

„Adpocalypse“ – Quo Vadis, YouTube?

A critical but constructive appeal

By Jörg Sprave

Introduction

I'd like to start with short introduction of myself. My name is Jörg, 52 years old, a German. I am now a professional YouTube creator, but my background is business administration (got my Master at the University of Paderborn in '90). I am looking back to 30 years+ of a career as an executive manager in consumer electronics. I have extensive experience as chairman and CEO of mid-size high tech companies. My last job before I changed over to the YouTube career was VP of online marketing and sales, working for a sizeable international premium television manufacturer.



My channel (officially called “JoergSprave”, but unofficially known as “The Slingshot Channel”) was started in 2008 and now has about 1,9 million subscribers and 288 million views in total.

My content is on the good hearted side of “badass” – exploding watermelons, flying toilet brushes, Oreo shooting (rubber powered) pump guns. I make most of the things I show by myself, from wood and rubber bands. I don't do firearms and I never shoot at anything that lives. My channel never crosses into illegal activities. It is a bit like Mythbusters, Kipkay, Crazy Russian Hacker and Smarter Every Day combined, with a dash of Arnold Schwarzenegger mixed in. Always upbeat with plenty of laughter, no violence and zero drama.

History of my channel

After a slow start, I ran my channel basically as a hobby for many years. I became a YouTube partner a long time ago (2010?), but it took years before the income was significant in any way. Some of my videos went viral every now and then, but my income never reached a level that came close to what I was making as an executive manager. See the graph (2014 to date).



Because I employed more ways to generate income (sponsors, my store, Patreon ...), I finally decided to quit my VP job and go full time as a YouTube creator. Since I am a one man show with very little cost, I was content with the money. Less than I made before, but in exchange I have much more fun than ever before in my life. I even won the “Webvideopreis” for 2014.

Things were good until the recent changes hit us all like a truck.

You know the “advertiser boycott” story better than I do, so I won’t recapitulate here. But I was getting into the focus of the UK media with my “how to pierce a stab proof vest” video, which was online and getting below average views on my channel for about six months when the “Mail On Sunday” picked it up, put it on the front page as “Google Blood Money”. The video was removed and I got my first strike ever.

My partner manager sorted it all out the week after. I added the required context by explaining it was really a product review and just had a provocative title, then I was allowed to reupload the video and it stood (monetized) ever since (April 2017).

The Mail on Sunday picked it up again a few weeks ago, demanding a takedown again, but my partner manager told me that you guys would stand “100%” behind me.



Today I got a call from her, informing me that you guys changed policies again and now the video, surprise surprise, has to be taken down. Which I did by myself in order to save us all some headache. [Update: I did set it to “private”, but it was removed a few hours later anyway] It wasn’t very successful anyway. I don’t care for that video. But I am angered by the “back and forth” game you guys are playing with me.

But the truly miserable news is that I feel my channel is doomed, basically because of the new “content categorizing” policy YouTube introduced a few months ago.

Originally about 25 (from a total of 689, about 3.5%) of my videos, mostly very old clips, were put into the “limited or no ads” category, and some of those were reevaluated eventually by human reviewers. All of those got reinstated. 17 videos (2.5%) still are “lona”. Most have been under review for months, probably because they are so old that they aren’t getting many views anymore and have lowest priority.

But I feel that I am getting much fewer ads on my monetized videos than earlier, and also I feel that my videos are being ignored by the recommendation engines. Look at my income curve – much down ever since this all began.

My suspicion

I think I know why that is.

I wasn’t surprised when I saw videos about the secret “excluded_ads” meta data a few weeks ago as it was clear to me that YouTube HAD to put videos into more categories than just “monetized” and “limited or no ads”. Fellow creators found numbers that marked a video for “rough language”, “Shocking” and so on. The meta data text “excluded_ads” was swiftly removed, but that of course does not mean that the categories are



gone too. They are just no longer marked in plain sight. It was probably an oversight by the programmers in the first place.

Why wasn't I surprised?

Because YouTube (or, better, google adwords) offers such content exclusion options to advertisers. See below.

List of content exclusion options

For Video campaigns

Content exclusions options for Video campaigns are found in campaign settings. Here are the available options:

Standard content filter ▼

Sensitive content ▲

- Sensitive social issues:** Discrimination and identity relations, scandals and investigations, reproductive rights, firearms and weapons, and more
- Tragedy and conflict:** Obituaries, bereavement services, violence, war, missing persons, and more
- Profanity and rough language (beta):** Moderate or heavy use of profane language and curse words
- Sexually suggestive content (beta):** Provocative pictures, text, and more
- Sensational and shocking (beta):** Content that creates shock value, including sensational, gross, and crude content

In order to offer these options, YouTube MUST analyze each and every monetized video and check it for the criteria listed above. Of course. No way around it.

What did surprise me was that this obviously also applied to videos that were NOT marked as "limited or no ads". I thought "limited ads" meant only some (but not all) of the "sensitive content" options were applied to such videos, whereas "no ads" meant all five categories were identified. But if a video was marked with the "green dollar" sign, I thought it would be completely open for all kinds of ads. No "sensitive content" limitations.

When I checked my videos for the "excluded_ads" meta data, I found that virtually all of my videos were affected. Not just the handful of "limited or no ads" videos. Even videos that were reviewed by a real person and put back to monetization still had the dreaded "numbers".

Which explains why my income is down.

I also believe that such videos are pretty much "down voted" by the KIs that decide upon the recommendations. Makes sense, why should YouTube recommend videos that are not fully monetized? But for a creator, this means there is almost no more chance to grow the channel as new subscribers often (for the most part) come from recommended videos.

A channel that no longer is "recommended" is bound to die, eventually.

No more viral videos. Very few new subscribers. This is the reality. I need to think about alternatives now, a shame as I really would love to leave things as they are.

The way I see it

I am a reasonable person and also I have plenty of experience in terms of hard business decisions. I know how to handle a crisis and here is my assessment.

YouTube had to go down that road and start analyzing the content. Just the “flaggers” was never enough. Plus YouTube cannot ignore the wishes of the main customers – the advertisers, especially those with the big budgets.

Therefore I fully understand the need for very detailed analysis of all the (potentially monetized) content. This may be bad news for creators working in sensitive areas or using provocation, but that is the way it is.

What I do NOT accept is the way how this all is communicated with the creators. This must be transparent, fair, with reasonable transitional periods (announcement time) and a chance for the creators to express their demands, then starting a process in order to achieve a mutually beneficial solution.

After all, we are partners in this business. You do not hide facts from your partners and you do not surprise them with sudden changes of the mind.

For a long time, YouTube (officially) did not care much about the contents of a video. As long as the community guidelines were halfway kept (those guidelines are softer than a sponge and are pretty meaningless for a creator), everything was OK.

Now this has changed. YouTube deeply involves itself into the content, not generating it, but judging it. These decisions (typically made by machines rather than real people) have a major impact on the income of the creators. Specifically for those creators that are full time, YouTube therefore has to accept responsibilities.

Here are my ideas how to solve these problems.

Suggestions

First, please be transparent. Creators are smart people and will find out what is going on anyway. Just tell us your plans and let us start the discussion. On time, not afterwards.

Regarding the content criteria, clear rules are necessary. I know you hate those as they limit YouTube in the ultimate decision making, and even law suits may be based on such rules. But they are needed. Examples of videos that fulfill the criteria for “sensitive content” and those who don’t would be very helpful. A well written and thought out “code” book is required. Not that vague, unspecific web page you guys put together and keep referring to.

It would also be very good if people could upload a video for a review BEFORE it is categorized. Especially large channels with provocative content would benefit immensely. It does not create more work as those videos WILL be demonetized and a review WILL be requested anyway. You might as well review it beforehand.

Communicate with us please. You analyze the video anyway and you of course identify the critical parts. So let us sit down and talk about required changes in the video so it is still OK. A real person in the “content department” we could talk to. I am sure the partner managers would appreciate that, too. We would all learn from each case and we’d be able to reduce the numbers of lona videos quickly. It is common practice for mainstream movies already. Why not on YouTube? It doesn’t have to be “You against us”. We are partners, after all, sitting in the same boat. If you don’t get ads, we don’t get ads too. We can do this together. We HAVE to do this together.

Rules sometimes have to be changed, I realize that. But even tax laws have an announcement period! If you are changing the rules, tell the creators early enough to react. It feels terrible to depend on a company that may change the rules again and again all of a sudden.

Also, please consider a MONETIZED age restricted category. I am sure plenty of advertisers don't care much for kids clicking on their ads anyway. Kids can't afford cars and aren't able to buy alcohol, for example. Right now, age restricted videos cannot be monetized at all. If that changes, then I believe many creators would checkmark the age restriction. For such content the rules may be much more lenient.

What will happen otherwise?

Easy enough prediction.

YouTube will end up a boring place (in tendency anyway) and will lose much business to new and old competitors.

It will be boring because many creators will quit or leave for other platforms.

It will be boring because people no longer see recommendations that they find interesting.

Boring web sites don't have a bright future. Word spreads fast these days, keep that in mind.

Don't do it. Don't make YouTube boring. Work with us creators and keep YouTube a great place to hang out on and work for.

Thanks for reading!

Rothenberg, Germany, Christmas of 2017.

Jörg Sprave