

## **Zachariah Levitan**

University at Albany - State University of New York

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#### ***The YouTube Adpocalypse and Adquisition: Proposing a Change in YouTube's Political Content Monetization Methodology***

### **The Adpocalypse Defined**

In March, 2017, the social media platform, *YouTube*—purchased by *Google* in 2006—began a massive demonetization-of-content project in response to *Google* advertisers' concern with content's facets. This colossal withdrawal of advertisements from content provider's services is commonly known in the *YouTube* community as the '*Adpocalypse*'. A content provider on *YouTube* is subjected to the Adpocalypse when *Google* flags his or her video as being unfit for association with investors. Thus, advertisements are not displayed at any point before, during, or after the video, and the content provider does not receive a profit for the uploaded content, regardless of how many views it generates.

The Adpocalypse commenced after significant investors such as *AT&T*, *Johnson & Johnson*, *PepsiCo*, and *McDonalds* withheld their advertisements from being allocated to *YouTube* videos. In response to this loss in revenue, Philipp Schindler, *Google's* Chief Business Officer, announced that *Google* has begun "taking a tougher stance on hateful, offensive and derogatory content" (Schindler, 2017, at large). However, the Adpocalypse has caused demonetization of content—both vulgar and family-friendly—uploaded by *prominent* political

pundits and social critics. These content providers attract substantial traffic to the *YouTube* platform as they have enormous audiences that are eager to consume political information not provided by the corporate-mainstream media. In other words—many of the content providers that bring the highest rates of traffic to the *YouTube* platform are being subjected to *YouTube*'s demonetization policy. In effect, many of the frustrated political pundits and artists have already begun primarily featuring their content on other platforms that provide monetization for provocative content, and are bringing their audiences with them. Additionally, numerous content providers are openly considering following suit.

The reason investors make financial contributions to *YouTube* is because they want their advertisements to be featured on popular content that they are comfortable being associated with (expressive association will be detailed). Surely, not all investors have the same sanctioning standards. *This paper recommends a nuanced monetization system* that is primarily grounded in audience size rather than content, while still allowing for *Google*'s investors to selectively discriminate against the association with content providers based on their rhetoric and ideology. This is the best strategy for meeting the desired ends of most participants in the *YouTube* community.

It is in the best interest of all stakeholders in this dilemma for *Google* to adhere to its stated goal of providing a free-speech platform that allows users to make a career out of expressing themselves (this will be further discussed). *Google*'s interest is in profiting from a platform that fosters free speech. The investors have an interest in profiting from association with approved content. Popular content providers have an interest in profiting from their engagement in political dialogue from an independent perspective. Finally, viewers are interested in reviewing these perspectives untroubled. The monetization system provided by this paper

allows for all of these interests to be satisfied. Before detailing this structure, *YouTube's* current monetization scheme must first be clarified.

### **How Google Currently Allocates Advertisements to Content on YouTube**

It should be noted how *Google* currently assigns advertisements to content on its platform, as this will further unveil the problem that the Adpocalypse imposes on the dissemination of independent ideas. *Google* has two ways of assigning advertisements to an uploader's video. The first method is by having an employee review the content and choose an advertisement that appears to be appropriate for the content material. Another—increasingly common—procedure is to have programmed artificial intelligence do the review and advertisement approval. *Google's* support staff asserts “We regularly monitor and update our systems to deliver the most relevant ads to your videos. However, we don't manually control all of the ads that appear with your videos, so we can't guarantee that specific ads will be displayed” (google.com, 2017, support). The use of algorithms in allocating advertisements to political content is a crucial contributor to the tension between profit incentives and free-speech principles that *Google* and investors endure. This is due to the fact that computer algorithms cannot adjust its video title and description word association features to avert advertisements from messages that oppose the displayed endorsement.

An illustration of this issue has been seen in the repeated occurrence of videos by political pundits advocating for legislation restricting the authorization of firearms sales featuring advertisements funded by firearm manufacturers—just as one example. This was a common occurrence before the Adpocalypse. However, *Google's* demonetization policy has removed advertisement allocation to videos on this subject altogether instead of reprogramming artificial intelligence to better align the pundit's message with the investor's message. Improper

association of messages continues to occur on *YouTube* across a broad range of categories that have not been demonetized as well, such as travel and food.

Thus, advertisers on *YouTube* do not communicate with content providers. Instead, they pay *Google* to assign their advertisements to videos that either the staff or artificial intelligence believes are relevant to the advertiser's target audience. Content providers simply sign in to the website, using their *Google* account, and upload their videos. Content providers select categories and tag-words that they believe to be appropriate placements and search associations with their videos, assisting viewers and artificial intelligence in increasing platform traffic. When content is demonetized, the *Google* staff and artificial intelligence flag a video as inappropriate, and advertisements are not displayed before, during, or after the video. Most of the time, the content is still available for viewers to watch, however the content provider will not profit from that video, even if it receives over two million views, which does happen (Rogan, 2018, Joe Rogan Experience #1070 - Jordan Peterson, at large).

This is particularly problematic for popular non-corporate political pundits that report the news and their opinions, as these topics frequently trigger demonetization algorithms. *Google* has explicated that "Video content that features or focuses on sensitive topics or events including, but not limited to, war, political conflicts, terrorism or extremism, death and tragedies, sexual abuse, even if graphic imagery is not shown, is generally not suitable for ads" (Support, Google, 2018, at large). *Google* has also made it clear that the content does not have to use inflammatory speech or support depraved content to be demonetized. In fact, *Google* portrays a self-consciousness about how their policy directly affects independent news "videos about recent tragedies, even if presented for news or documentary purposes, may not be suitable for advertising given the subject matter" (Support, Google, 2018, at large). While *Google* enforces

this strict policy in an attempt to not be off-putting to investors, there are many lenders to television outlets that discuss the aforementioned contentious categories of news. This is accounted for in the *recommended monetization system*. Before describing this arrangement, *Google's* published principles of expression and business building on *YouTube* should be elucidated, as it has also been factored into the equation.

### **Google's Principles of Expression and Business Building on YouTube**

This paper details that the tension between profit and self-employed expression causes political speakers that are already marginalized, albeit popular, to no longer pragmatically utilize the *YouTube* platform. However, *YouTube* was originally established with the intention of being a *free marketplace of ideas*. The free marketplace of ideas is a metaphorical structure in which speech is a commodity to be accepted or rejected by society, as other items are—like automobiles—in a free market of economics (Shiffrin & Choper, 2011, p. 13). Whether or not speech is accepted by the masses depends on a multitude of factors, ranging from the persuasiveness of the speaker to the rationality of the listener. The creed of the free marketplace of ideas is open self-expression with the opportunity of building support, inviting dissent, and producing growth of one's ideas.

Since its development in 2005, *Youtube's* slogan has been “Broadcast Yourself”. Furthermore, the website's *About* page lists the company's “four essential freedoms”, which are: “Freedom of Expression”; “Freedom of Information”; “Freedom of Opportunity”; and “Freedom to Belong” (youtube.com, 2017, About). Each of these freedoms are consistent with the principle of the free marketplace of ideas. It is clear that the foundational philosophy of *YouTube* is to provide equal opportunity for all to develop a following by means of self-expression. Additionally, upon further analysis of the “Opportunity” and “Freedom to Belong” principles'

descriptions it becomes evident that the *YouTube* platform was also intended to be an open market of economics—before the Adpocalypse—with the commodities being users’ self-expression. In other words, *Google* has propositioned *YouTube* as a platform to expand dialogue by empowering marginalized speakers while generating profits for itself, its investors, and its content creators.

As a description of *YouTube*’s “Opportunity” freedom, the company informs that “We believe everyone should have a chance to be discovered, build a business and succeed on their own terms, and that people—not gatekeepers—decide what’s popular” (Youtube.com, 2017, About). However, in reality it is the platform providers that tip the scale against certain content providers in their attempt to build a business. If *YouTube* were to function as a free marketplace of ideas as intended, then the most viewer-favored content providers would receive advertisement revenue for their videos, because those ideas are preferred by listeners. Once again, the problem that arises out of *Google*’s worry about potentially upsetting investors is the institutional demonetization of salient messages on the *YouTube* platform. This disadvantages content providers, and burdens viewers—as content providers often result to relying on financial contributions from viewers and changing platforms.

Moreover, *YouTube* explains the “Freedom to Belong” principle as “We believe everyone should be able to find communities of support, break down barriers, transcend borders and come together around shared interests and passions” (Youtube.com, 2017, About). This is shown to not be the case when *YouTube* and its advertisers believe that the community members’ political speech may negatively impact their bottom line. However, there are many independent-political content providers that experience difficulties transcending financial borders, but are successful in rallying members of the *YouTube* community around their shared interests. Next some examples

of popular, independent political speakers that espouse peaceful political action and the inclusion of diverse ideas should be noted. This will provide an illustration of how successful political speakers that are archetypal of *YouTube*'s established principles are being disadvantaged by the Adpocalypse.

### **Illustrations of the Adpocalypse Negatively Affecting Independent Political Speech**

One of the most prominent progressive political pundits facing *YouTube*'s incommensurate advertisement policy is Kyle Kulinski, host of *Secular Talk*. Kulinski is a Social Democratic political commentator that discusses factual news stories—often stories not portrayed on cable television—as well as his personal beliefs about the issues at hand. Kulinski is also a co-founder, and former executive-board member, of the Political Action Committee *Justice Democrats*.

In April, 2017, *Secular Talk* was blacklisted from *YouTube* advertising revenue for all of its content, and Kulinski proclaimed in his video *Secular Talk BLACKLISTED By YouTube, Pressured Name Change*: “I come out here everyday and I promise you guys—and I think you know it—that I’m going to be totally unfiltered. I’m never gonna say anything that I’m saying because somebody else wants me to say it. It’s always what I think, what I believe, what I feel...I’ll give you the facts, I give you my opinion” (Kulinski, 2017, 6:36-6:53). Kulinski prides himself on communicating with his audience in a dialect and cadence that he would use with his close friends, a technique not commonly portrayed on corporate-cable television. This means that his workplace vernacular is not always as clean as that of television pundits. That being so, his language is not extravagantly grotesque.

However, all of Kulinski’s videos were instantly demonetized upon publishing for a brief period of time in April, 2017, including videos containing chaste language and uncontroversial subjects. Kulinski was candid with his audience about his experience with repealing his blacklist

status to *YouTube*, and that status was eventually converted. Nevertheless, after *Secular Talk* was removed from the blacklist in April, 2017, Kulinski reported to still be receiving less than 1% of the advertisement revenue that he received prior to being blacklisted (Kulinski, 2017, *Secular Talk Is OFF YouTube's Ad Blacklist!*, 4:10-4:435).

Kyle Kulinski is not a member of a scant community. His *YouTube channel*—named *Secular Talk*—has over 500,000 subscribers (youtube.com, *Secular Talk*, 2017, at large). Furthermore, the channel received an average of 263,335 views a day between November 20, 2017 and December 3, 2017 (vidstatsx.com, 2017, *Secular Talk*). In comparison with moderate and “left-wing” corporate-cable news during the month of November, 2017: *CNN*’s own quantitative ratings analysis for itself and *MSNBC* reveal that *Secular Talk* is the most frequently viewed show by the key demographic—25-54—when analysing these three programs. In November, 2017, *CNN* received an average of 229,000 daily views, and *MSNBC*, was viewed by a daily average of 211,000 people (cnnpressroom.blogs.cnn.com, 2017, at large). This data shows that *Secular Talk* is more frequently viewed by the key demographic for political news than both *CNN* and *MSNBC* are. Kyle Kulinski is a success in the free marketplace of ideas. However, his ambition to build a business with his show is being obstructed by *Google*’s attempts to please its financial contributors. Still, it must be the case that some of *Google*’s investors would be interested in having their advertisements allocated to *Secular Talk*, a show with an eminently populous and voluntary audience.

The forthcoming system-of-monetization proposal will allow for those investors willing to be associated with brogue language to do so. It also will not obligate investors to be associated with *Secular Talk* if they explicate a desire to be disconnected from that speech. This will also be crucial for enacting a just structure in which champions of the free marketplace of



ideas that are far more outrageous in their word selection than Kulinski can continue to build a business on *YouTube*, as they were before the Adpocalypse. Such a character is T. J. Kirk, formerly known as *The Amazing Atheist*.

Kirk, a social-political critic who joined *YouTube* in 2006, is one of the most enduring *YouTube* careerists on the platform. Since the genesis of his channel he has maintained the expression of his honest and controversial beliefs, often being proudly crude and obscene while doing so. However, Kirk's authenticity has earned him over 1,000,000 subscribers during his time on *YouTube* (youtube.com, TJ Kirk, 2018, at large). It is also worth noting that although his language is insensitive, Kirk's ideas are expressed in a variety of methods including direct extrapolation and judicious satire—he views himself as an artist. Kirk's crass choice of words is attractive to viewers that use *YouTube* as a source of independent ideas about modern culture that are excluded from the mainstream conversation. Kirk's experience of the Adpocalypse is another opportunity loss incurred on the content provider, potential advertisers, and *Google*. To fully understand the breadth of the Adpocalypse's reach, a content provider that uses antithetical articulations to Kirk should be introduced.

Boston College Communications Professor David Pakman hosts the independent-progressive production: *The David Pakman Show*. Pakman's news show is aired on *YouTube*, the radio, and television. To have his content featured on the radio and television, Pakman is conscientious to have his content meet the *Federal Communication Commission's* standards. Thus, his material does not feature profanity. "The topics of Mr. Pakman's videos are no more controversial than the programming typically found on CNN or the local news"(Hess, 2017, at large). However, *The David Pakman Show* is demonetized on *YouTube* due to the platform's policy of averting advertisements from news content.

It is worth noting that *The David Pakman Show* is also not a meager political news outlet. Pakman's *YouTube channel*—named *David Pakman Show*—currently has over 400,000 subscribers on *YouTube* alone (youtube.com, David Pakman Show, 2017, at large). The demonetization of prominent, independent, family-friendly political content on *YouTube* is an issue. Once again the *YouTube* community uses this platform because it *wants* exposure to alternative political dialogue. The publicity of these ideas is intractable to maintain when the content providers' ability to employ themselves is strained.

This paper has made several references to investors being associated with content on *YouTube* that they disapprove of. This controversy was the catalyst of the Adpocalypse. Before explaining the proposed system of advertisement allocation, the issue of *expressive association* should be clarified, as this is a core factor in devising a plan for monetization that is good for the *YouTube* community at large.

### **Expressive Association Explained**

Expressive association is the public and private right of an individual or organization to be identified with a message of another individual or organization's speech. Additionally, one has the right by means of expressive association *not* to be correlated with the ideas of another (Shiffrin & Choper, 2011, p. 467). The United States Supreme Court has ruled in protection of the right of private businesses to not be associated with the speech of those unaffiliated with that organization. More specifically, private entities are not obligated to be linked with the speech of others who oppose their own message.

There have been expressive association rulings that are relevant to the conflicting interests involved in the *YouTube* platform. By the Supreme Court's precedent, *Google's* investors cannot be mandated to financially support content providers that assail their operation

or political ideology. The Supreme Court ruled in the case of *Pacific Gas & Electric Company v. Public Utilities Commission of California* (1986) that private businesses are not mandated to transverse the expression of others, especially those who are critical of that business. This case occurred when *Pacific Gas & Electric Company*—a private organization—refused to disseminate the captious message of the public interest group, *Public Utilities Commission of California*, in its billing envelopes (Shiffrin & Choper, 2011, p. 473). In relation to an aforementioned scenario, this means that firearm manufacturers cannot be obligated to have their advertisements broadcasted on Kyle Kulinski’s show *Secular Talk*, where stricter firearm sales regulations are advocated for.

Thus far the origin of the Adpocalypse, *YouTube*’s current advertisement-allocation arrangement, the free marketplace of ideas, *YouTube*’s stated principles of expression and business building, examples of the Adpocalypse’s negative effects on independent political content, and expressive association have all been defined and explained. This paper will now name its proposed system of content monetization that allows the *YouTube* community to have a net increase in satisfied desires compared to its current position.

### **Introducing the Recommended Content-Monetization System: The Adcquisition**

This paper refers to its nuanced process of monetizing content on *YouTube* as the ‘*Adcquisition*’, because it provides *Google* with a strategy for maximizing overall profits in both the free marketplace of ideas and the economic market. To be blunt—the *Adcquisition* is a *utilitarian model of managing relationships among all members of the YouTube community*. By “all members” this paper refers to: *Google* as the platform provider; *investors* as financial contributors to the platform; *content providers* as commodity contributors to the platform; and *viewers* as the targeted audience of both investors and content providers, as well as the

paramount reason for a monetization system to exist. Without viewers, there would be no desire for investors to feature their advertisements on *YouTube*.

This proposed structure does not guarantee that every potential investor contemplating contributing to *Google* will prefer this process to *Google's* current methodology. However, in utilizing the free marketplace of ideas *Google* will make a financial profit while upholding its published principles of free speech and business building instead of choosing between conflicting interests. Also, investors will have their advertisements featured on content—unbounded to any specific content provider. On a similar note, not every channel is granted general monetization. A subscription quota must be met to achieve ‘default monetization’ status. Furthermore, content providers surpassing this subscription quota may still be subject to selective discrimination by investors. This will allow family-oriented investors to not be involuntarily associated with T. J. Kirk, for example. Now that the basic structure for the Adquisition has been stated, its functionality can be further detailed.

### **The First Principle of the Adquisition**

The *first principle* of the Adquisition is that it promotes the free market of both ideas and economics for *YouTube* careerists. Therefore, to receive ‘default monetization’ status one’s channel must have a minimum of 100,000 subscribers. This is not an arbitrary number. When a content creator on *YouTube* obtains 100,000 subscribers, that person is recognized by *Google* for reaching the milestone of becoming a “Silver Creator” (YouTube.com, Creators, Awards, 2018, at large). The Silver Creator receives a placarded silver play button from *Google* as an award for his or her accomplishment. There are titled statuses for content providers with less than 100,000 subscribers, as well as titles and awards for those with 1,000,000 and 10,000,000 subscribers. However, the Silver Creator acknowledgement is the first milestone that is rewarded for being a

substantial contributor to the *YouTube* community when reached, and so reaching this milestone will also be rewarded with entry to the *Adcquisition*.

To justify the first principle of the *Adcquisition*, it is important to be mindful that this structure establishes the ‘default monetization’ status of *YouTube channels*, not individual videos. If a content provider with a small audience uploads a video that goes viral and advertisers want to sponsor it before that channel has 100,000 subscribers, that is fine. The content provider’s channel will not reach ‘default monetization’ status until that milestone is reached, however.

Critics may argue that 100,000 subscribers is too high a number to make the entry point to the *Adcquisition*, and that this rule does not promote business building. These critics should not lose sight of the fact that *YouTube* is not intended to merely be a platform for launching a business. It is also intended to be a free marketplace of ideas. Content providers who “make it” in the free marketplace of ideas by growing their audience to 100,000 subscribers are able to prove to *Google* that their content is a wise placement for advertisements. The investors are, after all, interested in having their advertisements viewed by large audiences. Furthermore, this gives the *Google* staff more time to review a content provider’s channel as it progresses through the lower titles, allowing for that channel to be most appropriately positioned in the *Adcquisition algorithm* once the content provider reaches the 100,000 subscriber milestone. The *Adcquisition algorithm* will now be explained.

### **The *Adcquisition Algorithm***

Supporters of *Google*’s current demonetization methodology may argue that—if advertisers do not want to be associated with depraved content or entertainment material that does not appeal to the advertiser’s values, then the company should have the right to not

contribute to that content's funding. This valid concern is why advertisers will submit an electronic, algorithmic form—provided by *Google*—that details whether or not they want their products to be shown on videos of various subjects. Bear in mind that only content providers that have reached default monetization status will be in the monetization algorithm. To further illustrate, a checklist will be filled out with a 'yes' and 'no' box for each category on the *YouTube* search engine. This list will be further narrowed, such as having options of what political ideologies to be associated with, if 'yes' is selected for 'news and politics'. Therefore, the opportunity to specify one's desire to not be shown on social-democratic content, for example, will be available to the investor. By having advertisers fill out a checklist, *YouTube*'s monetization algorithms can more accurately display advertisements to their intended audiences.

Additionally, the document will include an area for advertisers to directly name any content providers that they do or do not want to be associated with. After investors have narrowed down the ideologies they approve of, there will be a "known to use profanity" list, so that advertisers can further specify their sanctioned association, and also make it easier for *Google* to personalize algorithms for each advertiser.

This will be especially helpful for advertisers that are avoiding highly controversial content providers and pundits that espouse a conflicting message. Moreover, it will help advertisers that wish to appeal to the viewers of more provocative content, since those content providers also have large audiences. The participation of such advertisers in the Adquisition has been alluded to earlier in this paper. It is reasonable to consider these investors as a feature of this monetization structure because both verbally profane and refined political-content providers have received independent sponsoring throughout the Adpocalypse as a way of sustaining their channels. Additionally, there is evidence of investors' willingness to participate in expressive

association that has occurred before the Adpocalypse began. The support of this assertion will now be discussed.

### **Willingness to Invest**

Some demonstrations of independent sponsoring are witnessed in the businesses and individuals that have sponsored T. J. Kirk's content since the outset of the Adpocalypse. Examples include the creators of the smartphone game-applications *Vikings* and *Alliance*, the electronic-cigarette liquid business *Don't Drink My Juice*, and the content provider Ian Reitmayer, who manages the *YouTube* channel: *The Knowledge Nut*. Additionally, the pet-supplies business *BarkBox* has sponsored Kirk's content in 2016, prior to the Adpocalypse.

Furthermore, the company *Vintage Seltzer* is known among the *Secular Talk* fanbase for being comedically generous to Kyle Kulinski despite his politics in 2016. (Kulinski, 2016, *Secular Talk Sells Out To Big Seltzer*, at large). After Kulinski sipped the company's product during one of his shows and made a joke about how it was not a paid advertisement, a fan sent the video to *Vintage Seltzer*, who then publicly messaged Kulinski on the social media platform *Twitter* that they would like to send Kulinski a remittance. Finally, *The David Pakman Show* also has various sponsors including: *Coinbase*, a cryptocurrency exchange service; *Brilliant*, an online-education service; and *Winc*, a wine distributor.

This information shows that there is a diverse set of profit-driven firms that are willing to be associated with popular lewd language and family-friendly dialogue about news and politics. In other words, this is evidence that *Google's* current monetization scheme causes a substantial financial opportunity loss for *Google*, content creators, and potential investors. This opportunity to profit by expanding political dialogue is recovered by the Adcquisition.

### **Reflective Remarks**

Influential investors in *Google* withdrew their financial support in 2017 due to outrage about the *YouTube* content that they were being associated with. This led *Google* to rashly and severely alter its advertisement-allocation arrangements, rendering the work of many prominent content providers demonetized. This development is known as the Adpocalypse, and its effects have been lasting. This is particularly problematic for political news pundits on *YouTube*, as all videos simply discussing controversial matters may be demonetized due to *Google's* fear of losing more financial contributors.

*Google's* impulsive decision has resulted in the violation of its stated principles of expression and business building. Additionally, it has created a considerable financial opportunity loss, as many content providers that have already succeeded in the free marketplace of ideas are being constrained from progressing in the economic marketplace while some investors are willing to be associated with controversial speech.

This paper contends that the Adquisition—its proposed solution to the problems created by the Adpocalypse—will allow more stakeholders in the *YouTube* platform to have their ends met than is currently the case. These stakeholders are *Google* as the platform provider, investors as financial contributors, content providers as commodity producers in both the free marketplace of ideas and the economic marketplace, and viewers as vital community members on the social media platform that is *YouTube*. The Adquisition is a utilitarian model that upholds the free marketplace of ideas and economics. It maintains the opportunity for content providers to build a business while also ensuring investors that they will not be unwillingly associated with messages that contradict their values.

The Adquisition is the optimal policy for *Google* to adopt as it produces a profit for *Google*, content providers, and investors, while allowing the audiences to view their favored



programs unbothered by financial solicitations, platform changes, and the concern of discontinuation due to demonetization. Furthermore, the Adquisition encourages the dissemination of marginalized political speech, adding to the larger conversation.

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