



Internet giants quietly censoring government critics

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Earlier this month, YouTube, the behemoth video-sharing website was accused of censoring users.

Claiming some of their videos had been barred from making money through the company's ad services, YouTube hosts like Philip DeFranco spoke out against the policy, claiming over "a dozen of his videos had been flagged as inappropriate for advertising, including one dinged for 'graphic content or excessive strong language.'" "

In a video entitled "YouTube Is Shutting Down My Channel and I'm Not Sure What To Do," DeFranco called YouTube's policy "censorship with a different name," since users touching on what the company considers to be controversial subjects end up losing money. "If you do this on the regular, and you have no advertising," DeFranco added, "it's not sustainable."

While YouTube has already confirmed its policy regarding what it considers unfit for monetization hasn't changed, the issue might lie elsewhere now that the company seems more efficient in enforcing its own rules. As a matter of fact, the content policy changed in 2012, when YouTube first introduced its "ad-friendly" guidelines.

But while an algorithm is allegedly used to spot and "de-monetize" videos that break the company's rules, many continue to accuse the company, currently owned by Google, of having "vague" descriptions of what its leadership considers ad-friendly.

YouTube rolled out its monetization tool in 2006, when ads consisted of videos that would pop up at the bottom of the user's screen. If the user did not click on it, it would roll for about ten seconds before going away. But as ad executives pressured YouTube to "to do a better job at promoting its creators," the relationship with its advertisers changed. As better and even more intrusive ads were added to YouTube videos, the company allegedly became more concerned with the content.

Those who are affected often complain about copyright claims, but some complain about another type of targeting — one that involves power players.

YouTube Content Creators Speak Out

Derrick J. Freeman, the host of FR33MANTV, told *Anti-Media* that he monetizes all of his videos, "and every day some video — even much older ones — gets slapped with some kind of warning or another because of music playing in the background somewhere. Usually a public place."

While Freeman's work is often political in nature, he hasn't seen any of his videos being flagged for breaking YouTube's rules concerning subjects related to war or political conflicts.

Mat Bars, another YouTube user, also complained about copyright claims.

Asked about the alleged censorship problem, Bars told *Anti-Media* that "what it really most likely comes down to is advertisers not wanting their ads to be associated with certain things." To the YouTube host, the company is "mostly blameless in this. The site isn't even profitable, so letting advertisers push them around like this suits their best interests." Instead of complaining about censorship, Bars added that what affects him personally is "the copyright system."

But to more radical political figures who gather a considerable number of followers on YouTube, things are slightly differently.

To Luke Rudkowski, the man behind the popular channel We Are Change, YouTube's policy of nixing monetization on some of his most popular videos has been a problem for a long time.

"For years," he told *The Anti-Media*, "I have monetized and still get f*cked from it." Especially, he continued, "[when I launch a video about] Hillary, or war and foreign policy." When his videos touch on drugs or guns, however, he says ads remain in place.

"When the videos only have 'Hillary Clinton' they do fine," he added, "however, when we add 'FBI', that's when YouTube" springs into action.

Anti-Media journalist and senior editor Carey Wedler got her start on Youtube and has had a similar experience with her channel.

She explained the first time she realized the site had singled out her videos was "a couple of weeks" after she "posted a video about how America's culture of militarism is an underlying contributor to domestic mass shootings."

She continued: "The video was released shortly after the Orlando shooting, which occurred in June. By July 6, I had received an email saying the video was not 'advertiser friendly.' Two days later, I received another email about a video I released at the beginning of June — before I released the mass shooting video. This video, which pointed out inconsistencies in Bernie Sanders's record and questioned his 'revolutionary' status, was also stripped of monetization."

While the mass shooting video's monetization has been restored without her appealing the company's decision, her Sanders video remains ineligible. The Sanders video focused largely on his record of supporting war and the military-industrial complex.

Her other videos affected by YouTube's policy include "What Every American Needs to Know About Radical Islam," a video "that challenged rampant Islamophobia and jingoism right after the Paris terror attacks last November," and "Why I'm 'Ready for Hillary!'" which the creator claims to be an "extremely sarcastic indictment of Hillary Clinton published before she announced her candidacy early last year."

Other videos by Wedler that suffered the same fate include "How America 'wins' the wars in Syria & Iraq" and "How I became a 'self-hating Jew.'" All of the de-monetized videos contain anti-war sentiments.

According to the prolific writer and vlogger, YouTube only bothered to email her notifications regarding the changes in monetization for the Sanders and the mass shooting videos: “I noticed the [other] videos had all been stripped of monetization when I logged into Youtube to check out the two that had been officially flagged. However, when I checked my settings following receipt of the two emails regarding mass shootings and Bernie, my overall monetization setting had been switched off — meaning none of my videos were monetized.”

She claims to have “*never selected that option*” prior to learning about the issues with the videos mentioned previously, yet when she turned the monetization option back on, “the monetization reactivated — but only for videos that hadn’t been specifically flagged.”

“I also noticed that my videos before the self-hating Jew video hadn’t been rejected for monetization at all,” she said.

In cases involving YouTube’s decision to flag her videos that included notifications, Wedler added, YouTube failed to give her “a specific reason as to why the videos were stripped of monetization. I’ve seen some screenshots of those emails from other Youtubers ... and some contain reasons. Mine didn’t, though it’s pretty clear to me that in my case, it’s because they are considered ‘controversial.’ Some discuss war and some contain images of war, and they are always questioning military violence.”

While Wedler agrees that this type of policy is “not direct censorship ... it does amount to an implicit attempt to discourage me and others from saying controversial things.”

She added that while YouTube is a “privately owned company that can decide which content is appropriate for its advertisers, ... if they are deciding [which of] my videos shouldn’t be allowed to generate revenue, they are effectively removing much of my incentive to continue producing content on the platform.”

Despite the company’s policy, Wedler vows to continue making these videos simply because the message is what matters.

Google and Its Addiction to Buying Influence

As Wedler stated, YouTube is a private company and it has the right to set its own policies. But it’s undeniable that the site’s owner, Google, has, on a number of occasions, shown its favoritism through lobbying, prompting many to highlight the company’s appearance of favorable bias toward Democratic Presidential candidate Hillary Clinton.

Google went from spending \$80,000 on lobbying in 2003 to over \$16 million in 2014. After 2014, Google, Inc. became Alphabet, and in 2015, Alphabet invested over \$16 million in lobbying. To date, the company has spent over \$8 million on Washington politicians.

Alphabet’s top recipient this election cycle is, unsurprisingly, Hillary Clinton.

But despite its knack for influence buying, Google has, over the years, created relationships with think tanks that would have criticized the tech giant’s crony capitalist ways under different circumstances.

According to the Washington Post, Google has embarked on a quest to woo free market organizations by populating “elite think-tanks such as the Cato Institute, the Competitive Enterprise Institute and the New America Foundation” with its fellows, including “young lawyers, writers and thinkers paid by the company.”

From *the Post*: “To critics, Google’s investments have effectively shifted the national discussion away from Internet policy questions that could affect the company’s business practices. Groups that might ordinarily challenge the policies and practices of a major corporation are holding their fire, those critics say.”

Claiming to be defenders of privacy, Google successfully waged an aggressive lobbying campaign within Washington to defeat a congressional effort that could have put Google in the middle of a very nasty antitrust fight.

After supporting the European Union’s antitrust prosecution of Microsoft, Google found itself the target of the same type of scrutiny, being accused of unfairly discriminating against users.

With the excuse of going after companies like Google for antitrust law violations, Congress came up with the Stop Online Piracy Act (SOPA), a bill disguised as an anti-online piracy fix that would have allowed the federal government to target “illegal copies of films and other forms of media hosted on foreign servers.” The bill would have hurt Google the most because the search engine would have several results deleted from its database, requiring “ISPs to remove URLs from the Web, which is also known as censorship last time I checked,” Google chairman Eric Schmidt said.

Just one month before SOPA was unveiled by Rep. Lamar Smith (R-TX), Schmidt appeared before Congress during a Federal Trade Commission (FTC) hearing where a Republican senator “accused the company of skewing search results to benefit its own products and hurt competitors.” As this hearing took place and Google was grilled by lawmakers, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and the Motion Picture Association of America lobbied Congress to pass harsh anti-privacy legislation, accusing companies like Google of giving users access to pirated music and movies.

Afraid of the backlash caused by the hearing, Google feared the Hollywood lobby would end up hurting many of its partners, as well as smaller organizations directly tied to Google. But the search engine giant had a way out — its aggressive lobbying and partnership building skills.

As SOPA appeared poised for passage, Google and several other tech firms stood in opposition and the bill finally failed.

While SOPA was, indeed, a farce — and privacy advocates in Washington were happy the bill didn’t see the light of day — it’s important to note how hard Google worked to keep it from becoming a reality, putting the Silicon Valley giant closer to powerful institutions that, in theory, are against crony capitalism.

But after SOPA, the FTC went back to the drawing board, threatening to investigate Google’s alleged antitrust violations further. At the time, the “company’s rivals, including Microsoft and Yelp, were aggressively pressing arguments that Google was exploiting its dominance in the search business.”

Reaching out to another partner, George Mason University's Law & Economics Center, Google and the university put together "the first of three academic conferences at the GMU law school's Arlington County campus," which, according to the Washington Post, helped to shape the FTC's approach to the Google probe from then on.

At the third academic conference held at GMU, Google remained present as a silent partner. As "[a] strong contingent of FTC economists and lawyers were on hand for the May 16, 2012, session," the Washington Post reported, research financially backed by Google was presented by GMU lawyers and economists. And "[i]n January 2013, after an investigation that spanned more than a year and a half, the FTC settled the case with Google, which agreed to give its rivals more access to patents and make it easier for advertisers to use other ad platforms."

From the publication:

"But when it came to the charges that Google biased its search results to promote its own products, the five FTC commissioners all voted to close the investigation, saying there was no evidence the company's practices were harming consumers."

As Google became more involved with politics, other lobbying opportunities would arise.

More recently, Google got involved in yet another powerful lobbying effort, which started when the company hired the former administrator of the U.S. National Highway Traffic Safety Administration to serve as the company's Director of Safety for Self-Driving Cars, proving the revolving door that presidential candidate Barack Obama promised to nix is still alive and well. The effort paid off, and personal injury attorneys are now concerned that Google may try to push still more regulations, forcing regulators to stick the human driver with the blame for crashes and getting Google's autonomous driving system off the hook.

Whether YouTube's ad policy has anything to do with its parent company's politics is impossible to determine. But as we analyze Google's influence in Washington, it's important to note that, whether you agree with the tech giant on none, some, or all issues, governments create the incentives for companies like Google to continue rent-seeking.

As the economist David R. Henderson puts it, individuals "are said to seek rents when they try to obtain benefits for themselves through the political arena. ... licensed electricians and doctors [for instance] often lobby to keep regulations in place that restrict competition from unlicensed electricians or doctors." Companies like Google are champions of this practice, which has helped to protect the brand's popularity by keeping competitors at bay.

So it's not a surprise to see many claiming their content is being censored by Google's YouTube. After all, with the amount of power the company holds in Washington, it's as if Google — or Alphabet — is an actual wing of the government.