
Who Are You, YouTube? The Invisible Corporate Individuals of YouTube and its Extremely Visible Creators

Emma Joanne Small

Abstract

This paper seeks to understand the invisibility of the corporate individuals working for YouTube and how the extremely visible creator community responds to them as a singular corporate person. The paper proposes that to achieve greater visibility and thereby accountability, YouTube should create an organizational chart for its stakeholders, rely less on algorithms, and establish stable individual identities and a consistent professed corporate persona. The literature review first explains how individuals outside of clandestine organizations must make organizational assumptions based on the little information available due to the organizations' invisibility and secrecy. Then, the paper looks at accountability and the need for dissenting opinions in organizations to keep them accountable. Next, the paper defines what a superperson, corporate person, and corporate persona means to explain how organizations form into a singular identity. After, the paper explains the origins and general structure of YouTube and then demonstrates the communicative fallout of YouTube's "Adpocalypse" of 2017. The discussion sections seek to demonstrate how YouTube is an invisible organization and an unaccountable corporate person, especially in the context of the Adpocalypse, and how YouTube can make themselves more visible and more accountable.

Keywords: organizational communication, YouTube, Adpocalypse, clandestine organizations, accountability, superperson, corporate person, corporate persona

Introduction

Shane Dawson. Jeffree Star. David Dobrik. Lily Singh. Logan Paul. Susan Wojcicki. For most YouTube users, one to all of the first five names may be recognizable as YouTube creators; however, Susan Wojcicki, the CEO of YouTube, may be more difficult for individuals to pin down (Arthurs et al., 2018, p. 8). Similarly, other corporate personnel at YouTube may appear even more mysterious and unknown to the greater YouTube user base and creator community. With an essentially invisible corporate staff, YouTube as an organization has transformed through its own individual employees' creation and definition of YouTube as a singular person (Cheney, 2009, p. 165). Creators on YouTube, then, respond to the organization as such; for example, Green and Green (2017) stated in their YouTube video, "...if you create quality content [that] YouTube wants, [then] YouTube might push toward your content." YouTube's status as an individual allows the organization to exemplify a corporate persona that renders its organizational structure invisible and its actions unaccountable. Such a phenomenon occurred during the so called "Adpocalypse" of 2017, where communication broke down between YouTube and its creators, leading to creator frustration, distrust, and profit loss from advertisers

pulling out of the platform after their ads were placed on inappropriate content (Rading-Stanford, 2018, pp. 203-204). Upon examining YouTube's organizational invisibility and secrecy that leads to unaccountability, the creation of YouTube as a corporate person, its origin and structure, and the fallout of the Adpocalypse, YouTube could avoid communicative disasters by making itself more visible through establishing an organizational chart, relying less on algorithms, and solidifying its corporate identity.

Organizational Invisibility and Unaccountability

An invisible organization is not necessarily always clandestine, though such organizational bodies can provide substantial information on how invisibility is expressed within these contexts. Stohl and Stohl (2011) define clandestine organizations as having three "necessary and sufficient characteristics": (1) Member affiliation secrecy, (2) Internal activities and governance structure that operate outside the public realm, and (3) External traces that become known outside of membership (p. 1199). Essentially, the internal structure of the clandestine organization is unknown and operates without public knowledge, while its external activities are allowed to be known in specific instances. Due to the invisibility of clandestine organizations, "external observers often construct their own organizational 'reality' based on their own positions, history, and understanding of the context" (Stohl & Stohl, 2011, p. 1204). Because individuals on the visible outside do not understand the secretive inside, they must make their own organizational assumptions based on the information they have. However, though clandestine organizations appear the least transparent of organizations, corporate organizations have their secrets as well.

Clandestine and corporate organizations both represent opposing paradoxes. For the clandestine organization al Qaeda, Schoenebern and Scherer (2012) argue that the criminal network "fundamentally depends on achieving an extremely high degree of visibility and attracting global attention to increase the probability of its own perpetuation" (p. 967). The internal organizational structure of al Qaeda remains invisible, yet its external activities must be made extremely visible. Contrarily, legitimate private organizations have a high degree of visibility in their governance structures, but lack visibility in their internal affairs, such as corporate strategies or innovation processes (Schoenebern & Scherer, 2012, p. 968). However, a legitimate organization may release internal information if experiencing a corporate scandal, where their legitimacy is under intense scrutiny, such as with YouTube's response to the Adpocalypse in the reform of YouTube advertiser-friendly guidelines (Schoenebern & Scherer, 2012, p. 968; Rading-Stanford, 2018, p. 204). Organizational tactics of invisibility typically lead to specific individuals in an organization being unaccountable for their actions.

Constructive dissent, such as questioning the ethical nature of an action, is paramount for an organization. Without dissent, organizations are likely to fall prey to groupthink, where each employee goes along with an idea contrary to their true thoughts on the matter (Cheney & Lair, 2005, p. 66). According to Cheney and Lair (2005), "Hegstrom (1990) sees organizational rhetoric fulfilling a 'mimetic condition' that serves to inhibit rather than foster dissent" (p. 62). Nowadays, there is a practical emphasis on "unity of voice" for an organization's identity and messages (Cheney & Lair, 2005, p. 62). But, if every member of an organization is expected to be unified, the resulting lack of dissent may lead to unaccountability when issues arise.

Organization as Superperson and Corporate Person(a)

Organizations can form, amalgamate, and become a singular superperson, as with the case of YouTube. The superperson is the decision maker, sometimes the leader, and typically the organization as a collective (Czarniawska-Joerges, 2016, p. 193). Although, Czarniawska-Joerges (2016) argues that “[o]rganizations are not people at all... but *sets of collective action* undertaken in an effort to shape the world and human lives” (p. 194). Essentially, organizations may front as one person, yet are constituted by the collective efforts of multiple people. However, organizations have likely been categorized as superpersons to create “legal persons” who become accountable “both as citizens and as consumers and as producers” (Czarniawska-Joerges, 2016, p. 195). Yet arguably the individuals in the organization become *less* accountable. In addition to a superperson, an organization can be called a corporate person.

The corporate person is similar in many ways to the superperson, with YouTube seeming to display qualities of both. Cheney (2009) explains that the origins of the corporate person come from “*natural* persons” struggling to define “new centers of power” (p. 165). Corporate persons in turn transcend the “lives, resources, energies, and powers of the natural persons who created them” (Cheney, 2009, p. 165). The corporate person, then, becomes ambiguous. Cheney (2009) states, “Just as legal ‘incorporation’ limits and diffuses individual responsibility, so do corporate messages complicate matters of authorship, voice, attribution, and responsibility” (p. 176). Natural persons and individuals are subsumed by the greater corporate person identity. Furthermore, the “individual or self is to some degree decentered through self-definition and self-diffusion in corporate symbols, images, [and] messages” (Cheney, 2009, p. 176). Subsequently, the corporate person will exude a corporate persona.

The corporate persona has the same roots as the notion of the corporate person. According to St. John III (2014), sense-making used to be formed by institutions, such as churches and governments, but now has a new sense-maker in “big business” (p. 692). In the case of Mobil’s “Observations” advertorials from 1975-1980, the ads revealed how a “corporation attempts to build such an influential persona by offering a corporate personality that is an empathetic fellow traveller who is relatable by being believable, and influential by being aspirational” (St. John III, 2014, p. 693). The more real and genuine these characteristics are expressed through corporate messaging, the more influential to the target audience. However, St. John III (2014) warns that “this kind of corporate persona – the reasonable, empathetic corporate entity who wants the best for its fellow citizens – can be problematic” (p. 697). Even when staying in line with their “professed character,” organizations are co-mingling both their “professed corporate citizenship and drive for success in the marketplace” (St. John III, 2014, p. 697). Consumers could be beguiled by the company’s corporate persona yet fail to realize the organization’s hiding of costs to society, such as unsustainable practices (St. John III, 2014, p. 697). An organization’s corporate person, then, has the potential to lead to underhanded negative consequences for society as a whole.

Origins and General Structure of YouTube

Most know that YouTube is owned by Google, but before the \$1.65 billion deal in 2006, the platform was founded by three PayPal employees in 2005 (Arthurs et al., 2018, p. 3). The website survived and subsequently thrived off user-generated content (i.e., videos uploaded via “content creators”), growing exponentially every year (Arthurs et al., 2018, p. 3). Such expansion led several content creator channels to reach “YouTube celebrity status” in areas like gaming, how-to, and beauty (Arthurs et al., 2018, pp. 3-4). Contemporarily, YouTube has become a “hybrid commercial environment where user-generated content production is efficiently tied to forms of monetization,” such as paid advertising (Arthurs et al., 2018, p. 7). Simply, creators can make profit from their videos.

However, in 2016, CEO Susan Wojcicki still regarded YouTube as in an “investment stage of development,” which insinuates that it had “yet to return a profit” (Arthurs et al., 2018, p. 7). In addition, the “hidden working” of the algorithm employed by YouTube, and ultimately Google, “has always influenced what gains most visibility” (Arthurs et al., 2018, p. 6). YouTube defines four “essential freedoms” that “define who [they] are”: freedom of expression, freedom of information, freedom of opportunity, and freedom to belong (YouTube, 2020). Yet, many would criticize these values after such communicative issues like the Adpocalypse of 2017.

Communicative Fallout of YouTube’s Adpocalypse

The Adpocalypse spanned across an 18-month period, where YouTube “was subjected to a major advertising boycott” (Rading-Stanford, 2018, p. 203). The term Adpocalypse was coined by the creator PewDiePie, following a large number of “high profile brands” withdrawing their adverts after having them appear on “thousands of videos expressing hate and extremism” (Rading-Stanford, 2018, pp. 203-204). According to Rading-Stanford (2018), YouTube’s response was two-fold: (1) reform YouTube’s advertiser-friendly guidelines and (2) wide scale *retroactive demonetization* of millions of videos that breach the new guidelines (p. 204). Retroactive demonetization means that creators’ past videos were stopped from making profit.

Where the massive communicative fallout occurred is that no one from YouTube’s corporate staff *notified creators of the above two processes* (Rading-Stanford, 2018, p. 204). Therefore, creators were not given the chance to change their videos to fit within the guidelines. All the creators saw was a large discrepancy between their views and profit (Rading-Stanford, 2018, p. 204). The silence from YouTube prompted creators to bring these issues to their wider audience on the platform, engaging in meta conversation about the website itself and its future (Rading-Stanford, 2018, p. 204). After all, YouTube continued to operate as “the framework upon which the content, conversations and community are built,” instead of a company with visible individual employees available for creators to voice their concerns to (Rading-Stanford, 2018, p. 208). Rading-Stanford (2018) states, “For many, the new guidelines were too restrictive, punishing creativity and guiding creators towards making a more simplistic and inoffensive style of content.” (p. 204). These new guidelines clearly clash with YouTube’s self-proclaimed “freedoms,” since such creator complaints demonstrate a lack of values in self-expression, information, opportunity, and belonging.

YouTube as an Unaccountable Corporate Person

YouTube constitutes an invisible corporate staff, while its creators are extremely visible. Building upon Stohl and Stohl's (2011) three characteristics of a clandestine organization, YouTube as an organization seems to embody all three (p. 1199). Relating to the first two characteristics, the organizational structure of YouTube is clouded in secrecy, since a Google search will only yield results about what an organizational chart looks like generally, *not* what YouTube's specific one entails. One of the only employees that individuals may know is the CEO Susan Wojcicki. In addition, as the Adpocalypse illustrates, YouTube's activities are largely unknown and kept hidden, such as their algorithms and policy change. For the last characteristic, the external activities of YouTube are known extremely well through the user-generated content of all their creators. The creators of YouTube appear as the front end on a stage, while the corporate part of the organization hides in the back end behind closed doors.

The Adpocalypse demonstrates the clear unaccountable corporate person that YouTube has become. Creators were not notified of such a large change to their guidelines, being intentionally bereft of vital information. All creators could do in facing the invisible organization with a corporate persona is "construct their own organizational 'reality' based on their own positions, history, and understanding of the context" (Stohl & Stohl, 2011, p. 1204). For example, YouTube creators created videos responding to the situation and informing their wider audiences (Rading-Stanford, 2018, p. 204). YouTube's actions in not notifying creators may have been caused by inhibited dissent, where no corporate personnel questioned whether their silence was ethical. The corporate staff of YouTube appear to have been overwhelmed by their corporate persona, struggling to stabilize their decentered individual identities (Cheney, 2009, p. 176). Their internal organizational battle seems to have led to discrepancies in their professed character between being a distinct and open platform to one that conforms to advertiser standards and restricts creativity. If YouTube continues to be unaccountable and invisible, more creators will likely continue to leave the platform in the hopes of something better.

Making YouTube More Visible and Accountable

There are three actions YouTube could potentially take to achieve greater visibility, and thereby, greater accountability to their creator community and user base.

Organizational Chart

YouTube can develop an organizational chart with optimal Search Engine Optimization (SEO). An organizational chart open to YouTube's stakeholders would clear up any doubts about the governance structure of the organization and its departments. Contact information could be given for certain individuals on the chart, so that creators could call them when an issue arises. Exceptional SEO would be a must for YouTube's organizational chart as the Google Search Engine will usually only pull up general information, rather than substantial data on the organization itself.

Algorithms

YouTube needs to rely less on algorithms. Most creators' frustrations come from how the algorithm influences what content is visible (Arthurs et al., 2018, p. 6). For example, the Adpocalypse left the algorithm sensitive to "unfriendly advertiser content," so any video not following the new guidelines was less likely to be seen. An open dialogue is needed between the YouTube corporate personnel and creator community. Sometimes an individual needs to talk with a *natural* person to sort through a problem, instead of a corporate persona automated response system (Cheney, 2009, p. 176).

Identity

YouTube corporate personnel need to center their own individual identities and the organization itself needs to stabilize its professed character. Individuals in the company need to take back their voice of dissent that questions the unified voice in a constructive and open manner. On a greater scale, the organization needs to redefine their values. If they are a distinct, open platform for everyone to express themselves, then their policies should align. Otherwise, YouTube needs to rebrand and admit that their platform is for content that can work within the confines of an advertiser-friendly lens. More transparency would breed more accountability.

Conclusion

YouTube is a platform that could benefit from making transparent their organizational structure, engaging more with content creators, and defining who they are as corporate individuals and a large organization. YouTube as an organization has shown itself to fit the definitions of organizational invisibility, superperson, and corporate person through its organizational actions, especially with concern to its reliance on algorithms. The YouTube superperson with the corporate persona needs to become more visible and accountable to its stakeholders, especially when communication crises arise like the Adpocalypse. In a post-Adpocalypse YouTube space, many creators are looking towards YouTube to reach out their hand to help those still recovering. However, there is more than just one hand; there are numerous ones connected to people with their own experiences, reaching altogether in a collective display of unity. The only thing these individuals need to realize is that they have names too. They are also an integral part of the "You" in "YouTube."

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