for alt-right fascism, then it also serves as the present context for Ressentiment. Taking a cue from Weigel, I ask, *how and why does Ressentiment manifest under neoliberal networked informational capital?*

Contemporary philosopher Byung-Chul Han (2014) provides a partial answer to this question by interrogating the relationship between economic infrastructures and affective patterns under post-industrial capital. Han presents the case for a neoliberal political economy of affect, whereby the same systems responsible for the generation of capital are also responsible for the generation of streams of affect that mutually reinforce one another. The political has psychological dimensions that are ripe for exploitation in favor of capital, and the psychological has political dimensions are which used as justifications for capital's exponential production. I argue that neoliberal Emotional Capitalism (an affective outgrowth of the Network Society) weaponizes preexisting psychological patterns of Ressentiment to fuel an always-on economy driven by free or undercompensated labor, where production and consumption are motivated by

⁶³ Weigel 149.

⁶⁴ Weigel 150 .

lingering feelings of Ressentiment that can never be truly eradicated. Like the ouroboros, Ressentiment presides over at both ends of the neoliberal, entrepreneurial, digital, networked marketplace. I subscribe to Peacock because I resent the fact that I cannot rewatch *The Office* for the third time on Netflix anymore (thus decreasing my cultural relevance amongst my peers), and NBC-Universal and other streaming media industry giants rejoice in knowing that this same feeling of inadequacy and discomfort with my own silence will drive me to reactivate my third cancelled streaming service when *The Office* inevitably moves yet again to another platform. I will do so to assuage my negative feelings about my own perceived value, even if only temporarily, so that I can say to myself, “See, I *do* watch what’s cool and funny,” until I can’t, and have to set up another round of autopay.

Although my example might frame it as such, it is important to clarify that media-tech companies and large economic players do not consciously or intentionally set out to foster Ressentiment, nor do they even necessarily consider their decisions in these terms. Ressentiment is an emotional pattern which exists with or without capitalism’s activities. Rather, as Scheler demonstrates, capitalism’s emphasis on a “system of free competition” amplifies tendencies towards feelings of Ressentiment, much like the fact that digital communications networks are not responsible for vitriolic alt-right discourse on social media, and violent video games are not to blame for the horrifying rise in domestic gun violence. These structures, material and ideological, provide a context for the intensification of particular “structures of feeling” that engage with normal elements of human psychology. I do not wish to argue that Ressentiment is evil (for that would be falling into the same moralistic pitfalls that Nietzsche warned of), but I do wish to argue that it is negative, and naturally so. As Scheler reminds us, the feelings associated with Ressentiment that we seek to repress are “certain emotions and affects which, as such are

normal components of human nature.” It is through the repression, or what I describe as temporary assuaging or deferral, of these normal negative feelings that Ressentiment wreaks havoc on the neoliberal subject. Where media-tech companies and large economic players come into play is in their creation of structures and systems which function on the premise of the negative feelings associated with an affect like Ressentiment, and which reward the repression of these feelings with wages or claims to labor value. I examine how Ressentiment manifests in our encounters with the Internet, more specifically on social media platforms. The flexible, distributed structure of post-industrial capital creates disparities and paradoxes that define activity on digital communications networks, as hierarchies of protological control and practices of tiered platform governance function on a fundamental logic of inequality, where not all computers on the network and not all creators on the platform are created equal.

Disappointed with Digital Democracy: Free Speech and Ressentiment on YouTube

Despite the evident structural and functional inequities of Web 2.0’s “system of free competition,” and the negative feelings associated with it, platform managers, creators and users alike invoke the rhetoric of democracy to describe social media platforms and their potentialities. One month prior to initiating his acquisition of X (formerly Twitter), Elon Musk posted: “Given that Twitter serves as the de facto *public town square*, failing to adhere to free speech principles fundamentally undermines democracy. What should be done?”⁶⁵ The notion of Twitter as a “town square,” at least in explicit articulations, can be traced back to the vision of the platform’s former CEO, Dick Costolo, who referred to it as such in a conversation hosted by D.C. think tank and non-profit public policy organization the Brookings Institution in 2013. Likening the

⁶⁵ Emphasis mine. @elonmusk. “Given that Twitter serves as the de facto public town square, failing to adhere to free speech principles fundamentally undermines democracy. What should be done?” *X*, 26 March 2022, <https://x.com/elonmusk/status/1507777261654605828?lang=en>. Accessed 22 April 2024.

platform to an advanced version of the Greek Agora, Costolo described Twitter as a multidirectional form of media “that has the elimination of time and space built into it, but also brings back all those capacities of the Agora,” marked by being the place “where you went to find out what was going on and talk about it.”⁶⁶ Nearly 10 years after Costolo’s facile characterization, and despite substantial changes in the conditions of platform media, a democratic imaginary still figures prominently into our understanding of our activities online, and, as evidenced by Musk’s declaration, continues to be invoked by those at the top.

Musk’s and Costolo’s visions of Twitter are emblematic of the conceptual triangulation between social media platforms, freedom of speech, and democratic governance that managers, creators and users deploy to legitimize their beliefs in the Internet as a logical and necessary extension of the democratic state. Costolo draws on the Greek Agora—today’s fantasy of what direct democracy looks like in practice—to position Twitter’s (and for the sake of argument, social media more generally) as a space for meaningful public discourse to occur thanks to its technological ability to simulate simultaneity. In other words, when we access digital distributed networks that take the shape of social media platforms, we experience the sensation of direct discourse with others—a discourse which, as Musk reminds us, *must* “adhere to free speech principles” as to not undermine democracy. But what makes this configuration “de facto”? Musk’s comment indicates that he wishes to position his takeover of Twitter as what must be done in order to protect the “public town square” and its necessary role as an agent of free speech from increasing practices of content moderation.⁶⁷

⁶⁶ “The ‘Town Square’ in the Social Media Era: A Conversation with Twitter CEO Dick Costello.” *YouTube*, uploaded by The Brookings Institution, 11 Oct. 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ua_g_KznLtQ&t=3s. Accessed 10 June 2026.

⁶⁷ The suspension of former president Donald Trump’s account from the platform in the final days of his presidency in January 2021, and the subsequent events of the attempted coup on Jan. 6 marked a height in increased attention to social media content moderation, and its potential ability to protect users from misinformation, violence, and hateful speech. The alignment of political outrage with social media activity continues to polarize users in the United States,

In some ways, Musk's calls to protect social media's democratic function are reminiscent of the outrage expressed by YouTube creators at the launch of the Advertiser-Friendly Content Guidelines in 2016. The introduction of the Advertiser-Friendly Guidelines marks an important milestone in the history of YouTube's economy by reconfiguring the dynamic between creators, advertisers, and the platform in favor of advertisers with the goal of maintaining a "public town square" that advanced the conditions of advertiser desirability over "free speech principles." The guidelines, which went into effect at the end of August/beginning of September 2016, marked the site's shift in focus towards more "family-friendly content." Many in the YouTube space began to refer to this change in platform direction as the Adpocalypse by 2017 when major advertisers (including Coca Cola, Disney, Johnson & Johnson) pulled their partnerships with YouTube en masse in response to an offensive video posted by popular YouTube creator PewDiePie, who at the time lay claim to having the greatest number of subscribers on the platform with upwards of 53 million.⁶⁸

and across the globe, and has sparked many debates over the role these platforms play in the political and ideological formation of its users.

⁶⁸ "Pewdiepie." *Trackalytics*, <https://www.trackalytics.com/youtube/user/pewdiepie/>. Accessed 23 April 2024. Although PewDiePie's controversial videos were uploaded in Jan 2017, the Adpocalypse can be best understood as a series of cascading events that highlighted the increasing tensions between creators, advertisers, and content moderation practices on the platform. PewDiePie's videos, which included references to Adolf Hitler and depicted two Indian men whom he had paid through the freelance platform Fiverr holding a sign that read "Death to all Jews," faced criticism from YouTube for promoting anti-Semitic and hateful speech, and resulted in losing his partnership with the YouTube multi-channel network Maker Studios (owned by Disney) and his eligibility for YouTube's preferred-advertising program that rewards the top 5% of creators. Other landmark events frequently associated with the Adpocalypse include the withdrawal of Pepsi's advertising partnership with YouTube following backlash for their infamous ad depicting Kendall Jenner handing a can of Pepsi to police amidst a civil rights protest, and the withdrawal of Mars, Adidas and Deutsche Bank's advertising partnerships in Nov. 2017 in response to the growing popularity of the now removed Toy Freaks channel, which depicted children in upsetting situations. These three incidents over the course of 2017 indicate the power that major advertisers have over shaping the landscape of the platform, including the removal of channels, the suspension of creator privileges, and the creation of new guidelines. For more on the Adpocalypse and its reverberations, see Caplan, Robyn, and Tarleton Gillespie. "Tiered Governance and Demonetization: The Shifting Terms of Labor and Compensation in the Platform Economy." *Social Media & Society* vol. 6, no. 2, 2020. pp. 2 and, "YouTube Adpocalypse." *Wikidata: The YouTube Wiki*, Fandom, https://youtube.fandom.com/wiki/YouTube_Adpocalypse. Accessed 23 April 2024.

Jenna Marbles, who ran an incredibly popular comedy channel from 2010-2020 and had amassed over 20 million subscribers at her channel's height, was one among many of the major creators who voiced their discontent with the Guidelines. In the days following their release, Jenna uploaded an episode of her podcast bearing the title, "The Censorship/Demonetization of YouTube," that framed the Advertiser-Friendly Content Guidelines as being diametrically opposed to the platform's previous approach of being "laissez-faire, and they have been for many, many, many, many years. Ten fucking years."⁶⁹ Jenna's comments trade in neoliberal ideology not only in her reference to laissez-faire economics—an Enlightenment concept re-popularized by economists in the 1980s to justify the unbridled advancement of late-capital without state-imposed restrictions—but also in her episode's title and subsequent diagnosis of YouTube's economy which equates demonetization and disincentivized revenue practices with censorship. With anger, frustration her voice, Jenna proceeds to claim that,

The real issue is censorship, and that we use YouTube, as YouTubers, as a platform. We use it a community. We use it as a place of discussion, for a free and open exchange of thoughts and ideas where people can be themselves and talk about what they want and say what they want and reach a lot of people doing that. And by this system being implemented, yeah you can dance around it and make ways so that you can monetize those videos, but the end of the story is that this is censorship.

This is a classic case of Ressentiment. From Jenna's perspective, the platform serves (or ought to serve) the same function as the ideal democratic state, which protects the "de facto" rights of its *user-citizens*, namely that of free speech in this case. Creating barriers to monetization through *legislation-terms of service/community guidelines* that draw boundaries around content deemed suitable for advertising, therefore, performs an act of censorship as opposed to an exercise of democratic governance. Jenna was not the only member of the YouTube "commentariat" whose

⁶⁹ Mourey, Jenna and Julien Solomita. "Podacast #107 - The Censorship/Demonetization of YouTube." *YouTube*, uploaded by Jenna Julien, 5 Sept. 2016, https://youtu.be/dZK8N_tk2is?si=_csMsLQJu6LqZkPj. Accessed 23 April 2024.

critiques of the Advertiser-Friendly Content Guidelines framed this policy change as an act of censorship.⁷⁰ In contrast to Jenna, as she herself points out, top creator Phillip DeFranco, best known for his political commentary, experienced significant demonetization of his channel, resulting in many of his videos being deemed unfit for advertisers through the new Guidelines. In response, DeFranco uploaded a video (which he has since made private and inaccessible on the site) titled, “YouTube is Shutting Down My Channel and I’m Not Sure What to Do.”⁷¹ Although he does not use the word censorship, the semantics of his title implies that by disincentivizing the creation of certain video content by withholding revenue, or rather by withholding the capacity for potential revenue, YouTube is, in effect, forcing DeFranco to terminate his channel as it currently exists. In other words, the Guidelines discourage DeFranco from making videos that explore “Controversial issues” or “Sensitive events” with the threat of decreased revenue.⁷² On the one hand, if he continues to make videos that discuss contentious elections and unpopular pieces of legislation, then he will lose consistent access to the revenue that permits him to consider YouTube content production as a stable source of income. On the other hand, if DeFranco decides to change the direction of his channel and start uploading toy unboxing videos where he ogles over the latest Lego releases with discussion limited to the quality of the product, then the Guidelines ensure that these videos will provide him with a dependable source of

⁷⁰ Bishop, Sophie and Joseph Daniel. “Advertising as Governance: The Digital Commodity Audience and Platform Advertising Dependency.” *Media, Culture & Society*, vol. 46, no. 6, 2024, pp. 1-18. Bishop and Daniel refer to high profile YouTube creators as members of the platform’s “commentariat” for the role that they frequently occupy as self-reflexive commentators on the platform, its culture, and their roles as creators in the space.

⁷¹ Mulkerin, Tim. “A bunch of famous YouTubers are furious with YouTube right now—and here’s why.” *Business Insider*, 1 Sept. 2016, <https://www.businessinsider.com/youtube-stars-advertiser-friendly-content-guidelines-2016-9>. Accessed 24 April 2024.

⁷² YouTube Help. “Advertiser-friendly content guidelines.” *Google*, <https://support.google.com/youtube/answer/6162278?hl=en>. Accessed 24 April 2024.

Although the precise wording of the descriptions for each category have been routinely modified, and some new categories have been added over the years, “Controversial issues” and “Sensitive events” have existed as categories since the launch of the Guidelines in 2016.

income. Jenna's and DeFranco's statements equate negative financial incentives with censorship, as if to say, "if I can't say anything I want and make money here, then you're telling me what I can and can't say." If this logic strikes you as the financialization of speech, that's because it is.

Despite the fact that numerous videos on both her podcast and personal channels could have met the criteria for the category "Inappropriate language," Jenna notes that none of her videos at the time of uploading the episode had been demonetized. Even in this particular episode, she frequently relies on profanities to express her frustrations with YouTube, almost as if to mock the Guidelines' evident hypocrisy. Robyn Caplan and Tarleton Gillespie reframe what Jenna calls censorship as a practice of "tiered governance," whereby "different users—amateurs, professionalized amateurs, legacy media organizations, and YouTube's contracted producers of original content are held to different standards in different ways."⁷³ Caplan and Gillespie cite the origins of this form of governance on YouTube back to the creation of the YouTube Partner Program (YPP) in 2007. Still in effect today, the YPP designates the first set of criteria creators must meet in order to share in the revenue generated by the advertising placed on their videos. It is worth taking a moment to note that YouTube can run ads and generate revenue on any video it chooses, regardless of whether the creator is a member of the YPP, thus positioning revenue sharing as a privilege as opposed to a "de facto" right. Being a member of the YPP is, therefore, the closest a creator can get to obtaining the status of a creative employee of YouTube's media industry, apart from joining the company in some other capacity. Currently, the eligibility for the YPP is contingent upon a creator obtaining 1,000 subscribers to their channel who contribute to

⁷³ Caplan, Robyn, and Tarleton Gillespie. "Tiered Governance and Demonetization: The Shifting Terms of Labor and Compensation in the Platform Economy." *Social Media & Society* vol. 6, no. 2, 2020. pp. 2

4,000 hours of valid watch time over the last 12 months—a far more generous set of criteria than those which were in place during the Adpocalypse.⁷⁴ As Caplan and Gillespie point out, however, the YPP’s earliest form resembles that which Jenna accuses the Advertiser-Friendly Content Guidelines of doing—of “cherry picking” content to monetize—by giving YouTube the license to hand select which creators could participate in revenue sharing based upon who they regarded as the most popular and most prolific.⁷⁵ To this extent, we can regard the origins of the YPP as a practice of tiered governance at its most explicit. By contrast, YouTube’s reliance on vague language in the Advertiser-Friendly Content guidelines serves as a more implicit form of tiered governance. This set of ambiguous and flexible criteria can be deployed in dynamic ways to achieve whatever ends the platform needs or desires. YouTube always has an explanation available as to why one creator’s crass comedy video has been demonetized, but Tonight Show videos continue to generate massive amounts of revenue for TBS.

I trace the strategy of tiered governance on YouTube into the present with the practice of Self-Certification, a 2019 addition to the Monetization Guidelines which requires creators to pre-flag their content in accordance with the Advertiser-Friendly Content Guidelines. Self-Certification institutionalizes several of the concerns about censorship raised by creators like Jenna in the wake of the Adpocalypse, and further complexifies them by creating concrete mechanisms for what one might be tempted to call self-censorship, or, at the very least, self-moderation. The policy reconfigures monetization as democratic responsibility for participating in the financialized public square under the subheading “Creator Responsibility,” which reminds

⁷⁴ At the time of writing, YouTube has also qualified 10M valid public Shorts views in the last 90 days as sufficient for YPP eligibility in addition to the 1,000 subscribers. Shorts is YouTube’s version of short-form video content designed as a direct competitor to TikTok.

Since the creator outrage over monetization during the Adpocalypse, which also saw a tightening of YPP eligibility criteria, YouTube has gradually moved to loosen YPP criteria.

⁷⁵ Mourey “Podcast #107”

creators that “the earnings of all YouTube creators are negatively impacted when advertisers lose trust.”⁷⁶ After creators select the categories which correspond to the potentially unmonetizable content in their video, an algorithmic check determines whether they have, in fact, selected what YouTube deems to be the correct category. The platform then awards the creator a percentage accuracy rating. For example, if I uploaded a video about the 6.1 magnitude earthquake that hit Taiwan in the beginning of April 2024, then I would need to pre-flag my video for containing a discussion of “Sensitive events” related to a natural disaster. In theory, this would constitute a correct selection, and I would be awarded a positive accuracy rating. If the content was deemed eligible for monetization, then I would be permitted to share in the ad revenue generated from the video. If YouTube’s algorithm determined, however, that I did not select the correct category that corresponds to the Advertiser-Friendly Content Guidelines, then I would receive a negative accuracy rating. If your accuracy rating remains at a certain unspecified “high” percentage over an unspecified period of time, then YouTube claims that “we’ll use your input to help decide which ads can run on your videos.” In other words, this claim translates to YouTube’s assertion that it will remove the process of the algorithmic check from your personal monetization practices because you have demonstrated successfully, through Self-Certification, that you as a creator can be trusted to interpret the Guidelines correctly and report your content honestly.

YouTube’s economy, like Musk’s and Costolo’s celebrations of the digital agora, draws on a conceptual triangulation between the platform, free speech, and democratic governance. This triangulation, however, relies on a negative valuation in order to derive economic value. The positive value of free speech is recast as potentially unprofitable speech, and is exchanged

⁷⁶ YouTube Help. “YouTube channel monetization policies.” *Google*, <https://support.google.com/youtube/answer/1311392?sjid=14708913033095148303-EU#zippy=%2Ccreator-responsibility>. Accessed 25 April 2024.

in favor of moderated, advertiser-friendly speech. Free speech can only be a democratic good on YouTube if it generates profit. Content creation, therefore, always starts from a perspective of negative value—that which must be proven to be monetizable (*unoffensive*, *uncontroversial*, *innocuous*)—before it can be an agent of economic value. This negative valuation structure has consequences for how YouTube conceives of its creators and itself as a platform. Monetization policies, which equate “Creator Responsibility” to advertiser trust, and “Self-Certification” (an extension of creator responsibility) to YouTube trust, position the platform and advertisers as occupying the same functional role for creators—the authority to which you must demonstrate your (trust)worthiness. YouTube replicates the conditions of a “system of free competition” that Scheler warns conflates the motivation structure for moral value with the motivation structure for economic value. Policies repeated use of the word “trust” makes this abundantly clear, as one typically associates trustworthiness with moral value (it is *good* to be trustworthy) as opposed to economic value (it is *profitable* to be trustworthy). To take Scheler’s Marxist analysis a step further, YouTube videos, which often serve as metrics of personal value, identity and self-worth for creators, are reconfigured as “commodit[ies] destined for exchange and defined by their monetary value.”⁷⁷ This logic frames YouTube as a business enterprise sustained by high value (responsible) creators that generate consistent (trustworthy) revenue for the platform, as opposed to Greek agora or a town square.

Conclusion

Although YouTube could never at present be considered a democratic space, a democratic imaginary persists as meaningful reference for the platform’s users, creators and platform managers. In its talk of advertiser trust, for example, YouTube deploys the concept of

⁷⁷ Scheler 57.

responsibility to describe the relationship creators have with the platform, thus evoking the commonly referred to democratic tenant of “freedom and responsibility.” In order for creators to participate in this democracy, they must likewise be responsible for maintaining and protecting it. This imaginary can also position creators and users as citizens of a digital democratic community, who gather to discuss issues of governance and speculate on ways that monetization and moderation can be effectuated more justly. In the next chapter, I contextualize YouTube’s digital democratic imaginary within the presumed analogy between the state and the platform which positions YouTube as having state-like authority over the speech of its users. The positive potentialities of democracy expressed through its rhetorical imaginary, however, come up against the platform’s economic realities, thus leaving ample room for creators to speculate on its failure. I situate these speculations within creator production cultures as they manifest at different registers of the platform’s technological and ideological architecture. The ethnographic interviews conducted with True Crime content creators that I present in Chapters 3 and 4 reveal how the neoliberal rhetoric of democratic individualism and self-accountability performs a tonic function for creators who experience Ressentiment, stimulating them to repress their negative feelings about monetization with the false promise that their continued participation in the network assures them control over their own labor.

Chapter 2—Americans Dream of Techno-Utopian Sheep: The Internet as a Technology of Democracy

In his public debut as a Trump supporter in October 2024, Elon Musk took the stage in Butler, PA to articulate a diminished view of democracy that dominates contemporary American political thought. Encouraging swing-state voters to sign his “Petition in Favor of Free Speech and the Right to Bear Arms,” Musk cautioned that,

This is no ordinary election. The other side wants to take away your freedom of speech. [...] Free speech is the bedrock of democracy, and if people don’t know what’s going on, if they don’t know the truth, how can you make an informed vote? You must have free speech in order to have democracy. That’s why it’s the first amendment.⁷⁸

Signatories pledged their “support of the Constitution” by intending to vote for the candidate whom Musk suggested will best defend it in exchange for a \$47 payment from his America PAC for each registered voter they refer to sign.⁷⁹ Musk’s public launch of the petition indicates two undeniable facts about the present condition of American democracy: first, that present discourse about its wellbeing is dominated by free speech fearmongering which often frames one political party as upholding the Constitution while the other dismantles it⁸⁰; and second, that media and technology corporations with unquestioned market dominance have taken on an increasing role in matters of the state. For scale, Amazon, Meta, Google, Microsoft, and Uber each donated \$1 million to Donald Trump’s 2025 inaugural fund, with the CEO’s of Uber, Meta, OpenAI, and

⁷⁸ “Elon Musk Makes Surprise Appearance at Trump Rally.” *C-SPAN*, 5 October 2024, <https://www.c-span.org/clip/campaign-2024/elon-musk-makes-surprise-appearance-at-trump-rally/5135526>. Accessed 8 Oct. 2024.

⁷⁹ America PAC. *Petition in Favor of Free Speech and the Right to Bear Arms*. 6 Oct 2024, <https://petition.theamericapac.org/>. Accessed 8 Oct. 2024.

Although payment for petition-signing does not violate federal law, some have argued that Musk’s petition is unconstitutional because only registered voters are eligible payment. In effect, the petition serves as an intermediary for a federal offense. The petition’s strategic ambiguity, which claims that referring individuals to sign the petition ensures payment, is an evident attempt on Musk’s part to protect himself and his America PAC from prosecution.

⁸⁰ The irony of President Trump’s current efforts to limit birthright citizenship, for example, and the overturning of the landmark case *Roe v. Wade* in 2022 by a majority of supreme court justices appointed by Republican presidents is not lost on the reader

Apple donating an additional million in their own names respectively.⁸¹ Musk himself donated at least \$260 million to Trump’s campaign, earning himself the temporary position of “special government employee” in the President’s Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE).⁸²

To a certain extent, big tech’s presence in contemporary politics and the coincident surge in free speech ideology reflects the logical conclusions of the *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission* (2010) ruling. In establishing the precedent of “corporate personhood,” the United States saw the emergence of superPACs, like Musk’s America PAC walking the tightrope of election fraud, whose right to unlimited expenditure towards political campaigns is now protected under the First Amendment. Notwithstanding the *Citizens United* ruling, media technology corporations like Amazon, Meta, Google, and Microsoft exert political influence by providing and controlling the market of products, infrastructures, and services, through which a majority of Americans access information.⁸³ On social media platforms, people encounter an

⁸¹ Lisa, Andrew. “Amazon and 9 More Major Tech Companies Donated to Trump’s Inauguration Fund—Here’s Why.” *Yahoo Finance*, 16 Jan. 2025, https://finance.yahoo.com/news/amazon-9-more-major-tech-140030421.html?guccounter=1&guce_referrer=aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cuZ29vZ2x1LmNvbS8&guce_referrer_sig=AQAAABgkWJS9Tga2pyfrGxr8C7nlYYofgLwGbYcunN33KkasUJgq9CwRdVyxZqeC5rDjJb6BTNqhKU1EOmOfTg5ImdYPo8T29MpA1_pTJAonKnoaQ7NrSK3_5tbBM_2VsQrLRQprAr2kA4h2UjPKNbkdKH5Ssh_IOW0UV-DyyE4U2jj. Accessed 23 April 2025.

⁸² Schouten, Fredreka, et. al. “Musk spent more than a quarter-billion dollars to elect Trump, including funding a mysterious super PAC, new findings show.” *CNN Politics*, 6 Dec. 2024, <https://www.cnn.com/2024/12/05/politics/elon-musk-trump-campaign-finance-filings/index.html>. Accessed 23 April 2025.

⁸³ According to 2021 U.S. census data, 95% of American households have at least one computing device and 90% have a broadband internet subscription. Smartphones, which host the applications that media technology companies design to facilitate the use of their popular platforms, were reported to be the most commonly held device at 90% of households. United States Census Bureau, “Computer and Internet Use in the United States: 2021.” American Community Survey Reports, <https://www2.census.gov/library/publications/2024/demo/acs-56.pdf>. Accessed 6 May 2026. In a 2025 survey conducted by the Pew Research Center 53% of American adult Internet users indicated that they “at least sometimes get news from social media.” Of those surveyed, 41% of those who reported to be YouTube users indicated that they regularly receive their news from the platform. “Social Media and News Fact Sheet.” *Pew Research Center*, 25 Sept. 2025, <https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/fact-sheet/social-media-and-news-fact-sheet/>. Accessed 6 May 2026. There has been increased critical interest in the role that social media platforms play in electoral politics since Trump’s 2016 election. A 2026 study published by University of Wisconsin Madison, for example, found that racially targeted voter suppression ads likely reduced voter turnout in the 2016 Presidential election. Kim Mie, Young et. al. “Targeted Digital Voter Suppression Efforts Likely Decrease Voter Turnout.” *PNAS*, vol. 123, no. 5, 26 Jan 2026.

uninterrupted stream of largely unorganized information, punctuated only by advertisements or the limits of our device's battery life and hierarchized by the logic of recommendation algorithms that predict what will mostly likely grab our attention: We log on to Instagram to find out that our cousin in California has announced that she's expecting her second child; next, we scroll TikTok to see a comedic recut Katy Perry's interview describing how she learned about love on the first all-female passenger flight to outer space operated by Jeffrey Bezos' Blue Origin; after which we encounter a video on YouTube's homepage, uploaded by Fox News, depicting a sudden ongoing war in Iran and the President's calls for increased defense spending. Experiences on social media platforms, whether with "newsworthy" information or not, shape people's potential engagement with democratic processes by informing how they vote, modeling how to engage in public discourse, inspiring or discouraging the communication of their needs and values to elected representatives, or aiding them in organizing acts of assembly which resist against or argue for certain change. In other words, these technologies are often understood as conduits for eventual democratic action.

This chapter examines the relationship that social media platforms and the American state have to ideologies of democratic governance. I turn to YouTube as the platform which sets the standard for social media economies that advertise on user-generated content and incorporate creator revenue sharing models to further my inquiry into how platform economies shape U.S. conceptions of democracy in their management and monetization of user speech. By legally reconfiguring the economic actions of corporations as acts of speech, the reverberations of the *Citizens United* ruling raise questions about what exactly constitutes speech, who has the authority to limit it and what constitutes its unjust limitation. As users, technology designers and politicians increasingly understand that platforms play a role in U.S. politics by mediating

citizens' access to information and by serving as a primary site for discourse, media technology corporations look to strengthen the popular imagination of their products as democratic microcosms of free speech. Media technology corporations build an analogy between their products and the U.S. democratic state, which aligns the platform's authority over the activities of its users with the state's authority over its citizens, to justify corporate power as possessing the same naturalness and unquestionability as democratic rights. The cultural staying power of the analogy between the state-platform can be situated within a longer history of American digital techno-utopianism, whose vision emerges in the 1960s with the creation of the first Internet network, ARPANET, and whose ideology coalesces around the individual rights of the "netizen" in the 1990s with John Perry Barlow's publication of *Declaration of Independence of Cyberspace* (1996).⁸⁴ I assess the strength of this analogy and the other analogies it produces, namely that of the citizen-user and law-guideline, to trace digital techno-utopianism into the platform era, where corporations position themselves as authorities of democratic wellbeing through the services their platforms provide.

I argue that YouTube and its corporate owner Google/Alphabet construct the functional analogy between the state and the platform by strategically embedding democratic rhetoric into its documents of platform governance to position YouTube's state-like authority as natural and self-evident to users. Furthermore, I suggest that the attribution of democratic qualities to platforms like YouTube hinges upon a fundamental conflation between free speech with monetized speech made operative by the logics of financialization associated with neoliberal

⁸⁴ The term "netizen," a combination of the words "(Inter)net" and "citizen," originates from a 1997 publication of the same name co-authored by Michael and Ronda Hauben to describe a person actively involved in online communities. A copy of the manuscript was available online as early as 1994, such that the term was in popular circulation prior to its publication. For more, see Hauben, Michael and Ronda Hauben. *Netizens: On the History and Impact of Usenet and the Internet*. IEEE Computer Society Press, 1997.

capitalism. I define monetized speech as any form of expression online, such as images, videos and text, that correlates to profit by providing digital objects that can be advertised upon. In the context of this project, I focus on YouTube videos as the primary form of monetized speech that concerns my interlocutors. Taken together, therefore, the *neoliberal* state describes the type of state to which the state-platform analogy refers to, as opposed to other formulations of the modern nation state like the totalitarian or social democratic state. I take my definition of the neoliberal state from David Harvey's historical account of the emergence of neoliberal ideology in the U.S. and Great Britain in the 1970s and 80s which coincided with the elections of President Ronald Regan and Prime Minister Margret Thatcher and innovations in global networked communications technologies that transformed economic and social relations. Harvey defines the neoliberal state as that which aligns individual property rights and the freedom of its markets with the individual freedoms of action, expression and choice of its citizens. Of particular concern to this chapter is his description of the neoliberal state's authority, whose legal framework "is that of freely negotiated contractual obligations between juridical individuals in the marketplace" in its resemblance to the authority users concede to YouTube over their expressive actions in the platform's economy by signing the user agreement found in the Terms of Service.⁸⁵ The neoliberal state-platform analogy recasts the right of the user to speak freely as the right to profit—a belief internalized by my interlocutors in their explanations in Chapter 4 of content demonetization as a form of censorship that infringes upon their right to participate in revenue sharing. Drawing upon Jodi Dean's concept of "communicative capitalism" as a political-economic framework which "treats commercial choices as the paradigmatic form of choosing," I understand conflations between free speech and monetized speech online as

⁸⁵ Harvey, David. *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Oxford University Press, 2005, pp. 64.

indicative of broader neoliberal processes of financialization, whereby the value of communicative actions on the platform, including video production and content moderation and monetization decisions are flattened by capital.⁸⁶

To interrogate the strength of the state-platform analogy and the salience of the related analogies of the citizen-user and the law-guideline, I perform a comparative rhetorical analysis between YouTube's Terms of Service and Community Guidelines and several founding documents of U.S. governance, including the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights. I follow Tarleton Gillespie's rhetorical analysis of "platform" to unpack the connotations of "Service" to elaborate on how corporations tactically deploy linguistic nuance to position their actions as operating beyond market forces.⁸⁷ I close with a close reading of John Perry Barlow's *Declaration of Independence of Cyberspace* (1996) to highlight an explicit expression of the analogy between the Internet and the U.S. democratic state prior to the platform era, whose arguments about the authority of the state, the identity of the citizen, and the role of political declarations reappear in present techno-utopian thinking. Although neither materially nor functionally does the platform resemble the state, the neoliberal tenets of market freedom, individual responsibility and self-regulation provide the rhetorical and ideological glue which holds the imperfect analogy together for both users and media technology corporations.

The documents whose rhetoric grounds my comparative assessment between the state and the platform's articulations of democratic governance reflect the ideological and material stakes of the analogy. Those which evidence the concepts of the state belong to the founding period of the United States from approximately 1776-1791. Not only do these documents belong

⁸⁶ Dean, Jodi. *Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies: Communicative Capitalism and Left Politics*. Duke University Press, 2009, pp 22.

⁸⁷ Gillespie, Tarleton. "The Politics of 'Platforms.'" *New Media & Society* vol. 12, no. 3, 2010, pp. 347-364.

to a group of texts which first expressed a coherent vision of American democracy, but they also contain the reference points for neoliberal democratic thinking, which reformulates the authority of the state and the freedoms of the citizen in terms of market capital. Neither, for example, does neoliberalism look to the 13th and 14th Amendments to define personhood as it refers to the citizen, nor does it look to social welfare as its model for state authority. Rather, it refers to the values individual freedom and self-regulation expressed by documents like the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution and the Bill of Rights, whose ideas about democracy are inflected with religious and political radicalism and desires for economic freedom from British Empire. I argue that YouTube's Terms of Service and Community Guidelines embed neoliberalism's coopted versions of these values in relation to the flexible and ever-evolving material conditions of the platform. The documents I take to evidence of the concepts of the platform, therefore, are the most current versions of YouTube's Terms of Service and Community Guidelines. Working from their current versions, as opposed to taking their hundreds of other iterations into account, mirrors the experience of the YouTube user, who finds their unspecified number of scrolling pages-long unwieldy and unnavigable. Although this presents a possible analytical unevenness in relation to the material stability of the founding state documents, my analysis evidences the relationship the typical user has to the platform's regulatory documents. Earlier iterations, though technically available, are not easily accessible.⁸⁸

⁸⁸ Google makes earlier iterations of the Terms of Service available by providing a link to the previous version at the bottom of the homepage of the current version, but in order to access several versions the user must follow a rabbit hole of hyperlinks to each successive previous version. Even if the user chooses to access multiple previous versions in their browser at once, it is difficult to track meaningful changes to the Terms over time due to their length and density. One savvy digital user by the name of Paranoid Paul created a website which allows users to "track changes to made to online documents that affect your **privacy** or **personal information**, like Privacy Policies, Terms and Conditions or User Agreements" and sign up for email notifications of such changes to websites of interest (emphasis in original). To combat the density problem, Paranoid Paul visualizes changes to the Terms by highlighting any added language in green and highlighting and crossing out any removed language in red. Although the website is still active as of 2025, recorded changes to YouTube's privacy policies stop at 2019, and Paul does not track other types of changes, such as those that impact monetization policies.

This comparative rhetorical analysis of the state and the platform's respective documents of governance foregrounds the ethnographic interviews with True Crime content creators I present in Chapters 3 and 4 by providing insight into the broader the ideological context of their video production and monetization labor. I model John Caldwell's work on Hollywood film and television production cultures by putting a "textual analysis of trade and worker artifacts" in conversation with firsthand accounts of media workers to likewise consider "culture as an interpretive system" which is "fully embedded in the play of power and politics."⁸⁹ By analyzing how YouTube linguistically positions itself as having state-like authority over its users (including content creators) in its documents of platform governance, I can validate the claims of censorship made by my interlocutors as grounded in a digital democratic imaginary which the platform actively invests in for its own economic benefit. Drawing out the ideological connections between platform management strategies and historical conceptions of American democratic state governance indicates how deeply embedded the values of individual freedom and self-determination, including the right to free speech, are in the value frameworks U.S.-based internet users refer to when making sense of their online activities. When put in conversation with my ethnographic interviews, my textual analysis of documents of state and platform governance also engages Caldwell's strategy of "industry disembedding research," which I take up in more detail in Chapter 3, by unearthing the systems which seamlessly fold creators' beliefs about YouTube as a democratic space of free expression and their subsequent negative feelings at its failed realization into the platform's economic infrastructure.⁹⁰

Paranoid Paul. 2010, <https://www.paranoidpaul.com/>. Accessed 23 April 2025.

⁸⁹ Caldwell, John. *Production Culture: Industrial Reflexivity and Critical Industrial Practice in Film and Television*. Duke University Press, 2008, pp. 2-4.

⁹⁰ Caldwell, John. *Specworld: Folds, Faults, and Fractures in Embedded Creator Industries*. University of California Press, 2023, pp. 9.

The two primary lines of inquiry in this chapter characterize the body of scholarship that addresses the relationship between American political ideology and the Internet: that which tracks the historical origins of digital techno-utopian thought in the United States, and that which examines how online users engage with systems of governance in different technical contexts. Fred Turner's (2006) historical account of the creation of the private military network ARPANET contextualizes beliefs about the Internet as a technology for democratic free expression and self-governance within the co-evolution of advances in networked computing and the emergence Silicon Valley culture. Drawing upon archival research, Turner sheds light on how the values of 1960s countercultural movement, of whom many of ARPANET's designers were participants, can be found in later iterations of digital techno-utopianism in online communities of the 1980s and 90s.⁹¹ Marget O'Mara's (2019) history of Silicon Valley's tech culture goes well beyond Turner's in scope, as she takes her study into the platform era to address how of companies like Amazon, Google and Facebook interface with the American state and its systems of political thought. O'Mara's account of digital democratic utopianism also has roots deeper than that of that of the 1960s counterculture. Instead, she suggests the anti-establishment, revolutionary rhetoric that Silicon Valley used to market its consumer products in the 1980s draws upon the ideology of the founding period of the United States, whereby, according to its self-description, "Silicon Valley seemed just like the latest and greatest example of the American revolution in action."⁹² David Golumbia (2024) picks up where O'Mara leaves off by focusing less on the history of Silicon Valley and more on how digital techno-utopianism serves right-wing political agendas in the contemporary United States. While he draws upon

⁹¹ Turner, Fred. *From Counterculture to Cyberculture: Stewart Brand, the Whole Earth Network, and the Rise of Digital Utopianism*. University of Chicago Press, 2006.

⁹² O'Mara, Margret. *The Code: Silicon Valley and the Remaking of America*. Penguin Press, 2019.

some of the same historical examples as Turner and O'Mara, including John Perry Barlow's participation in the Electronic Freedom Foundation (which I also address later in this chapter), he instead emphasizes how the present form of American techno-utopianism, which he terms "cyberlibertarianism," uses the values of hyper-individualism, digital rights, and anti-government interventionism to work against regulation that would promote democratic wellbeing and social good.⁹³

While Turner, O'Mara and Golumbia deconstruct techno-utopian associations between the Internet and democracy by tracing political, technological and cultural histories, other scholars assess the extent to which web infrastructures promote or argue for their own capacity to engage ideologies of American governance. Borrowing his title from Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* (1776), the explicit connection Yochai Benkler's *The Wealth of Networks* (2006) draws between the technical arrangements of the Internet and the modern nation state can be understood as a predecessor to the contemporary analogy between the state and the platform that I interrogate in this chapter. Although Turner and O'Mara credit industrial technology designers and later corporate owners as the primary evangelists of this kind of thinking, Benkler's work serves as an example of techno-utopianism within the academy. His argument, however, that the Internet models democratic engagement through systems of "commons-based peer production," where users actively collaborate in the production of information, value and knowledge, relies on examples of websites from the late 1990s and early 2000s, which no longer characterize the structure of the proprietary platform Internet whose corporate operators have vastly more authority over user activity.⁹⁴ Tarleton Gillespie (2010) analyzes how contemporary

⁹³ Golumbia, David. *Cyberlibertarianism: The Right-Wing Politics of Digital Technology*. University of Minnesota Press, 2024.

⁹⁴ Benkler, Yochai. *Wealth of Networks: How Social Production Transforms Markets and Freedom*. Yale University Press, 2006.

platforms position this authority, which permits them to flexibly manage the activity of users to maximize profits, within the Internet's techno-utopian imaginary through documents of platform governance which strategically argue that the corporate platform is a "a progressive and egalitarian arrangement."⁹⁵ His view of the Internet's capacity to model democratic engagement contrasts sharply with Benkler's due to the political-economic, technological and cultural differences between Web 1.0 to Web 2.0. Although Gillespie (2018) notes that even still the "fantasy of a truly 'open' platform is powerful, resonating with deep utopian notions of community and democracy" which may have been more achievable with Web 1.0 architectures of commons-based per production described by Benkler, within an Internet dominated by the corporate centralization and management of information "it is just that, a fantasy."⁹⁶

The emerging discourse that this chapter aims to join navigates between the optimism of early Internet scholars like Benkler and the political-economic realism of platform studies scholars like Gillespie's. Characterized by the work of Irinia Kalinka (2025), this new direction in platform studies examines how in positioning themselves as governing powers, platforms and their corporate operators actively shape conceptions of democracy. Kalinka argues that contemporary platforms reformulate democratic ideology using the technocratic logics of optimization, which encourages people to conceive of themselves as "*user-citizens* of the service of digital public space, where citizenship is an improvable and quantifiable skill instead of a shared responsibility."⁹⁷ I share Kalinka's interest in the user-citizen (which I distinguish in the context of this chapter as the analogy of the citizen-user for the sake of clarity) as an emergent political identity that offers insight into how media technology corporations exercise significant

⁹⁵ Gillespie 350.

⁹⁶ Gillespie, Tarleton. *Custodians of the Internet: Platforms, Content Moderation, and the Hidden Decisions Which Shape Social Media*. Yale University Press, 2018, pp. 5.

⁹⁷ Kalinka, Irina. "The Political Imaginary of User Democracy," *Public Culture*, vol. 37, no. 1, 2025, pp. 51

power over our understanding of democratic governance through the use of their products and services. Our objects of analysis, however, which serve as the primary evidence for what she calls the “political imaginary of user democracy” differ.⁹⁸ While Kalinka draws upon public statements by platform designers and educational programs designed by technology corporations like Google’s Digital Safety and Citizenship Curriculum, I, like Gillespie, concentrate on the rhetoric of documents of platform governance.

The position the citizen and the rights associated with its identity, however, are not evenly ascribed to all within the modern democratic state. Drawing upon the black American intellectual tradition including figures like abolitionist Frederick Douglass (1818-1895) and sociologist and founder of the NAACP William Edward Burghardt Du Bois (1868-1963), both of whom lived during the Reconstruction period following the Civil War and the abolition of chattel slavery in the United States (Douglass, himself, an escaped slave), black scholars have focused critical attention on how the construction of the modern state relies on the racialization and subsequent exclusion of black bodies from its notions of democracy and freedom. I point to Douglass and Du Bois as key figures within this intellectual tradition, as their writings directly respond to a moment in which the state had an opportunity to redefine itself around a more equitable democratic politics that would address the deep structural inequalities at the heart of the nation’s founding, but instead re-formed around a racial politics that salvaged pre-emancipation economic, social and political systems. Douglass resists the cultural assumption that these rights belong only to the white subject by linking the right to free speech as essential to abolitionism. In speech in Boston, MA on the eve of the Civil War (1860), Douglass states:

Liberty is meaningless where the right to utter one’s thoughts and opinions has ceased to exist [...] Slavery cannot tolerate free speech. Five years of its exercise would banish the auction-block and break every chain in the

⁹⁸ Kalinka 40.

South [...] Are we going to palliate and excuse a palpable and flagrant outrage on the right of speech—by implying that only a particular description of persons should exercise that right?⁹⁹

He notes the contradiction of freedom's centrality to American identity, suggesting that by both suppressing pro-abolitionist voices and by actively denying enslaved blacks the right to free speech, the state renders liberty itself meaningless. He argues that the institution of chattel slavery actively attacks free speech by attributing democratic rights only to "a particular description of persons," despite the Declaration of Independence's foundational claim that "that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights."¹⁰⁰ Although these rights were imagined at their origins with a particular democratic subject which the systemic violence of chattel slavery justifies, Douglass argues that using free speech to calling out its own conceptual limits can be a liberatory force which can "banish the auction-block and break every chain."

Du Bois notes that the persistent racial othering of black identity functioned as a social infrastructure, in conjunction with Jim Crow legislation, to construct American whiteness as the primary subject of the rights upheld by the post-Civil War American state. In his extensive analysis of population data and legislation passed during the Reconstruction era, Du Bois' *Black Reconstruction in America* (1935) describes the "public and psychological wage" that racism gave poor southern white laborers, now in a shared economic position with freed blacks, which maintained the sense superiority which the property relations of chattel slavery had institutionalized.¹⁰¹ Black feminist scholar Hortense Spillers elaborates on this concept in her

⁹⁹ Douglass, Frederick. "A Plea for the Freedom of Speech in Boston." 9 Dec. 1860. *The Frederick Douglass Papers*, The Frederick Douglass Papers Project, <https://frederickdouglasspapersproject.com/s/digitaledition/item/9060>. Accessed 15 May 2026.

¹⁰⁰ "Declaration Independence: A Transcription." 4 July 1776. *America's Founding Documents*, National Archives, <https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration-transcript>. Accessed 23 April 2025.

¹⁰¹ Taylor, Keenga-Yamatta. "Black Reconstruction in America 1869-1880." Review of *Black Reconstruction in America: An Essay Toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy*

seminal essay “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe” (1987), which conceives of black feminine identity as “grammarian construct.”¹⁰² She analyzes how the language of “ethnicity”—her term for the essentialization of race—is a signifier designed by the apparatus of the state to both represent and justify the historical and continued violence against black bodies. Spillers engages semiotics to takes Du Bois’ analysis of racism as a “public and psychological wage” a step further and suggest that the language used to describe the world has the power to shape perceived realities. To this extent, the language of race has the power to validate the discriminatory practices of the state.

Contemporary media studies scholars like Ruha Benjamin and Armond Towns build on the legacy of Douglass, Du Bois and Spillers to explore how the language and methodologies of media studies can be used to analyze the construction of race within the state. Whereas Spillers describes race as a symbolic and rhetorical construction, Benjamin positions “race itself is a kind of technology—one designed to separate, stratify and sanctify many forms of injustice experienced by members of racialized groups, but one that people routinely reimagine and redeploy to their own ends.”¹⁰³ Benjamin places the coding of racial bias into contemporary digital technologies within longer media and cultural history to demonstrate how the logics of racial othering have long been used to program the inequities of white American culture. Her concept of the “new Jim Code” challenges widely held assumptions that digital technologies are not only neutral, but are “more objective and progressive than the discriminatory systems of the previous era.” Like Douglass’ caveat that the democratic right to free speech imagines a white

in America, 1860–1880, by W.E.B. Du Bois. *International Socialist Review*, vol. 57, Jan-Feb 2008, <https://web.archive.org/web/20181022002630/http://www.isreview.org/issues/57/feat-reconstruction.shtml>. Accessed 15 May 2026.

¹⁰² Spillers Hortense. “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” *Diacritics*, vol. 17, no. 2, 1987, pp. 65-81.

¹⁰³ Benjamin, Ruha. *Race After Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code*. Polity Press, 2019, pp. 36.

speaker, algorithmic technologies, she argues, are designed to privilege and protect whiteness.¹⁰⁴

Benjamin adds that the politics of visibility are key to the function of race as a technology of white supremacy, whereby black bodies are simultaneously rendered disproportionately visible for policing, discrimination and violence in the coding of algorithmic technologies, and rendered invisible by designs that do not account for the needs of black users.

Building on Benjamins' notion of race as a technology and Spiller's formulation of race as a "grammarian construct," Towns uses the language of infrastructure studies (Parks and Starosielski 2015) to describe the black body as an essential media infrastructure upon which white western society builds itself. His concept of "black mediality" recuperates Marshall McLuhan's concept of media as "extensions of man" to argue that the black body is a media which serves as the "*extension* of the western construct of man."¹⁰⁵ As a medium, black bodies literally extended the economic advancement of white western society through the chattel slavery, but also mediate a relationship to progress for white civilization. Towns refers to the concept of the "racial contract," a reference to social contract theory associated with white liberal western thinkers Thomas Hobbes and Jean Jaccques Rousseau (whose philosophies inspired the writing of the founding documents of American governance taken up in this chapter), to suggest that media are themselves contracts which associated Western social and technological development with whiteness and nature and tribalism with blackness.¹⁰⁶ Like Benjamin's emphasis on the politics of visibility, Towns notes that "like all media infrastructures, the Black body is *invisibilized*" to the societies which rely upon their exploitation. As Towns' and Benjamin's work make evident, white Western society uses the racialized body to position the

¹⁰⁴ Benjamin 5-6.

¹⁰⁵ Towns, Armond. "Towards a Black Media Philosophy," *Cultural Studies*, vol. 34, no. 6, 2020, pp. 852-853.

¹⁰⁶ Towns 855.

democratic state and its freedoms as natural and unquestionable in the narrative of human progress.

The individual democratic freedoms which black studies scholars have pointed out have only been regarded as inalienable for certain bodies and which digital techno-utopianism promises the Internet will fully realize and are the same freedoms that neoliberalism draws upon in its reorganization of the state around the freedom of capital. A cornerstone work in studies of neoliberalism for its analysis equal parts ideological and material, Harvey's (2005) *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* examines how neoliberal logics transform society beyond the election of anti-establishment conservative figures like Reagan and Thatcher and the passing of deregulatory legislation that reinstated rights to corporate monopoly. While tracing these concrete historical changes in power and policy, he describes neoliberalization as the process of financialization, which reconfigures the apparatus of the state, its freedoms, and the daily lives of its citizens in terms of market capital. Harvey demonstrates how core democratic values like the individual's right to free expression and action are invoked by neoliberalism to obfuscate the state's prioritization of capital accumulation, noting that neoliberalism and its advocates are actually "profoundly suspicious of democracy," to the extent that "governance by majority rule is seen as a potential threat to individual rights and constitutional liberties" and is, at best, "a luxury only possible under conditions of relative affluence."¹⁰⁷ Instead, neoliberal democracy takes the logic individual freedom to its extreme, in which "each individual is held responsible and accountable for his or her own actions or wellbeing, [extending] into the realms of welfare, education, healthcare and even pensions," which are often understood to be the responsibilities of the state.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁷ Harvey 66.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid 65.

A branch of scholarship in the decades after Harvey published his historical account of neoliberalism has elaborated on how the political-economic system poses an outright threat to liberal democracy in the United States. Jodi Dean (2009) develops the work of Harvey to suggest that leftist politics has largely failed to advance a coherent democratic vision to challenge neoliberalism due to the rise of “communicative capitalism,” which reduces political action to the expression of opinions and feelings. Similar to the vital role information technologies played in the development of neoliberal markets, Dean cites the Internet and other networked communications media as major contributors to the rise and embrace of communicative capitalist logics, whereby “politics is nothing but consumer choices, that is, individuated responses to individuated needs.”¹⁰⁹ Several of Wendy Brown’s works also expand upon Harvey’s analysis of neoliberalism as a threat to U.S. democracy. In *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism’s Stealth Revolution* (2015), Brown engages Foucault’s concept of biopolitics to describe how neoliberal market logics transform not just economies, societies and political institutions, but all human activity with an “exclusively economic frame, one that has both epistemological and ontological dimensions.”¹¹⁰ She dives deeper into some of the U.S. Supreme Court cases she draws upon in *Undoing the Demos* in her subsequent work *In the Ruins: The Rise of Antidemocratic Politics in the West* (2019), which, like Golumbia’s notion of cyberlibertarianism, positions neoliberalism as an ideology which serves the contemporary far-right. Brown suggests that this current iteration of neoliberalism joins with elements of its opposite, such as “nationalism, enforcement of tradition, morality, populist anti-elitism, and demands for state solutions to economic social problems,” to create a new political formation which requires frameworks beyond the well-trodden understandings of neoliberalism she presented in *Undoing the Demos* to account for the

¹⁰⁹ Dean 11.

¹¹⁰ Brown, Wendy. *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism’s Stealth Revolution*. Zone Books, 2015, pp. 62.

specificities of the present anti-democratic turn in the United States.¹¹¹ For example, the final chapter of *In the Ruins*, shares my interest in Ressentiment (although Brown focuses on Nietzsche's formulation, not Scheler's) to unpack the affective and psychological dimensions of the white, American neoliberal male subject who rejects present democratic politics outright.

In what follows, I argue that the presumed techno-utopian analogy between the democratic state and the social media platform draws its salience from a neoliberal conception of the state, whereby value of the citizen-user is reduced to its ability to generate corporate profit. YouTube functions like a neoliberal state to the extent that it uses the language of governance to associate the platform's authority to manage the activity of its users in a way that maximizes revenue with the promise to provide a democratic good. A comparative rhetorical analysis between YouTube's Terms of Service and Community Guidelines and founding documents of American governance demonstrates how the platform strategically deploys democratic rhetoric to position its management of user activity as natural and self-evident. I conclude with a discussion of John Perry Barlow's *Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace* as a precursor to the state-platform analogy in its description of the Internet as an ideal space for the realization of individualist democratic values.

Does Techno-Utopianism Still Matter, and was YouTube ever Democratic?

On its face, the analogy between the state-platform can be easily disputed without contest. YouTube, evidently, does not function as a democratic space if Google sets the rules which organize the platform's content moderation infrastructures without soliciting a vote or substantial input from its users. Despite the commonsense differences between a public sidewalk and a social media platform, YouTube users and those who create content in particular,

¹¹¹ Brown, Wendy. *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism: The Rise of Antidemocratic Politics in the West*. Columbia University Press, 2019, pp. 16.

frequently turn to claims the concept of censorship to make sense of demonetization, with one of my interlocutors exclaiming, “of course its censorship!” This self-theorizing which identifies YouTube as a democratic space with fundamental rights on experiential rather than legal grounds points to the fact that techno-utopian ideas continue to shape how people imagine the relationship between technology and political possibility. Often conceived of as modeling democratic engagement through community self-regulation on widely accessible tools for expression, the centrality of social media platforms like YouTube in U.S. culture requires revisiting anew techno-utopian claims that digital networked communications technologies can engineer a more democratic world.

Growing critical consensus surrounding techno-utopianism largely dismisses the attitude as either misguided philosophy to the likes of McLuhan’s “global village,” or nostalgia for a Web 1.0 characterized by chatrooms and bulletin board servers (BBS) of the 1980s and 90s. Scholarship that celebrates the democratic potential of the Internet often suffers from technological determinist thinking which suggests that certain infrastructural arrangements are more conducive to democratic participation than others. Golumbia points to Benkler and Clay Shirky as scholars whose suggestions that “we let technology take the lead: social institutions and governments can try to catch up, ponder, and perhaps adjust to what technology has done only afterward,” parrots a digital-technological view of progress advanced by both right-wing thinkers and corporate media technology designers.¹¹² Benkler’s optimism for the Internet as a technology which “opens a range of possibilities for pursuing the core political values of liberal societies—individual freedom, a more genuinely participatory political system, a critical culture, and social justice,” relies on outdated examples like Google’s PageRank algorithm whose role

¹¹² Golumbia 4.

has changed substantially over the past few decades.¹¹³ When Benkler was writing in 2006, the search engine primarily used a logic of peer-produced relevance that recommended results based on how many times a site had been linked by others. Google's present-day suite of recommendation algorithms, however, increasingly employ a logic of hyper-personalized relevance that mines data about the user's online activity to suggest targeted information and products.¹¹⁴ On the platform Internet, information's value is directly tied to the probability of its consumption, as opposed to its value relative to other pieces of information. David Harvey describes the subsumption of information into commodity as the processes financialization, whereby market logics infiltrate all areas of society and translate actions on communications networks into financial value, including the act of speech.¹¹⁵ Financialization executes communicative capitalism's framing of commodity consumption as the ideal form of decision making around which the Internet and social media platforms are increasingly designed.

As the platform hit the 20-years online, users and creators share reminiscences of a less financialized YouTube before the platform set the standard for social media economies that advertise on user-generated content. Phil Lester, a popular UK-based Comedy and Video Game creator, voices nostalgia for the platform's early days in a video reflecting on his 20-year tenure on the platform. He notes that,

In 2006, most people weren't making entertaining YouTube content. It was kind of like a Facebook status where I was just gonna talk about the most mundane sh** ever [...] there was no money to make on YouTube back then, so I wasn't really worried about getting more subscribers or mainstream appeal for these weird videos. I was just having fun.¹¹⁶

¹¹³ Benkler 7-8.

¹¹⁴ Google still uses PageRank, but it is only one among several algorithms that make up the search engine's recommender system. As early as 2004, Google started deploying personalized search functions. For more about the history of PageRank, see Stox, Patrick. "The Evolution of Google PageRank." *Ahrefs blog*, Ahrefs, 27 June 2024, <https://ahrefs.com/blog/google-pagerank/>. Accessed 23 April 2025.

¹¹⁵ Harvey 33.

¹¹⁶ Lester, Phil. "Phil and Dan React to 20 YEARS of AmazingPhil. *YouTube*, uploaded by AmazingPhil, 27 March 2026, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Snm6KbLvQo/>. Accessed 10 June 2026.

During the period that Phil lovingly remembers (circa 2005-2010), YouTube activity was governed by a logic of peer-produced relevance similar to that of Google's PageRank algorithm, which Benkler cites as digital design that realizes the Internet's democratic potential. An early YouTube user made watch choices at the recommendation of friends or by perusing the now defunct Trending Page, whose suggestions were based on aggregating the view and like counts of the platform's users.¹¹⁷ As crowdsourced choices determined which videos gained popularity and recommendation over others, YouTube gave users the impression that the platform realized the neoliberal promise of the free market, where the best content would naturally rise to the top. During the first year of Google's acquisition of the platform, uploading videos and the corresponding communicative actions of users (viewing, commenting, liking) had no immediate correlate to profit.

The launch of in-video advertising and YouTube's creator revenue sharing model the YouTube Partner Program (YPP) in 2007, however, marked the beginning of the platform's shift from a video repository of people "just having fun" talking about "the most mundane shit ever" into an emerging media industry in competition with legacy media for talent and global capital. These early transformations in the platform's infrastructure and economy, along with several others over the course of the next two decades, created the YouTube denigrated by many today as rife with money hungry influencers begging you to "like, comment, subscribe, and use my code for 15% off your next HelloFresh order." Consequently, the transitional years just before and after the addition of content monetization have come to be regarded as the platform's "golden age": a mythological, idyllic era before market logics governed all YouTube activity which ended

¹¹⁷ Goodrow, Cristos. "On YouTube's Recommendation System." *YouTube Official Blog*, YouTube, 15 Sept. 2021, <https://blog.youtube/inside-youtube/on-youtubes-recommendation-system/>. Accessed 23 April 2025. YouTube discontinued its recommended page, which had been active since 2010, in July 2025.

sometime around 2010, uncoincidentally the same year the *Citizens United* ruling. Like my interlocutors' accusations that content demonetization constitutes censorship, the popular intuition that we have seen the sun set on YouTube's golden age speaks both to the lived realities of platform users, overburdened by ads and the relentless marketing of premium subscriptions, and the power of a techno-utopian beliefs that YouTube was and could be again a space of expression free from Google's profit incentives. Monetization gave a whole new meaning to the slogan "Broadcast yourself," which the platform used until 2012. The introduction of midroll ads and the compensation of creator labor aligned the emerging media industry with broadcast television, even drawing this connection explicitly by referring to user profiles as "channels" and using a skeuomorph of a CRT television set as their iPhone app icon until 2017. The slogan refashioned the peer-to-peer communication model of radio for the televisual, implying that the platform gave the user the power and the tools to transmit and receive television-like content from millions of others.

YouTube's choice to abandon the iconic slogan in 2012 coincided with two significant moments that heralded a definitive departure from its identity as a user-centered space associated with the myth of the platform's golden age. The October 16 livestream of the Barack Obama-Mitt Romney debate in partnership with ABC News explicitly announced the platform's capacity to be co-opted by media corporations for matters of the state.¹¹⁸ The peer-to-peer communication model of "Broadcast yourself" could be readily supplanted by the unidirectional broadcast of the state to its citizens. In addition, the rewriting of YouTube's recommendation algorithm sometime during the same year to prioritize watch time over view numbers redefined desirable content as

¹¹⁸ "Presidential Debate 2012 – Schedule, Livestreaming: What You Need to Know about the October 16 Debate." *Latin Times*, 16 Oct. 2012, <https://www.latintimes.com/presidential-debate-2012-schedule-live-streaming-what-you-need-know-about-oct-16-debate-124115>. Accessed 10 June 2026.

that which kept users on the platform for the longest duration of time.¹¹⁹ This design change signaled YouTube's intention to maximize advertiser revenue by encouraging creators to provide more screentime for the placement of midroll ads. For creators, however, the incentive to make lengthier content signaled that YouTube could rewrite the communicative logics of the platform at any time to increase profits and reorder the quantity of user engagement as superior to its quality. These two pivotal decisions in 2012 marked an end to the credibility of YouTube's claims to prioritize the user's ability to "Broadcast yourself," and firmly established the platform as a technology of neoliberal capitalism through a bait and switch. On the one hand, creators gained more opportunities for revenue sharing by making longer videos, but, on the other, YouTube demonstrated that the platform could be mobilized at any moment to engage media corporations and U.S. political process.

Despite the fact that the end of the "Broadcast yourself" era solidified YouTube as flexible technology whose technical infrastructure can be reshaped to align with corporate media interests and participate in matters of the state, the platform has not fully shaken its cultural reputation as tool for personal connection. Several of my interlocutors, for instance, beam in their interviews about the meaningful connections they've built with their audiences and state that they feel more beholden in their labor to their viewers than the platform itself (a fact whose resistive potential I address in the Conclusion). The socio-technical imaginary of YouTube as platform for the formation of communities outside of established institutions and power relations goes beyond the scope of social media and figures into longer American techno-utopian narratives outside of the academy. Fred Turner situates these beliefs instead in the thinking of industrial technology designers responsible for the earliest iteration of the Internet. Turner tracks

¹¹⁹ "History of YouTube." *Google Wiki: The Google Encyclopedia*, Fandom, https://google.fandom.com/wiki/History_of_YouTube. Accessed 23 April 2025.

the rise of digital utopianism in the United States to the creation of the private, military network ARPANET, whose designers actively participated in 1960s counterculture movement and the burgeoning tech culture of Silicon Valley. He cites Steward Brand's Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link (the WELL), as a prime example of how the economic and technological conditions afforded by the collaboration of public and private investment converged with the values of the counterculture to form a community of digital users committed to the idea of using networked computing as a tool for free expression and democratic self-governance. These ideas would later be articulated in the 1990s by John Perry Barlow in his *Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace* as in need of urgent defending from the state's interference.

As Turner makes evident, the Internet's democratic imaginary can be situated within a genealogy of beliefs about communications technologies' ability to transform social relationships by reorganizing time and space. Armand Mattelart and Carolyn Marvin trace the emergence of these beliefs back further to the advent of nineteenth century technologies like the telephone, the telegraph and the railway on the basis of their abilities to collapse distances that had maintained strict boundaries between public and private life.¹²⁰ Social media platforms accelerate this boundary collapse with far greater scope and even greater speed, granting the potential to anyone with a network connection to communicate with another citizen on other side of the country or another person on the other side of the world. Technologies that close the meaningful distance between citizens and bring them into proximity with one other, could promote Benkler's ideas of "a more genuinely participatory political system" by creating more opportunities for direct discourse.¹²¹ My critical emphasis, however, is less concerned with the historical evolution of

¹²⁰ Mattelart, Armand. *Networking the World*. Presses Universitaires de France, 1996.
Marvin, Carolyn. *When Old Technologies Were New: Thinking About Electric Communication in the Nineteenth Century*. Oxford University Press, 1988.

¹²¹ Benkler 8.

these technologies and ideas in concert, and instead is preoccupied with how late capitalist, neoliberal reworkings of the democratic tenants of freedom, self-regulation, and individual responsibility map onto our present-day experiences on social media platforms.

The radical political, economic and cultural transformations that occurred during the Internet's transition from a text-based landscape to the proprietary platform web and its continued elaboration on platforms like YouTube make it difficult to engage digital utopianism without relying on selective or outdated cases. The project of this chapter, therefore, shares Turner's discursive approach by understanding ideas as co-constructed by systems of knowledge, power relationships and means of expression. For Turner, the WELL serves as a critical site of the American techno-utopian imaginary in the expressions and actions of its users. Through the WELL, the rhetorical becomes literal and the imagined becomes real. By examining the rhetorical relationship that YouTube constructs between its regulatory documents, democratic ideas, and its users, I validate the beliefs of my interlocutors and provide insight into the textures of YouTube's platform management strategy. As I have previously suggested, neoliberal rhetoric provides a tonic function for creators who experience Ressentiment in relation to their monetization labor. Creators appeal to the language of free speech, self-regulation, and individual responsibility embedded in YouTube's terms and guidelines to repress their negative feelings and to substantiate the false promise that continued content production will eventually culminate in control over their own labor. A discursive approach unearths how creators engage YouTube's democratic techno-utopian imaginary by internalizing the neoliberal language of its regulatory documents that position the platform as having state-like governing authority.

Following the creation of advertiser-driven economies and revenue sharing models, I demonstrate how present neoliberal political thought supports the conflation between free speech

and monetized speech that underpins the state-platform analogy. To this extent, content moderation practices which restrict, limit or demonetize user speech are described by users and politicians alike as undemocratic. I suggest, therefore, that neoliberal market logics have subsumed not only the techno-utopian imaginaries of social media platforms like YouTube, but also contemporary American political discourse, which frequently associates digital products and their corporate designers with democratic values.

Free Speech Myths and Monetization Ideologies of the Neoliberal State

The analogy that American techno-utopianism draws between the democratic state and the social media platform rests upon a fundamental conflation between free speech and monetized speech whereby any restriction to expression is perceived as undemocratic. The identity of the state to which the state-platform analogy refers to, therefore is that of the neoliberal state, which decontextualizes the tenets of liberal democracy until they become less a political ideology and more, according to Joyce Appleby, “a description of reality” that has become “part of the nation’s self-understanding.” Built on communicative capitalist logics, the neoliberal state prioritizes the rights of the individual over notions of social or collective wellbeing associated with other theorizations of democracy. Appleby ties the centrality of the individual to “core liberal affirmations” articulated during the founding period of the United States, including the beliefs that “human nature manifests itself naturally in the quest for freedom. Political self-government emanates from individual self-control” and that “rational self-interest can be depended on as a principle of action.”¹²² Neoliberalism translates these core liberal affirmations into the economic terms of post-industrial capital. If Nature vis-a-vis God

¹²² Appleby, Joyce. *Liberalism and Republicanism in the Historical Imagination*. Harvard University Press, 1992, pp. 1-10. Although Appleby does not use the term “neoliberalism” in her writing, she does describes the failures of American liberalism in contemporary thought, which I take to be the political philosophy’s present vacuity in having bowed to market capital.

endowed human beings with a fundamental orientation towards freedom in the eighteenth-century, then in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries “individual freedoms are [understood to be] guaranteed by freedom of the market.”¹²³ Neoliberal political ideology equates the wellbeing of the state with the wellbeing of the free market, such that limitations to free speech can simultaneously be invoked as threats to the democratic rights of individuals and threats to the freedom of capital.

The tendency for present political discourse to reduce democratic wellbeing to the act of speech stems from neoliberal market logics, whereby speech is a democratic good so long as it is freely expressed, just as capital is good so long as it can freely circulate in the market without state interference. Being a good citizen simply means speaking your mind, regardless of your speech’s relationship to other ideas and values or its impact on others. Musk’s speech at Trump’s rally and his America PAC petition demonstrate neoliberalism’s binary position on free speech: either you support free speech unconditionally and without exception (the “democratic” position), or you oppose it entirely (the totalitarian position). Any intervention to speech, even if in the name of protecting other citizens, demonstrates an abuse of the state’s power. The touchstone that “free speech is the bedrock of democracy,” though not wholly incorrect, fails to consider that discernment is essential to making “an informed vote.” Musk’s offer to pay registered voters receives little to no ideological backlash from his conservative and far right constituencies as being unconstitutional (instead, backlash comes in the form of not being paid their dues) because he embodies the ideal representative of the neoliberal state: he who alleges to secure individual freedom through his exercise of personal capital. The freedom of his capital necessitates the freedom of his personhood, and vice versa.

¹²³ Harvey 7.

Although neoliberal free speech ideology supports the interest corporate platforms have in comparing their regulation of user expression to democratic state governance, it also allows far-right ideologues to misconstrue content moderation practices as actions akin to those of a totalitarian state. “Free speech warriors” like Musk view the Internet as a venue of top concern because so much political, social and cultural discourse, especially in a post-COVID19-outbreak world, occurs not in the town square, the late-night café, or the proverbial watercooler, but online. The Terms of Service and Community Guidelines of a given platform typically describe content moderation as a practice that protects users by shielding them from hateful and obscene speech, and mediates their discernment of information by targeting deceptive content (consider, for example, the consequences of circulating incorrect information about the outcome of an election or effects of a vaccine on a mass scale). In actuality, content moderation practices that remove or ban users and their posts, or more subtly render them invisible through shadowbanning, can just as easily be construed as oppressive.¹²⁴ Far-right pundits frequently point to these regulatory guidelines as executing legal attacks on democracy to sidestep criticism from the opposition which accuses them of amplifying hateful speech, misinformation and harmful beliefs.

¹²⁴ Shadowbanning is a content moderation practice whereby a user is not made aware that their activities are being completely or partially restricted from the view of others. Shadowbanning itself is not a codified policy, but rather a phenomenon that reflects a platform’s lack of transparency in communicating moderation decisions to individual users. Furthermore, YouTube’s Terms of Service are not unique in stating that the platform reserves the right to remove any content that they deem harmful (further defined in the Community Guidelines), and to terminate any user’s account that they deem to cause harm to other users. TikTok, Instagram and Tumblr, for instance, all include clauses that permit the platform to terminate or restrict user accounts on the basis of such violations. See TikTok Legal. “Your Access to and Use of Our Services.” *TikTok*, Nov. 2023, <https://www.tiktok.com/legal/page/us/terms-of-service/en>. Accessed 23 April 2025 for TikTok’s policy. See Instagram Help Center. “Content Removal and Disabling or Terminating Your Account.” *Meta*, <https://help.instagram.com/581066165581870/>. Accessed 23 April 2025 for Instagram’s policy. See “Content and User Content.” *Terms of Service*. Tumblr, 6 Sept. 2024, <https://www.tumblr.com/policy/en/terms-of-service>. Accessed 23 April 2024 for Tumblr’s policy.

Musk's transformation of Twitter into X presents an extreme case of how a binary position on speech that understands any intervention to its expression as undemocratic can be embedded into platform governance. After acquiring Twitter for \$40 billion in late 2022, Musk began dismantling the platform's forms of content moderation, claiming that although he sought to loosen speech restrictions, "Twitter's strong commitment to content moderation remains absolutely unchanged."¹²⁵ Devaluing content moderation infrastructures validates the act of speech itself as the primary indicator of democratic good, ultimately ignoring whether or not the speech enhances the ability of the citizen to participate in democracy. As a result, Musk created on X a system without engineered checks and balances to mutually regulate the actions of the state-platform and its user-citizens. One disgruntled user rightly called out the evident contradiction between Musk's free speech ideology and his heavy promotion of the America PAC petition on the platform, stating simply, "Well?" above a screenshot of one of Musk's tweets from 27 April 2022 that reads, "For Twitter to deserve public trust, it must be **politically neutral**, which effectively means upsetting the far right and the far left equally."¹²⁶ X is not the only social media platform to tactically deploy democratic rhetoric to achieve its ends. The ends justify the means, or rather the end goal—whether it be profit, political influence or a

¹²⁵ O'Brien, Matt, and Barbara Ortutay. "Twitter slashes its staff as Musk era takes hold on platform." *Associated Press*, 4 Nov 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/elon-musk-twitter-inc-business-layoffs-c0334da78b3af9faf2f43cf3f6e52ffa>. Accessed 24 Oct 2024.

According to a report released by eSafety, Australia's online safety commissioner, Musk fired 80% of engineers working on trust and safety and 1/3 of its non-engineer trust and safety employees upon his acquisition and ultimately disbanded the Trust and Safety Council in Dec 2022, an external advisory board of about 100 independent organizations formed in 2016 to help address various content moderation issues on the platform. See Brewster, Thomas. "Musk's X Fired 80% of Engineers Working on Trust and Safety, Australian Government Says." *Forbes*, 10 Jan 2024, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/thomasbrewster/2024/01/10/elon-musk-fired-80-per-cent-of-twitter-x-engineers-working-on-trust-and-safety/>. Accessed 24 Oct 2024. For more information on Musk disbanning the Trust and Safety Council, see O'Brien, Matt, and Barbara Ortutay. "Musk's Twitter disbans its Trust and Safety advisory group." *Associated Press*, 13 Dec 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/elon-musk-twitter-inc-technology-business-a9b795e8050de12319b82b5dd7118cd7>. Accessed 24 Oct 2024.

¹²⁶ @Frank_TIHZHO. "Well?" X, 7 Oct. 2024, https://x.com/Frank_TIHZHO/status/1843249723580506592. Accessed 8 Oct 2024. Highlight for emphasis in the original, changed to boldface for the purposes of formatting. The post appears as a comment on Musk's post first promoting the America PAC petition.

combination of both—determines which aspects of democracy are embedded into platform governance infrastructures. In this instance, Musk takes a zero-sum approach to free speech on X to empower far-right politicians, whereas YouTube places individual self-regulation at the forefront to stabilize the flow of advertiser revenue.

Reducing democratic participation to the act of speech, grows out of a particular mythology surrounding the founding of the United States which, as Appleby suggests, “denie[s] its own roots and substitute[s] a genealogy of key ideas” for neoliberalism to co-opt in service to the interests of multinational corporations and financial capital.¹²⁷ This myth seeks out “those who could be characterized as pathfinders, inventors, forerunners, dissenters, trailblazers—the lonely outsider or victim of convention authority” to argue in favor of the freedom of the market from state intervention. The centrality of these “pioneering figures” and their decontextualization from their historical context allows neoliberalism to tell a half-truth about the formation of the American democratic state which suggests that the individual freedoms enshrined in our founding documents of governance arose from the freedom of capital. Former 2024 Republican presidential candidate and fellow entrepreneur Vivek Ramaswamy writes Musk into this neoliberal retelling of American history by likening him to Benjamin Franklin, who, ironically, died before the ratification of the Bill of Rights. In an interview with following the 2024 presidential debate, Ramaswamy paints a clear picture of how neoliberalism imagines the relationship between private entrepreneurial capital and individual liberty:

[innovation] is also the founding spark of American exceptionalism, right? Our founding fathers were the likes of Thomas Jefferson, who not only wrote the Declaration of Independence, he also invented the swivel chair and the polygraph test. Benjamin Franklin—I think of Elon Musk as a modern Benjamin Franklin type of figure—invented the lightning rod and the Franklin stove, yet these were also the people who led the country politically and set it into motion. So, I think we have a chance to revive that

¹²⁷ Appleby 8.

1776 kind of spirit, and I think there's a role for a modern Washington, a modern Jefferson, a modern Benjamin Franklin. I think in many ways Donald Trump is stepping up to be the modern George Washington of our time. Elon Musk reminds me of the Benjamin Franklins of their day, and so I think we've found different common cause in our love of this country to revitalize that founding spirit, even though each of us have had our own successes separately in the private sector, and I'm biased but I'm of the view that we need actually more of those people stepping up to play different roles in defining the future of our politics in America.¹²⁸

The relationship Ramaswamy outlines hinges upon a series of inappropriate comparisons whose viability rests on the fact that Trump, Musk, Franklin, Jefferson and Washington all own/owned massive amounts of private capital, which he assumes translates to an inclination towards democratic values. Though seeming less egregious than referring to Trump as the “George Washington of our time,” Ramaswamy’s description of Musk as a “modern Benjamin Franklin type of figure” executes an insidious misdirection suggestive of the role of technology corporations have to play in the state.¹²⁹ If one wanted to liken Musk to historical inventors, then Thomas Edison would be a more apt comparison in his ownership, operation and management of a successful enterprise of inventors from whom he took the lion’s share of the profit and the credit. In choosing to compare Musk to Franklin instead, Ramaswamy frames the former as a benevolent genius whose capital literally engineers democracy.

¹²⁸ “Ramaswamy Says More Innovation Needed in the US.” *Bloomberg Technology*, Bloomberg, 28 June 2024, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/videos/2024-06-28/ramaswamy-says-more-innovation-needed-in-the-us-video>. Accessed 8 Oct. 2024.

¹²⁹ Describing Donald Trump as the “George Washington of our time,” could not be more misplaced in light of his incitement of the 6 Jan. 2021 attacks on the US Capitol. Whereas the 45th president refused to acknowledge his defeat for a second term and chose instead to incite his supporters to violence, the first president, despite calls from his supporters to serve a third term, chose to step down after two, stating in his farewell address, “I have the consolation to believe, that while choice and prudence invite me to quit the political scene, patriotism does not forbid it. See Washington, George. “Washington’s Farewell Address to the People of the United States.” 17 Sept. 1796. *United States Senate Historical Office*, https://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/history/resources/pdf/Washingtons_Farewell_Address.pdf. Accessed 30 Oct 2024. Several online sources, including Mount Vernon’s official website, claim that Washington had feared that remaining in office until death would set a dangerous precedent for the nascent nation. The two-term limit precept, set informally by Washington, would later be ratified into the Constitution as the twenty-second amendment in 1951—the very constitution that Trump and his far-right constituents believe is under attack. The irony of Trump’s refusal to cede office in 2021 is not lost on this point.

His reference to Franklin fails to mention that his writings, more than his inventions, align him with the neoliberal values of always-on productivity, market freedom, and self-management evidenced by his posthumously published memoirs which logged his daily productivity and virtues, including his famously rephrased quip “time is money.”¹³⁰ These values are the moral foundations of the Network Society, described by Manuel Castells as post-industrial capitalism’s socio-technical arrangement around digital networked communications technologies that restructure of labor into communication on flexible, self-sufficient networks of interlocking managerial nodes.¹³¹ The shape of society resembles “the shape of the network” engineered to maximize the efficiency of capital flows.¹³² Distributed networked communications technologies fold these neoliberal values seamlessly into the digital infrastructure of our daily lives, so that when we do not question whether or not constant productivity, market freedom and self-regulation are democratic values. Ramaswamy intentionally does not acknowledge the real connection between Franklin and Musk because it would mean unmasking neoliberalism’s ideological vacuity, whose ideal of democracy prioritizes the rights of capital and corporations over the rights of human beings.

Ramaswamy’s love letter to “that 1776 kind of spirit” weaves our current political moment into the myth of the founding of the United States to justify the naturalness of the neoliberal state and how it translates democratic values. This myth, still taught in most American public schools, paints the practitioners of early American governance as selfless heroes who used their wealth and intellect to liberate its citizens through the creation of the United States. The

¹³⁰ Franklin, Benjamin. “Personal Virtues.” 1726. *Benjamin Franklin Historical Society*, <http://www.benjamin-franklin-history.org/personal-virtues/>. Accessed 23 April 2025.

¹³¹ Castells, Manuel. “An introduction to the information age.” *City*, vol. 2, no. 7, 1997, pp. 6-16.

¹³² “The Shape of the Network” is taken from the title of a chapter from Tung-Hui Hu’s *A Prehistory of the Cloud*. MIT Press, 2015.

colloquialism “founding fathers” indicates the popular belief that individual freedom needs benevolent paternalism as its advocate. Elisabeth Anker points out, however, that while “freedom has taken the shape as individual liberty and emancipation from tyranny, it has also taken shape as the right to exploit and the power to subjugate.” The creation of the American democratic state relied on disrupting indigenous systems of governance and “world destroying acts of dispossession” of settler colonial violence, land theft and treaty manipulation. The legalized enslavement and exploitation of millions of Africans and their descendants, “was not merely considered the opposite of freedom but also a practice of freedom: the freedom of the master.” Slave labor provided the authors of the founding documents of American governance “the freedom of mastery, prosperity, and leisure, including the leisure to write treatises on liberty” that would articulate the tenants of our democracy.¹³³ To take seriously what kind of state is at stake in the analogy between the state-platform, we must concede that these values were selectively applied by those in power to maintain the Transatlantic Slave Trade and the dispossession and annihilation of American indigenous peoples, the effects of which are reified by today’s social, political and economic institutions. In no way can the violence and exploitation responsible for creating the American democratic state be compared to the exploitation of creator labor on social media platforms, but acknowledging this history provides an opportunity to consider the long tradition of powerful institutions weaponizing democratic narratives with the intent to profit, whether that be in the service of the ruling class of a nascent nation, or in the service of a media technology corporation.

¹³³ Anker, Elisabeth. *Ugly Freedoms*. Duke University Press, 2021, pp. 3-4.

Platform Contracts: The Guidelines to Conditional Citizenship

Claims that the Internet and its digital platforms serve as microcosms of democracy assume a relation of identity between the political and the technological. Tarleton Gillespie's cornerstone piece in the field of platform studies also takes up the case of YouTube to argue that corporations strategically deploy the term "platform" to cohere their technologies, services and profits within a cultural imaginary. Following Gillespie, I argue that the analogy between the state-platform conflates the term's figurative and political "semantic territories," whereby the term platform's "conceptual usage, as 'the ground or foundation of an action' simultaneously signals its political valance in terms of "beliefs being articulated" related to issues of governance.¹³⁴ To consider YouTube as a platform, as opposed to as a video-sharing website as it was treated during its early years, positions the technology as a political entity, whose users are reconfigured as political agents through content production and consumption labor. Making, uploading and monetizing videos, and commenting and viewing are recast as political actions through YouTube's technical and conceptual platform architecture. The term platform's effectiveness a "discursive resting point" for technology companies, according to Gillespie, "emerges not simply as indicating a functional shape: it suggests a progressive and egalitarian arrangement, promising to support those who stand upon it."¹³⁵ To call a website a platform, therefore, evokes a political entity of the democratic kind by virtue of its capability to support the actions of its users on material and ideological registers. YouTube offers its users a virtual space to upload videos at will with a promise to protect the user's right and ability to do so. Otherwise stated, the platform provides users with a technology that promotes "free" action in exchange for the right to regulate these actions in a way that serves the platform's continued existence. This

¹³⁴ Gillespie 350.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

exchange smoothly aligns with the democratic platitude *freedom with responsibility* at the core of liberal social contract theory: the state protects the freedom of its citizens, so long as its citizens agree to act within the bounds outlined by the state.¹³⁶ Regulatory documents like YouTube's Terms of Service and Community Guidelines evoke the fundamentality of social contract theory to democratic governance in their provision that users must choose to agree to the terms before use of the platform. In clicking "I agree," users consent that content moderation decisions, even those that are illogical, inconsistent and uneven, fall well within the scope of the platform's authority.

To a certain extent, the process by which the user opts into the platform's material and ideological conditions outlined in its regulatory documents bears functional similarity to a person's decisions to undergo the naturalization process to become a citizen of the United States. The citizen of the state, however, occupies a more definitive position relative to the platform user, as one cannot be born a YouTube user; you must agree to become one. In contrast, one can be born a citizen of the United States and demonstrates this identity through actions that fall within a prescribed set of expectations, both legal and socio-cultural. Furthermore, *Afroyim v. Rusk* (1967) affirmed citizenship to be a fundamental right in the United States, which cannot be revoked for either natural-born or naturalized individuals.¹³⁷ YouTube, on the other hand,

reserves the right to suspend or terminate your Google account or your access to all or part of the Service if (a) you materially or repeatedly breach this Agreement; (b) we are required to do so to comply with a legal requirement or a court order; or (c) we reasonably believe that there has been conduct that creates (or could create) liability or harm to any user, other third party, YouTube or our Affiliates.¹³⁸

¹³⁶ See Locke, John. *Second Treatise of Government*. 1689. Hackett Publishing Company, 1980, Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. *On the Social Contract*. 1762. Hackett Publishing Company, 2019, and Hobbes, Thomas "Part II: Of Common-Wealth" *Leviathan*. 1651. Routledge, 2016 for different articulations of social contract theory.

¹³⁷ United States, Supreme Court. *Afroyim v. Rusk*. 29 May 1967, *Justia US Supreme Court Center*; Justia, <https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/387/253/>. Accessed 23 April 2025.

¹³⁸ "Terminations or Suspensions by YouTube." *Terms of Service*. YouTube, 15 Dec. 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/static?template=terms>. Accessed 23 April 2025.

By agreeing to these guidelines, the user consents to the possibility that YouTube may decide to restrict or eliminate your access to the platform as a result of internal or external decision making. In the context of the state-platform, analogy Provision (b) positions YouTube as a state-like entity that must concede to the powers of international governing bodies, like the United Nations or the World Trade Organization. A nation state, however, must elect to participate in such organizations for their judgments to have any practical meaning or consequence. An international governing body's power rests on the basis of mutual recognition and participation.

YouTube's terminations and suspension guidelines, however, do not suggest that engagement with international governing bodies is optional. The platform, and subsequently its users, cannot choose whether or not they want to abide by the declarations of superior legal entities. As a product of Google that operates in over 100 countries, YouTube's internal governance must comply with the laws of the various nation states in which it operates. The platform, therefore, is not an independent legal entity like the state, which has the liberty to selectively engage with the global political stage. Rather, it is a corporate entity which is subject to the laws of the countries in which it sells its products. Isolationism for the multinational corporation would be deadly. Instead, it seeks to expand to the point of global monopoly whose economic power might even shape local law overtime to maximize its profits. The state-platform analogy flips participation dynamics on their head. On the one hand, the citizen's status within the state is not conditional, but the state maintains the option to participate in forms international governance. On the other hand, the user must opt-in to the platform's guidelines to participate, but the platform cannot opt-out of international law without risking profit loss.

The Humble Servant: Corporate *Usership*

The flipped opt-in, opt-out dynamics between the state and its citizens and the platform and its users highlights not only some of the obvious limits to the state-platform analogy, but also gestures towards an alternative analogy between the corporation-platform. As a corporate product, the platform shares the corporation's operational qualities. YouTube, as an extension of Google, offers the consenting user access to the "platform and the products, services and features we make available to you as part of the platform (collectively, the "Service")."¹³⁹ "Service," like the term platform, serves as a "discursive resting point" for Google to position its actions within a particular cultural imaginary. In this cultural imaginary, the corporation can obfuscate its identity as an economic player selling a product to a consumer by claiming a more paternalistic role of offering a desired service to the user in need. "Service" also "suggests a progressive and egalitarian arrangement, promising to support those who stand upon it" through its multiple meanings, which can be strategically conflated by the corporation in marketing campaigns, regulatory documents and governance decisions regarding the consumption of its product.¹⁴⁰ According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the primary definitions of service include 1) "Religious (mainly Christian) ritual or worship," 2) "The action of serving someone or something, the work of duty of a servant," related to "the state or condition of being a servant," 3) "Help, benefit, advantage, use," 4) "The action of waiting a table, or of supplying food; the delivery or supply of any commodity."¹⁴¹ These four primary definitions can be summarized as worship, work/duty, benefit, and delivery/supply. Each of these connotations of "Service"

¹³⁹ "Welcome to YouTube." *Terms of Service*. YouTube, 15 Dec. 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/static?template=terms>. Accessed 23 April 2025.

¹⁴⁰ Gillespie 350.

¹⁴¹ "Service." *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2021, https://www.oed.com/dictionary/service_n1?tab=meaning_and_use#23370159. Accessed 23 April 2025.

position Google as subservient to the user by fulfilling its duty to provide access to YouTube. Definitions 1) and 2) diminish the corporation's dominant role to that of the humble servant, who labors to provide a digital space at the demand of the user, while definitions 3) and 4) position YouTube, the product, as a kind of public good, a beneficial commodity that "allows you to discover, watch and share videos and other content, provides a forum for people to connect, inform, and inspire others across the globe, and acts as a distribution platform for original content creators and advertisers large and small."¹⁴² Taken together, these multiple connotations of "Service" provide YouTube with a rhetoric that downplays its status as a product of corporate monopoly. These connotations position the platform as an agent of public good in the service of *users* and downplay the role of the *user* as the actual servant whose engagement with the "Service" produces corporate profits.

The language of the Terms of Service, therefore, crafts a narrative of the corporation as an agent of democracy in terms of how it provides its users a public welfare (benefit, delivery/supply) in the form of the platform, and in terms of its commitment to regulating and protecting this welfare (work/duty). Google provides "your rights to use the Service" that is YouTube and professes "our service commitment to you" in the Terms.¹⁴³ The platform, therefore, serves a transitive function for the analogy between the state-corporation, whose financialized entanglement defines the neoliberal state. The state exchanges its political philosophy for economic philosophy. Policies aimed at efficiency, maximizing profit and productivity, and preserving the individual from government interference replace policies that

¹⁴² "Welcome to YouTube," *Terms of Service*.

It is interesting to consider YouTube in an expanded context of 3) and 4) as a kind of food for the chronically online user of today— its supply being either in the case of necessary sustenance (benefit) or in the case of desired consumption (delivery/supply).

¹⁴³ "What's in these terms?" *Terms of Service*. YouTube, 15 Dec. 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/static?template=terms>. Accessed 23 April 2025.

would enhance communal welfare and require more intervention of the state in the life of the citizen. This also leads to the expansion of the power of corporations in relation to the state, whereby political governance is superseded by economic governance. The *Citizens United* ruling, which protects the financial actions of corporations as acts of free speech, not only marks a departure from the precedent that speech is an act belonging to the citizen but also justifies the conflation between free speech and monetized speech.¹⁴⁴ Financial rights are democratic rights. To spend freely is to speak freely. Money is speech, or as the idiom tritely puts it, “money talks.”

In the case of the social media platform, money talks out of both sides of its mouth. Profit maximization drives YouTube’s management strategy, and *user* speech produces these profits. Financialized speech has become a double-edged sword for the user, especially if they seek to share in the profits. As I raised in the Introduction, it is not wholly correct to consider demonetization as censorship. YouTube does not forbid creators to make unmonetizable content. Rather, the platform disincentivizes it by withholding revenue sharing. Although financialization across the network (society), provides a sociopolitical ground upon which creators can argue that demonetization is a violation of some imagined right within the platform’s democracy, the corporation’s function as a middleman between the state-platform ultimately undermines the platform’s status as democratic entity.

Declarations of Independence: The 13 States and Cyberspace

YouTube’s Terms of Service and Community Guidelines, like the Terms and Guidelines of all other popular social media platforms, assume that the *user* concedes that these digital

¹⁴⁴ United States, Supreme Court. *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission*. 21 Jan. 2010. *Legal Resources*, Federal Election Commission, <https://www.fec.gov/legal-resources/court-cases/citizens-united-v-fec/>. Accessed 23 April 2025. Prior to *Citizens United*, the Privacy Act of 1974 defined an individual as “a citizen of the United States or an alien lawfully admitted for permanent residence,” thus making corporations ineligible for privacy rights. For more on the Privacy Act of 1974, see “Overview of the Privacy Act of 1974.” *Archives*, US Department of Justice, 24 Feb. 2021, <https://www.justice.gov/archives/opcl/definitions>. Accessed 23 April 2025.

spaces necessitate regulation and governance. Although the vast majority of us select “I agree” without a reading, our consent mirrors an accordance with the democratic tenant enshrined in the Declaration of Independence that, “Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just power from the consent of the governed.”¹⁴⁵ John Perry Barlow’s *Declaration of Independence of Cyberspace*, however, calls into question the primacy of this statement through a subversion of its origins that reimagines the development of a new, truer democratic state in the form of the Internet. The Electronic Frontier Foundation, of whom he was a founding member, describes Barlow as a “poet and Internet philosopher” who claimed that ““a good way to invent the future is to predict it. So I predicted Utopia, hoping to give Liberty a running start before the laws of Moore and Metcalf delivered up what Ed Snowden now correctly calls “turnkey-totalitarianism.””¹⁴⁶ Barlow published his Declaration in response the 1996 Communications Decency Act, which marked the U.S. government’s first major attempt at regulating Internet content.¹⁴⁷ Using the 1776 Declaration as a blueprint, the *Declaration of Independence of Cyberspace* serves as a foundational document for the birth of the analogy between the state-platform well before Internet platformization.

The Declaration of Independence is the document which first coherently expressed the idea of the American democratic state to the world stage, prior the crystallization of lasting institutions of governance. As a form, the Declaration of Independence simultaneously makes claims to statehood and makes a teleological argument for the project of democracy. The

¹⁴⁵ “Declaration Independence: A Transcription.”

¹⁴⁶ “John Perry Barlow.” *John Perry Barlow Library*, Electronic Frontier Foundation, <https://www.eff.org/john-perry-barlow>. Accessed 23 April 2025.

¹⁴⁷ Signed into law by President Clinton as part of the Telecommunications Act of 1996, the Communications Decency Act targeted pornography and offensive speech. The bill was ultimately overturned by the ruling of *Reno v. ACLU* the following year. For the full text of the Telecommunications Act of 1996, including the Communications Decency Act, see United States, Congress. Public Law 104-104. *Congress.gov*, <https://www.congress.gov/104/plaws/publ104/PLAW-104publ104.htm>. Accessed 23 April 2025.

arrangement of the democratic state is inevitable because its values, its “truths,” are held “to be self-evident,” and “whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or abolish it, and to institute a new Government.”¹⁴⁸ The Declaration of Independence imagines a world which moves inexorably towards the realization of democracy, as “it becomes necessary” for those under tyrannical rule “to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature’s God entitle them,” to create a state which protects individual freedom.¹⁴⁹ Democracy cannot be argued with because it is “self-evident,” proven not by the force of flawed men (like those who execute tyranny), but by the indisputable perfection of “the Laws of Nature and of Nature’s God.” Barlow’s Declaration takes up the same rhetorical strategy to make an argument against the regulation of the Internet, and which frames digital freedoms as unquestionable as any other freedom under the democratic state. The imaginaries of both declarations, however, address a specific democratic subject, the citizen, for whom the rights to “Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness,” are only “unalienable” if you occupy a position of privilege. In the case of the Declaration of Independence, the ideal democratic subject reflects the identity of its authors: white, Anglo-European, Christian, property-owning men. Notions of injustice formulated as “oppressions” by a “jurisdiction foreign to our constitution, and unacknowledged by our laws” intentionally fail to acknowledge the violent injustices responsible for the economic prosperity of the burgeoning nation. We cannot entertain the democratic principles put forward in this document without conceding to the material reality that these values were selectively applied by those in power to maintain rationalizations of slavery and the displacement of indigenous peoples from their lands in the name of the creation of the modern American *state*.

¹⁴⁸ “Declaration of Independence: A Transcription.”

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

Barlow's use of the 1776 Declaration as a model for the *Declaration of Independence of Cyberspace* not only demonstrates that the democratic values that he argues for are fundamentally flawed but also gestures towards the broader trend in neoliberal political philosophy and techno-utopianism to rework histories of early American democracy into a mythology of idealized governance. Barlow's Declaration makes the same pitfalls in its framing of the Internet user as free from "privilege or prejudice accorded by race, economic power, military force, or station of birth" by virtue of their participation in "a world where anymore, anywhere may express his or her beliefs, no matter how singular, without fear of being coerced into silence of conformity."¹⁵⁰ Peter Steiner's now infamous 1993 New Yorker cartoon, "On the Internet, nobody knows you're a dog," conveys much of the same sentiment, albeit with a sense of sarcasm, in its portrayal of a black dog sitting in an office chair before a desktop computer talking to a smaller white dog seated on the floor.¹⁵¹ Both Barlow and Steiner, refer to the popular belief that the anonymity afforded by early digital communications networks protected its users from the kind of identity discrimination they might face otherwise. While this is partially true, visual anonymity does offer unilateral protection from harm. Embedding this belief in a *digital object* that uses the format and language of the Declaration of Independence constructs an argument that the Internet possesses a greater structural capacity to realize democratic values than the democratic state itself. Moreover, Barlow's declaration suffers from the same exclusionary fallacies to the extent that the "all" and "anyone, anywhere" in these segments refers to a small collective of Internet users at the time, who were in the technology's

¹⁵⁰ Barlow, John Perry. "A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace." 8 Feb. 1996, *John Perry Barlow Library*, Electronic Frontier Foundation, <https://www.eff.org/cyberspace-independence#main-content>. Accessed 23 April 2025.

¹⁵¹ Steiner, Paul. "On the Internet, nobody knows you're a dog." *New Yorker*, 5 July 1993, Smithsonian Magazine, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/the-most-reprinted-new-yorker-cartoon-breaks-record-at-auction-for-a-single-panel-comic-180983135/>. Accessed 24 April 2025.

earliest days were predominantly white, young, educated men. We can also read this “all” and “anyone, anywhere” as aspirational towards technological development, as in “we are creating a world” which someday a larger portion of the global population will have access to.

Analysis of these two declarations presents two “self-evident” conclusions. First, that democratic values as we know them to exist are inherently flawed; and second, that people believe that technology, specifically distributed networked communications technologies, can amplify the expression of these values and can enhance one’s experience of and participation in democracy. The *Declaration of Independence of Cyberspace*, as a response to the 1996 Communications Decency Act, focuses exclusively on preserving the First Amendment Right to free speech, and in doing so simultaneously constructs an argument for the Internet, or Cyberspace, as a sovereign state distinct from that of the state which seeks to regulate it. Barlow’s rhetorical strategy for demonstrating this relies on drawing a distinction between Cyberspace as a “home of the Mind,” representative of the future and innovation, in contrast to the United States as one of the “weary giants of flesh and steel” which belongs to the “the Industrial World” of the past.¹⁵² The juxtaposition of the mind and the body frames any attempt on behalf of the state to regulate the Internet as akin to unleashing the thought police. This “home of the Mind,” however, despite claiming to be “everywhere and nowhere, housing “identities [which] have no bodies,” deploys numerous references to physical space and territory with concrete qualities in order to argue for its sovereignty as a proper state. Barlow posits that the state’s “legal concepts of property, expression, identity, movement and context do not apply to us. They are based on matter, There is no matter here,” he cannot argue for the applications of these same democratic values in Cyberspace without describing it as a space of “frontiers”

¹⁵² Barlow “A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace.”

around which the state attempts “to ward off the virus of liberty by erecting guard posts,” and which faces “increasingly hostile colonial measures.” In this sense, the right to self-determination and independence of the state inevitably serves as model for the Internet’s right to self-regulation, even if Barlow’s arguments position the state and Cyberspace (later, the platform Internet) in opposition to each other.

Conclusions

As Barlow suggests in his declaration, beliefs about the Internet and the rights of users have the power to shape political thought offline. The techno-utopian imaginary which analogizes the state and the social media platform voices a wider set of beliefs about the ability to design the world according to a set of values. The extent to which media technology corporations argue for the naturalness of the association between the products they design and democratic values not only validates the increasing presence of corporations in contemporary U.S. politics but also reaffirms the current paradigm of neoliberal democracy. What is seductive about the state-platform analogy is exactly what makes it dangerous. On the one hand, imagining the platform to have state-like authority indicates that political frameworks are just as malleable as the platform’s documents of governance. Power can be reshaped and redefined. On the other, the platform’s corporate identity positions this power as unquestionable by the individual user, who, unlike the citizen, is not endowed with a vote to demand for change. In unpacking both the cultural history and the political logic behind the state-platform analogy, I aim to challenge the power that corporate voices have in designing democracy around capital. While the freedom of speech has long been central to articulations of U.S. democracy from Jefferson to Douglass to Barlow, the freedom of financial capital does not imply or create democratic freedom for the citizen.

Chapter 3—Welcome to the True Crime Content Community

In an overly air-conditioned ballroom at the Gaylord Rockies hotel in Denver, CO, an audience of fans shares a laugh over an alleged child-murderer. Vinnie Politan, anchor of the live trial news coverage channel CourtTV, welcomes CrimeCon 2025's attendees to the panel "From Murdaugh to Morpew: Crime, Cameras, and the Court of Public Opinion" by saying, "okay, today we're going to talk about 10 reasons why we hate Casey Anthony." The crowd laughs along with the other panelists: two podcasters, a civil attorney and a retired homicide detective. Surely, people do not find the failure to convict Anthony in 2011 for the abuse and murder of her two-year-old daughter Caylee funny. But in some roundabout way, they do. It's what the fans are here for—to share an inside joke, funny only to those who are obsessed with True Crime media, with the professionals behind the curtain (excluding the criminals, of course). Disproportionately fielding questions to Jodi Tovay, a podcast host and producer at Tenderfoot TV, Politan asks her how she chooses to make content about some cases over others. Tovay responds that it has to do with has captured the most public attention: "it may be a horrible case, but man is it sexy!" The audience laughs again. This is True Crime Media. This is CrimeCon.

This chapter outlines the industrial landscape of True Crime media across legacy and social media industries. Drawing on my field observations from CrimeCon 2023 and 2025, an annual True Crime media convention hosted by the Oxygen network, and ethnographic interviews I conducted with creators who attend the convention, I describe how the immense popularity of True Crime content on social media platforms is reshaping industry dynamics. I demonstrate that in the case of True Crime media, industry hierarchies are unstable and sometimes even inverted. While television networks and documentary film production companies attempt to find new ways to integrate platform-based talent into their production and distribution, a subset of

industry-based talent have chosen to leave their successful, stable careers to start producing their own True Crime content on social media. I introduce the career trajectories of my four interlocutors, all of whom produce and monetize content for YouTube, to describe the most common creator identities of those who labor within the True Crime content community. I use the term “content community,” a phrase borrowed from my interlocutors, to describe how the structure of YouTube’s industry emerges in relation to creators who labor around a shared video topic. As I address in further in the Conclusion, the content communities which structure the industry also include the shared experiences between creators and their viewers.

This chapter centers the accounts of two creators, Joshua Zeman and Crystal Gutierrez, both of whom left their respective careers in documentary film production and journalism, to assess the extent to which the techno-utopian imaginaries discussed in Chapter 2 inform their decisions to transition to YouTube. Their interviews share a strong belief that a platform like YouTube offers them more freedom than legacy media industries, raising questions about the conceptual origins of this freedom and the grounds for its limitation. I suggest that True Crime’s media straddling of journalistic and creative modes of expression leads to debates about whether its limitation through demonetization could be understood as violation of the freedom of press or free speech. I close by arguing for a conception of the True Crime Media Industrial Complex, which acknowledges the relationship that True Crime media has to the state, both in terms of its subject matter and its industrial connections to right-wing media and political personalities. The close proximity True Crime media has to the activities of the state positions creators within this content community as having critically significant insights about free speech, platform authority and the relationship between social media and politics more broadly. I continue my ethnographic work in the following chapter, where I analyze the feelings of Ressentiment associated with

demonetization described by my two other interlocutors, John Lordan and Rachel Shannon, and how the negative affect's value confluences support both YouTube's moral-affective and capital economies.

My positionality as an avid YouTube user and active consumer of True Crime media shapes the ethnographic work conducted in the following two chapters. First and foremost, I grew up with the Internet. As someone born in 1994, I came of age during a time when the family desktop computer with largely unmonitored Internet access became a staple in many upper-middle class household. My parents, mechanical engineers who met while working at a firm in Boston, MA in the early 1980s, were among the wave of early Internet adopters that came with advances in personal computing and dial-up Internet access. My mother recalls frequently visiting the Kirstein Business Library, an old brick building in Boston's financial district while working at a small consulting firm in 1987, to reference hard copies of Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) filings, annual reports and equity analyst presentations because although the library's computers had an Internet connection, not much had been digitized.¹⁵³ Sometime around 1984, my parents got a desktop computer from my father's best friend who worked for the now defunct Wang Laboratories in Cambridge, MA, which did not have an Internet connection until the late 80s or early 90s. After my father ran the Wang desktop into the ground typing up his crane services proposals, my parents bought a Dell. This would be the desktop computer where I spent my early childhood playing CD-ROM games which would

¹⁵³ The separate location of the business branch, now the Kirstein Business Library and Innovation Center (KBLIC), no longer exists and has been consolidated into the Boston Public Library's main branch on Boylston Street. Founded in 1930 by Louis Kirstein, a Vice President of Filene's Dept. Store and Trustee of the Boston Public Library, the Kirstein Business Library was the second library in the country to be built as a business reference library. For more, see "Central Library: Kirstein Business Library & Innovation Center (KBLIC)." *Boston Public Library*, <https://www.bpl.org/services-central-library/kblic/>. Accessed 1 June 2026.

give me nightmares about the animated characters that would disappear and reappear at the click of a mouse.

Some of my earliest memories using YouTube would resemble these first experiences being frightened by the digital uncanny on the desktop in our North End apartment. I have a vivid memory of being jump-scared in 2006 by a 21-second YouTube video titled “Relaxing Car Drive” when one of my friends and I, in search of relaxing music to accompany our preparations for a school dance, mistakenly clicked on a popular meme that uses a screaming zombie to frighten unsuspecting viewers.¹⁵⁴ By then, we had moved out to Brookline, a predominantly white suburb of Boston with a large Jewish population, where my friends and I would crowd around the family desktop watching music videos and short sketch comedy on YouTube. One year later, YouTube would integrate content monetization into the platform, leading to the transitional period (2007-2010) popularly regarded as YouTube’s “golden age.”¹⁵⁵ During that time, I encountered Jenna Marbles and her viral video “How to trick people into thinking you’re good looking,” and remained dedicated to her weekly uploads until she left the platform in 2020 in response to accusations that she had performed black face in earlier, since deleted videos.¹⁵⁶

Sometime around 2016, the same year that Jenna would make the statements on her podcast about demonetization and censorship that inspired this project, I started watching True Crime content produced by the global media and technology company BuzzFeed. As a child who had grown up with a fascination for the dark, the strange, and the unknown and was drawn to television shows like *Truth or Scare* (2001-2003) and later *Ghost Adventures* (2008—), I was

¹⁵⁴ The original video is still accessible today. Rockhill, Brienn. “Relaxing Car Drive.” *YouTube*, uploaded 30 March 2026, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GMgsFZ4rkEI>. Accessed 1 June 2026.

¹⁵⁵ See discussion of YouTube’s “golden age” in Chapter 2.

¹⁵⁶ Mourey, Jenna. “How to trick people into thinking you’re good looking.” *YouTube*, uploaded by JennaMarbles, 9 July 2010, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OYpwAtnywTk>. Accessed 1 June 2026.

excited to find that YouTube could also be the source of a seemingly limitless number of creepy and unusual stories. I discovered many creators whose independently produced videos that centered in-depth research and factual storytelling interested me much more than BuzzFeed's comedic emphasis. During this period of exploration, I encountered John Lordan, whose insights have been indispensable to this project and whom I finally had the opportunity to meet in person at CrimeCon in Orlando, FL in 2023. His "filmed-research method" became my standard for ethical True Crime media, and I actively sought out more creators who took a similar approach.¹⁵⁷ All of my interlocutors, therefore, meet this ethical standard, and do not reflect the sensationalist tendencies often found in other True Crime media, as I discuss in further detail later in the chapter. After keeping up with John's content for several years, I eventually contacted him in 2021 for a preliminary phone interview, knowing only that I wanted to ask him if he, like Jenna, considered demonetization a form of censorship. During our conversation, he made me aware of the addition of Self-Certification to YouTube's monetization processes in 2019, which would become a primary focus of the project and which I discuss at length in the next chapter.

At the time of writing, I still regularly consume True Crime media, though, more often than not, I opt for podcasts that don't require me to devote my attention to a screen. It is due to this consistent engagement with the YouTube True Crime content community for approximately ten years that I knew creators frequently encountered difficulties with monetization. I noted that creators often began or interrupted their videos with a comment about demonetization and their efforts to avoid it. These comments range from explanations of their decision to use vague or sanitized word choices in their storytelling to reminders for audience members to turn on

¹⁵⁷ Lordan, John. "My Story." *JohnLordan.com*. 2020, <https://www.johnlordan.com/>. Accessed 2 June 2026.

notifications for their channel's uploads to maximize the amount of ad-revenue they could gain in an effort to offset previous revenue losses. By the time I started this project, therefore, I was well aware the True Crime content community had direct experiences with demonetization and likely had strong opinions about how it affects their speech. It was also through creators like John that I learned about CrimeCon, as creators who plan to attend the media convention often promote it in their videos in the months prior to encourage viewers to attend. Creators frame the convention as an opportunity for viewers to meet their favorite creators in person and connect with other fans in the community, sometimes offering their audience a discount code with a small reduction on ticket prices. Based on statements made by creators like John in their videos, I knew that CrimeCon would not only be a venue to connect with potential interlocutors who were enthusiastic about talking about their work, but also to learn about the True Crime media landscape writ large, as social media content creators are only one subset of the convention's presenters.

As my visits to CrimeCon attest, my identity position as an upper-middle class, cis-gendered white woman reflects the dominant identity group of True Crime media's listeners and the dominant identity group whose stories are told by True Crime media.¹⁵⁸ My affinity for the subject is deeply tied to the work of this project, raising pertinent questions about why so many white women love listening to True Crime. Due to my proximity as an avid listener and watcher, it is impossible to articulate with objectivity why I am drawn to the topic. Perhaps as a writer engaged with cultural and political critique, I am interested in True Crime's emphasis on stories

¹⁵⁸ For an example of the popular discourse surrounding women's interest in True Crime, see Grosse, Jessica. "Why Women Find Watching True Crime comforting." *New York Times*, 16 Nov. 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/11/16/opinion/women-true-crime-victims.html>. Accessed 2 June 2026.

For an example of the popular discourse surrounding True Crime media's emphasis on white victims and on white women, in particular see Stodghill, Ron. "I wrote a Black true crime book 20-years ago. Why is the genre still so white?" *Los Angeles Times*, 11 Jan. 2024, <https://www.latimes.com/opinion/story/2024-01-11/black-authors-true-crime-atlanta-lance-herndon>. Accessed 2 June 2026.

about *real* people and *real* events. Alternatively, as suggested by popular psychology, perhaps I am subconsciously appealed by stories that reenact the threat of violence at a safe distance, thus offering me a catharsis for my ever-present fear living as a woman in a violent, patriarchal society. Or, perhaps, as described by Susan Sontag, I am complicit in a kind of capitalist *schadenfreude*, in which “the hunt for more dramatic (as they’re often described) images drives the photographic enterprise, and is part of the normality of a culture in which shock has become a leading stimulus of consumption and source of value.”¹⁵⁹ My research necessarily engages these dimensions, whether or not my interviews and their analysis address them directly, and positionality as a researcher cannot be effaced, despite historical attempts on the part of anthropological and sociological disciplines to strengthen the validity of their claims through appeals to scientific objectivity.

Furthermore, the identity positions of my interlocutors reflect the whiteness of True Crime media. Three out of four of my interlocutors are white, while one identifies as Hispanic. Although I took efforts to connect with a range of creators with diverse identity positions, the creators who responded within the time frame of this project are predominantly white. Leya Nicole, a black woman content creator based in Atlanta, GA whom I had the opportunity to connect with at Orlando CrimeCon in 2023, but who did not respond to several requests for interview in the months following, dedicates her channel to telling the stories of the black and brown victims of crime.¹⁶⁰ Likewise, Crystal Gutierrez, whose perspective as a former-newscaster-turned-YouTuber I center in this chapter, describes receiving comments from many of her followers thanking her for covering cases of U.S. minorities, many of Hispanic descent

¹⁵⁹ Sontag, Susan. *Regarding the Pain of Others*. Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2003. pp. 15.

¹⁶⁰ Nicole, Leya. “Description.” *YouTube*, <https://www.youtube.com/@LeyaNicole>. Accessed 2 June 2026.

like herself, who feel “we are often forgotten.”¹⁶¹ Rachel Shannon, a young white woman in her late twenties whose interview features heavily in the next chapter, reflects the dominant identity position of social media True Crime creators. As I describe in more detail during my discussion of Rachel’s professional trajectory, a large portion of the creators within the YouTube True Crime content community are relatively young white women approximately between the ages of 25-45, much like their audiences. For example, at both 2023 and 2025 CrimeCon, the presenters listed as having tables on Creator Row (formerly called Podcast row)—the convention’s dedicated area for social media content creators— were predominantly white, with slightly more women creators listed than men.¹⁶² Although the creators who choose to attend CrimeCon as presenters do not necessarily reflect the entire scope of True Crime media production on social media platforms, they do provide some insight into the relative gender and racial identity dynamics at play within True Crime media industries.

As social media industries have established themselves as viable competitors with legacy media industries like film and television, a group of scholars have turned their attention to the emergent dynamics between the two. John Caldwell’s most recent publication *Specworld: Folds, Faults, and Fractures in Embedded Creator Industries* (2023) expands upon his earlier work on Hollywood film and television production cultures to consider how the labor practices and cultures of legacy media industries have shifted in relation to a new workforce which has extensive experience with platform media production. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork at VidCon, social media creator workshops, below-the-line-worker trade-mentoring programs, and trade gatherings at major studios and festivals like Paramount and Sundance, Caldwell suggests

¹⁶¹ Gutierrez, Crystal. Text message to Anna Parkhurst. 2 June 2026.

¹⁶² “Podcasts.” *CrimeCon 2023*, <https://crimecon2023.sched.com/directory/artists>. Accessed 2 June 2026.
 “Creators.” *CrimeCon 2025*, <https://crimecon2023.sched.com/directory/artists>. Accessed 2 June 2026.

that legacy media industries are embedding platform logics into their production systems. He characterizes twenty-first century media production as a conflict between “futurism (ideation) and creator mining (monetization),” whereby legacy media increasingly adopt both social media’s anticipatory logic associated with practices like viral marketing and rebranding and an extractive logic associated with the normalization of speculative, uncompensated labor.¹⁶³ Film and television, he argues, are attempting to find ways to seamlessly fold digital-born creators into their industries by celebrating those who freely share their intellectual property as a strategy for “monetize[ing] and *mut[ing]* the very stressed labor sectors on which creative brainstorming and content development still largely depend.”¹⁶⁴ Rather than treat them as merely a source of competition, Caldwell’s research indicates that legacy media industries may regard social media platforms as models who provide them with a workforce already accustomed to cost-cutting, exploitative labor practices.

T.L. Taylor’s work on the relationship between social media and legacy media takes a narrower approach than Caldwell’s by conducting a case study of a single platform. Her book, *Watch Me Play: Twitch and the Rise of Game Live Streaming* (2018), investigates how the live streaming platform Twitch, acquired by Amazon in 2014, redefined esports spectatorship around the practice of “transform[ing] private play into public entertainment.”¹⁶⁵ Taylor argues that Twitch’s model of “networked broadcasting” reworks television’s unidirectional form of broadcasting into a networked dynamic in which audience member participation actively shapes the content and direction of the broadcast, the earliest iterations of which appeared with the live

¹⁶³ Caldwell, John. *Specworld: Folds, Faults, and Fractures in Embedded Creator Industries*. University of California Press, 2023, pp. 20.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid 27.

¹⁶⁵ Taylor, T.L. *Watch Me Play: Twitch and the Rise of Game Live Streaming*. Princeton University Press, 2018, pp. 22.

cams of the late 1990s and early 2000s.¹⁶⁶ Through ethnographic interviews with Twitch streamers and esports broadcasters, Taylor demonstrates that audience shifts challenge the stability of the esports industry, despite the fact that platforms like Twitch have accelerated the growth of esports by providing a nearly constant broadcast of content. She notes that while individual competitive players successfully use Twitch to cultivate their brands and their audiences, she reported that many esports organizations struggle to “capture this emerging market using existing paradigms” associated with traditional media structures such as an in-person audience, a standard runtime, and designated commercial breaks.¹⁶⁷ Despite these difficulties, Taylor concludes that the technical affordances of live streaming has ultimately secured the esports industry by decoupling it from the television industry. Both the ethnographic work of Caldwell and Taylor validate that social media platforms are reshaping both the labor practices and relative dominance of legacy media industries.

An emerging field of scholarship has also developed around the rise in popularity of True Crime media on social media. Although True Crime media produced by film, television and publishing houses has long drawn in audiences, scholars like Judith Fathallah and Bethan Jones draw on fan studies to explore how digital platforms transform dynamics between audiences and media objects. In her book, *Killer Fandom: Fan Studies and the Celebrity Serial Killer* (2023), Fathallah argues that the fan communities that develop around serial killers share the characteristics of other more mainstream fandoms. Through a close analysis of posts, comments and fan-creations on platforms like TikTok and Tumblr, she reveals how audiences mediate the celebrity of killers like Ted Bundy and Jeffrey Dahmer with shifting and sometimes playful, ironic attitudes. Fathallah’s work not only confirms that serial killer fandoms can be examined

¹⁶⁶ Taylor 22.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid 141.

similarly to the communities more often the subject of fan studies research, but also that the “serial killer industry” is part of the fabric of mainstream culture.¹⁶⁸ Even if the fandom operates “at the edges of popular discourse,” Fathallah’s inclusion of the pre-digital history of serial killer fandom indicates that “fans did not make serial killers into celebrities,” but rather that a long cultural obsession with violence did.¹⁶⁹ Jones takes a similar approach to Fathallah, but places his critical emphasis on how social media platforms blur the boundaries between fandom and citizen investigation.

His book chapter, “Forensic Fandom: True Crime, Citizen Investigation and Social Media” (2023), focuses the disappearance of Gabby Petito in 2021, a young white travel vlogger who was murdered by her fiancé while on a road trip, as a prime example of how fans can move from interested observers to active participants in solving a case. Drawing on television scholar Joseph Mittell’s concept of “forensic fandom” as a mode of viewing that invites viewers to act like detectives who dig deeper into the complexity of a story, Jones suggests that Petito’s active social media presence created the conditions for forensic fandom to develop quickly around her case, with True Crime fans-turned-investigators making posts on platforms like TikTok, YouTube and Reddit that analyzed the locations of her Instagram posts and even her Spotify playlists.¹⁷⁰ Like Fathallah, Jones links True Crime’s fandom to a longer history. His reliance on Mittell’s concept forensic fandom, however, leads him to draw connections primarily to fan communities that developed around television productions, whereas Fathallah connects serial killer fandom back to pre-screen media sensations like the newspaper coverage of Jack the Ripper.

¹⁶⁸ Fathallah, Judith. *Killer Fandom: Fan Studies and the Celebrity Serial Killer*. Media Studies Press, 2023, pp. 3.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid 3.

¹⁷⁰ Jones, Bethan. “Forensic Fandom: True Crime, Citizen Investigation and Social Media.” *True Crime in American Media*, edited by George S. Larke-Walsh, Routledge, 2023, pp. 165.

When taken together, media industries scholarship and scholarship on True Crime media's digital fandom frame CrimeCon as a site where industry dynamics and fan communities shape one another. My field observations at CrimeCon in 2023 (September 22-24) and 2025 (September 5-7) attest to the influence that the online fan communities exert on legacy media producers, challenging them to find ways to recapture audience attention that they may have lost to their platform competitors. In the section that follows, I draw on my field observations from CrimeCon to describe the current landscape of True Crime media with particular attention to the relationship between social media and legacy media producers. I also address some of the rapid changes occurring in the media space in relation to the dominance of digital platforms and the dynamics of oversaturation and hyper-commodification. I conclude my discussion of CrimeCon by introducing my interlocutors, all of whom have attended the media convention at some point during their careers and whose insights continue to be featured in the next chapter. The backgrounds of my interlocutors and their production approaches raise pertinent questions about how True Crime's fluid media identity changes the framework for understanding demonetization as a potential form of censorship.

Industry Shifts and the Rise of the True Crime Content Creator: CrimeCon 2023 and 2025

On the convention's website, CrimeCon describes itself as "the platform that brings the content and the community together" with events that are "equal parts education and experience."¹⁷¹ My field observations from CrimeCon 2023 and 2025 attest that while the convention's expressed intentions may be to balance education about advocacy, crime prevention and investigative technologies and techniques with providing a fan experience, a substantial emphasis is placed on the latter. CrimeCon has been hosting conventions since 2017 at luxury

¹⁷¹ "About CrimeCon." *CrimeCon*, <https://www.crimecon.com/about-crimecon>. Accessed 3 June 2026.

resorts around the country located in tourist destinations that frequently align with popular cities for hosting bachelorette parties (I did, in fact, see a group of women proudly wearing sashes that indicated they were attending a bachelorette party at CrimeCon 2023). The first CrimeCon was held in Indianapolis, IN with only 800 people in attendance.¹⁷² Since then, the convention's organizers appeared to quickly learn that selecting cities with larger tourism economies would help boost convention attendance. For reference, Nashville, TN (2018 and 2024), Las Vegas, NV (2022 and 2026), New Orleans, LA (2019), Austin, TX (2021), Denver, CO (2025), and Orlando, FL (2023 and upcoming in 2027) have all hosted since CrimeCon, each boasting thousands of attendees. At the first CrimeCon I attended in Orlando in 2023 there were reported to be 4,000 in attendance.¹⁷³ CrimeCon also regularly hosts conventions in the UK (2021, 2022, 2023 and 2024) as well as a series of "Crime Cruises" with tropical destinations like the Bahamas featuring a vastly smaller number of presenters (2021, 2023 and 2024). Presenters at the convention belong to a wide range of backgrounds in association with the True Crime media industry, including journalists, social media content creators and podcasters, members of law enforcement agencies, survivors and victims' families, lawyers, television personalities, authors, film and television producers, crime lab technicians, representatives from corporate platforms and even vendors selling self-defense tools or macabre souvenirs. Current ticket prices to attend the full three-day event range from \$299 for a standard ticket; \$899 for Gold VIP, which includes priority seating at panels, access to a private lounge with complimentary beverages and VIP-only experiences; and \$1999 for Platinum VIP, which adds the features of complimentary

¹⁷² "CrimeCon 2022 Recap." *CrimeCon*, 6 May 2022, <https://www.crimecon.com/crimecon-2022-recap>. Accessed 3 June 2026.

¹⁷³ Hale, Kathleen. "The Dark Origins of the True Crime Frenzy at CrimeCon." *Vanity Fair*, 8 July 2024, <https://www.vanityfair.com/style/story/crime-con-true-crime-report?srltid=AfmBOoo4oPQ3JmZP4iCkh3hsviAocTdv-a3SxbCVJ9Yyf5iQdY0EyZcs>. Accessed 3 June 2026.

breakfast and snacks, priority and private passes for meet-and-greets, and access to a private concierge.¹⁷⁴

I decided to attend CrimeCon in 2023 to connect with John in person, whom I had spoken with on the phone a few years earlier, in the hopes that he could introduce me some other YouTube creators who would be interested in contributing their insights about demonetization to the project. Upon arriving at the World Center Marriot to pick up my badge, I immediately noted the overwhelming number of Oxygen television network logos plastered everywhere. An archway framing the entrance to the convention that read, “Thank you to our sponsors” boasted three Oxygen logos alongside the logos of several streaming media technology companies, including AcornTV, PlutoTV, TenderfootTV, Amazon’s Freevee, and TVOne. Although Oxygen has been CrimeCon’s primary presenting sponsor since 2017, the presence of companies that own and operate streaming video-on demand (SVOD) platforms and an increasing number of free ad-supported streaming television (FAST) platforms far outweigh the presence of traditional legacy media players at the convention. At both CrimeCon 2023 and 2025, the number of presenters associated with traditional television production outside of the Oxygen network was negligible with the exception of Nancy Grace, whom the convention featured heavily both years as a speaker for multiple panel sessions and VIP meet-and-greets. A long-time staple of cable television programming on networks like CNN and CourtTV, she has also transitioned to producing content for digital platforms including YouTube and her website Crime Online. Aside from Grace, the majority of legacy media representation at the 2023 and 2025 conventions came from journalists and news networks. Some examples include the panels “FOX True Crime with Emily Compagno” (22 Sept. 2023); “Inside the Daniel Marsh Murders Erin Moriarty 48 hours”

¹⁷⁴ “CrimeCon Orlando 2027.” *CrimeCon*, <https://www.crimecon.com/cc27>. Accessed 8 June 2026.

(5 Sept. 2025); “ABC News Presents: The Case Against Diddy” (6 Sept. 2025); and “20/20 Presents: The Murdaugh Defense” (23 Sept. 2023).¹⁷⁵ CrimeCon’s programming and sponsors, therefore, reflect a media landscape in transition. As True Crime media industries continue to draw on their roots in legacy media, they are increasingly investing in sponsors who produce and distribute platform-based media.

My observations on the floor in the main exposition hall validate that True Crime audiences have also largely shifted their preferences away from legacy media producers and towards platform-based creators as well. The “Expo Hall,” as the convention refers to it, houses a section called “Creator Row” dedicated exclusively to social media content creators and podcasters. In 2023, creator row boasted 57 creators and 65 in 2025. When I finally sat down with John and a fellow creator Danelle Hallen, with whom he hosted the show “Crime After Crime” (2018-2023) and who continues to post regularly on her own YouTube channel, they described to me how CrimeCon’s treatment of social media content creators has changed drastically over the years. John and Danelle reported that at the first CrimeCon they attended in Nashville in 2018, they did not feel welcome or adequately recognized. John recalled feeling as though there was “an invisible wall” between them and everyone else, and the two laughed as they reminisced about making their own handmade placard that read, “True Crime YouTubers” in an attempt to better alert attendees to their presence. By the time we had this conversation at CrimeCon 2023, the presence of social media creators was firmly recognized by the convention’s organizers and attendees as a major draw. I noted the stark contrast between the long line of fans anxiously waiting for a chance to chat briefly with Stephanie Harlowe and Derek Levasseur, the hosts of the popular YouTube channel and podcast of the same name *Crime Weekly* (2020—),

¹⁷⁵ Program for CrimeCon 2023, World Center Marriot, Orlando, 22-24 Sept. 2023.
Program for CrimeCon 2025, Gaylord Rockies, Denver, 5-7 Sept. 2025.

and the emptiness surrounding the table for CourtTV, whose hosts repeatedly tried to call me over to participate in a mock filming.

By CrimeCon 2025, the dominance of Creator Row was even more palpable. This year's convention featured the immensely popular YouTube creator and Denver-resident Kendall Rae, whose table drew a line of fans equally long and filled with excitement as those waiting to snap a picture with Stephanie and Derek. Kendall appeared to be a featured creator that year, as I found that the complimentary tote bag I received upon picking up my badge included a keychain with her podcast's logo on it. In comparison with 2023 CrimeCon, I remarked that several creators were going to greater lengths to try and differentiate themselves from the sea of platform-based True Crime media producers. For example, multiple creators tried to entice fans to their booths with the allure of make-up and skincare products. Criminally Obsessed, which was not listed as a creator but rather as an "Exhibitor," despite exclusively posting their content to Instagram, YouTube, TikTok and Facebook, had me watch a segment of their True Crime content on an iPad while a representative from POP Beauty touched up my makeup. I elected to watch a short video covering the case of a missing young woman who may have been murdered by a jealous ex-boyfriend while the representative added gold shimmery eyeshadow to my eyelids. After agreeing to go on camera and state which unsolved case I was most interested in seeing solved, they let me pick out two full-size products to take home with me. Although I was undeniably pleased to receive something for free, I remarked the crude juxtaposition between Criminally Obsessed's shameless marketing and the efforts a few tables over of the parents of Jason Laundry, a Texas college student who went missing following a car crash in 2020, who were handing out flyers and small trinkets with reminders to continue sharing their son's missing persons information. On the other side of Creator Row, I encountered another social media

content creator attempting to entice people to her table by advertising her own line of skincare products. Still feeling unsettled by my encounter with *Criminally Obsessed*, I asked her how she understands the relationship between skincare and True Crime. Without pause, she responded that these are two things she likes, so why not put them together? I immediately thought of the bookmark I had picked up upon entering the convention that listed “8 simple rules” for being an ethical true crime fan, feeling quite certain that at least one among those eight provided sufficient reason not to.

Although John did not attend CrimeCon 2025, I connected with two other interlocutors on Creator Row that year: Crystal Gutierrez, a former journalist who left her local news network to start her own YouTube channel; and Rachel Shannon, a pediatrician who started her YouTube channel during her studies as an extra source of income. John and I conducted a follow-up interview that November, during which we debriefed what he had missed that at this year’s convention. When I told him that I felt the tone of the 2025 Denver convention was perhaps on the whole more respectful than the previous one we had both attended in Orlando in 2023 (the shameless marketing ploys I encountered paled in comparison to my horrifying memory of watching a group of intoxicated women disrupt a panel discussion with wrongfully convicted man who had just been exonerated after 10 years with their demands for more merlot), John sighed in dismay. Noting that CrimeCon planned to hold their 2026 convention in Las Vegas, he said, “I mean, I’m not surprised they’re going back there because I know they’ll sell it out, but I’m surprised in terms of, *is that really the kind of clientele you want to cater to?*”¹⁷⁶ At the end of our interview he suggested that I reach out to his friend and fellow creator who also had some strong feelings about CrimeCon. Joshua (Josh) Zeman, a former documentarian who recently

¹⁷⁶ Lordan, John. Interview. Conducted by Anna Parkhurst, 4 Nov. 2025.

launched a YouTube channel, expressed defiantly in our February 2026 interview that he would never be invited back to CrimeCon, finding Oxygen's sponsorship of the convention egregious.

Joshua Zeman (JZ): Ten years ago, people were starting to talk about victim's rights, and I was like, *guys, Oxygen is just the fucking worst thing.* I don't understand. If I was a hardcore feminist, I'd be torching it, torching the Oxygen network. [...] It's just consistently putting women in torture porn, but somehow because it's for women...but I'm sorry, it just reinforces horrible stereotypes and victimization.¹⁷⁷

Even more concerning than Oxygen's role in the convention, Josh alerted me to the fact that digital media management company Red Seat Ventures has been the owner and operator of CrimeCon since it first launched back in 2017. Acquired by Fox acquired in February 2025, Red Seat Ventures represents Republican media personalities like Megyn Kelly, Tucker Carlson, and Vivek Ramaswamy (whose ideas about the relationship between technology and democracy I discuss at length in the previous chapter); frequent CrimeCon presenters Nancy Grace and Chris Hansen of Dateline NBC; and center-Right authors like Arthur C. Brooks and Bari Weiss (founder of the media company Free Press now owned by CBS/Paramount-Skydance).¹⁷⁸ I address the implications of Red Seat Ventures/Fox's ownership of CrimeCon at the end of this chapter in my conception of the True Crime Media Industrial Complex. Josh's strong feelings and industry knowledge guide much of my discussion in the rest of this chapter about how True Crime media's identity shapes claims about demonetization and censorship. In what follows, I introduce each of my interlocutors and their relationship to YouTube to both explore questions of media identity and to demonstrate how True Crime media flips traditional industry dynamics that

¹⁷⁷ Zeman, Joshua. Interview. Conducted by Anna Parkhurst, 6 Feb. 2026.

¹⁷⁸ Steigrad, Alexandra. "Fox buys Red Seat Ventures to tap podcast market, reuniting with Megyn Kelly and Tucker Carlson." *New York Post*, 10 Feb. 2025, https://nypost.com/2025/02/10/media/fox-buys-red-seat-ventures-to-tap-podcast-market-reuniting-with-megyn-kelly-tucker-carlson/?fbclid=IwZXh0bgNhZW0CMTEAAR2nvXm7Ig4BeqBJp3JHZKY3CyADKYFjBhFsF85FTx06J0vzJj_KyBnZtA_aem_GTHt8drEk67vg3fcGwu0VQ. Accessed 4 June 2026.

"Our Clients." *Red Seat Ventures*, <https://www.redseatventures.com/clients>. Accessed 4 June 2026.

often position legacy media production as the ultimate goal for those laboring on social media platforms.

Producing for YouTube: Industry Knowledge and Aesthetic Regimes

Several different groupings describe the relationships they have to True Crime media, media industries and to the YouTube platform. John Lordan, a middle-aged man residing in Minnesota, is a well-established True Crime creator who has been making content for YouTube since 2013 under the channel name *LordanARTS*. In 2015, he started the show “BrainScratch,” which marked his transition into True Crime media. Dedicated to discussing unsolved mysteries in a “filmed research method,” John walks viewers through his process of gathering and analyzing evidence from news sources, statements from law enforcement, and mapping locations—in early videos even pointing his camera at his desktop monitor as he clicks through the pieces of evidence found online.¹⁷⁹ This approach situates John in a small subset of True Crime content creators who take a distinctly journalistic approach to their content production, which strays from the production model of shocking narratives recounted by “talking-heads” accompanied by ominous tonal background music, which continue to dominate and were ultimately part of the rise in popularity of the True Crime content community on YouTube. I came across John sometime around 2016 after when he went viral for his coverage of the Elisa Lam case— a mystery which itself went viral due to publicized elevator surveillance footage that showed the young Canadian tourist acting strangely before being found deceased in a water tank on the roof of the Cecil Hotel in Los Angeles, CA in 2013. When I first interviewed to John in February 2021, he had just been featured on the Netflix documentary series *Crime Scene: Vanishing at the Cecil Hotel* (2021), which revisited Lam’s case. This was not his first foray into legacy media,

¹⁷⁹ Lordan “My Story.”

however, as John “was raised and worked around showbiz for most of [his] life,” working in IT for companies like 20th Century Fox, TV Guide and Circe de Soliel before starting his YouTube career.¹⁸⁰

He shares this background in legacy media with Josh Zeman, a 54-year-old documentary filmmaker residing in New York whom John referred me to, thinking I might be interested in his status as a newcomer to YouTube. Most well-known for his 2009 documentary *Cropsey*, which examines the relationship between the urban legend of a figure by the same name and the 1970s/80s Staten Island child kidnapper Andre Rand, Josh began a YouTube channel in early 2025 in search of more creative freedom than his contracts with streamers like Netflix allowed. “I feel like I’ve been pushed out by my own success,” Josh said, when I asked why transition into social media content production when he’s had such a successful career as a documentarian. “We’ve created a Frankenstein’s monster of True Crime,” that streaming platforms and their production companies, who we agreed to refer to as “legacy media 2.0,” have little interest in supporting.

JZ: It’s the enshittification. It’s so ironic because interesting True Crime docs were literally what gave rise to Netflix, yet at the same time they don’t want to do that anymore. They want very mid cheeseburger True Crime [...] People don’t want interesting stories; they want the same comforting stories of death and murder. They don’t want to go too far, and they don’t want interesting. That’s from the gatekeepers. The gatekeepers really didn’t understand True Crime to begin with. That’s the funny thing. We gave this to them. We did this with them. We gave it to them. They took it, they made money off it, and then when they want to theoretically make more of it, they don’t know how to do so.¹⁸¹

Josh cites filmmaker Joe Berlinger, director of the *Vanishing at the Cecil Hotel* series which features John, as a primary inspiration for his work which blends horror film aesthetics with

¹⁸⁰ Lordan Interview 2025.

¹⁸¹ Zeman Interview.

documentary footage and mode of address. In starting the channel *Sinister with Josh Zeman*, he hopes both YouTube's audiences and platform infrastructure will better recognize the amalgam of stylistic conventions he uses to mediate his storytelling. While his videos deploy more cinematic editing than John's, the two share a deep commitment to journalistic ethics often lacking on YouTube and shockingly absent in much mainstream True Crime media, with Josh being informed by his time in journalism school.

Crystal Gutierrez, former a news anchor for the CBS affiliate KRQE in Albuquerque, NM in her early 40s, not only shares Josh's training as a journalist but also turned to YouTube in search of more creative freedom. After working in broadcast for 16 years, she decided to start her own production company Edison Entertainment and YouTube channel *Crystal Gutierrez TV* in 2022 in partnership with a retired Sante Fe police detective who now works as a private investigator. While Josh associates the limitations of working with legacy media companies like Netflix as a mismatch of aesthetics, Crystal describes the limitations of working with KRQE as related to demands of a 24-hours news cycle:

Crystal Gutierrez (CG): If you're 18 and older, and if police do not deem that there was any sign of foul play, it's highly unlikely that a TV organization will pick up your loved one's missing persons cases. That's because they don't really have very much to go with, and they have to fill the newscast with content of the day. When you're on a 24-hour cycle, or I should say less than 24-hour cycle now because of social media, you're constantly chasing the next story on TV news. It's a little bit more difficult to dedicate time to cases that loved one absolutely deems important.¹⁸²

Crystal leverages what were once constraints by filming her own investigation of cases that may have overlooked by New Mexico law enforcement. Two videographers film her investigative process as she interviews victims' family members, follows up on tips, and tracks down leads, giving her content a unique look that blends the aesthetics of traditional news reporting and

¹⁸² Gutierrez, Crystal. Interview. Conducted by Anna Parkhurst, 15 April 2026.

social media vlogging. During our interview, Crystal catches herself frequently using the pronoun “we” to describe her work on YouTube and laughs, telling me, “I feel like that is such a thing that we would do in news. It's like we, we, we.” She corrects herself, stating, “It's *my* creative idea. It's *my* editing style. If it doesn't go well, it's all on me. If people don't like it, they can blame me because I'm the only one that steers the ship in that direction.” In terms of her video style and the language she defaults to when describing her labor, Crystal has not fully cast off her legacy media identity. Instead, like Josh, it continues to shape her dedication to producing ethical and thoroughly investigated True Crime content.

To this extent, John, Josh and Crystal stray from the archetype of the social media-born content creator that dominates contemporary scholarship on influencer and creator cultures. Due in part to social media's emergence in relationship to legacy industries like film and television as a potential model, scholarship and popular discourse share an interest in the narrative the content creator who begins her career online and aspires to break into the world of legacy media to secure her place in entertainment for the long-haul, relying on her dual status as social media star and up-and-coming Hollywood personality to stabilize the precarity of her labor.¹⁸³ In *Specworld* (2023), for example, Caldwell attends to “how and why aspiring twenty-first century adolescent creators in the social media sharing era would rail against similar stress-inducing precarities” as

¹⁸³ For example, much attention has been paid to the record-breaking success of the 2026 films *Iron Lung* dir. Mark Edward “Markiplier” Fischback, *Obsession* (2026) dir. Curry Barker and *Backrooms* dir. Kane Parsons. All three films were directed by creatives who began their careers on YouTube before breaking into the mainstream film industry. Parson's *Backrooms* broke the record for largest opening weekend for an original horror film, grossing \$118M and making him the youngest filmmaker ever to top the box office. It was also noted to be the production company A24's largest opening ever. Curry Barker's *Obsession*, still in theaters at the time of writing, has grossed \$148M worldwide so far, making it one of the most profitable films of all time. Markiplier's *Iron Lung* also grossed \$52M globally before being released for purchase and rental on YouTube. For more, see Cohen, Syd. “What ‘Backrooms’ Teaches Creators.” *The Publish Press*, 1 June 2026, https://news.thepublishpress.com/p/what-backrooms-teaches-creators?utm_source=news.thepublishpress.com&utm_medium=newsletter&utm_campaign=what-backrooms-teaches-creators&_bhlid=c246dcdd89e0745efb90a70c51f764ffe9bcbf83. Accessed 4 June 2026.

their late-twentieth century creative professional counterparts, and examines how these amateurs are folded into an increasingly formalized industry by association with related legacy media industries.¹⁸⁴ Stories like John's, Josh's and Crystal's, however, go largely undiscussed, as few can conceive of why someone with a stable and successful career in mainstream entertainment would try their hand at rising the ranks of an oversaturated and unstable industry idealized mostly by children. "It's like a career path for kids now," John tells me. "My nephew wants to be a YouTuber."¹⁸⁵

Rachel Shannon's career trajectory typifies that of the social media-born True Crime content creator. A 28-year-old pediatrician, Rachel started her channel, now titled *Rachel Shannon True Crime*, in 2018 to make money while completing her undergraduate studies.

Rachel Shannon (RS): Originally my idea was to do Fitness, actually. I wasn't even thinking about True Crime [...] The two things I was pretty into were Fitness and then I was also spending a lot of time watching True Crime and it's something that weirdly enough, I tell people, I kind of grew up with it because my mom was super into it, my grandma was super into it, so we would always watch *Criminal Minds* and stuff like that.¹⁸⁶

When I met Rachel at Denver Crime Con in 2025, she told me she has been collaborating with John on a project for an alternative True Crime media convention. Her booth, located a one of the two heads of "Podcast Row," stood alone, modest and relatively unadorned in comparison to both her legacy media and well-established content creator counterparts displaying branded signage and a team of staff behind them managing the purchase of exclusive merchandise and lines of fans eagerly waiting for a photo-op. She occupies the most precarious position of my interlocutors and yet the most typical in the YouTube True Crime space. Although her subscriber count outranks both John and Josh at 242K subscribers (while John has 178K, Josh has 11.8K,

¹⁸⁴ Caldwell, *Specworld* xxiii.

¹⁸⁵ Lordan Interview 2025.

¹⁸⁶ Shannon, Rachel. Interview. Conducted by Anna Parkhurst, 17 Dec. 2025.

and Crystal has 13.8K), she presently encounters the most difficulties with monetization. As a fan-turned-creator, Rachel has neither a background in media production nor a prior public reputation that might aid her recognizability and, instead, has to distinguish herself from the masses of other young women who, as avid listeners of True Crime content, have designated their hours consuming as commensurate with enough experience to turn their personal interest into a source of potential revenue.

Rachel recounts a familiar story about how she shifted her channel to *Rachel Shannon True Crime* sometime between 2019-2020, finding inspiration in other content creators. The success of Kendall Rae, a well-established creator whose booth in the row perpendicular to hers was accompanied by a line of eager fans (myself included) spilling out onto the convention floor, modeled for Rachel what a career on YouTube could look like: “When I saw her page and all the great things that she was doing, and how she was raising money and spreading awareness on these cases and people were watching her, I was like, *wow, that’s really cool. And I’m already spending so much time doing this, so why don’t I give it a try.*”¹⁸⁷ Although her entry into the YouTube True Crime community follows the typical trajectory from viewer to creator, her profession as a pediatrician who cares for children with disabilities sets her apart even from big creators like Kendall Rae, whose offline engagement with True Crime grows directly out of her media network. “A lot of people don’t realize that some disabilities, not all of them, but some of them do come from abuse,” Rachel explains, “and so the cases that you don’t see covered, those are the kids that I’m working with at my job.” Drawing on her direct experience in pediatric medicine, Rachel’s intimate medical knowledge and understanding of the institutions involved in cases of abuse and violence against children informs the orientation of her channel towards cases

¹⁸⁷ Shannon Interview.

that lack significant media coverage, a combination which she notes often garners praise from viewers in her comments section.

RS: When you're seeing real people that have gone through similar things as to the cases that you're covering, it puts [it] in a different perspective. Not that it's anything close to what I cover on my channel, but the kids that I see, again, some of their families are similar to the families that I talk about in an unfortunate way. So, it's kind of like I've dealt with this in real life, so I know what the systems can be like, I know how it can end up in a situation that's not pleasant, but it gives me a good perspective.

Rachel's "day job" (although she tells me she splits her time relatively equally between her medical career and YouTube career), distinguishes her from many creators in the True Crime content community. Even a top creator with 946K subscribers like Stephanie Harlowe, whose podcast with former police detective and private investigator Derrick Levasseur *Crime Weekly* won CrimeCon's Clue Award for Creator of the Year in 2025 and 2026, built her understanding of True Crime media from the ground up. Unlike my interlocutors, she was a stay-at-home mom at the time that she launched YouTube channel and has no prior experience working in media industries or fields related to the criminal justice system. In comparison to top creators like Stephanie, smaller creators like John, Josh, Crystal and Rachel all demonstrate some degree of divergence from the assumed professional trajectory of the YouTube True Crime content creator.

The professional experiences of John, Josh, and Crystal in particular shed light on a flipped dynamic within True Crime media production, where skills they obtained from working for legacy media industries better informs their social media content creation. For all three, legacy media industry work has been a steppingstone, rather than a goal. Their knowledge about the structure and power dynamics of legacy media industries helps them navigate their relationship with YouTube: an unconventional employer of a transnational, invisibilized workplace whose rules can change on a dime. Only recently participating directly in the production labor of

documentary films, John he applies first-hand knowledge from his experience working with digital distribution technologies to imagine how platform design shapes the circulation of his content on YouTube: “I’m an old IT guy, so I’m always looking to the interfaces and how easy things are, and, more importantly, what the intent of the technology is, what it’s trying to get you into.”¹⁸⁸ While it is a semi-formalized labor practice for creators to speculate on how their content might be treated by YouTube’s recommendation algorithm and appear on an interface oversaturated with True Crime media, evidenced by the proliferation of sensational video titles and thumbnail designs containing the face of the shocked creator, John’s insights are grounded in his direct experience as a technology designer. In lieu of looking into the “black box” of YouTube’s algorithms, video title and thumbnail design are strategies that creators use to navigate opaque technical systems by engaging with their effects. Caldwell defines this kind of labor tactic as a “critical industrial practice,” whereby media workers develop labor conventions and interpretative schemas by thinking self-reflexively about the effect of their actions have in specific production contexts.¹⁸⁹ Rachel, for instance, likely models the strategy of attracting viewers with shocking titles of off top creators like Kendall Rae. Their two recent video titles at the time of writing were, “Disgraced Mayor Assaults Son’s Teenage Friend...Then Ordered Plan B,” and “He Was Texting Other Women With Her Body In The Trunk: The Case of Jessie Bardwell,” respectively.¹⁹⁰ Comparatively, John opts for less eye-catching titles that still contain phrases of interest, but rely primarily on factual statements about the video’s contents, such as

¹⁸⁸ Lordan Interview 2025.

¹⁸⁹ Caldwell, John. *Production Culture: Industrial Reflexivity and Critical Practice in Film and Television*. Duke University Press, 2008, pp. 5-6.

¹⁹⁰ Shannon, Rachel. “Disgraced Mayor Assaults Son’s Teenage Friend...Then Ordered Plan B.” *YouTube*, 11 March 2026 uploaded by Rachel Shannon True Crime, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pT4KksFazfs>. Accessed 4 June 2026.

Rae, Kendall. “He Was Texting Other Women With Her Body In The Trunk: The Case of Jessie Bardwell.” *YouTube*, uploaded 10 March 2026, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tvLxNaRTmiw&t=1217s>. Accessed 4 June 2026.

“Running Away with a Star: The Case of Celeste Rivas and Updates on D4VD Investigation” for his “Brainscratch” series.¹⁹¹

Josh’s identity as documentarian and journalist by training helps him navigate the emerging structure of social media industries labor. His experiences producing and shooting for film, television and legacy 2.0 (streaming), including the woes of preproduction, such pitching a project and drumming up financial support from networks like HBO (and later Netflix), familiarized Josh with the precarity of creative labor, much of which is aspirational. Accustomed to the instability of creative work, which often entails performing free labor to secure employment, Josh has a tolerance for the chaotic conditions of social media content production that, coupled with years of a successful offline career, has made his transition to YouTube relatively smooth. His “training” motivates how Josh considers the legal liabilities and ethical responsibilities of publicly discussing (and monetizing) the stories of real people, particularly those associated with active investigations, and informs his choice to take precautions that many social media content creators might deem as excessive, or might not consider at all:

JZ: I’m coming at it wicked responsible. I spent my life...and I say this all the time, I have E&O [errors and omissions insurance] for YouTube. And maybe I don’t need E&O insurance for YouTube, but I have it because that’s my film training. Because speaking to network lawyers has been my training. So, my level is so high. So, I’m coming at it from a very high level of understanding and accepted responsibility. We can only talk about suspects if they’ve listed in the news as being a suspect in a certain crime, things like that.

Similarly, Crystal’s identity as a former journalist informs how she makes choices about what information she uncovers through her own investigations to release on YouTube. She explains that while she does have “a little bit more leeway” without a corporation explicitly setting the

¹⁹¹ Lordan, John, “Running Away with a Star: The Case of Celeste Rivas and Updates on D4VD Investigation.” *YouTube*, uploaded by LordanARTS, 27 Feb 2026, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1erLHO6rars&t=1s>. Accessed 4 June 2026.

parameters of her what she can and cannot say in the interest of maintaining the integrity of the company's brand, she is careful not to release private information that would either result in a lawsuit or harm an ongoing investigation being conducted by law enforcement:

CG: I'm very cautious about how much to release, how much not to release. That way, one, we don't harm the investigation, but two, I allow the public to know I'm looking into this individual who is listed on a public document that anybody has access to. We toe the line with that, but all the information that we do release is, I would say, about 85% to 90% of it is listed in a public document that the public can obtain on their own. It's not as if I'm just coming up with these assumptions. We have documentation to back why we're looking into certain people in certain cities and states.

Caldwell suggests that this is precisely the kind of training that academic programs in film and media production should provide to better meet the needs of an up-and-coming generation of creatives who increasingly enter programs with significant content creation experience, but who may fail to grasp the legal stakes of monetizing of intellectual property. Most young, aspiring social media content creators share a knowledge set more akin to Rachel's than John's, Josh's or Crystal's. They are intimately familiar with the digital platform landscape from a presentist, corporate ethos that encourages users to make the most of democratized tools of expression—*keep producing, keep consuming*—but less understanding of how to concretely enhance the stability of creative labor in the long term, after the sponsorship contracts have expired and the platform economies that they built their burgeoning careers upon have shifted.

Whereas Caldwell advocates for education that fills knowledge gaps in histories of copyright law and industry regulation to support the careers of emerging social media content creators, the ethical, legal and ideological concerns for those who aim to make True Crime content are marked by the messy relationship between representation and truth. After speaking with Josh, it occurred to me that not enough True Crime content creators consider themselves freelance or citizen journalists. Although some creators have been publicly called about by other

creators and users for over-sensationalizing violence and even fabricating evidence to enhance claims that they have exclusive information that sets them apart from other creators, a numbness to shock pervades the True Crime content community that frequently comes off as compositional carelessness. Josh is acutely aware how the aesthetics of storytelling engage with the real—a relationship that is often taken for granted on YouTube. Josh describes how the mixed aesthetics between documentary and horror define his work, recounting the production and reception of *Cropsey* (2009):

JZ: Some people were like, *oh, it's a really creepy Dateline episode?* It just didn't fit in the narratives of what they were [seeing]...it didn't fit within their labels. Now, you know, it's considered a kind of really creepy, weird True Crime documentary that blends horror and sits on the edge of *that's totally fucked up* [in] the most disturbing documentaries you've ever seen type of way.

Anna Parkhurst (AP): It's funny because as you're describing the process of making this film, it sounds a lot like the DIY-spirit that characterizes what we consider to be YouTube or social media content production. Like, *it's just two guys with a camera out in the woods*. So, maybe in some ways you were a little ahead of your time with the way that you were going about things from a production standpoint just really didn't fit into the world of what legacy media industries were looking for.

JZ: It was in the ether; we just couldn't put a name on it because we were so early in the game. But then, ironically, I was out there as a 35-year-old man with my partner. I had produced movies by that point, and she was working for the city, and we would be walking in the woods and there was five, three, six 10-year-olds or 12-year-olds with a camera and I'd be like, *hey, what are you guys doing here?* And they're like, *we're looking for ghosts*. I'd be like, *oh really?*

Filming on location at the Willowbrook State School in Staten Island, NY, Josh filtered his documentary film production practices through horror film aesthetics, identifying aspects of the built environmental facts by using tropes audiences are familiar with: *“look, the mental institution is right here in the woods, and it's so creepy and everywhere we look there's swing sets, mental institution swing sets that are like ‘ee-ee,’ and it was all right there for the shooting*

with the right style and the right attitude.” In contrast to the kids running around the area hoping to use their cameras to prove that something we imagine to be terrifying is, in fact, real, Josh set out to do the opposite—to use his camera to portray the real as terrifying. In a process that he describes as a something of a “reverse *Blair Witch*,” Josh explains that whereas “[*The*] *Blair Witch [Project]* tries to take fake footage and make it feel like a documentary—it tries to take horror film footage and try and make it feel like a documentary—I said, *I bet you I could take documentary footage and make it feel like a horror film.*”¹⁹²

As my response to Josh indicates in the excerpt above, the transformation of “documentary footage [to] make it feel like a horror film” typifies True Crime content production on YouTube. Some of the most popular videos (and subsequently, some of the most frequently covered cases) are ones which incorporate an abundance of publicly available footage from sources like police body cameras, surveillance cameras, interrogation rooms, courtrooms, and even victims themselves who may have, either knowingly or unknowingly, captured crucial evidence prior to the crime, or egotistical perpetrators who couldn’t help themselves from documenting their actions.¹⁹³ To a large extent, this is why John’s video on the Elisa Lam case drew in an influx of new audience members. Creators frequently begin their videos with a slowed, dramatic narration of the case’s overarching storyline over dark, atmospheric background music to situate the viewer within the dual register of *this is a true story, but one that you should relate to as a horror film*, thereby safely rendering the actual horror that we live in a violent and exploitative world more distant from the viewer’s reality and, instead, offering familiar film aesthetics through which truth can safely be engaged as fiction. Rachel abandons this composition after the

¹⁹² Zeman Interview.

¹⁹³ For more on the role of police body cam footage in True Crime media, see Anderson, Zachariah. “‘True’ Crime and the appropriation of state-recorded surveillance footage in American Murder: The Family Next Door (2020).” *Jump Cut*, vol. 62, 2023.

introductory portion of her videos, John and Crystal do not engage with it at all—opting instead for a purely journalistic mode of address—and Josh modifies it, occasionally starting with a “spooky” opening that features an investigator or journalist’s voice in lieu of his own.

This tension between truth and its mediation through generic aesthetic regimes characteristic of documentary filmmaking is transformed by the social media platform into series of questions about how the rights of free speech and free press might mutually reinforce the production of entertainment in an industry built on strategic references to political language in the service of profits. Discourse about documentary film positions the problem of truth and representation as a matter of concern for the director. The director of film holds a very different status from that of the social media content creator, both in the United States cultural imagination and academic discourse. The director is an above-the-line worker of a media industry whose production, distribution and exhibition channels are coveted behind contracts, gaining access to which is a key component of professionalization. It can take years to find a studio to finance a production, let alone a network or company interested in distributing a final product, as Josh bemoaned of his experience shopping *Cropsey* before its eventual theatrical release by Cinema Purgatorio. Social media, however, collapses these distinctions between distribution and exhibition (and sometimes even production for platforms which include interface design features that allow users to film content directly in their app versions, such as TikTok), such that all creators must do is decide which site to upload their video to. Combined with the accessibility of quality, mobile camera equipment in the consumer market, anyone can enter the industry of social media. This phenomenon, commonly referred to as the “democratization” of media production, “democratizes” the stakes of creation, whereby the media is rendered speech whose freedom must be protected. The director is no longer an artist whose work premieres first on the

festival circuit, but a private citizen who chooses to use technological tools to speak immediately in what is popularly regarded as a public forum. True Crime media on YouTube, then, becomes an act of free speech whose expression is protected.

True Crime media's emphasis on the discussion of *true* events poses a complex problem for the potentially dueling freedoms of speech and press. In other words, are creators' videos works of visual storytelling whose expression warrants protection as free speech, or are they pieces of investigative journalism, whose civic function supersedes any attempt to limit or moderate it? On the face of it, these two fundamental democratic rights don't seem to be incompatible. Free press is predicated on the right to free speech. The meaningful difference between the two is the position of the speaker. Expression through the freedom of the press gains protection by virtue of its claim to truth—that the citizens of the state have a right to have access to information that makes them an informed electorate better able to participate in democratic governance. Expressions through the freedom of speech, however, gain protection regardless of their relationship to truth. Free speech is free because it is speech, whereas the press is free because it (in theory) provides citizens access to the truth. Free speech has no such responsibilities to truth. What does this make True Crime content? Speech about the truth that bears no enforced ethical responsibility. The notion of journalistic ethics, however, does not necessitate their practice. Sensationalist tabloids line the checkout at the supermarket and major news outlets have become media circuses owned by small number of corporations. In other words, unethical journalism is a consistent and historical practice. The institution of the press, though, occupies a distinct cultural position from that of the entertainment industries, which endows its expressions with a reference point to truth and fact upon which narrative media does not rely. Social media's aesthetics of immediacy, therefore, endow True Crime content with a

false reference point: users perceive accounts of violence and exploitation to be true, without creators having to necessarily engage the responsibilities of fact.

Instead, the responsibility that creators must directly engage is to YouTube's Advertiser-Friendly Content Guidelines, which, through monetization, structure an inverse relationship between truth and profitability. In our first interview back in 2021, John expressed exasperation with the fact that YouTube appears far more comfortable monetizing fictional depictions of violence than factual discussions on the subject.

John Lordan (JL): I'm a big fan of video gamers and video game streamers. I love watching that type of content, but why can I go and see full frontal nudity and decapitation, all this stuff in a video game format that's monetized, but then if I come back to my channel where I'm talking about an actual crime, trying to raise awareness and exposure to it, sometimes raising money for causes supporting it or directly to the family, that gets demonetized. It's a tough question.¹⁹⁴

The uneven treatment between video game content that animates extreme violence and True Crime content which discusses it (no True Crime content creator could ever include footage of an actual murder, for instance, as this would immediately violate the platform's Community Guidelines outside of the scope of monetizable content), raises highlights how YouTube flattens meaningful nuances between journalism and entertainment through its economy. On its face, the platform deems fictional violence safely profitable, whereas real violence is not. At the height of his struggles with monetization, John imagined reshaping his critical industrial practice around this value judgement, even if it meant diminishing the integrity of his work.

JL: Literally, when I got this demonetization notice today, the first thought I had was, *you know what, I'm going to start including a statement before every episode saying this is all completely fictional*. Is that what I need to do? I need to pretend that these aren't real events, and then you're going to be okay with me having a very mild description of a body that's found at a location, or DNA testing? Yeah, I think there's things that they're comfortable with

¹⁹⁴ Lordan, John. Interview. Conducted by Anna Parkhurst, 15 Feb. 2021.

because they're recognizing them in popular culture and they're really trying to drive towards those things.¹⁹⁵

Whereas the current disclaimer John includes at the beginning of his videos discussing active investigations, encouraging viewers not to contact or harass individuals involved in the case or release sensitive information that could be used to violate their privacy reflects his own concerns about the ethics of producing and consuming True Crime media, YouTube's demonetization of True Crime content appears to have little to do with the question of ethics and is instead concerned with an assessment of financial risk. The popularity of video games in online culture, inspiring the creation of the livestreaming platform Twitch predominantly dedicated to gaming in 2011, reorients the discourse around video game violence away from *violent video games make people violent* to *violent video games make platforms money*.¹⁹⁶ In John's words, YouTube is "comfortable" consistently monetizing violent video game play due to its stable, if not increasingly central position in popular and youth cultures.

True Crime media, on the other hand, occupies a more troubling position for YouTube, who appear to assign value based on the industrial context of the speaker. Videos uploaded by major television networks, such as Investigation Discovery and Oxygen, the official host of CrimeCon, encounter no visible difficulties with monetization, sometimes even having disproportionately more ads running on their videos than those by individual creators.

JL: I mean, we've got ads, millions of dollars of ads being sold on these other channels that are running this type of content and quite honestly, some of the content I see over there, I'm like, *how many times are we gonna go through the JonBenét [Ramsey] story, how many times do we need to hear about Manson?* And the tone of some of the content is...like you could be very offended by it. But for some reason those advertisers are fine.¹⁹⁷

¹⁹⁵ Lordan, Interview 2021.

¹⁹⁶ Taylor 3.

¹⁹⁷ Lordan Interview 2021.

Ironically, YouTube's actions indicate that the platform feels more confident consistently monetizing True Crime content on the social media outgrowth of networks securely embedded in legacy media aiming to maintain their profits in an era dominated by the rise of user-generated content, even if their mode of address has always been more sensational as a strategy for capturing viewers' attention since the heyday of cable television. As demonstrated by the prevalence the production practice of integrating the dramatic reading of lurid details over an ominous soundtrack, content creators are also guilty of sensationalizing crime like their legacy media counter parts. As a production community, however, there is a wider range in the tone of their coverage, with some creators like John at one end of the spectrum choosing to foreground respect and research ethics, and creators like Bailey Sarian at the other, who garnered a massive audience of 7.4M subscribers by casually discussing cases while doing her makeup. While YouTube treats network media's consistently sensational content as universally monetizable, the high degree of diversity of production approaches within the True Crime content community renders all of its creator-made videos a financial risk.

Though, typically not affiliated with journalistic institutions, perhaps if YouTube regarded certain of its True Crime content creators who consistently produce ethical content like Rachel, John and Josh as user-citizen journalists of the YouTube platform-state, monetization risks would be abated. This distinction directly evokes the functional analogy between the state-platform addressed in Chapter 2 to acknowledge that some users create content whose patterns of circulation within the platform can resemble the work of a private citizen of the state who disseminates information which directly informs participation in civic life outside of professional channels. This identity framing would also include clusters of users who labor within the Political Commentary content community. I intentionally avoid classifying True Crime content

creators as “citizen-journalists” for several reasons. First, the majority of creators within the content community do not regard themselves as journalists, even if, like Josh, they have journalism training and/or adhere to standards of journalistic ethics in their production practices. To respect the Caldwellian research practice of validating media workers’ self-theorizing, if creators do not understand themselves as citizen-journalists, then, definitively, they are not. Although Josh also imagines that a press-like classification for certain creators would resolve issues of demonetization over copyright, which prevents creators like him who work across industries from using clips from media they have produced for other networks, his solution is not predicated on the notion that True Crime content creators should be considered journalists.

JZ: I could go direct a show, put that show on Netflix, and then I take a piece of that show—30 seconds of that show—and replay it on YouTube and I can’t play it, even though I directed it over here, even though I’m only taking 30 seconds to then continue on for the conversation. That pisses me off to no ends of the earth. Extremely baffling. As the content creator (but I also understand that Netflix owns that [show]) I will tell you, very interestingly enough, that now more than ever in my contracts I’m saying that I can take snippets and not have the algorithm flag it, although I can’t talk to the algorithm and be like, *I am the guy who created this*.

AP: And YouTube isn’t necessarily making exceptions in their policies for individual creators’ contracts.

JZ: That’s right, but we should be. If you are a creator, if you want to talk about views, let’s talk about *Murder Mountain*¹⁹⁸ and the 12 million views on Netflix. So, why can’t I then come to YouTube with a little creator badge that says, *oh, you know what you’re doing*.

AP: Ah, something that verifies your experience and your place in the creative process.

JZ: Exactly, like a press badge.

¹⁹⁸ Josh produced *Murder Mountain* 2018.

Somewhat in the spirit of Twitter's blue checkmark badge, which, prior to Musk's acquisition of the platform, verified the authenticity of accounts associated with public figures and companies, Josh's proposed "creator badge" would signal to viewers and, more importantly, content moderation algorithms that the person behind the YouTube account is responsible for, and therefore has the rights to, the products of their labor across media-industries. For Josh, designating certain creators with a kind of "press badge" signifies less a verification of journalistic integrity and more an acknowledgement on behalf of YouTube that would allow creators to own their intellectual property across distribution platforms.

Furthermore, True Crime content creators cannot be considered citizen-journalists because YouTube has neither positioned itself as an institution of independent press, nor been popularly treated as one due to content moderation practices. As a video sharing platform, YouTube's strategy for "keep[ing] YouTube fun and enjoyable for everyone," and avoiding "harm [to] our users, community, employees or ecosystem" that might subsequently jeopardize view counts and advertiser investment heavily restricts content that depicts real tragedy and violence typically associated with on-the-ground citizen reporting.¹⁹⁹ Consider the fact that platforms like Facebook and Twitter, frequently cited by scholars of social media activism as playing a crucial role in the 2011 Arab Spring revolutionary movements, prioritize text-based communication features such as private and public groups, direct messaging, and threaded comment replies.²⁰⁰ While YouTube also incorporates some of these features, including private channels accessible only by shared link, messaging, and threaded replies on comments, users of

¹⁹⁹ YouTube Help. "YouTube's Community Guidelines." *Google*, <https://support.google.com/youtube/answer/9288567?hl=en>. Accessed 4 June 2026.

²⁰⁰ Dubai School of Government. "Civil Movements: The Impact of Facebook and Twitter." *Arab Social Media Report*, vol. 1, no. 2, May 2011, <https://web.archive.org/web/20170829021253/http://unpan1.un.org/intradoc/groups/public/documents/dsg/unpan050860.pdf>. Accessed 4 June 2026.

the platform navigate a moving-image space in order to engage with textual features. As several of my interlocutors note, talking about violence is distinctly different from depicting it, enabling non-visual centric platforms to more easily facilitate the communication of information related to violence and tragedy. Groups on Facebook, for instance, particularly private ones, might have even more leeway when it comes to potentially sensitive visual content, with the platform's Group Privacy & Abuse policies stating, "We *may* review group content, including content in private groups, to maintain the integrity of our products, promote safety and security on and off our products, and improve our products and services as otherwise described in the Privacy Policy."²⁰¹

Alternatively, the hyper-visual platform TikTok, which actively discourages users from navigating the platform through its limited text-based features (many users bemoan the ineffectiveness of TikTok's search engine, therefore redirecting users to infinitely scroll their "For You Page" feeds to serendipitously consume algorithmically recommended gems), frequently serves as a site for citizen-journalism, most recently on-the-ground reports from users residing in Gaza and Iran. TikTok's relatively lax content moderation policies compared to YouTube's frame the practice on its official Content Moderation page as one that targets "illegal content," as opposed to harmful content, encouraging users who make reports to identify the country of operation and relevant law the video of concern violates.²⁰² The platform's Community Guidelines—a page distinct from the one titled "Content Moderation"—also specify that only "extremely graphic, violent, or disturbing content—especially when it could cause viewers

²⁰¹ Facebook Help Center. "Group Privacy and Abuse." *Meta*, <https://www.facebook.com/help/412300192139228>. Accessed 4 June 2026. Emphasis mine

²⁰² "Reporting Illegal Content." *TikTok*, <https://www.tiktok.com/legal/page/global/reporting-illegal-content/en>. Accessed 4 June 2026.

emotional distress” is not permitted on the platform.²⁰³ In contrast, the language of YouTube’s Community Guidelines on the same topic states that, “violent or gory content intended to shock or disgust viewers, or content encouraging others to commit violent acts” is not permitted.²⁰⁴ While the omission or inclusion of “extremely” might not seem significant, its qualification of violence designates that TikTok is willing to permit a much wider range of content than YouTube, while YouTube’s exclusion of any qualifier indicates that what constitutes violence itself is vague, allowing the platform a higher degree of moderation flexibility. Whether or not users are familiar with this meaningful linguistic difference in each platform’s Community Guidelines, the increased potential for platform interference with the citizen-journalism on YouTube redirects much of this subset of users away from the platform.

The aesthetic ambiguities that arise from the production of True Crime content also make it difficult to describe creators as citizen-journalists. If, at best, True Crime YouTube videos can be considered a form of educational documentary respectful of its subjects, and, at worst, a real-life slasher film that uses suspense and gore to shock viewers, then its generic references disqualify the videos from the journalistic mode of media making. Citizen-journalist practices center “real-time reporting” that collects, records and disseminates information, most often to actively provide essential, actionable knowledge for an ongoing event.²⁰⁵ In contrast, the production turnaround of True Crime content created for YouTube is far slower. To provide audiences with a consistent stream of content (and therefore to make themselves eligible for a consistent stream of profits), creators participate in what Caldwell terms “anticipatory

²⁰³ “Policies & Engagement.” *TikTok*, <https://www.tiktok.com/community-guidelines/en/>. Accessed 4 June 2026.

²⁰⁴ YouTube Help. “Violent or graphic content policies.” *Google*, <https://support.google.com/youtube/answer/2802008?sjid=1988073978993592368-NC#zippy=>. Accessed 4 June 2026.

²⁰⁵ Dangerfield, Micha Barban. “Power to the People: The Rise of Citizen Journalism.” *Tate*, <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/p/photojournalism/power-people>. Accessed 4 June 2026.

practices.”²⁰⁶ Some of these anticipatory practices include planning and conducting research for videos over the course of several weeks, sometimes months, and filming days or weeks in advance of the planned upload date. Rachel describes the occasional difficulties of keeping up with an upload schedule, explaining that, “I always get frustrated when I have to take a break and then catch up. Especially being out for a couple weeks, and now the holidays, I’m like, *damn. I really have to catch up, I fell behind.*”²⁰⁷ Some creators resolve this problem by having backlog of videos they can upload during planned and unexpected gaps in their production labor to provide users with the illusion of a stream of continuously produced content. For the citizen-journalist, whose work often responds directly to events as they are occurring, there is no real “falling behind,” or “catching up,” or taking a break for the holidays. Even if a creator covers an ongoing story with emerging, publicly available details, their motivation to produce a timely video has more to do with capitalizing on current audience interests in a “popular” case than disseminating relevant information for concerned citizens of the state to act upon. In that respect, both John and Rachel note feeling that their audiences, as opposed to YouTube, hold them accountable to their labor—a fact I will return to later. Furthermore, this longer production process affords creators the opportunity to shape their content around a certain balance of aesthetic regimes that will best capture the attention of their viewers, whereas citizen-journalists are largely unconcerned with how the stylistic form of their reporting will appeal to audience tastes. Of vastly greater concern to the latter is demonstrating credibility. True Crime content creators, however, competing for audiences in an oversaturated market of real-life horror as entertainment, must take aesthetics into greater consideration to craft a regularly available and exciting product for viewers to consume. Otherwise, if a user finds themselves growing bored of

²⁰⁶ Caldwell, *Specworld* 58.

²⁰⁷ Shannon Interview.

one creator's videos—even those pertaining to an ongoing case or current event—she can just as easily find another creator to subscribe to who has very likely produced videos on the exact same topic.

Demonetization and Censorship Frameworks

Although True Crime content creation on YouTube does not resemble citizen-journalism, questions about the difference between the right to free press and free speech inform inquiry into whether demonetization can be considered a form of censorship. Although Josh emphatically exclaimed, like Jenna did back in 2016, “Of course it’s censorship!” legal and theoretical perspectives on censorship complicate the validity of the accusations made by creators.²⁰⁸ In his book *Private Censorship* (2023) that examines how the management of speech by non-state actors like employers, social media platforms and search engines shape free expression, J.P. Messina draws out the differences between accusations of censorship whose legal grounds refer to free press versus free speech. He delineates between the two by arguing that freedom of the press is “bound up with a particular technology— historically, the printing press, but in recent interpretation, broadcast, print media, radio, and (certain corners of) the internet. The other does not presuppose any technology in particular [...] Freedom of the press is institutional, arguably industrial, in a way that freedom of speech need not be.”²⁰⁹ True Crime content creation is not “bound up with a particular technology,” even if creators describe themselves as YouTubers and dedicate their production practices to uploading content to YouTube. As Fathallah’s demonstrates in her work on serial killer fandom, True Crime media has a long history that far predates the Internet. The continued presence of authors at CrimeCon also suggests True Crime media need not be hosted on a digital platform. Messina’s secondary

²⁰⁸ Zeman, Interview.

²⁰⁹ Messina, J.P. *Private Censorship*. Oxford University Press, 2023, pp. 87

argument that the freedom of the press, unlike the freedom of speech, refers to an industrial context, likewise points to the significant differences between True Crime media production in legacy media versus social media industries. Despite the fact that social media platforms exert increasing influence in the landscape of True Crime media, the flexible, entrepreneurial, on-demand nature of digital platform labor contrasts with the historically formal professionalization associated with journalism. Crystal and Josh both participated in this kind of professionalization for their careers in legacy media by attending journalism school. Despite the lack of professionalization and True Crime media's expression in multiple technological and industrial contexts, it could still be argued that content creators are effectively "bound" to YouTube because the financial risks of leaving are too high. If they choose to leave YouTube, creators risk losing the platform-specific audience they have built and have to meet a new series of requirements to participate in revenue sharing. Ultimately, however, creators do have the freedom to start upload their content on other platforms which may have speech management practices and revenue sharing models that better support their goals. In addition, creators are free to host their content on multiple platforms and potentially profit from several different streams of ad-revenue. This freedom is precisely why media workers like Josh and Crystal choose to leave their careers in legacy media to pursue social media content creation.

If YouTube's demonetization of True Crime content is a form of censorship, then it would be on the grounds of violating creators' rights to free speech. Messina defines censorship as "*the attempted suppression of expressive content on the grounds that it is dangerous, threatening to (moral, political, or religious) orthodoxy, or inimical to the material interests of the agent aiming to suppress it.*"²¹⁰ When evaluating creators' claims based on Messina's definition, two problems

²¹⁰ Messina 7.

arise: First, can demonetization be considered a form of suppression? Having one's content demonetized does not mean that YouTube removes the content from the platform. The threat of revenue loss might discourage a creator from producing a certain kind of content, but demonetization does not forbid a creator from doing so. In other words, failing to meet the standards of the Advertiser-Friendly Content Guidelines is not the same as violating the Community Guidelines. At most, demonetization can be understood as an indirect form of suppression. Second, is True Crime content "inimical to the material interests" of YouTube? As evidenced by the long lines of fans YouTube creators draw to their tables at CrimeCon and the convention's growing interest in centering the presence of creators, True Crime content is undeniably profitable for the platform. As Jones suggests, this can be traced back to Season 1 of *Serial*, an investigative journalism podcast hosted and developed by *This American Life* in 2014 which is largely credited with digital True Crime media's explosion in popularity over the last decade.²¹¹ Major podcasting platforms like Apple Podcasts and Spotify host an estimated number of over 23,000 True Crime podcasts.²¹² FAST platforms like Pluto TV and Roku have increasingly taken interest in the topic as well, with 15 different True Crime channels offered on Pluto TV alone.²¹³ Although the statistics are not available for the number of True Crime-focused channels on YouTube, undoubtedly the numbers are in the tens of thousands. Moreover,

²¹¹ CBS reported in 2015 that *Serial*'s Season 1 episodes had been downloaded over 68M times. "New hope for inmate of 'Serial' podcast." *CBS*, 9 Feb. 2015, <https://www.cbsnews.com/video/new-hope-for-inmate-from-serial-podcast/>. Accessed 4 June 2026.

²¹² "True Crime Podcast Statistics that Will Blow Your Mind (2024)." *Podchaser*, 25 March 2024, <https://www.podchaser.com/articles/podcast-insights/true-crime-podcast-statistics-that-will-blow-your-mind>. Accessed 4 June 2026.

²¹³ Guttman, James. "Pluto TV Now Has 15 Live True Crime Channels." *Cord Cutters News*, 26 April 2026, <https://cordcuttersnews.com/pluto-tv-now-has-15-live-free-true-crime-channels/#:~:text=The%20New%20Detectives,series%20running%20in%20the%20background>. Accessed 10 June 2026.

YouTube continues to monetize True Crime content uploaded by channels associated with legacy television networks, like Oxygen and Investigation Discovery.

If demonetization is not an outright form of suppression and if True Crime content is not inimical to YouTube's material interests, then the concept of censorship itself poses a problem. Messina's differentiation between illegal censorship and wrongful censorship provides new avenues for thinking about censorial practices online that both validate the claims made by my interlocutors and acknowledge that ideas about censorship are changing in concert with technological developments. In the context of debates over free speech, Messina suggests that we are more often familiar with instances of illegal censorship, or that which infringes upon legally protected rights. For example, if I told a student in my classroom that he was not permitted to express a negative opinion about my favorite film, then that would be considered an infringement upon his legally protected right to express his opinion. Messina's concept of wrongful censorship, however, that which commits moral or ethical wrongdoing in its suppression of speech, better describes demonetization. Wrongful censorship does not require legal grounds to support its argument. Instead, it relies on an evaluation of whether or not the suppression of speech performs a moral or ethical wrongdoing most often associated with an abuse of power. In this context, demonetization can be framed as an abuse of YouTube's/Google's financial power relative to the power creators, who do not have the means or concrete avenues for advocating for large-scale changes to platform labor. Framing demonetization as a form of wrongful censorship highlights the relationship between free speech and systems of moral value that I return to in the next chapter. As I suggest in the Introduction, considerations what makes censorship wrongful ought to consider more than speech's content and instead should account for how it shapes our value systems around financial incentives.

Conclusions: The True Crime Media Industrial Complex

The argument that the demonetization of True Crime content constitutes wrongful censorship has implications that extend beyond YouTube and gesture toward the relationship between media industries and the state. True Crime media's focus on the actions of law enforcement, the justice system, and legislation aimed at preventing or managing crime contributes to how citizens understand the authority of the state. As Zachariah Anderson (2023) suggests, the appropriation of police body-cam footage and other forms of state-surveillance in social media content and in documentaries produced by platforms like Netflix shape public conceptions of the carceral state. Often used by creators to bolster their claims to objectivity, these state-produced media position the actions of police in a neutral, sometimes even celebratory, way that does not represent the asymmetrical and racialized power dynamics underpinning institutions of U.S. law enforcement.²¹⁴ Beyond the fact that True Crime content can easily be mobilized to reinforce rather than critique state authority, CrimeCon's ownership by Fox/Red Seat Ventures raises significant concern over the industrial production of True Crime media. Red Seat Ventures' representation of right-wing politicians like Megyn Kelly, Tucker Carlson and Vivek Ramawamy alongside some of CrimeCon's most publicized attendees like Nancy Grace and Chris Hansen suggests the potential for a shared investment in the production of media, True Crime or otherwise, that supports current state politics. I propose describing this relationship between True Crime media industries, the authority of the state, and the collusion of private and public investment in the production of True Crime media as the *True Crime Media Industrial Complex*. In this context, how the management of speech about True Crime on digital platforms shapes U.S. conceptions of free speech can be understood as a function of the True

²¹⁴ Anderson

Crime Media Industrial Complex designed to reinforce the growing alignment between the capital of media technology corporations and the authority of the state.

Chapter 4—Monetizing Ressentiment: YouTube Self-Certification

In its relationship to truth and the spectacle of violence, True Crime media walks a thin line between education and entertainment. YouTube struggles to codify this in its monetization infrastructures, which creates an uncertain gap on the platform between profitable content and that which risks alienating advertisers. True Crime content creators laboring within this gap encounter frequent disagreements and feelings of discontentment with how the platform manages their speech. While legacy media industries like film and television may operate with more ease in their treatment True Crime media as entertainment, drawing audiences in with statements like, “based on a true story,” and “all names have been changed to protect the real identities of the people involved,” social media platforms further complicate the boundaries between entertainment and information. At a technical level, the distributed communications networks in which my interlocutors labor reduce everything to information. All media objects and actions which respond to them (likes, clicks, views, comments) collapse into data— quantifiable bits whose potential for future profit can optimized and fed back into the network. At a semantic level, platforms flatten all media objects into content. In the introduction, I described how users on social media platforms flatten political action into content, transforming Charlie Kirk and his assassination into AI generated songs and TikTok dance trends that treat the alarming event and its backlash as little more than a bid for attention from their peers. Katie Eichhorn describes the logic of content as that which dispenses with communicative value in favor of the value of circulation itself.²¹⁵ Platforms build their economies around this logic, whereby circulation generates more engagement, and more engagement generates more profits.

²¹⁵ Eichhorn, Katie. *Content*. MIT Press, 2022.

The algorithmic systems which recommend, moderate and monetize user activity and the policies which describe them are where creators interface with the logic of content directly. For True Crime creators, YouTube's monetization infrastructures often fail to capture the nuances of their speech. The list of potentially sensitive content categories that creators must choose from to pre-flag their videos for Self-Certification, reduce the complexities of their speech (its context, its intent, the position of its speaker) into generic descriptions of advertiser desires. Well aware of the potential for demonetization, True Crime content creators often feel compelled to designate their content into one of these categories regardless of fit, thus making them complicit in the flattening of their own speech. After creators select which category of sensitive content their video belongs to, YouTube's algorithmic check determines whether or not they have accurately described their video's contents, claiming to calculate and register a cumulative "accuracy rating" for their channel. My interlocutors report a range of outcomes: sometimes, YouTube accuses them of failing to accurately report the potentially sensitive contents of their video by selecting the incorrect bucket and suggests an alternative; other times, YouTube claims there is in fact sensitive content in the video, as described in the Advertiser-friendly Content Guidelines, when the creator had determined there was none; and still other times, YouTube demonetizes several versions of the same video, only to approve one copy without explanation. Each of these scenarios, which appear in interview selections that follow, exemplify how social media platforms like YouTube simultaneously reduce speech to its monetary value and equate the profitability of speech with "good" or "bad" creator behaviors.

This chapter explores how YouTube's monetization infrastructures reinforce a moral-affective economy of negative feeling that drives creator labor. I concentrate on Self-Certification, a step in the monetization process which asks creators to pre-flag their content for

material potentially unsuitable to advertisers, as a critical site the neoliberal democratic rhetoric of YouTube's guidelines shape how creators navigate their labor. By comparing creators' accounts with the language of Self-Certification, I demonstrate how creators conflate the profitability of their content with a perceived moral judgement of their quality as a content creator. Extending my analysis of the ethnographic interviews I conducted with True Crime content creators in Chapter 3, I argue that demonetization produces feelings of Ressentiment, whose confluences between moral and economic value encourage creators to understand their loss of revenue as a personal failing. Creators turn to Self-Certification's language of trust, individual responsibility and self-regulation to make sense of wrongful instances of demonetization, thus directing their negative feelings and frustrations about the platform inward. A close reading of the Advertiser-Friendly Content Guidelines reveals that these wrongful instances of demonetization are tied to what Robyn Caplan and Tarleton Gillespie describe as YouTube's strategy of "tiered platform governance," whereby the intentional vagueness of the language in the guidelines permit YouTube to make flexible and inconsistent monetization decisions that maximize platform revenue.²¹⁶ I suggest that YouTube's promise to give creators more control over their own labor through a process like Self-Certification strategically reinforces the negative feelings associated with demonetization, such that creators continue laboring with the hope that monetizing correctly will stabilize their precarious revenue.

To unpack the relationship between (de)monetization and Ressentiment, I center the accounts of John Lordan, who has been making True Crime content on YouTube since 2015, and Rachel Shannon, who started her channel more recently in 2018. Unlike Joshua Zeman and

²¹⁶ Caplan, Robyn, and Tarleton Gillespie. "Tiered Governance and Demonetization: The Shifting Terms of Labor and Compensation in the Platform Economy." *Social Media & Society* vol. 6, no. 2, 2020, pp. 1-13.

Crystal Gutierrez, whose perspectives as former legacy media producers I center in Chapter 3, John and Rachel both have prolonged experiences with demonetization and describe negative feelings associated with their monetization labor. Although John no longer encounters significant issues at the time of writing, the differences between his 2021 and 2025 interviews both demonstrate the malleability of monetization infrastructures (as YouTube has made several modifications to the language of the guidelines and presumably made algorithmic changes in the span of four years), and provide insight into the platform's tiered-governance practices. John's experiences, as I discuss later in the chapter, reflect the fact that YouTube can change how they manage an individual creators' speech. As a researcher who does not have access to the source code for the platform's proprietary monetization algorithms and who cannot ask a YouTube employee (who likely has signed a non-disclosure agreement) the logic behind changes in governance practices, I can only speculate as to why John's content is compensated differently in 2025 than it was in 2021. I argue that even if YouTube's promise to "trust" creators who Self-Certify correctly appears to be fulfilled, locating the arbiter of such trust is near to impossible. Rachel, on the other hand, encounters consistent demonetization. Her experience in contrast to John's point to the unpredictability of monetization and practices of tiered platform governance, as I cannot say with certainty that John's longer tenure designates to YouTube that his content more worthy of compensation.

My interviews with John and Rachel focused on their experiences performing Self-Certification. I asked each of them to describe to me an instance in which their content was demonetized and to walk me through their decision-making process as they selected which flag from the Advertiser-Friendly Content guidelines to apply before uploading the video. My follow-up questions asked them to speculate on why they think YouTube made the decision to

demonetize this particular video, and to imagine what YouTube's logic might be in demonetizing True Crime content more broadly. If they began to describe having negative feelings in relation to these experiences, I asked them to elaborate on how these feelings shaped their subsequent video production and monetization labor. In other words, I wanted to know how the negative feelings and the loss of revenue together shaped their future labor practices. To understand how techno-utopian imaginaries about social media platforms as democratic spaces of free expression might figure into their labor, I asked John and Rachel to describe how they understand their relationship to YouTube, both as a technology and as an employer. Their insights about feeling most accountable to their audiences in response to this question are ideas I return to in the Conclusion.

This chapter engages the field of creator studies, which draws upon the technological specificity of platform studies and the methodologies of labor studies. Widely regarded as a cornerstone piece in the field, Teresa Senft's scholarship on camgirls of the 90s and early 2000s gives an early account of the development of Internet microcelebrity, today more commonly referred to as the "content creator" or "influencer." In *Camgirls: Celebrity and Community in the Age of Social Networks* (2008), Senft performs an ethnographic study of the young women who filmed and shared their private lives online before the advent of streaming video to identify common labor practices associated with "camming" culture.²¹⁷ Interviewing camgirls like Jennifer Ringley, who hosted the popular site Jennicam.org, she describes the reflexivity of self-presentation online as a feedback loop between the camgirl and her audience similarly to the way that T.L. Taylor describes the affective labor of video game live streamers on Twitch.²¹⁸ Senft's work not only modeled for the then nascent field of creator studies how digital infrastructures

²¹⁷ Teresa, Senft. *Camgirls: Celebrity and Community in the Age of Social Networks*. Peter Lang, 2008.

²¹⁸ Taylor, T.L. *Watch Me Play: Twitch and the Rise of Game Live Streaming*. Princeton University Press, 2018.

shape online culture, but also validated that the performance of self as an fundamental aspect of social media content creator labor. For instance, although True Crime creators are not producing content directly about themselves, self-presentation is still integral to their labor, especially for those who choose to appear on screen for a duration in their videos. For John and Rachel, the centrality of their selfhood to their content production likely supplements their feelings of Ressentiment which understand demonetization as a personal failing.

Brooke Erin Duffy's *(Not) Getting Paid to Do What You Love: Gender, Social Media, and Aspirational Work* (2017) exemplifies creator studies' current emphasis the entrepreneurial nature of social media labor. While Senft focuses on identifying the labor practices belonging to a particular community of online creators, Duffy characterizes social media labor more broadly as shaped by "aspirational labor" and "the prospect of a career where work and leisure coexist."²¹⁹ Duffy argues that creator labor is defined by this futurity, such that production practices are oriented around mostly uncompensated, independent work that promises the possibility rather than the assurance of returns. Drawing on insights from more than fifty ethnographic interviews with young women laboring in creative industries on blogging sites and social media platforms like Instagram, she notes the contradictions between *authenticity vs. self-promotion*, *creativity vs. commerce* and *hobby vs. professional status* that define social media labor. Like Senft's analysis of the reflexivity of self-presentation for the camgirl, the tensions Duffy identifies highlights the importance of self-expression in social media economies. Her emphasis on aspirational labor, however, demonstrates how the incentive of future reward transforms selfhood into a "set of highly individualized, value generating productive

²¹⁹ Duffy, Brooke. *(Not) Getting Paid to do What You Love: Gender, Social Media, and Aspirational Work*. Yale University Press, 2017. pp. 4.

activities.”²²⁰ Later in the chapter, I evoke John Caldwell’s concept of specwork, related to Duffy’s definition of aspirational labor, to describe YouTube monetization as both uncompensated and necessarily precarious labor in its inability to predictably secure profits for creators.

Adjacent to the field of creator studies is a body of scholarship that examines less visible forms of platform labor. While the onscreen “work of play,” as Taylor refers to it in her research on Twitch, is often regarded as the primary form of social media labor, Sarah Roberts sheds light on the hidden workers that support content moderation algorithms.²²¹ In her book *Behind the Screen: Content Moderation in the Shadows of Social Media* (2019), Roberts conducts interviews with commercial content moderators to outline the exploitative dynamics of relatively new global labor formation attempting to manage the massive amounts of user-generated content online. She demonstrates that this labor takes on a variety of configurations despite having a set of common practices, including repetitive, low-wage task completion and familiarity with documents of platform governance and knowledge of relevant local laws. For example, she distinguishes between those employed as contract workers for major Silicon Valley platform operators and those employed by content moderation firms who outsource their labor to the Global South, often to former U.S. colonies in a continuation of colonial practices of cultural and economic domination. The industry of commercial content moderation, Roberts argues, has been intentionally obscured by technology corporations to shield themselves from public scrutiny and accountability. She warns that keeping this labor hidden entails substantial costs, such as creating an entire class of “damaged workers and an even more frightening social media landscape.”²²² I

²²⁰ Duffy 7.

²²¹ Taylor 74.

²²² Roberts, Sarah. *Behind the Screen: Content Moderation in the Shadows of Social Media*. Yale University Press, 2019, pp. 18.

turn to Roberts' work not only to acknowledge the human labor that supports the monetization algorithms that I discuss later in this chapter, but also to share in her efforts to call attention to the exploitative dimensions of platform labor that media technology corporations obfuscate to protect their authority and their profits.

In what follows, I present two True Crime content creators' encounters with Self-Certification to trace how feelings of Ressentiment which arise from demonetization lead creators to interpret the profitability of their content as a moral judgement. Although John Lordan and Rachel Shannon experience demonetization differently and at different stages in their YouTube careers, together their accounts demonstrate how the platform uses a combination of intentional vagueness and neoliberal democratic rhetoric in their monetization guidelines to shift the responsibility of revenue loss onto creators. This emphasis on individual responsibility both drives creators' negative feelings inward to serve as a motivator for their continued labor and allows YouTube to justify their prioritization of advertiser trust over creator trust in the platform.

Unfulfilled Promises and Uncompensated Labor: An Ethnography of Self-Certification

When I interviewed John Lordan for the first time in 2021, YouTube had fully rolled out Self-Certification across the platform and True Crime content creators were already experiencing what he described as “a ripple through [the] whole community.”²²³ He expressed frustration with the fact that while YouTube did provide categories or, in his words, “buckets” for creators to select to identify the presence of violence-related content in their videos, these categories did not reflect the manner in which True Crime content engages with the topic, thus resulting in the demonetization of his videos regardless of which selection he made.

John Lordan (JL): So, they have several different overall buckets, there's seven of them if I remember [...] But the categories that concern us the most—they've got one related to violence (and the original language in it

²²³ Lordan, John. Interview. Conducted by Anna Parkhurst, 15 Feb. 2021.

was really about pranks) in video games, things of that nature, and it was always—especially in my type of content—*yeah we’re discussing violence, but we don’t really go too far in terms of showing graphic imagery or anything like that*, so it really wasn’t that big of a hurdle. They’ve since been changing the language, kind of massaging things. It’s got kind of this new section now. It’s right at the bottom. There’s one about tragedy, which before was lumped in with things that might be socially sensitive, like domestic violence or suicide. But they’ve kind of broken those out now, and in the tragedies section it’s split between—into really kind of strange phrasing for me—but like historical events or terrorism that happened pre-9/11, and then everything else kind of after that, and what I’m thinking is, what they’re saying is, historical stuff if it’s pre 9/11, they’re really not worried about it and they think that it will monetize fine, but if you’re going at any point after that, it’s a different game.

The big thing for us is that last one about the sensitive topics and events and it’s still one of those areas that’s kind of slip shot-y because I might look at it and say, like especially the wording, they’ll say: “fleeting mentions.” Like if you have fleeting mentions of domestic violence or suicide that should monetize, but what is a fleeting mention? You know, it’s still kind of nebulous based on your perspective thing.

As John notes, YouTube has continued to “massage” and modify these categories associated with the Advertiser-Friendly Content Guidelines since 2021, in theory responding to experiences like his in which the platform’s monetization algorithms repeatedly rejected his efforts to accurately label his videos. The inclusion of certain buckets not only designates which types of content are legible to YouTube’s monetization infrastructure at a technical level but also indicates at an industrial level what kind of production labor is worth compensating through revenue sharing. According to John, in 2021 YouTube recognized creator labor that produced videos containing simulated violence related to pranks and video games, discussions of tragedy, discussions of historical violence or terrorism pre-9/11, and discussions of sensitive topics and events with “fleeting mentions” of domestic violence or suicide as monetizable, but not sustained discussions of contemporary violence that characterize True Crime content. The vagueness of language like “fleeting mentions” poses an additional challenge for True Crime content creators who already

do not identify their production labor with any of the designated categories by sustaining a gap between a creator's understanding of their content and the platform's. "But" as John rightfully asks, "what is a fleeting mention?" Part of YouTube's tiered-governance management strategy, the design of ambiguous Advertiser-Friendly Content categories allows the platform to simultaneously validate the production of True Crime content while also reserving final judgement as to whether they feel the labor in question is worthy of compensation. YouTube uses vagueness to denote the possibility of profit for creators, without having to follow through on the promise. In other words, *keep laboring and maybe someday we'll consider your video to contain only a "fleeting mention."*

On the day of our 2021 interview, John had received a demonetization notice earlier that morning which alerted him to the inclusion of a new Self-Certification category relevant to True Crime content creators. Although the addition of this category showed promise that YouTube might be making strides to financially recognize True Crime content production labor, notifying creators of the change through demonetization defeated any confidence the platform may have garnered from John. As John walks me through his thought process for monetizing this video, I gain insight into how insufficient categories force creators to risk misidentifying their content, and thus risk lowering their Self-Certification accuracy rating, to secure the possibility of gaining revenue.

JL: On today's video, for example, so I did flag it for violence, and I picked the selection—thankfully I actually have a place where I can read to you like it says specifically—my selection was "violence that occurs as part of unedited video gameplay" (which isn't even true), "mild violence with minimal blood," which that's kind of why I flagged that. You know the case I'm covering today was a Jane Doe case. She was killed by someone, and her body was left somewhere, and I kind of knew that's certainly mild violence. I don't go into graphic details about the injuries, but there's some of that. You know she was shot several times, but their language continues "...dead bodies that are fully censored, blurred, prepared for burial, or

shown in historical events like wars that's an educational video." So that's the stuff they're actually willing to let through in the violence category.

What they came back and said is, *you should have actually picked this other one*. And I'm pretty sure this language has been added recently. I don't remember this being in this category before: "Graphic law enforcement in educational context." So, I literally think this is the first time I've seen it and if this is true, I'm pretty sure that from here on forward it's going to be very hard to monetized [...] What they said is: "Graphic law enforcement in educational contexts; showing dead bodies with obvious injury and/or mutilation in educational or documentary," and they put an example of the History/Learning channel, which that certainly doesn't fit into what I put out. Or "Display of non-gruesome dead bodies without educational intent." That certainly doesn't fit. "Edited video gameplay that"—once again some clips that focus on graphic violence—"that shows blood as part of noneducational video; Raw footage of armed conflict without educational intent." So, everything else in that selection, no fit at all, but I think they've just added that first sentence.

John's assessment that the new category "Graphic law enforcement in an educational context" (a version of which still exists in YouTube's Advertiser-Friendly Content Guidelines at the time of writing) does not align with the content of his videos, speaks to the fact that YouTube remains unwilling to consistently compensate the labor of True Crime content creators, despite how potentially profitable their content may be for the platform. Making do with the insufficient categories, John pre-flags his jane doe video for containing, "Violence that occurs as part of unedited video gameplay" and "Mild violence with minimal blood." Although he does not produce video game content, John selects a video game-related category because he thinks it best characterizes the representational relationship to violence he creates in his video: *the discussion of details pertaining to an unidentified woman's murder certainly constitutes "mild violence,"* he thinks. YouTube's algorithmic check on John's selection, however, replies that he should have selected one of the new categories he describes listed below:

- **Graphic law enforcement in educational contexts**
- Showing dead bodies with obvious injury and/or mutilation in educational or documentary

- Example of History/Learning channel
- Display of non-gruesome dead bodies without educational intent
- Edited video gameplay that shows blood as part of noneducational video
- Raw footage of armed conflict without educational intent²²⁴

John interprets the addition of the first description as an outlier in the associated list of categories which YouTube states he should have selected. In grouping the categories together in their feedback, the platform equates True Crime content like John's that discusses "Graphic law enforcement in educational contexts," to showing dead bodies on screen regardless of intent. He feels dissatisfied with YouTube's justification of their categorization through the example of a video uploaded by "the History/Learning channel," which he reflects "certainly doesn't fit into what I put out." Although he does not provide elaboration for his reasoning, John likely does not associate his production labor with that of the History/Learning channel primarily because he does not consider his labor to be associated with documentary practices which emphasize the creative narration of factual information, but also because his "filmed research method" does not show graphic images of dead, injured or mutilated bodies. His videos do not need an exception for why representing graphic imagery is monetizable when the majority of his visual content constitutes clicking through news articles, publicly available reports, non-gruesome crime scene photos and maps. Despite the mismatch, YouTube notifies John that he must identify his content as belonging to this category of potentially monetizable content if he wants his labor to be compensated with a share in advertiser revenue. By the time I spoke to John again in 2025, he reported that he no longer encounters difficulty monetizing his content:

JL: It's better now. Now, there are two indicators that I have to turn on regularly if it's for an unsolved murder case. One of them says something to the effect of, "law enforcement in regular action or operation" and the other is "discussing the loss of life but doing so respectfully. Fully blurred

²²⁴ YouTube Help. "Advertiser-friendly content guidelines." *Google*, https://support.google.com/youtube/answer/6162278?sjid=6154300091774514870-NC&visit_id=639098927545424307-162695806&rd=1#Violence&zippy=%2Cpolicy-detail. Accessed 8 June 2026.

images. Fully censored images.” So, as long as I tick those both on, I’m really not having any pushback with monetization.²²⁵

According to the version of the Advertiser-Friendly Content Guidelines at the time of writing, the first selection John refers to is a reworking of the original subset of the Violence category “Graphic law enforcement in educational contexts” that YouTube had pointed him towards back in 2021. The current wording defines monetizable violence related to law enforcement as that which “includ[es] regular duty in action (such as forcible arrest, crowd control, dispute with officer, forcible entry).” His second selection belongs to the Sensitive Events category, which states that, “Discussions involving the loss of life or tragedy that are not exploitative or dismissive” are eligible for earning ad revenue.²²⁶ Over years of trial and error on the part of John’s selections and YouTube’s rewording of the guidelines, John has finally found a selection of flags that allow his content to receive consistent monetization and, therefore, experiences relative stability in his platform earnings .

Although updates to the descriptions of the violent content and sensitive content categories have mitigated risks for John, the effects of these changes are not distributed evenly amongst creators. One of Rachel’s most egregious instances of demonetization highlights the fact that changes to the language of Advertiser-friendly content guidelines does not translate to more consistent alignment between creator selections and platform selections.

Rachel Shannon (RS): For example, the video I just posted today was a woman who hit someone with her car, and she drove her car through a playground. No one was actually killed, and no one was seriously injured. It was just one of those cases where she acted out and I bleeped out the word “bitch.” That was the only swear word that I caught myself saying because the reason she did it was someone called her a “bitch” and a “fat bitch.” So, I bleeped out the word “bitch,” and it was bleeped out in any police cam footage I showed. Unless...the only thing I could think of was if someone said, “she didn’t kill anyone,” or “she didn’t hurt anyone.” Me saying that

²²⁵ Lordan, John. Interview. Conducted by Anna Parkhurst, 4 Nov. 2025.

²²⁶ YouTube Help “Advertiser-Friendly Content Guidelines.”

even, it still got demonetized. And I was like, *this is one of the most tame videos I've ever posted*, and it still got demonetized and it wasn't even about someone getting seriously injured.²²⁷

Rachel's discussion of a woman who hit someone with her car resulting in no serious injury fits within what YouTube describes as monetizable content. Her video can be categorized as "Depiction of non-graphic injury," where "'Non-graphic violence' refers to portrayals of aggressive physical behavior towards another person, like finger pointing while yelling or isolated acts of violence."²²⁸ Rachel expresses justified confusion over the demonetization of "one of the most tame videos [she's] ever posted" because YouTube's decision does not align with the current language of the Guidelines. Furthermore, her removal of language that could possibly be considered inappropriate according to the Guidelines suggests that Rachel actively applies her knowledge of what constitutes Advertiser-friendly content in her video production labor. Not only does YouTube get it wrong in their assessment of her video's contents, resulting in revenue loss, but they discredit Rachel's labor by lowering her Self-Certification accuracy rating. By lowering her accuracy rating, YouTube effectively tells Rachel that she is responsible for the interpretative misalignment, such that she is the one who needs to improve both her knowledge of the Guidelines and her understanding of her own content.

Reflecting on past anxieties, John describes the threat of being assigned an accuracy rating as, "nerve-wracking, and thankfully, this seems to be gone now. It was nerve-wracking because [...] if you rated [your video] incorrectly, according to what they would have rated it, then they weren't going to trust your ratings."²²⁹ Although the written guidelines do not use the word "trust" to describe the role of the accuracy rating, in a video uploaded by the YouTube

²²⁷ Shannon, Rachel. Interview. Conducted by Anna Parkhurst, 17 Dec. 2025.

²²⁸ YouTube Help "Advertiser-friendly Content Guidelines."

²²⁹ Lordan Interview 2025.

Creator channel—YouTube’s “official channel for Creators” that offers news of official platform updates and tips and best practices—linked at the top of the *YouTube Help* “Self-Certification Overview” page, a platform spokesperson states, “when you’re able to rate your content accurately, it lets us know that we can start to trust your ratings for future uploads and not have to rely on our automated systems.”²³⁰ On the other hand, the written guidelines on the page states that “If your accuracy is high: That means we’ll use your input to help decide which ads can run on your videos.”²³¹ Both official statements frame the role of the accuracy rating differently. While the written guidelines describe the accuracy rating more vaguely as a form of creator “input” to platform monetization decision-making, the video uploaded by YouTube’s Creator channel implies that an accuracy rating’s magnitude determines whether or not the platform will use “automated systems” (algorithms) to make monetization decisions. The explanatory gap between these two official statements supports YouTube’s practice of tiered-governance identified by Caplan and Gillespie, which allows the platform to make flexible platform governance decisions to benefits its needs on an on-demand basis. Self-Certification is a process entirely built on strategic ambiguity, both in the descriptions of the Advertiser-friendly Content categories which may not map smoothly on to certain types of video content, and in the calculation and function of the accuracy rating. Nowhere does YouTube provide information on exactly how a creator’s accuracy rating is calculated. There is no such guideline or officially uploaded video that details how many percentage points are deducted from a creator’s accuracy score per demonetized video, if deductions are compounded by the rate and frequency of

²³⁰ “YouTube Self-Certification Program for Monetizing Creators.” *YouTube*, uploaded by YouTube Creators, 23 April 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bK2xupRNgaU&t=1s>. Accessed 8 June 2026.

²³¹ YouTube Help. “YouTube Self-Certification overview.” *Google*, <https://support.google.com/youtube/answer/7687980?hl=en#zippy=%2Chow-your-rating-impacts-your-channel%2Chow-to-read-your-accuracy-rating>. Accessed 8 June 2026.

demonetization and, of most concern to creators, what percentage accuracy rating determines an official designation of trustworthiness. Despite the lack of clarity surrounding the accuracy rating's calculation, John interprets his channel's decline in issues with monetization as an indication that "I have passed the bar enough that it's not affecting me anymore." With the ability to rely on the fact that YouTube will recognize his selections from the updated categories as successful Self-Certification choices, John's anxieties over monetization and his subsequent accuracy rating are largely thing of the past, leading him to report that, in contrast to our 2021 conversation, "I really don't think about it that much anymore. I just post the video."

While John's experience indicates that YouTube may follow through on their promise to trust creators by reducing or eliminating monetization disputes, Rachel's experience counters the reliability of this promise. Although John has been uploading and monetizing True Crime content on his channel for approximately four years longer than Rachel, the two have both been performing Self-Certification on this type of video content for roughly the same amount of time. In theory, they have had nearly the same chance to demonstrate that they can be trusted to pre-flag their content correctly, but the two experience different treatment in terms of how consistently the platform approves their content for monetization. John was already a well-established creator in the True Crime content community by the time Rachel "hit a stride on making True Crime content and [...] was like, *this is what I'm going to do*" sometime around 2019-2020 when Self-Certification first went into effect. She recounts that when she first started performing Self-Certification for True Crime content, almost all of her videos were being demonetized, with some receiving partial monetization (suitable for some advertisers). Amidst her frustration, Rachel turned to "specwork" strategies to circumvent potential revenue loss, what Caldwell describes as anticipatory, uncompensated labor that media workers perform with the

speculation that this labor might secure them stable employment in the future.²³² She tells me learned from another YouTube creator that, “if you just upload a couple copies of the same [video], then they will approve one of them. I don’t know if I’m supposed to tell people about that, but that’s sort of the trick that I use now.”²³³ By uploading and pre-flagging several copies of the same video with “little changes” to each one, Rachel performs an excess of free labor with the speculative aspiration that at a later point she will be compensated through the approval of one of these videos for monetization. Although there is no guarantee that her work “on spec” will result in future payment, Rachel views this additional labor as necessary. She admits that even though she initially started this practice to help get her off the ground at the beginning of her YouTube True Crime career, it is still “the only thing that can get [my videos] monetized.”

To a certain extent, all Self-Certification labor can be understood as a form of specwork. There is no certainty that a video will be monetized, even if the creator selects the categories of advertiser-friendly content that best align with the video’s content. Creator revenue is always precarious even when platforms outline a relatively legible process for monetization because the allocation of revenue relies on systems of interpretation which translate strategically vague guidelines into concrete decisions. Although platforms love to refer to their use of algorithms and “automated systems” to support claims about the efficacy and efficiency of their management strategies, these tools cannot be divorced from the human labor that supports them. As scholars like Safiya Noble, Ruha Benjamin and Cathy O’Neil argue, governments and corporations alike use algorithmic technologies and subsequent claims that mathematics can be used to model fair and consistent decision-making to shield themselves from criticism.²³⁴ YouTube, however, is not

²³² Caldwell 58.

²³³ Shannon Interview.

²³⁴ For more, see Benjamin, Ruha. *Race After Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code*. Polity Press, 2019. Noble, Safiya. *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism*. NYU Press, 2018. O’Neil,

so naïve as to suggest that their moderation decisions are best when fully automated and, instead, positions human input as central to platform governance practices. On the *YouTube Help* page entitled “How YouTube Reviews Content,” the relationship between algorithmic checks and human reviews is framed as collaborative:

Most of our systems are continuously supplied with millions of data points from human reviews. This means our automated systems can offer a high level of accuracy in detecting violations. Automated systems also provide efficient response times to our users for the high volume of content that YouTube receives.²³⁵

In this official statement, YouTube briefly summarizes processes of machine learning involved in the training of their content moderation algorithms. From a technical standpoint, the platform’s automated systems of moderation necessarily rely on human reviews to model what accurate governance decisions look like. Due to the sheer volume of content uploaded to the platform, YouTube frames the use of algorithms as a kind of necessary evil to ensure efficient decision-making for creators who, for instance, may want monetization decisions to be made close to the time of upload to ensure they receive the most amount of revenue possible. In contrast, YouTube positions human review as preferred in cases of uncertainty:

Keep in mind that automation is only used in cases where our systems have a high degree of confidence that content is violative. Otherwise, potentially violative content gets flagged for one of our trained human reviewers to evaluate.²³⁶

According to the statement above that responds to the subheading “Why does YouTube use automated systems to review content?” moderation actions like demonetization, removal, or age-restriction are only made by algorithms alone when there is a “high degree of confidence” that its

Cathy. *Weapons of Math Destruction: How Big Data Increases Inequality and Threatens Democracy*. Crown Books, 2016.

²³⁵ YouTube Help. “How YouTube Reviews Content.” *Google*, <https://support.google.com/youtube/answer/13304829?hl=en>. Accessed 8 June 2026.

²³⁶ *Ibid.*

decision to do so will be correct. In other words, only moderation decisions that can be made with near certainty can be automated for efficiency. The positioning of algorithmic forms of decision-making as not only contingent upon but subservient to human decision-making bolsters the platform's appearance of trustworthiness in two ways. On the one hand, it acknowledges the technical fact that algorithms can make wrong or unjust decisions because it is difficult to program the perception of nuance. On the other, it serves as a rhetorical of sleight of hand whereby YouTube affirms its commitment to treating creators fairly by suggesting that human interpretation can more reliably make moderation decisions in cases where context is essential to the judgement.

For Self-Certification, this means that YouTube will only demonetize a creator's video without input from a human reviewer if he or she has clearly pre-flagged its content incorrectly. As Rachel's and John's experiences evidence, however, what constitutes correct and incorrect selections is constantly shifting, and even selections that appear accurate to the creator may not be treated as such. This raises questions over the validity of Self-Certification accuracy ratings in addition to existing questions about its calculation and function. Rachel feels exasperated with the lack of alignment between her selections and the selections determined by YouTube, leading her to believe that there is a fundamental problem in the design of the platform's monetization algorithm:

RS: I get feedback from YouTube in my email all the time that are like, *you're rating accuracy is low*. And I'm like, *well, it's because your algorithm is not accurate*. Especially with the video I posted today, the only one I clicked was, "this depicts a violent situation." Everything else, it did not apply. I was like, *it is a violent situation, but nothing's graphic about it*. *This is not a crazy situation*, really, compared to what I talk about normally. And so, the fact that it was still like, *this is not accurate*, I was like, *that's not me doing that*. That was accurate. And I read the captions on what the Self-Certification says and I am specific.

Rachel interprets her consistently low accuracy rating as akin to being set up to fail. How can a creator possibly Self-Certify accurately when the algorithms mediating the review process have been programmed with a different understanding of what accuracy means? If, as YouTube states, its automated systems have been trained on actual human moderation decisions on the platform, then what notion of accuracy is operative for human reviewers? Put another way, if creators like Rachel note that its monetization algorithms frequently make mistakes when determining the accuracy of Self-Certification selections, this indicates that the determinations of accuracy made by human reviewers are potentially based on an interpretation of the Advertiser-friendly Content Guidelines that does not align with creators' understanding of the guidelines, or that interpretations of the guidelines are inconsistent between and within human reviewers.

Humans are fallible. Interpretation is not a completely objective practice, even when agreed upon protocol is used to structure the interpretation of the Advertiser-friendly Content Guidelines by individual human reviewers or automated systems into monetization decisions. Automated systems and the humans who design them and whose decision-making trains their interpretative processes are inherently flawed. Although YouTube can design for consistency, it cannot with certainty ensure it. Both John and Rachel note the fact that human moderators have different understandings of what constitutes a violation of the guidelines. Rachel directly acknowledges that inconsistent monetization decisions are a matter of “subjective opinion on if [the video] seems appropriate” for advertising which can depend on several factors, including a reviewer's degree of experience and how closely he or she watches the video.

RS: Every time it gets human reviewed and denied, I'm like, *that person probably is being pretty strict*. And then when it gets approved, I'm like, *this person is maybe a little bit more lenient or is under the impression that True Crime is not super explicit*.

In our 2021 interview, John took this a step further by speculating that “waves” of demonetization may have been tied to the repeated judgements of the same human reviewer:

JL: There’s almost these waves that you can kind of go through, where it seems like everything’s being demonetized. Like, literally, there were times where I felt like my videos are going to the same person. They just want this turned off, and they just keep demonetizing it. And then all of a sudden, a week or two later, everything will go through fine. It’s really, really hard to understand.²³⁷

Although there is no concrete evidence to support John’s claims that his videos were being sent to the same moderator for review during this period, both he and Rachel accept the fact that between inaccurate algorithmic decisions and the subjectivity of human review, content monetization on YouTube is unpredictable, aspirational “specwork” at best.

Understanding the inconsistencies of monetization, however, does little to abate the emotional consequences of framing creators as personally responsible for incorrect judgements. Assigning Self-Certification accuracy ratings configures creators as solely responsible for monetization outcomes, as opposed to a complex of creator, algorithmic and platform moderator choices. Creators, algorithms, and human reviewers all engage in the interpretation of YouTube’s Advertiser-friendly Content Guidelines to inform monetization decisions, yet creators are the only ones whose interpretations are scored, therefore falsely positioning them as the singularly subjective actor in an objective system. Rachel’s insistence of “*that’s not me doing that*” when she received the demonetization notice for her video of the non-graphic violent road incident rejects the narrative of “Creator Responsibility” YouTube sets forth in its monetization guidelines, which state “the earnings of all YouTube creators are negatively impacted when

²³⁷ Lordan Interview 2021.

advertisers lose trust.”²³⁸ In other words, creators are responsible for managing advertiser trust through their content production and monetization labor, not the YouTube platform or its corporate owner and operator Google/Alphabet. In an irony not lost on creators, YouTube’s concept of responsibility centers advertiser trust in profitable content over creator trust in the platform’s ability to compensate and manage their labor fairly. Self-Certification then flips the onus of earning the trust of the platform onto creators, billed back to them as a system that will “ultimately help you earn more revenue.”²³⁹

The language that YouTube uses to explain Self-Certification relies on democratic rhetoric that echoes the democratic platitude of *freedom with responsibility*. Creators have the freedom to earn revenue on the content they create so long as they assume responsibility for the labor of pre-flagging their videos and the consequences of the monetization decisions made by the platform. Accuracy ratings, therefore, serve as YouTube’s metric of creator responsibility, whereby a high accuracy rating indicates that a creator can be trusted to have the freedom to earn revenue, and a low accuracy rating suggests that they cannot. Through its monetization infrastructure and through Self-Certification specifically, YouTube positions revenue as a kind of democratic freedom that must be earned through an individual’s “good behavior,” or what the state-platform analogy discussed in Chapter 2 recasts as civic responsibility. Creators must behave as good, responsible citizen-users of the YouTube state-platform in order to deserve compensation for their labor. The functional equivalence between revenue and good, responsible behavior reveals the neoliberal logics which underpin the platform’s economy and systems of governance. In YouTube’s economy, being a good creator means creating speech that predictably

²³⁸ YouTube Help. “YouTube channel monetization policies.” Google, <https://support.google.com/youtube/answer/1311392?hl=en#zippy=%2Cfollow-the-youtube-community-guidelines%2Cfollow-our-program-policies%2Ccreator-responsibility>. Accessed 8 June 2026.

²³⁹ “YouTube Self-Certification Program for Monetizing Creators.”

falls into categories of Advertiser-friendly content which is consistently legible to the platform's moderators. Consider, on the other hand, that the monetization guidelines do not frame good, responsible creator behavior as including actions such as speaking out against the unjust withholding of wages or collective organizing for policy changes that offer creators more financial stability. Instead, winning the trust of advertisers, and therefore the platform, constitutes good, responsible creator behavior.

The association between individual responsibility and creator wages lies at the heart of the negative emotions my interlocutors report in relation to their monetization labor. By which conflating moral and economic value through Self-Certification (most visible through its accuracy rating), YouTube's economy creates the conditions for what Scheler describes as the "value delusions" of Ressentiment. The affect of Ressentiment recasts the revenue loss of demonetization as a personal, moral judgement of a creator's character. Even though my interlocutors express frustration with the platform in instances of demonetization, a large portion of this negative feeling is self-directed. Both John and Rachel recount their negative monetization experiences with emotional narratives that position themselves as having earned or fear of earning punishment. John first described these negative feelings back in 2021 as a challenge to his decision to continuing monetizing his content on YouTube, explaining that "there's an emotional impact that you also go through in this process. It's kind of like being slapped on the wrist by your boss for something and being told, *bad, you're doing bad.*"²⁴⁰ John's interpretation of demonization as a moral judgement of "bad" is directly tied to the attribution of his accuracy rating:

JL: Basically, what they're claiming—and I want you to actually think about this, about how this would work—their claim is that if you score yourself accurately their going rely less on their AI, that there's some kind

²⁴⁰ Lordan Interview 2021.

of slider that's going to say, "Oh, John's a good guy. We haven't had trouble with his previous videos. Don't run the AI against it." But how do they know when it goes off then? How do they know when its incorrect or one that they have to review? There is no situation that you ever get to where the AI isn't running on it, because when its demonetized it happens automatically officially and then you have to request a human review. So, it's kind of a false promise I'm pretty sure.

His skepticism that accuracy ratings determine whether or not the platform will algorithmically review a creator's content and monetization selections raises an important question about the distribution of YouTube's "trust" once it is earned. If the stated purpose of Self-Certification is to "ultimately help you earn more revenue"²⁴¹ by giving them a mechanism through which they can assess the monetizability of their content," how do creators know when exactly the platform has decided to "trust your ratings for future uploads?"²⁴² The ambiguity of how trust is both earned and distributed is part of what Caplan and Gillespie describe as YouTube's tiered governance approach, where the platform offers "different users different sets of rules, different material resources and opportunities, and different procedural protections when content is demonetized" despite statements in guidelines that give creators the impression that policies are enforced equally.²⁴³ By engaging tiered governance as a practice rather than as a stated form of policy, YouTube makes its unequal, uneven treatment of creators difficult to challenge. Furthermore, framing platform trust as a creator's individual responsibility justifies the uneven effects of this governance model, such that YouTube can readily point to even seemingly unjust instances of demonetization as a creator's personal failure to perform their monetization labor correctly.

Although John rarely encounters issues with monetization today, he never received any form of communication from YouTube that indicated he had earned enough trust to forego the

²⁴¹ "YouTube Self-Certification Program for Monetizing Creators."

²⁴² Ibid.

²⁴³ Caplan and Gillespie 2.

algorithmic moderation of his content. His background in information technologies for other large media companies likely informs John's suspicions that it would not be in YouTube's best interest to stop algorithmically reviewing a creator's content, regardless as to whether they have demonstrated the ability to Self-Certify correctly in the past. If they weren't running some sort of algorithmic review on your content, how would YouTube know that you had selected the wrong category in spite of your supposed trustworthiness? What if, despite your trustworthiness, you deemed a video that fully depicted a deceased individual who lost their life in a violent manner—something that unequivocally violates the guidelines—eligible for full monetization?²⁴⁴ The absolutely nonsensical notion of earning enough trust to mitigate a platform's use of algorithmic moderation infrastructures lends a defeated tone to John's hypothetical scenario in which YouTube decides, "Oh, John's a good guy. We haven't had trouble with his previous videos. Don't run the AI against it." The outrage he expresses towards YouTube for thinking they can easily commit creators to do more labor with the distraction of an impossible promise turns into the crushing weight of a moral judgement that he has little control over. YouTube will only stop monitoring John's labor if he demonstrates that he's "a good guy." Self-Certification's claim to provide a pathway to platform "trust" flattens the value of creators into a measure of their profitability.

By institutionalizing practices of creator self-regulation and paired with a rating of trustworthiness, YouTube Self-Certification creates a moral economy in which "good creators" are the ones who, by consistently identifying the profitability of their speech, earn compensation

²⁴⁴ An event like this did, in fact, occur in 2017 when popular YouTube creator Jake Paul, known for his shocking comedy and prank content, uploaded a video that depicted a person who had taken their own life in the Aokigahara Forest in Japan. Although the video was not monetized, it remained #1 on the platform's trending page until it was taken down by Paul himself after facing significant backlash from users and creators for overtly violating YouTube's community guidelines. The incident is widely regarded as one of the platform's biggest public missteps in content moderation.

for their labor and “bad creators” are the ones who get demonetized. The stated benefits of Self-Certification allow YouTube to frame creators as in control of their identity as a “good” or “bad” creator, despite the factual reality that monetization decisions are an amalgamation of creator, algorithmic and platform moderator decisions. Creator freedom and responsibility for monetization does enhance creator wellbeing, to the same effect that freedom of speech is not the only indicator of the democratic wellbeing of the state.

Despite YouTube’s claims that Self-Certification enhances creator wellbeing, both John and Rachel report feeling infantilized. When describing her strategy of uploading several copies of the same video to circumvent unjust demonetization decisions, Rachel qualified her statements with hesitant phrases like, “I don’t know if I’m supposed to tell people about that” and, “I just don’t want them [YouTube] to get mad at me about it.”²⁴⁵ The feelings of frustration towards the platform turn inward. Like Ressentiment’s emotional pattern which internalizes value conflation, Rachel associates the demonetization of her videos with a sense of personal punishment. Rachel’s concern about YouTube getting “mad” at her for trying to work around the platform’s flawed systems speaks to the affective control feelings of Ressentiment exert over creators. Despite the fact that YouTube content creation operates only upon a creator’s agreement to the Terms of Service and not a formal contract which outlines wages and expected parameters of labor, she personifies the platform like a boss who may storm into the office at any moment and chastise her. In contrast, YouTube’s regulatory documents go to great lengths to position the platform as a “service” as opposed to an employer, even being subservient to its users by providing technical affordances for connection and communication. A service cannot “get mad”

²⁴⁵ Shannon Interview.

at Rachel for anything, but, like John, her concerns about YouTube's opinion of her as a creator are tied to her accuracy rating:

RS: I was more so worried that if it said my rating was low it would somehow hurt my ability to get monetized or something, or that they would take away my monetization. They haven't yet, so I don't think it actually makes a difference especially because once a video is monetized, I delete the ones [the copies] that aren't.

With little clarity from YouTube's Guidelines about the concrete consequences of a low accuracy rating, she sought the counsel of her editor who works with several other creators on other platforms, because even though "I'm friends with a couple of other creators," she says with a laugh, "I just wouldn't want to slide into the DMs and be like, *hey, do you think that YouTube hates me?*" Unlike John who described monetization back in 2021 as a community "joke, or it's a thing that comes up. It's at the forefront of YouTubers talking to each other. We're on the phone, demonetization's going to come up at some point," Rachel feels trepidation confronting other True Crime content creators about the subject, as if she guards some degree of shame for the frequent emails she receives from YouTube notifying her of her low accuracy rating. The weight of these concerns become increasingly individualized as the number of creators in True Crime content community on the platform grows to the point of near oversaturation, lacking the kind of comradery that defined the space when John first joined in 2015. Reflecting on his ten years in the community, John described the lack of familiarity between creators today:

JL: when I got started, I could go and find everyone that was related to true crime. We all knew each other. It was a very small pool, and we found each other fairly quickly. At this point, it's so vast that if you're a new person getting into it, you don't even know who John Lordan is, or you don't know who Danelle Hallan is. You just don't because there's all this stuff. You might get a sense of, *oh I think I saw their face at one point*, but it's not like it used to be.²⁴⁶

²⁴⁶ Lordan Interview 2025.

Perhaps Rachel does not feel comfortable admitting intense feelings of inadequacy to her fellow creators because by the time she entered the community in 2019-2020, the intimacy that John remembers no longer exists. Even though she diminishes her concerns earlier in our conversation, stating, “at first, I was frustrated. What am I supposed to do about it? And then I was trying to be more accurate. And now [...] I just kind of roll my eyes and go, *whatever*, because I don’t really care anymore,” Rachel’s tongue-and-cheek hypothetical of “*hey, do you think YouTube hates me*” voices the same anxiety present in her fears about YouTube being “mad” at her. The fact Rachel and John associate demonetization and low accuracy ratings with YouTube being mad at or hating creators or thinking that creators are bad indicates that the platform’s economy engenders negative affect. In other words, self-directed negative feelings are an essential facet of YouTube’s economy.

John expresses his feelings of infantilization even more explicitly than Rachel, which have escalated over the years from describing YouTube as his employer to likening them to his parents. In the most significant instance of what he referred to as “*I upset Mom and Dad. They smacked me*,” YouTube threatened a video John uploaded in 2016 debunking the “Pizzagate” conspiracy theory four years later with a “community strike” in 2020, warning that his channel would be shut down if he incurred two more infractions.²⁴⁷ Although John closely analyzed email evidence to demonstrate that there were no factual grounds to support the conspiracy theory, and even acknowledged that conspiracies like Pizzagate can be dangerous in their spread of misinformation and potential to incite violence, YouTube treated his discussion of the topic

²⁴⁷ Lordan Interview 2021.

“Pizzagate” was a conspiracy theory linked to the far-right conspiracy group Q-Anon that gained traction during the 2016 Presidential election which accused top members of the Democratic party of operating a child sex-trafficking ring out of a series of pizza restaurants in Washington D.C. Conspiracy theorists on Reddit and 4chan claimed to have decoded the leaked emails of John Podesta, then Hilary Clinton’s presidential campaign chair, by tying apparent references to pizza to the operation. For more, see Grant, Tracy. “Pizzagate.” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 9 April 2026, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Pizzagate/>. Accessed 8 June 2026.

as a violation of the Community Guidelines. In 2021, John said he felt that this decision reflected YouTube's stance that, regardless of intention or tone, "any topic about Pizzagate was incorrect. It didn't matter what side of it you were on. It didn't matter what perspective you were trying to push. It seems like they just went after the complete topic, and just wanted it removed from the platform."²⁴⁸

When we spoke again several years later, John was able to clarify for me that YouTube stated they removed the video on the grounds that it "violates our harassment, threats and cyberbullying policy" for its discussion of a man who had entered a pizza place with a gun demanding to see the basement (presumably to check for child sex-trafficking victims, according to the conspiracy).²⁴⁹ YouTube deemed that in discussing the incident, the video could have damaged the man's reputation, even though, as John pointed out, his name had already been made publicly available. John was evidently proud of the video he made, explaining that "I knew that it was a little bit of an outlier for the type of video that I'd usually create, but I was just really motivated because I was not seeing good analysis [...] I knew that I could spend the time, do the research."²⁵⁰ It seemed like an ideal fit for his filmed-research method. Despite making a thorough and thoughtful video that definitively debunked the conspiracy theory for curious users, YouTube retroactively decided—when "No one was even talking about Pizza-gate at that point!"—that John's video was violative beyond demonetization to the point of deletion. John's feelings of infantilization follow Ressentiment's emotional trajectory from outward injury to a sense of personal defeat. The emotional logic of his interpretation that he "upset mom and dad" by making a video about a topic YouTube no longer approved of frames himself as personally

²⁴⁸ Lordan Interview 2021.

²⁴⁹ Lordan Interview 2025.

²⁵⁰ Ibid.

responsible for the video's deletion, rather than the platform. By placing himself at the center of the negative feelings tied to revenue loss, John performs Ressentiment's conflation of moral and economic value. Ultimately, John "upset mom and dad" by making a video that YouTube deemed unprofitable for the platform, leading him to consider that he did something wrong, rather than something unprofitable.

Although John's Pizzagate video involves platform moderation systems beyond Self-Certification, his experience and reflections on the incident epitomize YouTube's strategy of tiered governance that shifts the responsibility of decisions that result in revenue loss onto creators. Through formalized mechanisms of self-regulation like Self-Certification and language in the Terms and Guidelines that draw upon its cultural imaginary as a space of democratic free expression, YouTube suggests to creators that platform actions that diminish their opportunities for earning revenue are the consequences of personal failures, where being and broadcasting yourself is not enough.

JL: It's the most challenging thing about it because [...] the original draw to YouTube, is that you get to do whatever you want, you get to be yourself, you get to show that to the world and then if the world likes you enough then YouTube starts sending you money. That's the basics of it. And while it might not be the reality of it when you learn, *okay, this part isn't necessarily true like that, that part isn't necessarily true like that*, there's still a core value of, *I'm just being me*. And this thing that I'm trying to serve in some way of, *I'm trying to bring you content that you're going to make money on and I'm going make money on*, and, for a content creator like me, *we're going to be helping other people in significant ways—don't you guys recognize? Like, give me a little room. Look what we're trying to do here and give me some room*.

That level of humanity is not there. I feel like I'd be screaming at the YouTube sign on the top of a building and expecting it to respond to me. It's madness in a way. But yeah, the most hurtful thing, like with the Pizzagate video, is just this, *I put a bunch of work into something, I put my heart into something and I stand behind it, and I feel like you [YouTube] should too if you really understood what it was doing and you didn't?* Moments like that become strangely personal in a business that is wildly disconnected because

you never talk to your boss, but all of a sudden, it's like, *I noticed you. Wrong. Slap on the wrist.* And that's a weird dynamic.²⁵¹

For John, making the Pizzagate video and his production labor more generally is a statement of “*I’m just being me.*” The labor of being a YouTube content creator is personal and therefore has an affective resonance at all registers. As scholars like Senft and Duffy have written of the emotional dimension of creator labor, the selfhood of the person making the media is just as if not more central an object of consumption than the digital object. In the context of the True Crime content community, this manifests as users returning to the same creator, often remaining faithful for years, whose storytelling and research styles they prefer, as opposed to combing through the platform’s suggested videos on a particular case of interest. Users continue to watch a particular creator for the idiosyncrasies of their labor, just as Rachel noted that she receives frequent praise from her audience for her precise interpretation of physical evidence she can provide by drawing on her background in pediatric medicine. The personal nature of YouTube content production makes the negative feelings experienced by John and Rachel particularly dangerous to the stability of their labor.

Conclusions: Ressentiment and the Utopian Imaginary

While the intense sense of personal responsibility creators feel towards their labor has ties to the factual realities of content production and building an audience, they also draw upon a utopian imagination that conceives of the YouTube as an ideal space for self-expression. John articulates YouTube’s sociotechnical imaginary as, “the original draw to YouTube” which “is that you get to do whatever you want, you get to be yourself, you get to show that to the world, and then if the world likes you enough, then YouTube starts sending you money.” A slight variation

²⁵¹ Lordan Interview 2025.

on the often-repeated cliché of the social media platform as the town square, John imagines YouTube as a space where ideally you are financially compensated for being yourself. Although he admits that overtime creators find that this process plays out differently in reality, he emphasizes that “there’s still a core value” on YouTube that revenue is distributed as a result of individual, personal worth. The “core” of this value is ultimately shared by the core of neoliberal ideology. Value on the platform and in the neoliberal state derives from individual self-regulation in order to maximize the flexibility and profitability of the market. The right to free speech—sometimes reformulated on YouTube as the right to “do whatever you want” and to “be yourself”—underpins the security of the market by providing an endless stream of potential commodities. In the neoliberal United States, the notion of free speech protects the profitability of small businesses who do not wish to bake wedding cakes for gay couples or corporate craft supply stores who do not want to provide their employees with medical coverage for contraceptives. On YouTube, the notion of free speech protects the profitability of the platform by encouraging creators to continue producing speech acts which can be sold to advertisers.

For the neoliberal state, free speech is directly embedded into its infrastructure through documents of governance that enforce its continued practice. Free speech on YouTube, however, resides squarely within its utopian imaginary, where the promise of its freedom is used to incentivize creator labor. The documents of governance of the platform are infinitely more flexible than the documents of governance of the neoliberal state, which can be reworded and reshaped around language that suggests that speech on YouTube is free without ever having to protect it. A process like Self-Certification, therefore, simultaneously upholds and weaponizes the rights of the individual creator as a “core value” of the platform.

Conclusions: Free Speech Beyond Ressentiment, Beyond YouTube

Evaluating YouTube content creator labor as a site where emotionally motivated value delusions interact with ideologies of free speech opens new avenues of inquiry into the relationship between social media platforms and democracy. As Wendy Brown discusses in the final chapter of *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism: The Rise of Anti-Democratic Politics in the West* (2019), the negative emotional patterns of Ressentiment that drive YouTube content creation are shared by members of the current alt-right upswing in U.S. politics.²⁵² While this by no means suggests that my interlocutors identify with this political position, or that YouTube content creators are more likely to share ultra-conservative, populist values promoted by the Trump administration, it does call attention to the widespread condition of emotions, politics and values in the United States. Negative emotions built on internalized feelings of inferiority broadly define our relationship to politics in the U.S., dismantling our trust in democratic institutions and leaving a vacuum of moral value to be filled by the aggressive value of capital. Media technology corporations like Google-Alphabet capitalize on this void by providing platforms like YouTube that claim to satisfy our techno-utopian nostalgia with a democratic space of free expression. In reality, they replicate another space of disappointment and distrust in governing authority, especially for creatives whose labor is essential to building the platform's culture and generating advertiser revenue. Corporate platforms, not just incompetent elected officials, are complicit in the degradation of democracy.

Future scholarship must attend to how social media platforms shape U.S. politics beyond the question of what content they host. While attention to the problems of disinformation and

²⁵² Brown, Wendy. *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism: The Rise of Anti-democratic Politics in the West*. Columbia University Press, 2019.

misinformation have been essential to unpacking the relationship between our contemporary media landscape and our ongoing political crisis, I advocate for taking a view that regards social media platforms as technologies that shape politics by modeling forms of governance. In the context of free speech, this means reorienting debates over what kinds of online speech is protected under the First Amendment towards a discussion of how platforms position their authority to manage and monetize user speech. The social media platform is *not* the town square, no matter how much its users imagine it to be, or how much corporate platform operators describe it as such. To actually protect the right to free speech, as so many on the far-right claim advocate for, then we must examine how democratic values exist in relation to other systems of value, namely systems of economic value. The monopoly-like dominance of the media technology corporations that own and operate the most popular platforms indicates that a relatively small number of voices have engineered how we think about democracy online. These corporate voices have aligned user free speech with advertiser investment, therefore uplifting platform profit as a kind of democratic good of its own.

Challenging this economic vision of democracy, therefore, requires finding different avenues for holding corporate platform owners and operators accountable. Legislation that identifies what content platforms can host or which users can have access to the site does not address the problem of how media technology corporations position themselves as having the inalienable right to monetize user activity. Instead, accountability must reimagine platform authority. For example, perhaps an independent review board made up of technologists, cultural theorists, political scientists and legal scholars, contracted by the state, could set standards for how platforms monetize user activity and these profits are to be used and distributed. Imagine if Google were legally required to designate a portion of its revenue from YouTube to funding civic

education in American public schools. Acknowledging the role that social media platforms play in shaping our relationship to democracy does not necessarily mean finding a way to diminish their influence. If we are unwilling to challenge the explicit role that media technology corporations play in democracy by abolishing precedents like the *Citizens United* ruling (2010), then we need to imagine new terms for the economic relationship that these corporations have to the state and design new forms of platform authority that decenter advertiser trust in favor of earning the trust of the user.

Another component of reimagining how social media platforms shape democracy requires reevaluating how we define politics and political action. First, the scope of what we understand as belonging to the realm of the political needs to be expanded. My exploration of the relationship between Ressentiment and demonetization demonstrates that emotions function as an interpretative lens that we use to make sense of the world around us. Platforms shape the emotional patterns that structure user activity through the language of their policies, their governance practices and their direct communications with users. My interlocutors, for example, navigate the revenue loss of demonetization through a combination of feelings of disempowerment, internalized failure and frustration to interpret demonetization as a moral judgement. These emotions, however, exceed the platform architectures. YouTube's self-positioning as a governing authority that promotes the democratic wellbeing of its users organize these moral judgements into a schema of values that equates good speech with profitable speech. To this extent, emotions are political. Future research into the relationship between social media platforms, emotions and political values, therefore, should attend to the technological specificity of the digital in shaping perceptual relations. The emerging field of digital phenomenology, including scholars like Yuk Hui, who draws on Heidegger and Gilbert Simondon to describe the

relationship between data and culture, and Louise Amoore, who examines how algorithms are transforming ethics and politics, model innovative ways for studying how digital technologies structure perception.²⁵³ To advance research on how emotions experienced online have political implications, we must engage digital materiality with precision.

Second, we need to revive political action from its flattening into content. As I suggest in the Introduction with my discussion of Charlie Kirk's memeification, today's social media platforms encourage users to have a disconnected and depersonalized relationship to politics. Despite our inundation with a constant stream of information that could potentially mobilize us to action and advocacy, much politically inclined activity remains online, circulating as content that generates billions of dollars of platform profits. Our current crisis of values, tied to the failure of our democratic institutions and the aggressive authority of capital, minimizes politics into nihilistic cynicism and sarcasm. To resist the corporate and political powers responsible for the ongoing democratic crisis, we need to reclaim political action and political thought as having value in and of itself. In this profoundly anti-intellectual moment U.S. culture, returning to the history of political thought and histories of political activism can help us reinvigorate democracy. We cannot allow social media economies to define the political as that which generates the most likes, the most shares, or the most revenue. Thought must lead to action, and action must move offline in order for us to effectively challenge the economic authority of media technology corporations and the undemocratic actions of the state. Logging off to protest the building of data centers for generative AI, or to visit the office of your local representative and demand that they use their vote to enact legislation that holds corporate platform operators accountable is more

²⁵³ Amoore, Louise. *Cloud Ethics: Algorithms and the Attributes of Ourselves and Others*. Duke University Press, 2020.

Hui, Yuk. *On the Existence of Digital Objects*. University of Minnesota Press, 2016.

“inimical to the material interests” of social media platforms than content that fails to meet advertiser preferences.²⁵⁴ It is profitable for platforms if users believe that politics does not matter. Resisting state and corporate power, therefore, requires our culture to learn how take political action and political thought seriously in spite of the jokes, the memes, and the trends.

In addition to underscoring how to take back political agency on a cultural scale, this project sheds light on new forms of creator agency within social media industries. Although I dedicated substantial time to describing how YouTube content creators are trapped in cycles of production and consumption, driven by negative feelings and motivated by hopes of future compensation, the interlocutors centered in Chapter 4 provided insight into how accountability and authority can be reformulated around users. True Crime content creators John Lordan and Rachel Shannon both reported feeling more responsible to their audiences than the YouTube platform in their labor, despite the weight of feelings of personal responsibility related to Self-Certification. When I asked Rachel if she considered YouTube her employer (albeit an unconventional employer), she replied that, “really, the people that are holding me accountable and making sure that I stay on schedule are my viewers. That’s who I feel responsible to and who I want to make sure that I’m staying accountable to because they are people who expect things of me.”²⁵⁵ Likewise, John described how his viewers shaped his decision to include a minimal number of ads in his videos, explaining, “I had this rapport that I kind of developed with my audience of just like, *that’s not how we’re going to do things because I know that you guys are going to take care of me somewhere else and I don’t need to do that here.*”²⁵⁶ According to John’s and Rachel’s accounts, audiences play a direct, more immediate role in shaping their content than

²⁵⁴ Messina, J.P. *Private Censorship*. Oxford University Press, 2023, pp. 7

²⁵⁵ Shannon, Rachel. Interview. Conducted by Anna Parkhurst, 17 Dec. 2025.

²⁵⁶ Lordan, John. Interview. Conducted by Anna Parkhurst, 4 Nov. 2025.

the YouTube platform. Viewers, therefore, can be understood as an essential component of YouTube content communities to the extent that they shape the labor practices associated with a particular video topic. The close relationships that Rachel and John describe having with their audiences indicate that corporate authority is not the only power on the platform. As John reiterated to me, “the audience is what’s making the platform work. So, it’s really about the audience.”²⁵⁷ Positioning the audience as a form of platform authority provides alternative visions for thinking about how creators can exercise agency in the face of corporate economic control. Additionally, considering creators and their audiences together enlivens a vision of democracy and political advocacy built on solidarity, rather than individual profit. Social media platforms can be a site where we transform democracy for good, but we need to think beyond the scope of what the state and media technology corporations have designed for us.

²⁵⁷ Lordan Interview 2025.

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