



LABOUR AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

# ORGANISING YOUTUBE

A novel case of platform worker organising

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Content creators are part of a globally dispersed workforce on global platforms.



Confronted with unilateral changes to remuneration (working conditions), a group of YouTubers managed to successfully organise and formed the »YouTubers Union« (YTU).



In cooperation with the German trade union IG Metall, negotiations with YouTube and Google were conducted, thereby showing glimpses of how successful organising in this new environment might be conducted.



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»**Trade Unions in Transformation 4.0**« examines unions' strategic actions to mobilize power resources in a »new world of work« in which capital uses digital technology to re-organize the labour process. The Global Trade Union Programme of the FES aims to understand how the power balance between capital and labour is impacted and how workers are responding to the threats of the digital rollback towards greater exploitation and precariousness of workers. Pursuing a dialogue and action-oriented approach, the project ultimately intends to contribute to trade unions' strategic reflections, experimentation and purposeful transformation.

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## THE YOUTUBERS UNION: A NOVEL CASE OF WORKER ORGANISING

In the last decade, YouTube has established itself as the largest video sharing platform worldwide. Used by more than 2 billion people regularly today, YouTube is not just a crucial profit engine and data resource for its parent company Google (Alphabet 2020). It also serves as a source of income for more than 100,000 YouTubers, who produce the majority of content that users consume and engage with on the site every day (Alphabet 2020; Funk 2020).<sup>1</sup> The working conditions of YouTubers differ starkly from conventional forms of employment and resemble a type of ›platform work‹: an activity based on self-employment, with flexible scheduling and coordinated through a data-heavy, algorithmic environment. Even more than most platform workers, YouTube's globally dispersed workforce of content creators is facing a fragmented work environment, which makes the mutual association of workers seem highly difficult. However, in 2018, a group of YouTubers managed to successfully organise for their collective interests and formed a ›YouTubers Union‹ (YTU) to challenge corporate changes on the platform. The group eventually joined up with the German trade union IG Metall to enter into negotiation with YouTube and Google. This interesting and uncommon case of worker organising on a large-scale platform raises the question how successful organising in this new environment might be conducted.

Since the emergence of the ›platform economy‹ and companies like Google, Amazon and Facebook, labour activists and scholars alike have wondered how workers' collective action in this new field might look (Lehdonvirta 2016). Unclear distinctions between unpaid and paid work (embodied in the ›sharing economy‹ narrative), forms of false self-employment and new possibilities of control and surveillance have made questions about the composition of power resources for workers and their strategic employment a pressing issue. Our research aims to contribute to this discussion by laying out the case of the YTU, a so far unseen case of collective action in the platform economy. We would like to lay out *how YouTubers have constituted the YTU and what power resources the group could mobilise*. The argument we put forward in this article is that collective action on YouTube could not build on conventional forms of labour organising such as work stoppages, but instead was viable through (1) fast-pace mobilisation using online platforms, (2) the exercise of public pressure against the company and (3) the coalition with a traditional trade union. These tactics, along with the groups' invocation of many unclear legal issues, made it possible for the group to establish itself as a collective actor against YouTube (Dolata/Schrape 2018). While

the organising success was limited, we argue that the case can offer helpful insight into the possibilities and obstacles within platform-based worker organising.

By describing the collective efforts of content creators on YouTube, this research presents a contrast to most prior research on collective action in the platform economy, which has been focused on location-based gig work arrangements in the transport or delivery sector (Tassinari/Maccarrone 2017). Besides some »embryonic form[s] of collective action« (Wood/Lehdonvirta 2019: 28) described so far, successful organising has not appeared viable in this field. Considering the fact that most workers in the platform economy work in the remote sector, new developments in this field are of substantial importance. Just like with other ›tech giants‹ that have spearheaded economic developments in recent years, the labour dynamics on media platforms are likely to proliferate into the broader economy as well. Ellmer and colleagues argue that despite the still marginal size, the paradigms of platform labour are »certainly challenging established labor market institutions and may serve as a blueprint for redesigning work organization in other industries and domains« (Ellmer *et al.* 2019: 8). The same might also be said for workers organising on these platforms, a phenomenon that has started to grow in the last years. The research we present is based on the triangulation of three methods, each of them looking at the case from a different angle (Flick 2011). Knowledge about the motivations and actions of individual members was gathered through six problem-centred interviews with YTU members (Witzel 1985, 2000). Data on collective processes was gathered through online ethnography of the YTU's Facebook group and their joint campaign with the trade union IG Metall. Both research angles were complemented through expert interviews with the group founder and a representative of IG Metall. Most research data were coded through a Qualitative Data Analysis software tool (Kuckartz 2010) and categories were developed through a grounded theory approach (Corbin/Strauss 1990). The field research took place between October 2018 and October 2019.

## YOUTUBE AS A PLATFORM AND THE LABOUR OF CONTENT CREATION

To understand labour on YouTube and the conflicts within it, a consideration of the company's business model is required. Like its parent company Google, YouTube is structured as a platform firm (Srnicek 2017). Instead of producing goods or services, platform firms provide marketplace infrastructures that enable different actors (producers, consumers, employers) to communicate, trade or establish contracts. As a video sharing service, YouTube connects advertising firms, consumers and content creators (›YouTubers‹) through its platform, a business model that sets the company apart from the two-sided market model of conventional publishers and

<sup>1</sup> Our research concentrates on the work of professional content creators, who earn their living through YouTube. The number 100 000 is based on our own (conservative) estimate on the basis of Funk (2020). Beyond its role as full income-source, YouTube also serves as a side income for a much larger group of people. Several million people alone were registered in the last years with the YouTube Partnership Program, through which channels can generate earnings on the platform.

media firms.<sup>2</sup> As marketplace owners, platforms can dictate conditions of access to their infrastructures: they define entry requirements, set prices for transactions and extract commission from participants (Staab 2019). At YouTube, users can upload video material and receive regular earnings for it, while advertisers can promote alongside such videos. YouTube passes on a part of the advertisement earnings to content creators, with a cut of usually 45 percent (van Es 2019). Like other digital platforms, YouTube's functionality is based on the extraction of enormous amounts of user data, both to match advertisers with targeted consumer groups and to provide relevant or appealing material to viewers (Zuboff 2019). While YouTube differs as a media platform from conventional online labour providers such as Upwork or Mechanical Turk, it does operate as a labour platform for its content creators. Like other labour platforms, it uses specific managerial tactics such as algorithmic management and is based on the flexible use of an easily scalable freelance workforce.

Income-generating content creators on YouTube can be described as platform workers. Research defines platform workers as individuals who »use an app or a website to match with customers in order to provide a service [...] in return for money. [...] The use of an app or website typically forms an integral part of providing the service, for instance allowing the worker to submit their work [...] through the platform« (O'Farrell/Montagnier 2019: 1). Work on YouTube might be framed as a web-based (or remote) platform labour, since it is not tied to a specific geographical location. This is similar to platforms like Upwork and Mechanical Turk (which can be used online), but different from on-site platform labour such as Uber, Deliveroo or Instacart. In contrast to work on most other platforms, work on YouTube is usually paid for after its publication, based on the engagement and views it receives (Kenney 2018). Considering their field of work, YouTubers might be classified as cultural workers in the platform economy, placing them in a field along with platform workers on TikTok, Twitch or Instagram (Johnson/Woodcock 2019; O'Meara 2019; Stokel-Walker 2019b). Labour on YouTube is centred around the production of videos on a creator's channel and active engagement with the creator's viewership. Content creators work to act, film and post-produce their content, and usually engage with their audience through multiple channels. Overall, the work of content creators is characterised by three aspects: (1) multiple income sources, (2) the use of »algorithmic management« and (3) the primacy of workers' subjectivity in the labour process. Income for content creators usually does not only stem from YouTube directly, but from various other sources: subscription platforms like Patreon (where people subscribe to artists in exchange for payments), merchandise shops, brand deals and donations or sponsorships. All of these income sources are relatively contingent, they can surge and fall in very short amounts of time. However, the main precondition for a creator's success is their visibility

on the platform – if creators are shown often on YouTube's recommendation sidebar, they can increase revenue chances, if they are shown less, they lose income. Visibility on YouTube is tied to the platform's recommendation engine, an algorithmic architecture that chooses what users see as recommendations on their screens when they use YouTube. While it is also a tool to help users and to increase watch time on the site generally, for content creators it functions as a disciplinary management tool. In order to get recommended and be visible on the platform, creators have to stick to unwritten and often quickly shifting rules: a certain length of videos (more than 10 minutes), a high frequency of publishing (at least once a week) and the avoidance of controversial language are necessary to assure a steady amount of recommendations (Kumar 2019).

The possibility of not being recommended poses a »threat of invisibility« (Bucher 2018) to content creators, a pressure to comply with rules and a maximum publishing frequency in order to stay visible on the platform. The tracking of content creator data as well as the hierarchisation of workers based on neural network technology are common features of what has been described as »algorithmic management« (Lee et al. 2015).<sup>3</sup> About the insecurity of dealing with this labour regime, one of our interviewed creators stated:

*»They do 300 algorithm changes a year, and they tell us about almost none of them. We just notice. [...] There's like a million different causes (.), potentially, that could be doing that thing, that is happening, and you never know if it's YouTube. It's very frustrating.« (Interview 2: 15)*

This underscores that creators lack crucial knowledge on how YouTube distributes, gratifies or sanctions their activities, a phenomenon described as »information asymmetry« (Rosenblat/Stark 2016). This contrasts with the conventional relationship between freelancers and their distributors or clients. A third important characteristic of work on YouTube is its high degree of subjectivation. Research indicates that many creators situate themselves within social media platforms as »idols of promotion« (Duffy/Pooley 2019), meaning as individuals with a spirit of self-enterprise, the pursuit of a meritocratic promise and authentic self-expression (ibid.: 9). Similar to other forms of contemporary, self-entrepreneurial work, creators are engaged in constant processes of »self-branding« (Duffy/Pooley 2019), often across various platforms. Creators, especially those with a smaller following, also engage in forms of »aspirational labor« (Duffy 2017), work activities that are rarely paid, but feed their »prospect of a career where labor and leisure coexist« (ibid.: 4). While YouTube promotes itself as a democratic platform, its creators are not equal in generating income on it. Advertising rates privilege creators in the Global North and research suggests a gender divide that exceeds even traditional media outlets by far (Arnold 2013; Döring/Mohseni 2019; Writes 2019).

<sup>2</sup> In two sided-markets like newspaper publishing, »the media outlet needs to balance the interests of advertisers on one »side«, and readers or audiences on the other.« (Burgess/Green 2018: 9).

<sup>3</sup> Algorithmic management describes a work environment where »human jobs are assigned, optimized, and evaluated through algorithms and tracked data« (Lee et al. 2015: 1603).

From a collective action angle, the organisation of workers at YouTube appears difficult. Workers face three-fold fragmentation. First, they are confronted with *organisational fragmentation* through their status as independent contractors. Despite tight control of creators on the platform, they are not formally integrated into the organisation and therefore lack rights to collectively bargain or organise. The fact that workers are pitted against each other on YouTube as marketplace competitors intensifies this dynamic. Second, the logic of surveillance-based algorithmic management described above also suggests that workers face *technological fragmentation*, entangled with high information asymmetries that prevent them from communicating with each other. Third, creators are confronted with *geographical fragmentation*, due to the dispersion of workers across regions and borders, often with different legal frameworks. Sometimes neither workers, YouTube or advertisers are based in the same country and jurisdiction (Berg et al. 2019). The association of individuals on these grounds is difficult and has led to a collective voice of content creators not being visible on YouTube.

## CONFLICT ON YOUTUBE: THE ›ADPOCALYPSE‹

Like most labour organising, the emergence of YTU was linked to a specific workplace conflict. Conflict on YouTube arose from a series of scandals on the platform from 2017 onwards that led to tighter control of labour processes. YouTube suffered a major financial loss when advertisements were screened alongside racist, anti-Semitic and misleading content (Winkler et al. 2017). This led to advertisers like Walmart, Coca-Cola and Starbucks diverting spending away from YouTube and cancelling sponsorships (Nicas 2017). After only a few weeks, YouTube's losses were estimated at around USD 750 million, very likely rising to several billion USD in subsequent months (Rath 2017). To counter this development and regain trust among advertisers, YouTube enforced a strict regime of (mostly) automated content moderation on the platform. Besides the deletion of doubtful content, these changes also resulted in an intensified, algorithmic labour regime for most creators on the platform, leading to a high number of arbitrary sanctions, channel shutdowns and income loss. Regardless of actual rule violations, creators' videos were demonetised<sup>4</sup>, ›shadowbanned‹<sup>5</sup> or saw their channels closed for several weeks. Some examples of falsely flagged content include videos about a boat-building technique called ›strip built‹ (which was flagged because of the word ›strip‹), the use of vernacular language or terms such as ›gay‹ or ›trans‹, which were flagged as ›shocking content‹ (Alexander 2019; Kumar 2019: 7f.). YouTube's abrupt changes, unclear com-

munication and lack of accountability on the issue sparked a public backlash by content creators and users across the platform (Alexander 2019). The conflict, which was dubbed ›Adpocalypse‹ within the YouTube community, exposed the dependencies and vulnerabilities of creators that had already been present on the platform before. In this heated situation, a group of YouTubers formed the YTU to challenge labour conditions on the platform.

## ›YOUTUBERS UNITE‹: THE YOUTUBERS UNION

In reaction to YouTube's advertisement crisis and its repercussions, the YTU was established by content creators in March 2018. The group's founding was initiated by Jörg Sprave (JS), a popular German content creator whose income and visibility on the platform had dropped due to YouTube's advertisement restructurings. JS published a campaign video in which he called ›all YouTubers to arms‹ (Sprave 2018b) and created a Facebook group, which 15,000 individuals joined within six weeks. Regarding his motivation to initiate the group, JS states:

*»Since I was not the only one affected, I thought, this is such a huge issue at the moment, because it also shows how difficult it is as a small YouTuber. [...] I'm not that small myself, but even my big channel cannot ward this off. There is nothing you can do, they sit this out. That's why it is clear for me until now, if YouTube creators don't unite, no change will be achieved.« (Interview 6: 3)<sup>6</sup>*

The newly founded group consisted of three main constituencies: professional content creators, aspiring professionals, viewers and supporters. Most work was conducted by JS himself, a group of admin members and a couple of large professional creators who published campaign videos on their channels. According to our research, the YTU served three main purposes for members: to gather and exchange data, to organise or support campaigns and to discuss ongoing changes on the platform. (1) *Data exchange and collection* was important for creators to gather common knowledge on the problems they had faced individually. Surveys among all members were conducted to identify common grievances, and screenshots of statistics were shared to highlight problems creators experienced and collect evidence. (2) *Organisation and support of campaigns* was an important second form of interaction. The group's large membership base was put to use when the group's actions or campaigns were on display with public exposure, through likes, shares, comments or other forms of intervention via social media. (3) *Discussion of changes on YouTube* was a third important membership activity. Recent and upcoming developments on the platform (such as new terms and conditions) were discussed from a creator's perspective. This presented a contrast to the often unclear information

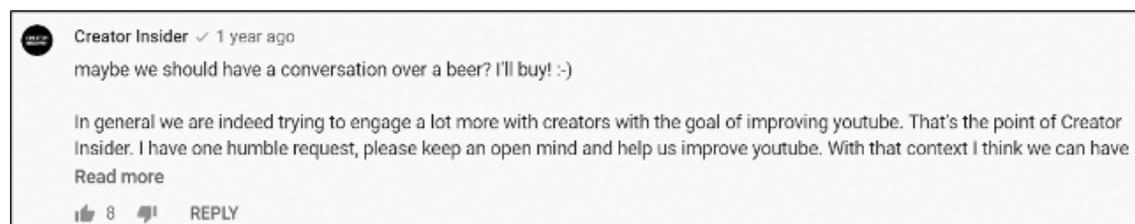
<sup>4</sup> ›Demonetisation‹ denotes the labelling of a video as ›not advertiser-friendly‹. Videos that are demonetised are not able to create revenue.

<sup>5</sup> ›Shadowbanning‹ denotes the process of making content on a platform hard or impossible to find. This limits the reach of content significantly.

<sup>6</sup> This and all following German quotes (Interviews 6, 7 and 9) have been translated by the authors.

Figure 1

Post from YouTube's account ›Creator Insider‹ in September 2018 below a YTU video (Sprave 2018c).



provided by the company itself. Usually, ties between YTU members were loose and fluid, and most of them did not know each other. While different channel genres were present in the YTU, its active membership was relatively homogeneous, consisting largely of male and white content creators from the United States or Europe, whose channels usually provided entertainment content. This homogeneity is not solely explained by YouTube's own racial and gender biases. It is also influenced by the prominence of white and male-dominated communities within the YTU, most importantly channels featuring weapons or firearms-related content. Accordingly, the YTU's campaign rhetoric played with martial themes addressed especially to men: »Creators, Users... To Arms! Join the YouTubers Union« (Sprave 2018a). This circumstance has likely contributed to this specific, homogeneous membership.

Overall, the development of the YTU can be broken down into two phases: a grassroots, self-organising phase in its first year (March 2018 to July 2019), and a second phase that was marked by cooperation with the German trade union IG Metall (beginning in July 2019). The first phase began with the initial formation of the group, after around 15,000 members had joined together in the Facebook group. The group sent introductory letters to YouTube headquarters, conducted internal membership surveys and launched a collective ›warning strike.<sup>7</sup> The first serious engagement from YouTube's side began in September 2018, after JS had published a video in the name of the YTU (›*Debunked: YouTube caught lying! (YouTubers Union Video)*«), which exposed the company's misleading communication on its monetisation guidelines (Sprave 2018c). While the company had stated that videos classified as ›unsuitable for advertisement‹ would not receive decreased visibility through the recommendation system, JS and other members provided channel statistics to show that both developments indeed correlated.<sup>8</sup> This argument was posted to an official YouTube channel (›Creator Insider‹), supported by YTU members, triggering debates among a wider audience on YouTube. Eventually, some members of the management responded

to the pressure and invited JS to a personal meeting (see Figure 1).

This invitation led to a number of personal meetings between JS and YouTube, held in Zurich (Switzerland) and at the company's headquarters in San Bruno (United States). While representatives did discuss some issues brought forward by the group, they did not elevate the talks to the status of negotiations with the group. The meetings made it possible to establish an informal feedback process between YTU members and YouTube. This brought about a couple of smaller changes on YouTube: some rules within the strike system were changed, and several members that had been demonetised were ›bailed out‹ through personal contact to YouTube. However, no lasting changes or institutionalised agreements could be achieved through this process. While YouTube proved open to talking with some large creators individually, the company refused to communicate with the group and rejected any institutionalised form of review and feedback.

## COOPERATION WITH IG METALL: FAIRTUBE

After talks with YouTube proved unable to produce lasting agreements, the YTU entered into a cooperative venture with the German trade union IG Metall. IG Metall is the largest trade union in Europe and has a tradition in the metalworking and electrical industry (IG Metall 2019c). While online labour would appear to be unfamiliar terrain for such a union at first glance, IG Metall had already initiated some attempts in the past to organise workers in the platform sector, most notably through their initiative ›Fair Crowdwork‹, started in 2015, and the adoption of the ›Frankfurt Declaration of Platform Work‹ in 2016 (N/N 2017). Representatives of IG Metall met the group founder JS in September 2018 at a trade union conference in Berlin, Germany. A major argument in favour of working together for JS was the legal expertise and financial resources of IG Metall, which offered the prospect of taking YouTube to court (comp. Interview 6). Between November 2018 and July 2019, the group met regularly to prepare their collaboration, which eventually resulted in the joint *FairTube* campaign. The *FairTube* campaign was initiated in July 2019, after JS and IG Metall announced their intention to work together in a joint press release:

<sup>7</sup> The idea behind the warning strike was to refrain from publishing content for several weeks in order to pressure YouTube into making concessions.

<sup>8</sup> The conflict for creators lies in the apparent correlation of the monetisation status of videos and their likelihood of being recommended. While YouTube has denied that it treats ad-sponsored videos different than videos without advertisements, creators that had their videos demonetised disagreed with this statement (comp. Kumar 2019).

»IG Metall, the largest trade union in Europe, and the Youtubers Union, an association of online video creators, announced today a joint initiative to improve the working conditions of YouTubers who earn income, or aim to, from the videos they upload to the YouTube platform.« (IG Metall 2019a)

After this intention was announced, members of the YTU were asked to confirm the proposal for collaboration via Facebook group polls and voting on joint demands. On 26 July 2019, the two groups then launched the FairTube campaign, consisting of three main elements: a public *campaign video* on social media, a *campaign website* (<http://fairtube.info>) that informed creators and the public about problems on YouTube, and six *campaign demands* that had been voted on by YTU members (Sprave 2019a). The demands were:

- »(1) Publish all categories and decision-making criteria that affect monetisation and views of videos
- (2) Give clear explanations for individual decisions [...]
- (3) Give YouTubers a human contact person who is qualified and authorised to explain decisions [...]
- (4) Let YouTubers contest decisions that have negative consequences
- (5) Create an independent mediation board for resolving disputes
- (6) Formal participation of YouTubers in important decisions, for example through a YouTuber Advisory Board« (FairTube 2019)

YouTube was asked by the campaign to either follow up on these demands or to engage in meetings and negotiations. It was attended to forward these demands with three pressure strategies: (1) a lawsuit against YouTube/Google for sham self-employment, (2) a lawsuit for violations of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) in the European Union and (3) public pressure through »collaborative brand attacks«<sup>9</sup> by YTU members. YouTube was given 30 days to react to the demands, with measures otherwise being threatened.

The FairTube campaign attracted a relatively high level of attention to the situation of content creators on YouTube. The campaign video had a widespread impact on social media and was accompanied by campaign videos of YTU content creators with a large following. Most notable was the widespread press reaction: it was covered by major news networks, business press and tech media outlets worldwide.

<sup>9</sup> Collaborative brand attacks describe »public offenses from a large number of Internet users via social media platforms on a brand that are aimed to harm it and/or to force it to change its behavior« (Rauschnabel et al. 2016: 381). In the campaign, this was also referred to as »shitstorms«, a term mostly used in Germany for brand attacks like this.

In the United States, the United Kingdom and Germany, the campaign was covered by most major media companies.<sup>10</sup> The campaign also received attention from other content creators and the YouTube community. The YTU's group size almost doubled in the course of the campaign, from 15,000 to over 25,000 in three months. While YouTube did not react to the campaign in the beginning, it did issue press statements a few days after the campaign had started and after media enquiries became more frequent. In response to the campaign demands, the company expressed concern about content safety for viewers as well as the importance of brand safety for advertisers and emphasised that content creators are not viewed to be employees by YouTube (Sands 2019). The most visible outcome of the FairTube campaign was an invitation issued by YouTube and Google Germany, which was received by IG Metall in the last week of the proclaimed 30-day countdown (Sprave 2019b). A few days before the meeting, however, YouTube refused to allow YTU members to attend. IG Metall thereupon cancelled the meeting (IG Metall 2019b). Subsequently, IG Metall and the YTU announced that they would be taking action against YouTube. At the time this article was written, the FairTube campaign was preparing a lawsuit against the company and continued to work together with YouTube on an informal basis.

While policy outcomes are still lacking, the campaign did transform the position of the YTU, YouTube and IG Metall. For the YTU, the campaign made their cause more visible to the public while also diversifying its membership.<sup>11</sup> YouTube came under public scrutiny but was able to sit out the pressure. IG Metall was able to promote itself in organising a campaign of platform workers, expanding on its previous work in this field. Asked about its motivation, a representative of IG Metall who was involved in the FairTube efforts stated that the joint campaign was aimed at preventing the spread of online shadow labour markets and at anticipating future challenges in the overall area of working conditions:

»One of our major goals is to work against the development of parallel labour market, which reverses all the achievements that unions and workers have ever fought for. That is one goal. A second goal is to be prepared for the changing conditions of organisation in the workplace and for technical tools to shape work at companies.« (Interview 9: 5)

Throughout the campaign, IGM members also supplemented the public statements with basic information on the con-

<sup>10</sup> The issue was covered by *The Washington Post*, *The London Times*, *Bloomberg*, *Forbes*, *Wired*, *MIT Technology Review* and others (Chen 2019; Ellis 2019; Moody/Schu 2019; Sands 2019; Webb 2019b, 2019a). In Germany, major publishers like *Tagesschau*, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* and *Handelsblatt* covered the campaign (Küchermann 2019; Ostendorf 2019; Specht 2019).

<sup>11</sup> While the group remained far from representative in terms of YouTube's demographic and regional composition, a visible amount of non-white, female and trans creators were part of the campaign organising. Some active members were based in countries like India, China or Brazil.

cept of unions, workers' rights and the goals of the labour movement. Besides IG Metall, the YTU also had encounters with other workers' groups in the platform economy. When eight LGBTQ<sup>12</sup> YouTubers in California filed a class-action suit against YouTube's algorithmic management dynamics, both the FairTube campaign and the LGBTQ YouTubers affirmed their mutual solidarity with one other and established permanent contacts (Ellis 2019; Solsman 2016). Similar exchange took place and solidarity was expressed between activists that have been campaigning for the AB5 arrangement for gig workers in California (Konger/Scheiber 2019) as well as walkouts and demonstrations by tech workers at Google (Bhuiyan 2019). The founders of the Internet Creators Guild (ICG), an earlier effort to represent YouTube creators, were also in contact with YTU and endorsed their efforts publicly (Stokel-Walker 2019a). More controversially, several right-wing groups tried to forge coalitions with the YTU, lobbying within the group to rally against the closure of right-wing-channels. This foray was not taken up or supported by the YTU. While some interventions were blocked and individuals were excluded from the group, the YTU on the other hand did not openly address this issue.

Overall, the YTU's development in two stages (the first one self-organised and then with union backing) has proved sufficient to establish the group as a collective actor within the YouTube community and in the public arena. Given the hurdles and fragmentations of content creators on the platform described earlier, the effort to establish and develop the YTU is already in and of itself notable. It raises the question as to what power resources the group could mobilise, which shall be discussed in the following.

## POWER RESOURCE ANALYSIS: POTENTIALS OF ASSOCIATIONAL AND SOCIETAL POWER

To assess power relations in this labour conflict and see what potential YTU was able to mobilise, this paper applies the Power Resource Approach (PRA). As a research heuristic to analyse the potentials of trade unions and social movements in labour conflicts, the PRA was developed in the course of a ›revitalisation‹ of labour organisations (Lévesque/Murray 2013; Turner 2006; Voss/Sherman 2000). The approach aims to determine how workers' organisations have found new strategies to exert their interests and build influence. In any conflict, it differentiates between structural power, associational power, institutional power and societal power of workers (Schmalz et al. 2018). While primarily used for the research on transformations of trade unions, PRA can also be used as a tool to assess social movements without institutional backing. Our argument based on the empirical material is that while structural power is very low for con-

tent creators on YouTube, the establishment of the YTU can be traced back to successful mobilisation and development of two other power resources, associational power and societal power. This process was fostered by a growing debate surrounding the legal responsibilities of YouTube (institutional power), which the group was able to invoke to its advantage.

In labour conflicts, *structural power* describes the power workers possess in the economic system (Wright 2000), either through strategic work stoppages or by opting out of the work relationship permanently. Both a look at fragmentation within the labour process of content creators and attempted strike actions by the YouTubers Union (›warning strike‹, ›dead upload day‹) suggested that collectively withdrawing labour power has had limited or no impact on the site's functionality and brand value.<sup>13</sup> YouTube's proprietary marketplace positions creators as real-time competitors against each other; if an income-earning creator ceases to publish content, other creators can immediately fill this gap. Similar cases have been made for other forms of web-based platform labour (Vandaele 2018).

As the description of YTU's self-organising processes in the foregoing have illustrated, *associational power* proved to be a crucial lever for the group. Associational power arises ›from workers uniting to form collective political or [...] workers' associations‹ (Brinkmann et al. 2008: 25) and requires identification and organisational processes among individuals to take place (Schmalz et al. 2018). The development of the YTU shows how creators have ›appropriated‹ the communicative resources of both YouTube and Facebook to associate individuals for their purposes. The YTU used YouTube's video sharing function to promote calls to action and demands, thereby making use of their vast networks and followership on the platform.<sup>14</sup> Facebook's group tools were used to assemble members collectively with little effort. It served as a cost-free infrastructure with a low entry barrier and no interference by YouTube. Creators could communicate under conditions of anonymity, upload content and even vote upon common issues. Through the use of Facebook, more than 25,000 people could be gathered together in very short time periods. The power to associate so many members was possible due to two pre-conditions: the prominent initiative of JS and the successful invocation of a common ›YouTuber‹ identity among the platform's creator community. The initiative and leadership of JS did not just lead to the foundation of the group, but also equipped the YTU with a somewhat relatable public

<sup>12</sup> LGBTQ is an acronym for the terms lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer. These terms describe a person's sexual orientation or gender identity (Lesbian & Gay Community Services Center 2020). Due to its open publishing structure, YouTube has become an important space for LGBTQ creators.

<sup>13</sup> This does not change the fact, however, that the platform is inherently dependent on its creators' labour power and is potentially vulnerable to its withdrawal. To some extent, larger creators in the gaming sector have showed forms of ›marketplace bargaining power‹ (one form of structural power), as they were able to move to the Amazon-owned platform Twitch or have worked on cross-platform branding (Cassillo 2019). This does not apply to the majority of YouTube creators, however.

<sup>14</sup> The FairTube campaign video, for instance, was watched by over 500,000 YouTube viewers and recommended within the platform, a success that was possible through the use of existing (subscriber) networks on the platform.

figure. While not bound to the rules of horizontal deliberation, JS could establish the group as a decision-making, collective actor vis-a-vis YouTube and IG Metall. Almost all content creators in the group appealed to the identity of a ›YouTuber‹<sup>15</sup>; all of them felt that the company was treating creators wrong and agreed to the notion of a conflict of interest (or in some cases, antagonism) between creators and YouTube. This was based on common everyday experiences of creators and created a sense of cohesion and solidarity among them. There were, however, also limits to the development of associational power. Although the use of YouTube's and Facebook's platform tools proved helpful, the almost exclusive use of these platforms also made the group dependent on the platform's socio-technical infrastructure, and at times also hindered sustainable association.<sup>16</sup> While JS's leadership role in the YTU was appreciated by members and had strategic advantages, it also resulted in rather passive membership participation, in which decisions were legitimised by common votes, but not decided on or negotiated. And even though JS proved very relatable to some content creators, he was probably less relatable to other groups of creators within YouTube. Even by the standards of YouTube, the overwhelming majority of the YTU is comprised of tech-savvy white men located in the Global North. Although the YTU could invoke a ›YouTuber identity‹, association with it remained vague and did not translate into a distinct YTU identity or »common ideological ground« (Schmalz et al. 2018: 120). YTU members were, in fact, part of a very heterogeneous set of social (and political) groups, ranging from do-it-yourself crafting communities or gardening channels to alt-right supporters, labour movement supporters and queer creators. While not an overall sentiment, some group members declined to show solidarity with other creators, most clearly queer creators and other marginalised groups. The influence by alt-right creators and their followership posed a clear risk to the group's development as a solidarity-based labour movement.

The collaboration with IG Metall removed some of these ambivalences, increasing the overall associational power of the YTU. The union's capacity to appeal to a broader constituency helped to diversify and strengthen associational ties. On a gender level however, this development was likely to be of limited effect, considering IG Metall's image and structure as a male-dominated (metalworkers') union. For the YTU, this collaboration also came along with infrastructural resources (expert knowledge, financial capabilities, institutional recognition). Through the broad media coverage, group composition also diversified in the course

of its development, and a larger variety of people were able to voice their issues and concerns.

*Societal power* describes the leverage »arising from viable cooperation contexts with other social groups and organisations, and society's support for trade union demands« (Schmalz et al. 2018: 122). Such power lies in the ability to shape the public discourse in their favour (›discursive power‹) and to form coalitions with other groups (›coalitional power‹). The YTU was able to mobilise both of these resources successfully. Specifically, in the FairTube campaign, the YTU was able to pressure YouTube into making public statements, pressuring it to make changes in its management conduct. The roots of this potential might lie in the great importance of ›brand value‹ for YouTube and Google, and the threat of creators to substantially damage this value by scandalising business practices. In the public sphere, the YTU was able to profit from growing sentiment against Google and other platform giants due to data collection scandals and tax evasion cases (Manavis 2018). Also, attention to the causes was no doubt amplified by the position of YouTubers themselves, as highly visible figures in the public debate. Public attention as discursive power has proven to be a viable strategy in other fields of platform labour in the past: delivery riders in Turin and Berlin have specifically targeted the company's public image and were able to pressure it successfully on some issues (Tassinari/Maccarrone 2017). While the importance of brand value might differ across the field of platform companies, this does form an essential part of each company's »intangible assets« (Haskel/Westlake 2018). For the YTU, YouTube's being a well-known company has also made it easier to target it in the public arena, a rather rare circumstance in the field of web-based platform labour. Most importantly, ›coalitional power‹ was generated with IG Metall, a trade union with good public standing and a large pool of resources. This collaboration granted the YTU institutional standing and recognition, widening its scope beyond just an online group. Other potential coalitions might be explored in the future, with content creators (ICG, LGBTQ-Creators) as well as with organised workers at YouTube and Google (Tech Workers Coalition). Of importance to the YTU have also been coalitional efforts within the group itself: the fact that amateur and professional creators are organising together with their viewership has widened the reach of the group substantially. The collaboration between creators and viewers perhaps warrants further research, as it appears to be an uncommon feature in labour conflicts.

*Institutional power* describes the possibility of invoking existing regulation to cease capital's power at the workplace. For content creators on YouTube, who are spread out globally and whose occupations are still widely unknown to authorities, the legal situation is often unclear and subject to changes. This points to the future potential of regulation within both work processes (with their algorithmic forms of management) and the employment status of creators (with its dubious status of freelance work). The YTU or creators generally could not make use of a right to bargain collectively with YouTube. However, the group has taken action to

<sup>15</sup> This is a significant difference to other web-based labour platforms, where workers usually do not identify with their platform (Wood et al. 2018).

<sup>16</sup> Facebook's *Edgerank* algorithm (which curates the newsfeed of Facebook users), for instance, is highly dependent on continuous interaction. When interaction was low in the group, members would not be informed about recent group developments in their newsfeed, even though new posts and comments had been published. As the interviews show, this has led members to miss important information on the cause, especially in times exhibiting low interaction.

initiate lawsuits in various fields to bring about clarity regarding the legal situation and pave the way for new regulation in the field. Through efforts to file a lawsuit against YouTube in the EU for GDPR violation and for sham self-employment in various countries, YouTube might be pressured to change its practices. One indication of such a development is several landmark bills and regulations that have been introduced in recent years, such as the AB5 regulation for gig workers in California (Konger/Scheiber 2019) and billion-dollar penalties for Google in the EU for violating antitrust law (European Commission 2019). Institutional power remains *terra incognita* so far, however. Court rulings could turn out in favour of content creators, but this remains to be seen. As a power resource for the YTU, institutional power could mostly be employed as a threat (of filing lawsuits) to pressure the company. Through the FairTube campaign, the YTU could profit from IG Metall's institutional power, for instance by initiating official talks with the company. While institutional power can generally be seen as offering potential for the YTU, the frequently national nature of institutions also poses an obstacle for transnational movements, possibly fragmenting its members.

In conclusion, it can be said that the YTU was successful in the mobilisation of two power resources, associational and societal power. Associational power was developed through the organising process that JS and other creators initiated at a time when YouTube's reputation was at a low point and dissent against its practices was strong. It quickly assembled membership through the use of Facebook's and YouTube's infrastructure and established a collective process geared around information exchange, mutual aid and strategy-finding. Societal power was developed through the successful scandalising of YouTube's treatment of creators and its increasingly controversial content governance. This generated significant public attention and pressured YouTube to react in various ways (informal negotiations, press statements, smaller policy changes). This pressure was increased through successful collaboration with IG Metall, which improved the YTU's standing and equipped the group with institutional and associational resources (i.e. legal status and expert knowledge). Additionally, the legal grey area of YouTube's privacy and labour practices served as an important leverage for the YTU to pressure the company and raise public awareness about its practices. Of course, none of the mobilised power resources proved to be without risks or ambivalences. While associational power has been crucial to building and developing the group (and countering the platform's immense fragmentation of workers), a multiplicity of aspects are putting the group's associational potential at risk or are ambivalent as a strength: limited participation due to the concentration of power in the hands of JS, a lack of collective identity and the threat of conflict and exclusion due to hostile subcultures. While institutional power offers potential, its actual impact remains uncertain so far. Societal power might continue to be an important resource for the YTU and similar groups, but it is unclear how long the discursive momentum can be maintained and if coalitions will prove to be lasting.

## CONCLUSION: CHALLENGING FRAGMENTATION

Looking at the development of the YTU and analysing its power resources, several conclusions can be drawn. First of all, it becomes clear that the YTU differs from the previous forms of collective action that have been witnessed with workers in web-based platform labour so far. The YTU's actions went beyond the spontaneous (and usually fragmented) backlash of workers and users on a platform and can instead be described as a »collective actor with strategic capabilities« (Dolata/Schrape 2018). At the same time, the YTU is not to be confused with formal organisations or trade unions. The group's actions are shaped by forms of »organised informality« (Dobusch/Quack 2011) which are distinct from both formal organisations and non-organised collectives. Another important difference of the YTU in contrast to other associations of creators is that its organising processes were based on the formulation of a clear conflict line against YouTube.<sup>17</sup> While willingness to cooperate with YouTube was stated clearly, the group has addressed the company as a core problem in the conflict, and has challenged the company's affirmative notion of »partnership« in the process. Still, the activity of YTU members does not stem from an anti-capitalist or »class-conscious« standpoint, as interviewees repeatedly emphasised. The main effort was to re-install the »old YouTube« as creators and viewers had known it before. Still, the antagonistic narrative of a conflict line might serve as a basis for more broader forms of labour organising.

An important aspect of the YTU is the clear hierarchy between the founder JS and regular members of the group. This fact shaped the potential of associational power in ambivalent ways. While a small team of administrators formed an organisational core around JS and were at times embedded in some decision-making, JS functioned as the major symbolic figure, spokesperson and coordinator of the group. Although the development of power asymmetries is a conventional dynamic within collective actors (Dolata/Schrape 2018), its manifestation in the YTU proved to be relatively distinct. This dynamic, however, also mirrors the overall distribution of power within YouTube, where a small minority of highly influential creators garner the majority of attention and influence. It is not surprising, then, that such »Matthew-effects« are also present in organising processes. How this will develop in the future remains unclear. The group could become more grassroots-oriented and might be able to maintain membership activity, or could develop more into a »Single-Person-Organisation« (Lovink 2010) focused on one leadership figure. Another finding from the research is that trade unions such as IG Metall are making efforts to position themselves in the field of platform labour and have been able to do so with some success. In this case, IG Metall was a provider of institutional standing, expertise and experience as well as financial and infrastruc-

<sup>17</sup> This can be said to have been the case with the »Internet Creators Guild« (ICG), which was closely affiliated with YouTube and refrained from elaborating an obvious conflict of interest.

tural resources for the YTU. For IG Metall, the collaboration might help to position the union as a possible negotiation partner with platform corporations like Google. This offers a contrast to other fields of organising in the platform sector, where traditional unions have played no or only minor roles (Wood/Lehdonvirta 2019). However, it is unclear yet if such forms of collaboration will spread and how they will develop further.

Above and beyond the case of YouTube, it can be conjectured that workers on web-based labor platforms have the potential to form movements or groups with strategic capabilities if they make use of public social media tools at times of increased conflict on the platform. Associational power can be built up rapidly, and also maintained for longer periods of time. Public initiatives and scandalising efforts can be crucial, especially if the platform is well-known in the overall economy. For trade unions, it should be clear that the organisation of platform workers, especially at a cross-border-level, is difficult to assess exclusively with the frameworks of institutionalised labour associations in mind. Web-based collective actors often exhibit hybrid and fluid forms of membership and can usually not build on legal recognition or rights to co-determination. The practice of IG Metall in this case can be seen as a notable approach toward finding coalitional potential between old and new labour organisations. While suggestions for building up workers' power in the platform labour sector are generally limited (due to highly heterogeneous forms of work), the findings described above might prove specifically helpful for other cultural workers on platforms, especially well-known platforms like Twitch, Instagram and TikTok. More broadly, workers in the web-based macro-work sector (with companies such as Upwork) might be able to draw useful conclusions from the case as well. As the case presented here and others show, media platforms should be seen as sites of work within mostly precarious conditions, and not just as sites of leisure or individual self-promotion.

Overall, the YouTubers Union can be seen as a successful step to challenge the multiple fragmentations that web-based platform workers on YouTube are faced with. This is not to say that these hurdles were overcome or that YouTube changed its policies substantially. In fact, the group's demands have remained unmet for the most part. As a step towards voicing collective discontent and establishing labour as a relevant issue on the platform, it has proven successful. For the research of labour in the platform economy, this case appears to be the first form of collective action on web-based platforms that could go beyond the »embryonic form[s] of collective action« (Wood et al. 2018: 28). This indicates that collective action is possible across labour platforms, and not only limited to specific parts of the location-based gig economy.

For the YTU, a couple of different potentialities and possible developments exist. As explained earlier, court rulings and legislation in the upcoming years will likely bring more clarity to labour arrangements of the platform economy. This will help clarify the scale of institutional power for the group and creators more generally. The YTU might be able to build on this development to enforce transparency or enable forms of institutionalised worker protection on YouTube. In the face of continuous and growing pressure against YouTube's practices (legally, publicly and by advertisers), the YTU might remain successful in scandalising the company's conduct. To increase influence and societal power, it could form coalitions with other groups of creators on YouTube, other workers at Google and other web-based creative workers who share similar grievances.<sup>18</sup> The group's most crucial field of development, however, appears to be associational power. Possible potential lies in the increase of membership, especially among large-scale creators with public influence. This might be hindered so far by the rather homogeneous composition of the group (making it appear similar to a special-interest group) and the focus on its leadership. It could be overcome both by internal efforts to accommodate a larger variety of creators and by efforts to foster close-knit cooperation with other groups. The FairTube campaign has been one step in the direction of such a possible development. The possibility to uphold group activity and maintain work is also crucial and will partly depend on the actions of other players (YouTube, advertisers, the public and regulators) in the conflict. As a novel case of worker organising in the (remote) platform sector, the case of the YouTubers Union might open up a horizon for campaigning in similar fields. Along with other efforts that have been described in the last years, it can illustrate steps towards a more contested platform economy.

<sup>18</sup> Most suitable in such efforts would be content creators at Twitch, Instagram and TikTok, as they exhibit a similar labour process (cf. O'Meara 2019) and could unite under the umbrella (identity) of creative work. Coalitions with other platform workers might be more difficult, but not entirely impossible.

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## ORGANISING YOUTUBE

### A novel case of platform worker organising



In the last decade, YouTube has established itself as the largest video sharing platform worldwide. Content creators on YouTube work to act, film and post-produce their content, and usually engage with their audience through multiple channels. Their success, and thus revenue, is dependent on their visibility on the platform. Visibility on YouTube is tied to the platform's recommendation engine, an algorithmic architecture that chooses what users see as recommendations on their screens when they use YouTube. Grievances among content creators raised, however, when YouTube enforced a strict regime of (mostly) automated content moderation on the platform.

Income-generating content creators are a globally dispersed workforce, however, facing a fragmented work



environment. This makes the mutual association of those platform workers seem highly difficult. Also, collective action on YouTube could not build on conventional forms of labour organising such as work stoppages. Nevertheless, in March 2018, grassroots, self-organising by a group of YouTubers has resulted in the creation of the YouTubers Union consisting of professional content creators, aspiring professionals, viewers and supporters. The YouTubers Union sent introductory letters to YouTube headquarters, conducted internal membership surveys and launched a collective »warning strike«. YouTube proved open to talking with some large creators individually. Yet, the company refused to communicate with the YouTubers Union, and rejected any institutionalised form of review and feedback.



As talks with YouTube proved unable to produce lasting agreements, the YouTubers Union entered into a cooperative venture with the German trade union IG Metall – the largest union in Europe. This coalition with a traditional union resulted in the joint FairTube campaign launched in July 2019. The campaign attracted a high level of attention to the situation of content creators but was initially able to sit out the pressure. Nevertheless, the campaign made their cause more visible to the public while also diversifying the membership of the YouTubers Union, while IG Metall was able to promote itself in organising a campaign of platform workers.

For further information on this topic:  
<https://www.fes.de/lnk/transform>