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WDC 618: Technologies of Social Change

### **Social Media as Means to Redress Exploitation of Disorganized Labor**

The late aughts and teens of the 21st century saw a boom in independent content creation, most notably in the field of video. With the creation of video platforms like Youtube, Vine and TikTok, creatives no longer had to contend with a gatekeeping establishment that was reticent to try new ideas. In this new order, it was no longer necessary to write and workshop your pilot, secure a production deal and book a soundstage to have a TV show—all you needed was a digital camera and an internet connection. And for good or ill, these brave new media artists' unfettered freedom to create was accompanied by a lack of policies that TV and film workers now take for granted—most notably, labor protections or unions.

Thanks to these pioneers, we currently enjoy a golden age of free or cheap, easily-accessed content. However, content creators are coming forward now more than ever to talk about the state of the industry, exposing the exploitation of their labor and abuse at the hands of their managers. In the pre-internet age of labor disputes, non-unionized labor had no way to easily communicate, organize or coordinate actions with their fellow workers. However, the advent of social media has closed that gap and played a vital role in not only redressing the grievances of mistreated workers and gaining informal audiences with their managers and employers, but also disseminate their message to the media and their biggest means of support, their fans. As a case study of the role social media can play in labor disputes, this paper will discuss the #ChangeTheChannel movement.

#### **I. Channel Awesome**

Founded by brothers Doug & Robert Walker, and their friend Michael Michaud in 2008, Channel Awesome began as a vehicle to promote Walker's comedy online (Rozsa, 2018). which typically involved multiple characters, skits, and criticism of intellectual properties intended for children from the 1980s and '90s. Over time, other video producers began to join under the CA umbrella. Many emulated Walker's critical oeuvre while also expanding the site's focus to pop culture criticism on nostalgic and contemporary films, television, comic books and video games. For the first four years of the site's existence, the Walkers and Michaud would create semi-professional anniversary movies commemorating the site's founding, starring many of the site's most popular creators. CA soon developed a devoted following, averaging hundreds of thousands of hits per month, and continued to enjoy sustained success for just over a decade.

In many ways, Channel Awesome has had a lasting effect on modern video content creation and criticism. The most prominent effect is the way it prefigured contemporary systems of online video content creation and aggregation. Doug Walker et al. effectively created the first multi-channel network, or MCN: a unified management system that will represent, promote and find sources of revenue, such as brand deals, for a decentralized collective of content creators. These types of networks are now commonplace, and resemble the closest thing to a union that the industry has. CA has also produced Youtube media personalities that have gone on to enjoy both viral and sustained success on YouTube, most notably Dan Olsen of Folding Ideas, and Lindsay Ellis, formerly known as the Nostalgia Chick to Walker's Nostalgia Critic. The latter has found the most success, co-creating and starring in the PBS literature webseries *It's Lit!*, the publication of a novel, and a Hugo Award nomination for her video series analyzing Peter Jackson's Hobbit duology (Weiss, 2019).

Channel Awesome's monetization was enabled by the website Blip.tv. Unlike Youtube, which was hostile to any content that involved transformative works—i.e., pop culture criticism—Blip.tv had no issues with hosting such videos on their website. Blip also paid better, since its content was automatically monetized and a share of revenue paid out, whereas Youtube required that producers seeking monetization apply for the Partner Program and be formally accepted before any revenue could be generated; in the heyday of CA, making the partner program was notoriously difficult for indie producers (Allen, 2007).

## **II. #ChangeTheChannel**

On March 13th, 2018, Allison Pregler, a video producer who had been formerly been under the Channel Awesome network umbrella, tweeted in response to a fan's question about Doug Walker: "I'd ask him, but he was there when I was kicked off of CA and did nothing, leeches \$90k off of fans, and treated me like crap. Also his reviews are bad" (Pregler, 2018). Pregler hearkened back to her abrupt dismissal from the site in 2015: the official reason given for her dismissal was being 15 minutes late to a Skype call with Michaud (Pregler, 2015). She also referenced the controversial 2013 IndieGoGo fundraising campaign CA had undertaken to fund 40 episodes of a new game show, *Pop Quiz Hotshot*. The campaign successfully raised \$90,000, but after a long wait and accusations of mismanaging funds, CA produced only 12 episodes in 2015 to meet their fundraising platform's legal requirements (Huller, 2018), much to the frustration of fans.

Soon, other former CA creators began adding to Pregler's Twitter thread, telling their stories of unprofessional management, ill-prepared and sometimes dangerous movie shoots. It was also common for producers to be paid absurdly low sums or in 'exposure' (i.e, not at all), and that

they forfeit any profits made from resulting collaborations filmed during the producers' downtime on those sets. Another recurring theme in the producers' stories told of a culture of bullying that enabled abuse from management to producers, often ignoring smaller producers in favor of the most popular. Eventually, this impromptu digital gathering was defined by a snappy, somewhat sarcastic hashtag: #ChangeTheChannel, which aided in assembling and disseminating information to curious fans and strangers.

On April 2nd, these former CA producers collaborated to create a document compiling all allegations alluded to on Pregler's Twitter thread and more, with a second revision published April 7th. The resulting 73-page document, *Not So Awesome*, was shared through Google Docs and featured narratives from Pregler, Ellis, and 17 other former CA producers as well as two anonymous accounts (*Not So Awesome*, 2018). At the heart of the document was one simple demand, as stated in the document's foreword. It also acknowledged that their demand may not be met, but still struck a hopeful tone for future indie content creators:

One goal many contributors share is the hope that Channel Awesome would both acknowledge and apologize for their behaviors, both on a public and personal level with the former and current producers. However, we do not necessarily expect that apology, as nice as that may be. Perhaps the best we can hope for is acknowledgement of any sort, good or bad. If that's not possible, then certainly, we all hope that by telling our stories, we are able to protect other innocent people from having to experience anything like this in the future (*Not So Awesome*, 2018).

Within the document, producers elaborated on the stories they first tweeted, painting a picture of Doug Walker as a hands-off figurehead disinterested in the business of the site and the

work of his fellow producers, and Mike Michaud as an abusive, uncaring tyrant of a boss who bullied and berated female producers, at least once to the point of tears (Allison Pregler, 19). Michaud's behavior featured prominently in many producers' accounts and was frequently cited as a reason producers felt there was no love lost between themselves and the site.

Among the most egregious labor abuses involved the site's sole human resources and administrative worker, who regularly worked weekends and holidays, being fired the day after getting major surgery for taking time off. She was also forced to sign a severance contract that included a non-compete clause forbidding her from working in the industry for the following three years (Holly Brown, 32). Another producer was injured on the set of the third anniversary movie during a stunt and was forced to sign a contract absolving CA of any liability after the fact (Iron Liz, 71).

There was no reply from the Channel Awesome's management until the publication of the document. What followed then was a formal statement tweeted from the official @ChannelAwesome account that featured the phrase "We sincerely regret you felt that way" (Channel Awesome, 2018)—in short, a refusal to take responsibility or acknowledge the #ChangeTheChannel movement's grievances. When #ChangeTheChannel producers and their supporting fans pushed back on this, CA released a rebuttal document that addressed some of the allegations featured in Not So Awesome but ignored the majority of complaints. The document only served to inflame the #ChangeTheChannel movement by cherry-picking issues on which to respond, and still without the requested apology.

Although the #ChangeTheChannel movement did not succeed in its primary aim, it was successful in raising awareness. Following the publication of the rebuttal document, many of

CA's fans began to leave the site in droves: the week of April 2nd alone saw over 63,000 unsubscriptions from the CA Youtube channel ("Channel Awesome's YouTube Stats (Summary Profile)," 2019). And from within, Current CA producers also began to resign in protest of the Walkers' handling of the situation, their inflexibility and their unwillingness to take responsibility for the damage they'd done to former producers and CA's reputation. To date, while the site still regularly produces content, where there were once 25-30 producers featured on CA before the rebuttal document, only 3 remain.

### **Conclusion**

Just as Channel Awesome prefigured the rise of indie content creation as a viable career and source of revenue on Youtube over a decade ago, it may have also prefigured some of the complaints that Youtubers have made against the site (Shaffer, 2018): much like Channel Awesome's management, Youtube ignores smaller indie content creators while catering to the most popular, regularly denying them monetization and allowing abuses of the copyright claim system without giving creators reasons for their decisions. It seems like such abuses are endemic to any form of online content creation—at least, without the aid of formal organization.

Unfortunately, it has been difficult to organize online content creators: the most prominent example, the Internet Creator's Guild, shuttered just three years after its founding (Alexander, 2019) and no organizations seem ready to take its place. However, with the use of social media, content creators have a direct line to their fans, and to each other, and for that reason, social media will remain one of the most valuable organization tools for non-organized content creators. Of course, like Channel Awesome, there may be a day of reckoning, when Youtubers speak up about their experiences and work together en masse to change their working conditions.

And when that happens, hopefully there will be another channel that we can turn to in solidarity with them.

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