

The YouTube problem

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We had a team meeting earlier this week. There's nothing surprising about that. We usually start the week reviewing the previous one, setting plans, and thinking a little more strategically about what we're trying to achieve.

This week we talked about our problems with YouTube. Traffic is down around 30% compared to last year, and the trend has been worsening since YouTube changed its algorithm in May.

April and May were good months for us. We reached a lot of people, which is, after all, why we make content. Traffic dipped a little in June, but we've been on YouTube long enough to know that June is usually a quieter month. July and August, however, have been markedly different.

At first, we thought this was because I'd been ill and unable to make videos for a week or so, and that YouTube was punishing us for the break in our regular posting pattern, as it is known to do. But we began to notice others reporting the same problems, and not just on YouTube but across many social media platforms.

Even very large channels, like Robert Reich's on Substack, are noting that people are tuning out, feeling alienated and fatigued by what is going on in the world. This has left them unable to face further comment on the state of both global and national politics, and the prospect of developing crises at both levels.

We also looked at this across the range of other platforms and niche themes we follow, from advanced biological and social research, which Jacqueline knows well, to photographic platforms, which Thomas and I watch, to political and economic platforms, which Jacqueline, James, and I all engage with. The pattern is consistent and is supported by research and extensive anecdotal evidence. The sense of despair around politics, the trail of destruction Trump has created, and the sense of powerlessness over crises like climate change have led some people we know, who are people we would consider politically engaged, not just to disengage from social media, but to delete their accounts entirely.

We also identified a specific YouTube problem, backed by research.

Two years ago, YouTube encouraged creators to acquire subscribers, promising it would then show their videos to those subscribers. So we focused on building our subscriber base, and now have 382,000.

Then YouTube said longer videos mattered because view time was their measure of value, so we, like others, made our videos a little longer.

Now, neither of those things matters. YouTube no longer shows videos to subscribers. Total view time no longer counts either. What matters instead is the proportion of a video watched and the likelihood a viewer will stay on YouTube afterwards.

What matters most, though, is novelty. Since May, that is what YouTube has prioritised. Loyalty is irrelevant. And if you stick to a theme like political economy, they treat you as repetitive, as they assume AI to be, even though what you're offering is expertise rather than AI-generated content. So they don't promote you.

This approach is, we know, alienating viewers. Instead of seeing videos from channels they've subscribed to, people are being served unfamiliar material heavy with advertising, whereas we, for example, refuse to allow YouTube to insert adverts into our videos. The result is that YouTube is, we are told, getting far fewer views overall. So are we, and so are most channels like ours.

On a practical level, this has consequences. At best, we will break even as an organisation if this trend continues, taking YouTube, donations, and all other income sources into account. A loss is also possible. As Jacqueline and I have agreed, that's fine for now, but if the trend continues, we'd have to reconsider. Pensions can be stretched, but only so far.

There are other consequences too. The first is that we want to generate long-term content that people might discover and return to over time. This is part of the purpose of the Understanding Economics series. Our hope is that as it develops, people who find it should work through the playlist, video by video, which is a common way of absorbing YouTube material and exactly what YouTube now wants. It may also provide a longer-term income stream, unlike most political economy content which has a short shelf life.

The other response is that we're deliberately varying our material to challenge the algorithm's assumption that we're repetitive. It is likely that I will, as a result, develop more microeconomic themes alongside our usual macroeconomic focus. These will cover work, workplace issues, decision-making, business motivation and organisation, and other related topics. These are areas I addressed throughout my career as an accountant, and they carry the same challenge to the neoliberal narrative that runs through all my work. This is an expansion, not a change of direction.

Given these changes, and the fact that I now accept that this channel and blog are my retirement project rather than a source of retirement income, I want to enjoy the process more than ever. Changing how we approach production is one way to achieve that. We are already experimenting.

As ever, I share these thoughts so you understand why there may be changes here over the coming weeks. The life of a social media content creator is an ever-changing one, and perhaps that's part of why I enjoy it. However, your opinions also matter, so some polls:

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