

YouTubers of the world, unite!

What happens when a grassroots, international creators' movement and a traditional trade union join forces?

Thanks to the efforts of the YouTubers Union and IG Metall, content creators on the platform now have greater transparency, arbitration power, clearer rules, better communication and greater participation.

By Jelena Prtorić¹

Jörg Sprave built his first slingshot at the age of six but didn't think of pursuing his hobby further until almost 40 years later. At that time Sprave, who holds a degree in economics, worked for a video editing software company. As they needed video content to test YouTube uploads, Sprave decided to film himself making slingshots.

Five years later, in 2013, Sprave decided to become a full-time, professional YouTuber. On [the Slingshot Channel](#), he has been publishing tutorials in English and reviews about self-made slingshots, crossbows, knives and airguns. His account has amassed over 433 million views and is followed by more than 2.6 million people.

Back in 2012, when YouTube opened its Partner Program to everybody, content creators could easily monetise their videos, provided they had enough views and avoided controversial (sexual or violent) content and language. But in 2017, a series of scandals shook the platform when some advertisements were played alongside videos [promoting extremism and hate speech](#). Several major companies pulled their ads and a total revenue loss of [US\\$750 million](#) was predicted for YouTube.

The scandal and drop in revenues pushed [YouTube to review its algorithms](#), but this had a negative impact on creators' content and revenues. Many professional YouTubers saw their videos demonetised, shadowbanned (blocking or partially blocking a user or their

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content in a way that is not obvious to the user) or their channels (temporarily) closed, thus putting many in a financially precarious position.

Sprave was one of them. He says the problem was not the algorithm change per se, but the fact that the process and new guidelines weren't clearly communicated to creators. Although YouTube was his main source of income, he had other means to make a living, but he felt it was his duty to fight back. In March 2018, he created the YouTubers Union (YTU) in order to facilitate the exchange of information among creators, organise support campaigns and discuss changes on the platform.



*In 2018, YouTube content creator Jörg Sprave formed the YouTubers Union after changes in the algorithm negatively impacted the video rankings and incomes of YouTubers. Following a popular campaign, the union manage to negotiate more rights and better conditions for content creators.
(True Images/Alamy Stock Photo)*

Unity and visibility

Workers organising on large-scale digital platforms is still relatively uncommon and is fraught with challenges, notes the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung report [Organising YouTube – A novel case of platform worker organising](#) by Valentin Niebler and Annemarie Kern. One of them is organisational fragmentation. Since workers are not formally integrated into the organisation they “lack rights to collectively bargain or organize.” They also “face technological fragmentation, entangled with high information asymmetries that prevent them from communicating with each other,” and are confronted with geographical separation, since they live and work in different areas of the world and are subject to different legislation.

But Sprave says there is another challenge: ideological differences. “The group gathers people of different political beliefs. We have right-wing and left-wing channels and everything in between.” Sprave made it clear that the union wasn't set up to discuss political and ideological differences. “Our goal was to enhance the working conditions of YouTubers. We said we were completely neutral regarding the content – as long as one's

channel follows the platforms' guidelines." This means that the union didn't support the demands of those who wanted YouTube to allow the airing of videos that promote hate speech and conspiracy theories.

Sprave also makes it clear that he never wanted to "kill YouTube and start another platform" nor demand that content creators become YouTube's employees. "We just wanted a fair partnership," he says.

YTU was initially set up as a Facebook group which allowed Sprave not only to share timely updates but also create polls that could be used as a tool in group decision-making. However, there is still a hierarchy in the group, and Sprave moderates its content. "If there are people that pursue things we don't support, we delete it and kick them out," he explains. In September 2018, Sprave published a video in the name of the union, Debunked: YouTube caught lying!, in which he criticised the tech giant's opaque and misleading communication processes. This action resulted in an invitation from YouTube for a number of personal meetings between Sprave and their team.

FairTube campaign success

Although this was a fruitful start to unionising efforts, no institutional agreements were reached, and in 2018 YTU decided to join forces with a traditional trade union – IG Metall (the German Metalworkers' Union), which was founded in 1949 and represents over 2.2 million workers in Germany.

IG Metall had already been involved in other campaigns aimed at improving transparency and the working conditions of digital platform workers, who are usually regarded as self-employed.

"We work with the platforms that have signed the Crowdsourcing Code of Conduct and we operate the Ombuds Office that mediates disputes between workers on digital platforms and the platforms themselves," says Michael 'Six' Silberman, a communication officer for IG Metall's Crowdsourcing Project.

While creators knew the YouTube ecosystem, they lacked the resources to navigate it. "IG Metall had financial resources, lawyers and political influence," says Sprave. Legal and financial means were important in the prospect of taking YouTube to court. YTU members were asked to approve the cooperation via a Facebook poll and vote on common demands. Not everyone was thrilled with the partnership. "There were some people in the United States who said they hated the fact we were teaming up with a trade union. The unions are not very popular there," Sprave remembers.

For IG Metall it was important to make sure the communication would be in line with their guidelines. “Hate speech, racism, sexism, homophobia, xenophobia, etc. are not welcome in any of our initiatives. We do not hesitate, for example, to delete comments with any of these characteristics in our online channels,” explains Silberman.

In July 2019, YTU and IG Metall launched the FairTube campaign which consisted of three main elements: [a viral 14 minute video](#) in which Sprave outlined the ways in which “it seems like YouTube doesn’t want independent YouTubers anymore”, a [campaign website](#), and six demands for YouTube. The key pressure points included a prospect of a lawsuit against YouTube/Google on the grounds of false self-employment and violation of the European Union’s General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), and “collaborative brand attacks” (which would involve YouTubers working en-masse to create videos discrediting YouTube). The campaign received a lot of attention – the size of YTU’s Facebook group almost doubled during the course of the campaign – and YouTube was ready to negotiate.

Thanks to the campaign, YouTube creators now have greater transparency (algorithms are now explained thoroughly), clearer rules, better communication with YouTube, arbitration power (access to senior YouTube managers to challenge decisions regarding cancellations and demonetisations), and greater participation (YouTube now asks its content creators for their feedback regarding innovations).

Sprave says that while he is content with the changes, he is currently looking into making FairTube a registered association that would also be open to other crowdworkers (such as Uber drivers) who would like to pull their knowledge and resources together to organise better conditions for all platform workers.

