

We must not punish content creators in our rush to regulate social platforms

Written by Stuart Cunningham, Distinguished Professor, Media and Communication, Queensland University of Technology

By harnessing social media, the teenage survivors of the Parkland, Florida massacre in the United States have [started a movement](#) that might finally shift the dial on gun control.

Using their cellphones and laptops, they've not only organised a march on Washington, but built a digital network of supporters who are putting unprecedented pressure on legislators.

Social media platforms such as Facebook have richly earned our distrust. From [Russian interference](#) in the 2016 US Presidential election, to the spread of [fake news](#) and the recent [Cambridge Analytica scandal](#), the news just keeps getting worse.

Read more: [**Australia's screen future is online: time to support our new content creators**](#)

But the Parkland movement reminds us that digital platforms have also provided the infrastructure to give a new generation voice and influence for civic good.

Recent attempts to deal with the proliferation of fake news and extremist content on platforms has seen some creators lose both audience and revenue. Now that the pitchforks are out for the platforms, their facilitation of new voices should not be overlooked in the push for further regulation.

Millions of creators and counting

The Parkland teenagers [were influenced](#) by established online creators like [Philip DeFranco](#).

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DeFranco owns and operates his own social media brand, producing a daily vlog featuring commentary about topical events that are of interest to his online fan communities. And he's just one of a number of young online leaders who are using social media platforms for good.

There are an [estimated](#) 1.8 million YouTube creators, as well as 3 million using Instagram, in the US alone. The top [5,000 YouTube channels](#) each have more than 1.2 million subscribers and over 360 million video views. US creators earned an [estimated](#) US\$5.9 billion across nine digital platforms in 2016.

We have been researching this rising global creative industry of social media entrepreneurs and entertainers – called variously influencers, YouTubers, micro-celebrities, or just creators. It is radically [more diverse and egalitarian](#) than mainstream media, and has brought new voices to the public.

Read more: [**Government regulation of social media would be a cure far worse than the disease**](#)

In many instances, these online leaders have engaged in or facilitated social activism, raising civic awareness and funding for progressive causes. Videogame player and YouTuber, [Markiplier](#), secured 20 million subscribers while also raising over [\\$US3 million for charity](#).

The Green Brothers' annual [Project4Awesome](#) campaign has encouraged dozens of online content creators to dedicate their time and efforts to raise funds and awareness for social causes for over a decade. Ben Stiller, Colin Kaepernick, and Jerome Jarre's [#LoveArmy](#) have raised millions for Mexican earthquake victims, Somalian famine sufferers, and Rohingya refugees.

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At the corporate level, YouTube, through its [Creators for Change program](#), has provided millions of dollars in support of the collective creative efforts of global multicultural creators.

Demonetisation has already hurt them

The capacity of online cultural leaders to pursue these agendas is vulnerable to the new appetite for regulation, and the need for the platforms to put their houses in order.

Both [The Guardian](#) and [CNN](#) criticised YouTube for placing mainstream brands' advertising alongside extremist videos. In response, Google [implemented](#) a filtration algorithm that would flag content deemed "brand-safe" for advertisers.

Though it may have been well-intentioned, the resulting "[adpocalypse](#)" led to the demonetisation of many of these progressive creators – including DeFranco – due to their use of language and content choices.

In another instance, [Casey Neistat](#) and #LoveArmy filmed a fundraiser for the victims of the Las Vegas shooting. However, it was [removed from YouTube](#) because of the platform's improper flagging mechanism, which was created in an attempt to minimise the spread of conspiracy videos about the event.

When The New York Times [highlighted](#) the rise of trending conspiracy videos about Parkland survivor, David Hogg, it failed to mention the numerous other videos created in support of the teens. These videos scaled five times faster and were likely also demonetised by YouTube's filtering system. One [video](#) by DeFranco directly addressing these "disgusting conspiracy videos" has close to two million views.

Regulation shouldn't stifle voices for good

As the call for greater regulation of these platforms gains momentum worldwide, it is critical to acknowledge that existing government regulation has already imposed greater constraint on many of these creators' practices than those rules applied to more traditional media like television.

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The US Federal Trade Commission [regulation](#) demands that online creators be transparent about sponsorship and branded content. But traditional celebrities are able to flaunt their own brands on the red carpet, on the court, and across their own online channels without prohibition.

For decades, Fox News operated with the tagline “fair and balanced” without any regulatory constraint. This despite the years of academic media [research](#) that nailed the channel as a purveyor of media disinformation with a staunch conservative bent.

Read more: [From #MeToo to #RiceBunny: how social media users are campaigning in China](#)

These concerns are at their greatest in the policing and censorship of Chinese creators (known as “Wang Hong”). Operating on Chinese owned-and-operated platforms, their ability to raise critically sensitive societal issues is [firmly surveilled](#) .

In China, as in many parts of the world, LGBTQ content and creators remain [forbidden](#) in mainstream media. The only hope for this community rests on the ability of these creators to express and fund themselves across social media platforms.

Whether because of hubris or poor internal governance, the platforms deserve what is coming at them. Our hope is that those regulators in a position to demand that platforms behave more responsibly will not implement policy at the expense of those young online leaders harnessing these platforms for good.

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Authors: Stuart Cunningham, Distinguished Professor, Media and Communication, Queensland University of Technology

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