



Kent Academic Repository

Miller, Vincent and Hogg, Eddy (2023) 'If you press this, I'll pay': MrBeast, YouTube, and the mobilisation of the audience commodity in the name of charity. Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies . ISSN 1748-7382.

Downloaded from

<https://kar.kent.ac.uk/100512/> The University of Kent's Academic Repository KAR

The version of record is available from

<https://doi.org/10.1177/13548565231161810>

This document version

Publisher pdf

DOI for this version

Licence for this version

CC BY-NC (Attribution-NonCommercial)

Additional information

Versions of research works

Versions of Record

If this version is the version of record, it is the same as the published version available on the publisher's web site. Cite as the published version.

Author Accepted Manuscripts

If this document is identified as the Author Accepted Manuscript it is the version after peer review but before type setting, copy editing or publisher branding. Cite as Surname, Initial. (Year) 'Title of article'. To be published in **Title of Journal** , Volume and issue numbers [peer-reviewed accepted version]. Available at: DOI or URL (Accessed: date).

Enquiries

If you have questions about this document contact ResearchSupport@kent.ac.uk. Please include the URL of the record in KAR. If you believe that your, or a third party's rights have been compromised through this document please see our [Take Down policy](https://www.kent.ac.uk/guides/kar-the-kent-academic-repository#policies) (available from <https://www.kent.ac.uk/guides/kar-the-kent-academic-repository#policies>).

'If you press this, I'll pay': MrBeast, YouTube, and the mobilisation of the audience commodity in the name of charity

Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies 2023, Vol. 0(0) 1–18
© The Author(s) 2023



Article reuse guidelines:

sagepub.com/journals-permissions
DOI: 10.1177/13548565231161810
journals.sagepub.com/home/con



Vincent Miller , and Eddy Hogg

University of Kent, Canterbury, UK

Abstract

This paper examines a new form of philanthropic fundraising as pioneered by the YouTuber MrBeast. We argue that MrBeast, by harnessing the advertising revenue sharing model of YouTube's Partner Program, has created an innovative model of philanthropic giving funded by mobilising what Marxist communication theorists refer to as the 'audience' or 'prosumer commodity'. Through this method, MrBeast has been able to use the algorithmically managed, revenue sharing model of YouTube, and the spectacle of philanthropy, to draw in ever larger audiences and thus create large amounts of advertising and sponsorship revenue to fund philanthropic activities. This revenue in turn funds even larger philanthropic acts in subsequent videos, drawing more audiences and revenue. Unlike previous media-based fundraising, which would ask audience members to contribute their own money or time to a cause, MrBeast positions his audiences as a knowing audience commodity whose viewership funds direct contributions of *other people's* money to good causes, merely by watching and being entertained. We assess the implications of this both for current debates around the 'work', 'labour', and 'exploitation' of audience and prosumer commodities, and their monetisation for philanthropic giving.

Keywords

MrBeast, audience commodity, youtube, prosumer, philanthropy, Dallas Smythe, digital capitalism, advertising, social media

Corresponding author:

Vincent Miller, School of Social Policy, Sociology and Social Research, University of Kent, Cornwallis North East Building, Canterbury CT2 7NF, UK.

Email: v.miller@kent.ac.uk

Introduction

MrBeast: “You’re probably wondering, why are we gamifying charity like this?”

Chris Tyson: “I have no clue”

MrBeast: “Because that will make them watch the video so we can get more views so we can get more sponsorships like Ziprecruiter so we can get more money to help people.”

Chris Tyson: “So if they hate charity they won’t watch the videos.”

([Beast Philanthropy, 2022: 03:55-04:08](#)).

In 2015, as in every year since 1987, *Forbes Magazine* (2015) published its popular set of ‘rich lists’. However, the 2015 list for the first time included a list of the highest earning YouTubers alongside their traditional high-earner lists of businesspeople, celebrities, and athletes. Inclusion of a YouTubers list reflected the growing importance and profitability of YouTube as a mainstream popular entertainment platform and the change in perception of YouTube from being an anarchic collection of amateur or ‘prosumer’ user-generated content, to becoming an increasingly important destination for ‘professional’ entertainment. PewDiePie topped this 2015 list with earnings of \$12 million USD that year; however, this was still a relatively modest sum compared to mainstream celebrities and did not approach the top 100 list of celebrity income earners.

Seven years later, the 2022 Forbes YouTuber list was topped for the first time by ‘MrBeast’ (aka Jimmy Donaldson), an American YouTuber who was reported to have earned roughly \$54 million USD in 2021. This was equivalent to the earnings of all the top 10 YouTubers on the 2015 list combined, and also would have been enough to earn him 40th place on the 2022 top 100 celebrity earners list (ahead of Jay Z and tied with Vin Diesel), if YouTubers were included in that list.

What marks MrBeast out from other YouTubers is the nature of his videos and the expenses involved in their production. He has built much of his audience, popularity, and financial success on a clever combination of his homespun charm and the giving away of huge sums of money (a seemingly sizable portion of the money he earns through advertising and sponsorships) to his friends, subscribers, and strangers through contests and charitable giveaways. In what has proven to be a virtuous circle, these large prizes and giveaways attract increasingly larger audiences, creating even more extreme amounts of revenue to give away in subsequent videos, which in turn creates even larger audiences and thus more revenue.

In recent years, MrBeast has begun to focus more of his videos and extreme giveaways on the needy and philanthropic causes, creating what we see as a new funding model of philanthropy which relies not on traditional models of charitable giving or donations from audiences, but on the virtuous circle of spectacle creation and audience monetisation. This allows charitable revenue to be raised merely through the act of watching and being entertained, with the audience being told explicitly that this alone will generate funds which will do good for others. The larger his audience, the more money he is able to spend on these causes, effectively monetising what Marxist communication theorists refer to as ‘the audience commodity’ in the name of charity.

In this paper, we will unravel this new virtuous circle of philanthropy, its implications for current academic debates around ‘prosumership’, digital labour and the ‘audience commodity’ debate, and its potential implications for charitable giving and philanthropy. We will first outline the parameters of the audience commodity debate within Marxist communication theory, and then we will examine that debate in the contexts of the development of social media, YouTube and the development of

advertising revenue sharing models on social media and video sharing platforms. We will then look closely at the career trajectory of MrBeast and his evolution from teenage YouTuber to ‘YouTube’s biggest philanthropist’, and finally critically evaluate the implications of the innovative advertising revenue funded model of philanthropic giving he has developed. We see MrBeast’s mobilisation of the audience commodity as opening up interesting questions about the complicated nature of the audience commodity debate within contemporary research on the nature of labour in social media practices as well as an important new approach to charitable fundraising and philanthropic giving enabled by the advertising revenue sharing models of social media.

Advertising, the audience commodity, and ‘blindspots’

Free time then does not merely stand in opposition to labour. In a system where full employment itself has become the ideal, free time is nothing more than a shadowy continuation of labour. (Adorno, 1991: 194)

In a series of articles and debate pieces beginning in 1977 and continuing throughout the 1980’s, Canadian media theorist Dallas Smythe made the criticism that Marxist analysts had failed to properly understand the media and its role in capitalism, arguing that there had been too great a focus on the role of the media in propagating capitalist ideology, and that a fully ‘materialist’ understanding which took into account various forms of surplus value produced by the media, and that practices involved in their creation, had not been developed.

Smythe challenged the focus on ideology as the primary function of the media in capitalism and the broader concept of what constitutes ‘work’ in materialist analysis, particularly the notion that one can only be exploited if one earns a wage in a workplace. He instead suggested that capitalism has succeeded in finding new ways of extracting value from human activity, and that this process had extended into the non-workplace activities of leisure, consumption, and even consciousness (Jhally and Livant, 1986; Fuchs 2015; Dolber 2016; Charitsis, 2016):

The material reality under monopoly capitalism is that all non-sleeping time of most of the population is work time... Of the off-the-job work time, the largest single block is time of the audiences’ which is sold to advertisers. It is not sold by workers but by the mass media of communications. (Smythe, 1977: 1)

He argued that in the media and communications industries, audiences and readerships perform ‘work’ by spending their time watching commercial media (and the advertising endemic in it) and that this work was a form of labour which produced a valuable commodity, the attention of the audience, which could be sold to advertisers:

The work which audience members perform for the advertiser to whom they have been sold is learning to buy goods and to spend their income accordingly... In short, they work to create the demand for advertised goods which is the purpose of the monopoly-capitalist advertisers. (Smythe 1981: p243-244)

Where traditional Marxist analysis uses the notion of ‘labour power’ (the potential for human beings to do physical work and create use-value) as an ‘audience commodity’ to be bought and sold and ultimately subject to capital to create profit, Smythe proposed a notion of ‘audience power’ (the potential for media audiences to spend their income and buy goods) as a commodity to be sold and ultimately disciplined into predictable consumption patterns (Arvidsson and Bonini, 2015).

The primary commodity of the commercial media for Smythe is the time of audience, which is purchased from producers (networks, broadcasters, publishers) by advertisers and used in the marketing of the advertiser's product. This commodity provides direct advertising income to broadcasters and an additional enhancement of surplus value through the stimulation of demand for the commercial goods and services that advertising supposedly creates.

For Smythe, these audiences are exploited because they are unpaid for their time spent as an audience and being exposed to advertisements, and even pay for the investments necessary to perform this work (such as television sets, radio's and, these days computers and internet connections) which creates surplus value for others. In exchange for performing the informal labour of spending time essentially marketing things to themselves by watching advertisements, audiences are merely given the 'free lunch' of media content.

Smyth's arguments were influential and the subsequent discussion around the 'audience commodity' which followed his intervention became known as the 'blindspot debate', referring to orthodox Marxism's analysis of contemporary capitalism being largely 'blind' to any understanding of the media outside its ideological function. But Smythe's assertions were by no means uncontested. Several authors question Smythe's expanded notion of 'work' and the idea that an audience could be seen as performing work or labour (or could be exploited) since labour, to be exploited, has to be sold knowingly by the worker in a market (Caraway, 2011; Reveley, 2013). Others question whether audience work in itself was a commodity of value, and that it is engaged in creating surplus value, or that advertising was particularly effective in stimulating demand (Kaplan, 2020; Reveley, 2013). For example, Meehan (1994, Cited in Kaplan, 2020) suggested that the audience commodity was being produced not by audiences, but by those rating agencies who measure the audience and thus create and package audiences as a marketable commodity to sell to advertisers, for example, the Nielson ratings company in broadcast media or, as we will see in the digital context, Google AdSense. Rigi and Prey (2015) argue that the value produced by watching advertisements is not through audience labour, but through (an expanded notion of) rent extracted by media owners from advertisers to access an audience, and thus it is the space or time on said media that is the commodity, not the audience itself.

Smythe's 'audience commodity' theory introduced fundamental questions which are still hotly debated among critical communications scholars: what is the nature of 'work' and 'exploitation' in a consumption-oriented culture? How is surplus value created in the media industries and who creates it? Indeed, as we will see in the next section, Smythe's assertions have found a new relevance in recent years with the advent of interactive digital and social media. At the same time, the evolving nature of the relationship between audiences, advertisers, producers, and broadcasters (especially in terms of revenue sharing models) both valorises the notion of the audience commodity and at the same time further complicates the concept of 'exploitation' within the context of contemporary digital media.

The audience commodity and social media

In many respects, Smythe's notion of the audience commodity, by blurring the lines between production and consumption and suggesting that audiences work by consuming media and producing themselves as commodities, prefaced contemporary characterisations of digital media, and particularly social media users, as 'prosumers' (Jenkins, 2005; Ritzer, 2015) who both consume and produce media at the same time through their use of interactive digital media and communication platforms. In an effort to emphasise the exploitation of free labour endemic in the social media industry, Fuchs (2012) updated the notion of the audience commodity and referred to the new 'prosumer commodity' of social media. In this model, the work of the prosuming social media

(SNS) user is more directly evident, as these ‘audiences’ on Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, Twitter, etc., not only consume existing content but actually interact with it by replicating and rebroadcasting it in various ways to new audiences. They add value by ‘liking’ and commenting, and rework media to create new content outputs such as memes. In addition, SNS users create their own content as part of their social media activity (posting pictures, videos, etc).

Thus, social media users, by the act of participating in social media practices which include them in the system of the production and circulation of content, become part of the content consumed by themselves and others, increasing the value of the platform. In addition, the act of using social media creates the bonus commodity of valuable personal and transactional data which is appropriated by social media companies and sold to advertisers. [Fuchs \(2015\)](#) and [Rey \(2012\)](#) make the point that this social media model of free prosumer labour operates essentially as a factory in which infinite exploitation is achieved, given that these prosumers do not share in any of the exchange value created and enjoyed by SNS enterprises, despite this labour being fundamental to the operations of these platforms.¹

Earlier, [Andrejevic \(2002\)](#) had already made the connection between Smythe’s audience commodity and the rise of surveillance and commercial data collection in online contexts. He pointed out that ‘the work of watching’ online also involved submitting oneself to various forms of surveillance, and thus was inherently tied with ‘being watched’. This again expanded the notion of ‘work’ from knowingly selling one’s labour in a marketplace to: the unrecognised of ‘work’ of watching media and advertisements (and having one’s time and attention being sold on as a commodity by broadcasters); being digitally surveilled at all times while merely existing in online spaces; and having one’s personal and transactional data and preferences being appropriated and commodified by a wide variety of internet concerns, including social media companies who sell this data on to advertisers.

[Caraway \(2011\)](#) and [Reveley’s \(2013\)](#) objections to this further expanded characterisation of work and labour in the digital age, apply just as much with Fuchs, Andrejevec and Rey as they did for Smythe. Again, digital prosumer labour still cannot be ‘exploited’ because is it not being sold by the worker in a market, and there is still no direct correlation between prosumer labour and the creation of surplus value which is articulated primarily through the share prices of social media companies. However, things have changed somewhat since the prosumer labour discussions of the mid-2010’s, and this perhaps provides interesting new caveats to Caraway and Reveley’s objections, as well as Smythe’s and Fuch’s original arguments. In particular, this section will examine how the rise of ‘revenue sharing’ models complicates arguments on both sides of the audience/prosumer commodity debate.

YouTube, formed in 2005 and bought by Google in 2006, started sharing advertising revenue made from video views with some of its prosumer content creators in 2007 through its YouTube Partner Program (YPP). Originally, inclusion in the YPP was limited to a small proportion of YouTubers who had amassed more than 10,000 lifetime video views, but this was still a small step away from the scenario of infinite exploitation that Fuchs and Rey described.

This revenue sharing policy has since evolved over time to better reflect ‘authentic’ audience engagement and placing more emphasis on ‘watch time’ over ‘views’ for example. Currently, rules for inclusion in the Partner Program are for a ‘creator’ to have at least one thousand subscribers, and 4000 or more hours of audience watch time in the last twelve months ([Van Es, 2020](#)). YouTube is quite secretive about their revenue sharing agreements with creators, but it is commonly understood that the standard rate of advertising revenue share is 45/55% in favour of content providers. Viewer subscription revenue for paid subscription services is also shared between YouTube and YPP members.

The purchase of YouTube by Google in 2006 began the process of moving YouTube away from being a sort of free-for-all user-generated content platform and bastion of participatory culture (Jenkins, 2006) into a more professionalised medium which monetised higher quality user-generated content and its creators through advertising. In some respects, it has moved to a model of income generation that is, at its base, not unrecognisable from old media broadcast television in the sense that the revenue generated is largely dependent on a commodified audience. However, there are a number of significant differences between YouTube and a broadcast television network.

First, YouTube does not produce content in the same manner as broadcast television networks. Instead, they rely on a prosumer model in which they merely provide the platform for independent producers to broadcast their content. This puts YouTube alongside other 'platform economy' services such as Uber, Air BNB, and Deliveroo, and alongside social media providers such as Facebook.

Secondly, where individuals in broadcast television networks, as 'producers' had editorial power and actively managed content on standards of quality, audience popularity and advertiser friendliness, what Nieborg and Poell (2018) and Poell et al. (2022) refer to as 'editorial curation', YouTube passively influences content on the basis of 'algorithmic curation' (ibid). The YouTube algorithm manages by demonetising content which runs afoul of YouTube content policies, and actively recommends videos based on viewer history, popularity, and policy-friendly content to its viewers (Ma and Kow, 2021).² This algorithmic logic effectively motivates independent prosumers to adapt their video content in order to keep within monetisation guidelines and increase their chances for recommendation by end-user facing algorithms thus enhancing their ability to monetise their content. For content creators, the algorithm is mystified, and this results in a preoccupation with trying to second guess what content the algorithm will 'like' and what it won't, with the ability to achieve an income being the reward for getting it right (Bucher, 2018; Bishop, 2020; Postigo 2016).

Thirdly, the system of audience measurement and thus revenue distribution in broadcast television was enacted by a neutral intermediary between networks and advertisers. In many cases, this intermediary was the AC Nielson company and their famous 'Nielson ratings'. This provided confidence in reported viewing figures and provided an externally verifiable basis for the pricing of advertisements. By contrast, YouTube is largely self-referential, using its own measurements of audience size, interest, and engagement with advertising through views, likes, comments, click-through's and, most importantly, watch time. The detailed operations of their audience measurement algorithms are unknown to both creators and advertisers, and YouTube periodically revises these (for example, moving to an emphasis on 'watch time' vs 'views' in 2018). With YouTube (up until recently a veritable monopoly online video streaming) dictating the means, measurement, and terms of pricing and reward, creators and advertisers very much engage with YouTube on YouTube's terms (Van Es, 2020). Again, this kind of control over creators, advertisers, and viewers has great implications for cultural production.

Lastly, performers on broadcast television networks were usually contracted employees of either the network or an affiliate production company, earning a fee based on their level of celebrity, quality of their work, and most importantly, their ability to bring in an audience based on their past performances. By contrast, and in line with other platform or 'gig economy' work such as Uber, Air BNB, or Deliveroo, content creators on YouTube are considered to be 'independent partners' who provide their services on a commission-type basis, which, in practice creates a heavily unequal relationship between the creator and the platform. YouTube creator income is largely a 'real time' income based directly on the advertising revenue generated off each video: a much more precarious

'hand to mouth' existence. Without the benefit of an income based on contracted performance fees (such as an actor, athlete, or musician), YouTubers instead have incomes largely tied directly to advertising revenue gained from the size of their audience for any given video. Essentially, YouTubers are akin to the commission-based salespeople of the entertainment industry, with the majority of their income being precariously based on day-to-day performance measured by the number of views, subscriptions, clickthrough's, and watch times they generate from their audiences. This can result in moments of instantaneous success and financial reward when a video 'goes viral' but sustaining continuous and reliable income can prove elusive in a very crowded social media entertainment mediascape which demands constant content production (Gregersen and Ørmen, 2021).

Other social media platforms have followed YouTube's lead in revenue sharing. The live streaming service Twitch was founded in 2011 with a principle of advertisement revenue sharing with creators, and in late 2015 Facebook initiated ad revenue sharing as part of its partner program (which also includes subscription income). TikTok is currently (2021) experimenting with a 'TikTok Creator Fund' that is not based directly on advertisement revenue, but on an obscure formula which includes rewards creators for authentic video views and platform-friendly content (TikTok Newsroom, 2021) and in 2022 is trailing *TikTok Pulse*, which will provide a yet to be disclosed share of ad revenues for the top 4% of videos (TikTok Newsroom, 2022).

The introduction of advertising revenue sharing models across social media has muddied the waters of the audience/prosumer commodity debate. Prosumers are now aware that it is possible (albeit unlikely) to get paid for one's online prosumer activities in the future. This awareness is reflected in the rise in popularity of career ambitions such as 'YouTuber' and 'Social Media Influencer' (now the second and third most popular career ambition among young people (Morning Consult, 2022; HR Papadatou, 2019).³ For some at least, that is motivating their activities, making their work more akin to 'hope labour' (Kuehn and Corrigan, 2013) often associated with music and the arts than the broadcast media of Smythe or the 'infinite exploitation' of digital prosumers described by Fuchs (2012, 2015) and Rey (2012) above. This also means that, young people at least, recognise and participate in a 'market' in which their active prosumer work, and their work of watching, have commodity value, complicating the objections of Caraway (2011) and Reveley (2013).

Now, at least some prosumers are now getting a share in the exchange value of the products they produce. And this can be considerable. Indeed, more accurate measurement of audiences through direct digital means (views, watch time, clicks, likes etc) and more accurate measurement of engagement with advertisements through Cost per View (CPV), Cost per Click (CPC), Cost per Acquisition (CPA), and a variety of other pricing systems, *mean it is much more possible to get an idea of what the audience or prosumer commodity is actually worth.*

The 2020 fiscal report for YouTube and Google's parent company, Alphabet, reported revenues of \$19,772,000,000USD, earned from YouTube advertisements, up from just over 15 billion the previous financial year (Alphabet, 2021). As mentioned above, the standard agreement for YouTube partners is that they receive 55% of revenue raised from advertisements in and around their content. So, while YouTube will generate an unknown proportion of its advertising income on its own,⁴ a significant proportion of this 19 billion USD received from advertisers will go to prosumer content creators.

The common calculation is that through AdSense, YouTube partners receive an average of 1.8 cents (USD) for every advertisement view (a view must last for 30 second to count), or about \$18 per 1000 ad views, which normally translates into about \$3–5USD per one thousand video views. This CPM (cost per thousand views) can change depending on a number of factors including

the geographical location of the audience, where views from developing countries are worth less. It is also generally accepted that top creators also achieve higher CPM remuneration rates than the average prosumer, but these rates are not disclosed. Creators also gain income within YouTube through paid channel subscriptions, and outside YouTube through brand sponsorships and product placements in videos. Indeed, such revenues have created a superclass of very high-earning YouTube celebrities and it is to one of them, MrBeast, and his career trajectory to which we now turn.

MrBeast: A road to spectacular philanthropy

MrBeast is a 24-year-old YouTube celebrity living in North Carolina, USA. He made his first YouTube video at the age of 13 and has amassed over the last nine years more than 700 videos and over 100 million subscribers. He has become the highest earning YouTuber in the world, and one of the top 40 highest earning celebrities on the planet (Forbes, 2022). Donaldson is widely seen as having taken YouTube video production to a new level in terms of expense, quality, and scale of viewership. For example, a recent video released on November 24, 2021 recreated the playground sets and contests used in the hit TV series 'Squid Game'. This twenty-five-minute video cost over \$3.5 Million USD to make (Pearce, 2021), gave away \$462,000 to the winner and achieved 212 million views as of February 1, 2022.

As a result, Donaldson now commands a mass audience and appeal rarely seen on online entertainment and is effectively able to monetise his own audience commodity in various forms. Like other elite YouTube celebrities, he has pushed out the power of his brand into new areas of investment and income, including merchandising, app development (Finger on the App), a ghost kitchen chain (MrBeast Burger), and several tech-based companies. Donaldson's career thus illustrates how algorithmically managed revenue sharing has created a new prosumer commodity relationship.

A number of authors (Ahmad et al., 2021; Bishop, 2019, 2020; Glotfelter, 2019) have researched the impact of the 'black box' that is YouTube's video recommendation algorithm on content creators' efforts to monetise their labour and make a career as a YouTuber. Donaldson's story is one of continual empirical experimentation to find out what video's 'work' with this recommendation algorithm in order to achieve the most exposure, and therefore views and subscribers. For example, he has suggested in interviews (eg, Creative Disruption, 2020) that the revenue-generating combinations of 'click through rate' (ie the ratio of video thumbnail views to actual video views) and 'viewer retention' (the time spent watching a video before moving on to the next) are the main factors which contribute towards the algorithm recommending a particular video. As a result, his strategy has revolved around putting large effort and resources into video thumbnail design and titling (to achieve a higher click-through rate) and content that centres around themes, such as contests, challenges, or stunts, which will keep the viewer interested for the duration of a video.

This has meant that Donaldson's output has charted an exploratory course through several genres. His early videos, posted when he was a young teenager, largely revolved around online gaming (footage of Minecraft gameplay in particular), slowly moving into commentaries of YouTube culture itself: 'best and worst' video's; commentaries on YouTube content and other YouTubers; as well as studies on how to be successful on YouTube.

By 2016, three years into his career, Donaldson began producing videos in three genres that would start to build his audience and enhance his profile. The first was the popular 'stunt' genre where odd, interesting, difficult, or dangerous acts are performed. This started modestly with '100 layers of Saran wrap and toilet paper!!' (Aug 23, 2016) and 'Microwaving a microwave' (Dec

9, 2016). These videos in themselves were not particularly original or successful, with many other YouTubers providing similar content at the time. However, 'I counted to 100,000' (Jan 9, 2017), which featured Donaldson counting to 100,000 in real time (a task which took him over 40 h without any breaks to complete)⁵, was his breakthrough viral video, earning millions of views and garnering Donaldson a large following.

The second genre developed in this period was what is often referred to as 'junklord' video: videos that involve buying as much of a product as possible and using it in an unusual way, or spending an extravagant amount on a particular product (see [Alexander, 2019](#)). For Donaldson, this meant, for example, gathering \$20,000 in pennies in 'I put millions of pennies in my friend's backyard' (Dec 8, 2018), using one million Lego pieces in 'I built a giant house using only Lego's' (Dec 2, 2018) and trying a range of ultra-expensive meals in 'I ate \$100,000 golden ice cream' (Jan 22, 2021).

The third genre developed in 2016, which became a trademark for MrBeast was the 'giveaway' genre, where Donaldson is filmed giving away ever larger amounts of money/prizes to his friends, family, contest winners, or random people. This starts modestly with '24 hour explosion giveaway! Win giftcards' (Sept 5, 2016), but as his following grew and revenue increased, these soon expanded in scale. Many videos involved competitions for his friends or subscribers to win extravagant prizes. These included: 'Last to leave ramen noodle pool wins \$20,000' (Sept 13, 2019); 'Last to leave revolving door wins \$50,000' (July 2, 2019); 'Last to stop swinging wins \$1,000,000' (Nov 30, 2019); and 'Extreme \$500,000 game of tag' (Sept 4, 2021). Of course, the premise of such videos is not original nor unique, replicating various game shows and competitions going back decades. However, Donaldson had rediscovered a formula which worked particularly well for YouTube and his understanding of what the recommendation algorithm prefers: giving spectacular sums of money away to achieve high clickthrough rate, and a finale or contest aspect to encourage viewers to watch the whole video and see who wins, thus maximising viewer retention and thus revenue.

'Giving a random homeless man \$10,000' (June 16, 2017) is widely credited as the video which put MrBeast in the space of elite YouTubers in terms of viewing numbers, capturing over nine million views. It also defines the approach Donaldson takes through much of his future work, using sponsorship money to fund ever larger giveaways and philanthropic contributions:

'Just so we are all on the same page, this is not my money. This is now a weekly series where I am getting companies to sponsor my videos, and I am giving one hundred percent of what they pay me away to random people. For example, this video is sponsored by Quidd. I am doing a brand deal for Quidd and they paid me ten thousand dollars, and I'm taking that ten thousand dollars and giving it to this homeless man'. ([MrBeast, 2017a](#): 0:20-0:41)

A few months later, in 'Giving my Mom \$100,000 (Proudest day of my life)' (Dec 2, 2017), Donaldson outlines this approach in even clearer terms, using sponsorship money and his own revenue to fund his largest giveaway to date, giving his mother \$100,000. In an exchange with his mother during this video, we gain a clear insight into his formula for future charitable giving: views create money which creates giveaways which created more views, more money, and larger giveaways, and so on.

Sponsorships, increased viewing figures and resulting revenues allowed Donaldson to create videos with even more spectacular giveaways, which in turn led to ever larger viewing numbers. Giveaways, which normally involved friends or subscribers, later began to take a more philanthropic turn involving strangers, for example 'Donating \$10,000 to random Twitch streamers' (Aug 15, 2017), 'Giving \$10,000 to random people and saying nothing' (April 30, 2019), and 'I opened a

free bank' (Nov 23, 2019) in which he and his team took over a bank branch and gave away large sums of money (totalling \$100,000USD) to bank customers looking for loans. The success of these videos had opened a new thematic path for MrBeast: Charity.

Monetising the audience commodity for charity

In June 2017, when Jimmy Donaldson (AKA MrBeast) received his first YouTube sponsorship deal of \$10,000, he wondered, "how can I transform this money into something good?" Not wanting to keep the money for himself, Jimmy agreed to the sponsorship deal with one condition: he was able to give away all of the money. The sponsor agreed.

Jimmy stayed true to his word and gave away the full \$10,000, but he quickly realized that handing someone an envelope of cash was not enough. This first giveaway ignited a flame within Jimmy, and every charitable act fueled his desire to help those in need.

Over the next few months, MrBeast started giving money to Uber drivers, to pizza delivery drivers, and Twitch streamers. Jimmy enjoyed the genuine reactions from his recipients, and he quickly realized how lives were being changed. It became Jimmy's mission through video integration to help as many people as possible overcome barriers.

And with a goal of making the world a better place, the idea for Beast Philanthropy was born.

([Beast Philanthropy, 2021c](#)).

The most interesting video theme which has developed within the MrBeast catalogue has been the development of his philanthropic-themed videos. The monetisation of his audience commodity into funding philanthropic causes has emerged as a core theme of the MrBeast brand, and it is a genre which has come to set him apart from other prominent YouTubers. The seeds of this social consciousness are present throughout the 'giveaway' video genre which often involved the likes of teachers and food bank volunteers being given large prizes or sums of money. The success of 'Giving a random homeless man \$10,000 (June 16, 2017), established that not only does giving away large sums of money gain viewership, but doing so within a frame of social consciousness, 'changing people's lives' directly on camera in a way that is easy to relate to, was also a winning formula.

That video was followed by 'Giving homeless people \$1000 (not clickbait)' (June 28, 2017), and 'Donating \$10,000 to random Twitch streamers', where he again praised his sponsors in allowing him to make a difference to people's lives:

'This is only possible because of Quidd.... What other app does good like this?' ([MrBeast, 2017b](#): 04:00-04:05).

In addition to sponsorships, the increased revenue gained from growing viewing figures allowed Donaldson to fund ever growing charitable contributions, as evident in the increased giveaways involved with 'I gave \$500,000 to random people' (May 11, 2018), and 'I gave a homeless man a home' (Feb 28, 2019).

In 2019, after reaching 20 million subscribers, Donaldson's fans challenged him to plant 20 million trees to mark the event. As a result, Donaldson becomes the public face of 'Team Trees' (alongside the Arbor Day Foundation, and established charity dedicated to planting trees), and pledged to plant one tree

for every dollar donated by the public to the cause. Soon after, he launched a similar philanthropic venture in 'Team Seas', with the promise of removing one pound of trash from the ocean for every dollar donated. Both of these efforts followed a classic donations model of charitable giving aided by celebrity sponsors, similar to the celebrity telethons that have existed for decades. These, [Nikel and Eikenberry \(2009\)](#) argue, position charitable acts as a source of entertainment and amusement as much as they are acts of generosity. In doing so, they draw on the symbolic power of charity, a power that reflects positively on the donor or other perceived altruistic actor ([Dean, 2020](#)). In these early charitable videos, MrBeast is clearly benefitting from the impact of this 'good glow' of charity on his personal brand. While [Österblom and Paasche \(2021: 1392\)](#) argue that the charitable activities of MrBeast and his YouTuber peers signpost to their mostly young audience that generosity and altruism are 'cool', the warm glow of that charity reflects back squarely onto the content producers.

However, Donaldson's own, and more innovative philanthropic model comes to fruition through 2019 and 2020. With time, the somewhat random giveaways to more or less worthy individuals become more organised, focussed, and explicitly philanthropic. For example, in 'Giving \$10,000 in presents to kids for Christmas' (Dec 23, 2019) Donaldson (dressed as Santa) and his team (dressed as elves) deliver thousands of presents to children's hospitals in California, New Mexico, Tennessee, New York City, and Washington, DC. Filmed during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, 'I gave \$200,000 To People Who Lost Their Jobs (Corona Virus)' (May 7, 2020) features Donaldson conducting a series of online interviews (posing as a newscaster, college professor, and construction manager), asking how various people have been affected by the pandemic. He concludes these interviews by revealing to the interviewees that the interviews are not genuine and giving participants large sums of money to see them through the pandemic. In 'I bought everything in 5 stores' (Jan 9, 2021), the contents of 5 retail shops (electronic goods, sporting goods, clothing and food outlets, and a car dealership) are purchased and distributed to various charitable causes.

By 2021, Donaldson's audience commodity model of philanthropy had matured and become more explicit. In the video 'If you press this, I'll pay' (Feb 13, 2021), he *makes the explicit link between charitable giving and the commodification of the audience*, stating:

"For the entire year of 2021, every time someone subscribes to this channel. I am donating ten cents to charity. Last month, three million subscribed to the channel which means I'm going to give away this three hundred thousand dollar mountain of money to people in need." ([MrBeast, 2021a: 0-0:15](#))

In that video, he saves a local business, pays occupant's rent in two apartment complexes, gives away computers to high school students, pays the college debts of a random selection of students on a university campus, and donates \$30,000 to a child suffering from cancer and \$40,000 to a research hospital. He ends the video:

"From now until the end of the year, every single time someone subscribes, I will give away ten cents. *By literally hitting that subscribe button, you are taking ten cents out of my pocket and giving it to people like we had in the video.*" (Ibid: 11:30-11:58, author emphasis)

This is followed shortly by 'I opened my own charity' (March 26, 2021), which debuts his new YouTube channel, 'Beast Philanthropy', and again makes the link between watching, and help for people in need in the video and in the comments section:

“This charity is going to cost tens of million a year to run, and I just can’t do that on my own. Imagine if we could grow this channel as big as my main channel, the amount of people that we could help would be insane”. ([Beast Philanthropy, 2021b](#): 2:40-3:02)

He also reiterates the link between viewership and charitable revenue generates in the comments section by stating ‘100% of my revenue earned form this channel, is going to my charity! – so just by watching this you’re helping people in need’. The title video for the Beast Philanthropy channel also presses the funding formula upon which Donaldson’s philanthropy is based:

“We are taking 100% of the money from this channel and funnelling it into the Beast Philanthropy charity. Beast philanthropy is literally funded by your eyeballs. Not even joking. And because the Beast Philanthropy YouTube channel has started doing really well, we’ve been able to expand and routinely feed five different communities every single month. ([Beast Philanthropy, 2021a](#): 0:00-0:46, author emphasis).

As of November, 2022, the Beast Philanthropy channel has 10 million subscribers, and 17 videos totalling 140 million total views 6. Donaldson’s strategy has been able to achieve two significant accomplishments at the same time: creating a massive and loyal and revenue-generating fanbase, and accomplishing dozens of substantial charitable acts for people in need, from stocking food banks, providing supplies to schools in disadvantaged areas, helping hurricane survivors, to digging wells in Africa. The theme that ‘watching allows me to do good’ works in terms of creating an extremely favourable brand image for MrBeast and attracts increased sponsorship revenue as well as advertiser-revenue from YouTube. It has become an almost self-perpetuating philanthropic enterprise which only asks the audience to perform the audience commodity ‘work of watching’.

This minimal investment by the audience seems at home within an online culture of micro-activism or ‘slacktivism’: the tendency for online-based activism to measure success in terms of digital ‘participation’ or ‘awareness’, and to achieve this success asking people to participate or show support for causes in the form of easily accomplished ‘micro-actions’ such as commenting, liking or forwarding political communications ([Bertolotti et al., 2011](#); [Gladwell 2010](#); [White, 2010](#)). Writers such as Gladwell saw the principles of micro-activism as actively discouraging ‘real’ social action. Suggesting that such gestures satisfy the need for the digital citizen to feel as though they have ‘done something’ to help, while actually doing as little as possible. He argues that this lures nascent activists away from more meaningful serious and practical efforts to effect change. [Nikel and Eikenberry \(2009\)](#) similarly discuss how such entertainment formats encourage a passive audience to feel they are supporting poverty relief.

However, in the case of MrBeast’s philanthropic audience commodity, a lot of people doing very little is actually producing results in the form of large sums of advertising revenue that can affect people’s lives, albeit on a relatively small scale. Such large sums of money being disposed at the charitable whims of one 23-year-old could easily backfire and be seen by viewers as an ostentatious display of wealth and the sort of inequalities generated in contemporary informational capitalism. Instead, the likability and humour of Donaldson and his cast of friends lionises these acts of charity and compassion as a form of entertainment that audiences seem happy to support through their own commodification: a kind of knowing exploitation of their audience commodity value.

Conclusion: The implications of a ‘beast’ model of audience commodification for philanthropy

Unlike traditional media-based philanthropy which relies on traditional donation models, MrBeast’s revenue-generating philanthropic videos can be understood as monetising a form of ethical consumption: the YouTube equivalent of buying ProjectRED Apple or Nike products. In this sense, it is the latest of a long line of initiatives that have been loosely termed ‘cause-related marketing’, a model whereby for-profit entities – in this case MrBeast – engage in partnerships with non-profit organisations to address social issues (Hawkins, 2015). MrBeast is one of the latest in this long lineage.

However, unlike these previous cause-related marketing schemes, MrBeast is using the ‘warm glow’ of charity (Dean, 2020) in combination with a very up-front and knowing monetisation of audience commodity value, to raise money for the causes he is championing. Essentially, the warm glow of MrBeast’s charity is itself a source of funds for charitable efforts and the glow that the spectacular charitable videos create means that charitable actions which are ‘literally funded by your eyeballs’ become sustainable. This represents an evolution from notionally philanthropic television programmes such as *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition* (US) and *DIY SOS: The Big Build* (UK), which indirectly use advertising income to fund charitable efforts. Audiences are now knowingly generating charitable income through their own self-exploitation as a valuable audience commodity which creates revenue for others.

Ethical consumption and cause-related marketing of the kind practiced by MrBeast in theory have benefits for all parties: the for-profit benefits from association with perceived ‘worthy’ causes; the non-profit benefits from the resources generated and consumers benefit by being able to engage in perceived ethical actions in the course of their daily activities (Hawkins, 2015). The criticisms of such approaches, however, are numerous. Many of these concerns stem from the ways in which such practices link the production of wealth to the practice of charity, binding the two together as ‘the solution’ to societal ills:

Philanthropy reflected in, distributed by, and used in the service of capitalism can only be the voice of capitalism and the complete destruction of imagination of alternatives. (Nikel and Eikenberry, 2009: 986)

Notably, MrBeast is explicitly presenting the source of his own wealth and profile – views on YouTube – as the solution to social issues. Nikel and Eikenberry (2009) argue that such approaches stifle philanthropy’s transformative potential. Inevitably, the logic of the market (even if that is the new and innovative logic pioneered by MrBeast) is presented as the answer to injustice. By almost completely closing the gap between the market and the negative impacts it has, the space for discussion around the causes of and solutions to social issues is itself closed (*ibid*).

By closing this space, the space for debates around the most effective ways to address thorny social problems is also closed. Food banks, equipment giveaways and handouts to homeless people only address the negative outcomes, not their root causes, many of which are likely and ironically to have resulted from the large-scale industrial changes and employment shifts emerging from increasing technologically enabled automation and globalisation endemic to contemporary informational capitalism. Whatever those structural problems may be, ‘Exposing the structural issues that keep people poor!’ is unlikely to be a Beast Philanthropy video any time soon. Rather, YouTube, informational capitalism, and the massing of excessive wealth which occurs in

informational capitalism, appears as the solution to the injustices and hardships which result from those structural problems.

Additionally, the need for causes supported to make good, algorithm-friendly content means that only a particular type of deserving beneficiary is profiled (Breeze and Dean, 2012). Those who the audience may perceive as less deserving – drug users, sex workers, ex-offenders and so on – are left out, excluded from the philanthropic story so as not to interfere with the warm glow of good deeds for deserving people, and an algorithmic logic which may not deem such content suitable or advertiser-friendly.

These efforts to explain Donaldson's novel approach to fund philanthropy through monetising the YouTube audience/prosumer commodity are not perfect. There is still much work to be done in understanding the real impact of this 'Beast' approach to charitable giving. For example, we do not know whether the funds and goods being distributed by MrBeast might have been donated in some other ways were it not for Beast Philanthropy. Sponsors, such as Jennie-O, who donated 10,000 turkeys for the video 'I Fed 10,000 Families For Thanksgiving!' (Nov 23, 2021), may well have a Corporate Social Responsibility budget which such donations come from. Thus, rather than generating *new* philanthropy, Beast Philanthropy may just be moving existing donations around – a zero-sum game. However, it is reasonable to suggest that most corporate advertising budgets are higher than their social responsibility budgets, and it is also clear that revenue gained from general advertising revenue through YouTube AdSense is not simply 'rearranging the deckchairs' of charitable funding, but actively funnelling new revenue into Beast Philanthropy's philanthropic causes that might otherwise simply go into creators' pockets. Indeed, this is the essence of the MrBeast brand as 'YouTube's biggest philanthropist'.

MrBeast is now the world's most subscribed YouTuber (BBC 2022). For better or worse, the success MrBeast and Beast Philanthropy will have a large influence in how YouTube creators and advertisers understand their relationships to their audiences, and the marketing value that charity brings to attracting those audiences. Online audiences, in turn, are arguably becoming more aware of their commodity value and where that value can travel. It will be interesting to see over the coming years whether MrBeast's success in marketing ethical video consumption through philanthropic revenue generation will have an impact on content, philanthropic fundraising, and, most importantly, YouTube's algorithmic logic.

Author's Note

All authors have agreed to the submission and this article is not currently being considered for publication by any other print or electronic journal.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

ORCID iD

Vincent Miller  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7193-5378>

Notes

1. Rey (2012) suggested that while exploitation on Facebook approaches infinite, because Facebook prosumers can still use and enjoy using their profiles and data at the same time that Facebook sells and monetises these commodities, alienation is minimal. This is why prosumers are able to accept the exploitative practice.
2. For example, in March 2017, in an event known as the ‘YouTube adpocalypse’, several news outlets reported how extremist content was earning advertising revenue on the site. Many major brands and advertisers resented their advertisements being featured around, and ultimately financially supporting extremist content and threatened to pull their advertising from YouTube. YouTube’s response was to step up their algorithmically managed ‘demonetisation’ policy in which videos containing content deemed to be unacceptable or controversial would be prevented from earning advertising revenue. As a result, thousands of YouTubers were deprived of income to which they had grown accustomed (Kumar, 2019). Many argued that this was a violation of free speech rights in an online public sphere. In addition, in several cases, the new criteria demonetised content that many would argue was not extremist or controversial.
3. Of course, these are commercial surveys, and thus not particularly comprehensive or reliable, but they do reflect an overall awareness among young people that prosumer activities have a value and can create income.
4. Unknown because only those in the YouTube Partnership Program receive a share of advertising revenue, and this is a small portion of the millions of prosumers creating content on the platform. So YouTube will be earning advertising income off those not in the YPP, as well as from more generic advertisements on their main pages.
5. The video itself is actually 23 hours long with some speeding up to make it more viewer friendly.

References

- Adorno T (1991) *Adorno: ‘Free time’ The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*. London: Routledge. chapter 8: 187-197.
- Ahmad P. M., Hikami I., Zufar B. N. F., et al. (2021) Digital Labour: Digital Capitalism and the Alienation of YouTube Content Creators. *Journal of Asian Social Science Research* 3(2): 167–184.
- Alexander J. (2019) *MrBeast Changed YouTube and Launched an Entire Genre of Expensive Stunt Content*. The Verge. (Oct 25, 2019) Available at: <https://www.theverge.com/2019/10/25/20924718/mrbeast-YouTube-stunts-challenges-money-philanthropy-creators-morgz> (accessed on 29 March 2022).
- Alphabet (2021) *Q4 and Fiscal Year Financial Report*, Available at: https://abc.xyz/investor/static/pdf/2020_alphabet_annual_report.pdf?cache=8e972d2
- Andrejevic M. (2002) The work of being watched: Interactive media and the exploitation of self-disclosure. *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 19(2): 230–248.
- Arvidsson A. and Bonini T. (2015) Valuing Audience Passions: From Smythe to Tarde. *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 18(2): 158–173.
- BBC (2022) *MrBeast Overtakes PewDiePie as Most Subscribed YouTuber*. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-63635382>
- Beast Philanthropy (2021a). Available at: <https://www.YouTube.com/channel/UCAiLfjNXkNv24uhpzUgPa6A>
- Beast Philanthropy (2021b) *I Opened My Own Charity*. (March 26, 2021) Available at: <https://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=f-empfLWbIk&t=109s>
- Beast Philanthropy (2021c). Available at: <https://www.beastphilanthropy.org/about/>
- Beast Philanthropy (2022) *Anything You Can Fit in the Circle I’ll Donate to Charity*. (8 April 2022) Available at: <https://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=KVKqOwN6uL0>

- Bertolotti T, Bardone E, and Magnani L (2011) Perverting activism: Cyberactivism and its potential failures in enhancing democratic institutions. *International Journal of Technoethics (IJT)* 2(2): 14–29.
- Bishop S. (2019) Managing visibility on YouTube through algorithmic gossip. *New Media & Society* 21(11–12): 2589–2606.
- Bishop S. (2020) Algorithmic experts: Selling algorithmic lore on YouTube. *Social Media + Society* 6(1): 205630511989732.
- Breeze B. and Dean J. (2012) Pictures of me: User views on their representation in homelessness fundraising appeals. *International Journal of Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Marketing* 17(2): 132–143.
- Bucher T. (2018) Cleavage Control: Three stories about algorithmic culture and power in the case of the YouTube ‘Reply Girls. In: Z. Papacharissi (ed), *A Networked Self and Platforms, Stories, Connections*. New York: Routledge, pp. 125–143.
- Caraway B. (2011) Audience labor in the new media environment: A Marxian revisiting of the audience commodity. *Culture & Society*, 33(5): 693–708.
- Charitsis V. (2016) Prosuming (the) self. *Ephemera* 16(3): 37–59.
- Creative Disruption (2020) *Is MrBeast a YouTube GENIUS or a Clickbait King?* <https://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=vfdbsir3J8E>
- Dean J (2020) *The Good Glow: Charity and the Symbolic Power of Doing Good*. Bristol: Policy Press.
- Dolber B. (2016) Blindspots and blurred lines: Dallas Smythe, the audience commodity, and the transformation of labor in the digital age. *Sociology Compass* 10(9): 747–755.
- Forbes (2022) *The Highest-Paid YouTube Stars: MrBeast, Jake Paul and Markiplier Score Massive Paydays*. Forbes, Jan 14, 2022. Available at: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/abrambrown/2022/01/14/the-highest-paid-YouTube-stars-mrbeast-jake-paul-and-markiplier-score-massive-paydays/?sh=2d0f01701aa7> (accessed 31 March 2022).
- Forbes Magazine (2015) ‘*The World’s Top-Earning YouTube Stars*’. Forbes, Oct 14, 2015. Available at: <https://www.forbes.com/pictures/gjdm45jih/YouTube-millionaires/?sh=856c539629dd> (accessed 31/03/2022).
- Fuchs C. (2012) Dallas Smythe today: The audience commodity, the digital labour debate, Marxist political economy and critical theory. Prolegomena to a digital labour theory of value. *tripleC: Communication, Capitalism & Critique. Open Access Journal for a Global Sustainable Information Society* 10: 692–740.
- Fuchs C. (2015) Dallas Smythe and digital labor. In: R. Maxwell (ed), *The Routledge Companion to Labor and Media*. New York: Routledge, pp. 51–62.
- Gladwell M. (2010) *Small Change: Why the Revolution Will Not Be Tweeted*. The New Yorker. Available at: http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2010/10/04/101004fa_fact_gladwe (accessed 2 February 2015).
- Glotfelter A. (2019) Algorithmic circulation: How content creators navigate the effects of algorithms on their work. *Computers and Composition* 54: 102521.
- Gregersen A. and Ørmen J. (2021) The output imperative: productivity and precarity on YouTube. *Information, Communication & Society*. Online ahead of print. DOI: 10.1080/1369118X.2021.2006745.
- Hawkins R. (2015) Shifting conceptualizations of ethical consumption: Cause-related marketing in India and the USA. *Geoforum* 67: 172–182.
- Jenkins H. (2005) *Convergence Culture*. New York: NYU Press.
- Jhally S. and Livant B. (1986) Watching as working: The valorization of audience consciousness. *Journal of Communication* 36(3): 124–143.
- Kaplan M. (2020) The self-consuming commodity: audiences, users, and the riddle of digital labor. *Television & New Media* 21(3): 240–259.
- Kuehn K. and Corrigan T. F. (2013) Hope labor: The role of employment prospects in online social production. *The Political Economy of Communication* 1(1): 19–25.
- Kumar S. (2019) The algorithmic dance: YouTube’s Adpocalypse and the gatekeeping of cultural content on digital platforms. *Internet Policy Review* 8(2): 1–21.

- Ma R. and Kou Y. (2021) "How advertiser-friendly is my video?": YouTuber's Socioeconomic Interactions with Algorithmic Content Moderation. *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction* 5(CSCW2): 1–25.
- Meehan ER (1984) Ratings and the Institutional Approach. A Third Answer to the Commodity Question. *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 1(2): 216–225.
- Morning Consult (2022) *The Influencer Report: Engaging Gen Z and Millennials*. Available at: <https://morningconsult.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/The-Influencer-Report-Engaging-Gen-Z-and-Millennials.pdf>
- MrBeast (2017a) *Giving a Random Homeless Man \$10,000*. Available at: https://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=N_GMakKf7G4 (June 16, 2017)
- MrBeast (2017b) *Giving Homeless People \$1,000 (Not Clickbait)*. Available at: <https://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=4KvmSG6KS2k&t=33s>
- MrBeast (2021a) *If You Press This, I'll Pay*. Available at: https://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=_uwNDiU04zE
- Nickel PM and Eikenberry AM (2009) A Critique of the discourse of marketized philanthropy. *American Behavioral Scientist* 52(7): 974–989.
- Nieborg DB and Poell T. (2018) The platformization of cultural production: Theorizing the contingent cultural commodity. *New Media & Society* 20(11): 4275–4292.
- Österblom H. and Paasche Ø (2021) Perspective: Earth altruism. *One Earth* 4: 1386–1397.
- Papadatou A. (2019) '1 of 5 British Children Want a Career as Social Media Influencers', *HR Review*. Available at: <https://www.hrreview.co.uk/hr-news/1-of-5-british-children-want-a-career-as-social-media-influencers/114597>
- Poell T., Nieborg D. and Duffy B. (2022) *Platforms and Cultural Production*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Pearce M. (2021) 'How Much Did MrBeast's 'Squid Game' Remake on YouTube Cost? We Did the Math', *Los Angeles Times*, <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/story/2021-12-09/mr-beast-YouTube-squid-game-video-hit>
- Postigo H. (2016) The socio-technical architecture of digital labor: Converting play into YouTube money. *New Media & Society* 18(2): 332–349.
- Reveley J. (2013) The exploitative web: misuses of Marx in critical social media studies. *Science & Society* 77(4): 512–535.
- Rey P. J. (2012) Alienation, exploitation, and social media. *American Behavioral Scientist* 56(4): 399–420.
- Rigi J. and Prey R. (2015) Value, rent, and the political economy of social media. *The Information Society* 31(5): 392–406.
- Ritzer G. (2015) Prosumer capitalism. *The Sociological Quarterly* 56(3): 413–445.
- Smythe D. (1977) Communications: Blindspot of Western Marxism. *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory* 1(3): 1–27.
- Smythe D. W. (1981) On the audience commodity and its work. *Media and Cultural Studies: Keywords*, 230: 256.
- TikTok Newsroom (2021) *TikTok Creator Fund: Your Questions Answered*. Available at: <https://newsroom.tiktok.com/en-gb/tiktok-creator-fund-your-questions-answered>
- TikTok Newsroom (2022) *TikTok Pulse: Bringing Brands Closer to Community and Entertainment*. Available at: https://newsroom.tiktok.com/en-us/tiktok-pulse-is-bringing-brands-closer-to-community-and-entertainment?utm_source=COMMSTWITTER&utm_medium=SOCIAL&utm_campaign=20220504
- Van Es K (2020) YouTube's operational logic: "The view" as pervasive category. *Television & New Media* 21(3): 223–239.
- White M. (2010) *Clicktivism is Ruining Leftist Activism*. *The Guardian*. Available at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2010/aug/12/clicktivism-ruiningleftist-activism> (accessed 15 May 2013).

Author Biographies

Vincent Miller is a Reader in Sociology and Cultural Studies at the University of Kent. He has written several books and articles in the area of digital culture, including *The Crisis of Presence in Contemporary Culture* (Sage), *Understanding Digital Culture* (Sage).

Eddy Hogg a Senior Lecturer in Social Policy at the University of Kent. His research looks at volunteering, charitable giving, and public attitudes to the voluntary sector. His research interests include volunteering and charitable giving for public services; youth volunteering; the value of charity involvement in supporting young people; attitudes towards charity regulation in England and Wales and; charity engagement with Fundraising Regulators.