**YouTube is Still Restricting and Demonetizing LGBT Videos — and Adding Anti-LGBT Ads to Some**

Megan Farokhmanesh, *The Verge*, June 4, 2018

<https://www.theverge.com/2018/6/4/17424472/youtube-lgbt-demonetization-ads-algorithm>

YouTube’s [track record](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-intersect/wp/2017/03/20/youtube-is-looking-into-complaints-that-it-unfairly-censors-lgbt-videos/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.38f873038efa) with LGBT creators isn’t great. Last year, YouTubers such as Rowan Ellis, Tyler Oakley, Stevie Boebi, and NeonFiona spoke up about their [content being hidden](https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/mar/20/lgbt-community-anger-over-youtube-restrictions-which-make-their-videos-invisible), [demonetized](https://www.autostraddle.com/why-is-youtube-demonetizing-lgbtqia-videos-395058/), or age-gated. YouTube responded with posts in April and May of 2017 that said their system [sometimes makes mistakes](https://youtube-creators.googleblog.com/2017/03/restricted-mode-how-it-works-and-what.html) “in understanding context and nuances,” that Restricted Mode “[should not filter out content](https://youtube-creators.googleblog.com/2017/04/an-update-on-restricted-mode.html) belonging to individuals or groups based on certain attributes like gender, gender identity, political viewpoints, race, religion or sexual orientation,” and promised to fix an engineering “issue” that had lead to the platform “unintentionally filtering content.”

Over a year later, however, the same problems persist. In a series of videos posted to his YouTube channel, trans creator [Chase Ross says](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6LnYJi_64a0) that for the past three weeks he’s been dealing with age restrictions on his videos daily; some of his older videos have been recently demonetized, or stripped of revenue-earning ads, with others being removed completely. He says YouTube has regularly demonetized his videos with the word “trans” or “transgender” in the title — and even run anti-LGBT ads on some videos geared toward the LGBT community.

Ross, a YouTuber for about 12 years, creates videos touching on his personal experiences as a trans person, and the trans community as a whole. In addition to his Trans 101 project, a 31-episode series that educates viewers about subjects like pronouns, terminology, and body dysphoria, Ross has also posted about his personal experiences transitioning. According to Ross, YouTube’s algorithm seems to be triggered by the word “trans” specifically to demonetize his videos. He suspects that some of these are the result of the platform’s algorithm for evaluating content as well as targeted flagging by anti-LGBT users. “I’ve done multiple tests in proving that the word transgender on my channels has demonetized my videos,” he says in one video. “It’s a trigger word. It triggers the algorithm.”

In [October 2017, he tweeted](https://twitter.com/ChaseRoss/status/917122952176467969) screenshots of two videos that were originally uploaded with the word trans in the title. Both were demonetized. When Ross removed the term, however, they were monetized as usual. He ran into this problem again this May after publishing a video about his life since his surgery five years ago. He uploaded two copies — one that had the word transgender in the title, and one that didn’t. “The second I added the word transgender it was automatically demonetized,” he says. On Twitter, he posted a screenshot comparing the two posts — one with the word transgender, and one without. The video marked transgender was marked “not suitable” for most advertisers. “Every single one of my Trans 101 videos has been demonetized,” he says. “...You’re going to tell me that trans people aren’t directly attacked?

[View image on Twitter](https://twitter.com/ChaseRoss/status/1001922360600137728/photo/1)

Other trans YouTubers have run into similar problems as well since YouTube’s 2017 announcement that their systems were “not working as intended.” In April, creator Ty Turner [tweeted](https://twitter.com/partar400/status/989278315050622976?lang=en) that his channel received a strike after he vlogged about picking up testosterone that was prescribed to him. Blaire White [tweeted](https://twitter.com/MsBlaireWhite/status/1002305364090482688) at YouTube on May 31st about a video where she reads letters from LGBT fans in the Middle East. “Why did you demonetize/restrict this video where I stand up for LGBT rights in the Middle East?” she wrote. “I attempted to boost the voices of people in need, but you’re censoring them.”

In an email to *The Verge*, YouTube denied that the use of the words “trans” or “transgender” triggered instant demonetization. “We do not have a list of LGBTQ-related words that trigger demonetization, and we are constantly evaluating our systems to ensure they are enforcing our policies without any bias,” a spokesperson said. “We use machine learning to evaluate content against our advertiser guidelines. Sometimes our systems get it wrong, which is why we’ve encouraged creators to appeal. Successful appeals ensure that our systems get better and better.”

Under automated systems like this, the burden is placed on the channel holder to appeal and hope for the best, but there’s no guarantee that a video will be restored with ads or have its age-restrictions removed. According to a source at YouTube, when videos are demonetized, it can make similar videos on that channel more likely to get flagged in the future. And even if the creator can successfully appeal a restriction, it may damage their potential to get views in the crucial hours after posting. After Ross’s tweets about the incident, YouTube’s official account responded that “we reviewed this video and it should now be monetizing. One of our team members will be reaching out to you to discuss the details of what happened.”

Ross says that YouTube has yet to reach out. “I really hope they do and I hope we are able to talk about what is happening and how to make it better,” he says. “I don’t feel the explanation was fair because it didn’t go into any details. A small tweet saying ‘LGBT words don’t demonetize videos’ doesn’t reassure me. I don’t think YouTube is doing this on purpose, but I think its something they really need to pay attention to.”

Restrictions on LGBT channels don’t just hurt their creators. They also remove education and information for young people who may not have access to it any other way. Ross says that he’s had at least 144 videos that have either been demonetized or age-restricted. “I have seen YouTube grow into this beautiful platform of education and community, especially for the trans community,” he says. “We all found ourselves here. We found our identities. We figured out who we were. We watched other people’s top surgery videos and realized oh my god I need that, I need that feeling. YouTube has been a lifesaver for so many trans people, and I wish that this education that’s available now was available when I was younger. But here’s the kicker: I was under 18, so all of this education I would not have had access to [if it was age-restricted].”

The troubles with YouTube and LGBT content don’t stop there. In a follow-up video posted on June 2nd, Ross pointed out that on top of demonetization and age-restriction, some of his video were also being tagged with anti-LGBT advertisements. The organization behind the ads, Alliance Defending Freedom, has been deemed a hate group by the Southern Poverty Law Center, and has [linked homosexuality to pedophilia](https://www.splcenter.org/sites/default/files/sears-osten-homosexual-agenda_pg-66.jpg), and advocated for the [sterilization of trans people](https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2017/07/27/anti-lgbt-hate-group-alliance-defending-freedom-defended-state-enforced-sterilization) and the recriminalization of homosexuality in the U.S.

“I know that it’s the algorithm and the bots and the way that everything is coded,” Ross says. “But you’re allowing an anti-LGBT ad, a very homophobic and transphobic company, [to] advertise their message.” He also questioned why homophobic and transphobic ads were showing up on his videos, especially given how the company has articulated its [support for diversity on the platform](https://www.forbes.com/sites/kathleenchaykowski/2018/04/10/youtube-ceo-susan-wojcicki-three-ways-tech-companies-should-improve-diversity/#4b8a4a8f18ca). (Last August, YouTube CEO Susan Wojcicki [noted](https://www.theverge.com/2017/8/9/16118018/youtube-ceo-women-tech-google-diversity-susan-wojcicki) the principle of free speech “does not mean companies cannot take action” when that speech perpetuates negative stereotypes or “the language of discrimination.”) Ross calls it hypocritical for YouTube to say they support marginalized creators, “and yet on the other side [it’s] advertising homophobic stuff on our videos.”

Ross isn’t the only creator to take note of these ads. In a video called “[Worse than Demonetization: Anti-Gay Ads on LGBTQ+ Videos](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CC3OOXD_2MA),” YouTuber Hank Green calls these ads running on LGBT channels “despicable and gross and disgusting.” He says that YouTube’s current system allows these advertisers to upload a video and decide what kind of content they’d like it to pre-roll against. “People are now doing this with anti-gay, anti-LGBT+ content, throwing it up on specifically content from LGBTQ+ YouTubers,” he says. “Are they doing this because they want to freak people out and be like, ‘well fine now I feel like this is an antagonistic place and I don’t feel comfortable on this platform’? Maybe. Are they doing this because they want to reach people who are vulnerable and are looking for support in a time of need? Almost definitely.”

On Twitter, writer and YouTuber [Gaby Dunn said](https://twitter.com/gabydunn/status/1002430763571208193) that viewers recently alerted her to these ads on her channel. Creator Elijah Daniel [tweeted](https://twitter.com/elijahdaniel/status/1003516498076303362) pictures of the ad, adding “how fucking dare you @youtube? you restrict creators beyond belief with what we can have ads on, but dont screen ads like this before going live? and let them run on LGBT channels? for days? during pride month?” The ads have also started to appear on other, broader channels, including musician [Gabriel Kahane](https://twitter.com/KarinaEmberly/status/1000480928605454336) and [YouTuber PewDiePie](https://twitter.com/nick_orbe/status/1001797820423311360).

In an email to The Verge, a spokesperson says YouTube is looking at ways to improve its policies moving forward. “We have [policies](https://support.google.com/adwordspolicy/answer/6008942?hl=en) against ads on YouTube that incite hatred or promote discrimination, and all ads that run on the platform have to comply with these policies,” the spokesperson says. “Even when an ad does not violate our policies, we understand that creators may not want ads from certain advertisers appearing on their videos. That’s why we give creators the [ability](https://support.google.com/youtube/answer/172795?hl=en) to block ads from an advertiser in their [AdSense](https://www.google.com/adsense/start/#/?modal_active=none) account. We also give creators the option to block certain categories of ads if they choose.”

Ross expressed frustration with how YouTube has handled the situation so far. “It’s like we can’t win,” he wrote in an email to The Verge. “I don’t feel like people take us seriously and it needs to change. YouTube really needs to start paying attention to this community ... I don’t feel like I belong on a platform that I and other LGBTQ+ individuals helped build.” Although he doesn’t feel that the company is homophobic or transphobic, he says there are still clear problems with the platform’s reliance on machine-learning systems to evaluate content, that have repeatedly left LGBT creators feeling targeted and unwelcome. “YouTube was a safe haven for so many trans people, including myself when I was younger, and it just hurts and really makes me feel like we need to leave and that people want us to leave.”