

# From Audience Commodity to Promotion Struggles: A Political Economy Approach to YouTube

Yungwook Kim<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Ewha Womans University, South Korea

## ABSTRACT

Although YouTube presents itself as a platform for participatory communication and creative self-expression, it has also become one of the most profitable infrastructures in the global digital advertising economy. This transformation reveals a fundamental tension between YouTube's participatory discourse, often summarized by the slogan Broadcast Yourself, and its underlying political economic logic. Building on the tradition of the audience commodity thesis, this article argues that YouTube represents a new stage in the commodification of participation in digital capitalism. While existing scholarship has largely explained this process through the framework of digital labor and prosumer commodification, this perspective does not fully capture how platforms organize competition among users for visibility and attention. To address this limitation, the article introduces the concept of promotion struggles, defined as competitive processes through which users attempt to capture and monetize scarce attention within algorithmically structured platform environments. Using a conceptual political economy analysis of YouTube as a case study, the article shows how recommendation systems and advertising infrastructures transform participation into continuous competition for visibility. In this environment, the promise of Broadcast Yourself increasingly evolves into a new imperative: Promote Yourself.

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## From Broadcast Yourself to Promote Yourself

With more than 2.5 billion monthly active users worldwide (Statista, 2026) and over 20 million videos uploaded daily (YouTube, 2026), YouTube has become a central infrastructure of the global digital media ecosystem and the attention economy. Unlike traditional broadcasting systems characterized by centralized, top-down content production, YouTube operates primarily through bottom-up participation in which users themselves generate the vast majority of the platform's content. This structural shift has often been interpreted as a fundamental transformation in the media system, suggesting a more participatory environment in which individuals can share creative expression and

communicate across spatial and temporal boundaries.

Early discussions of digital media frequently emphasized precisely this emancipatory potential. Drawing on the concept of grammatization, Stiegler (2010) argued that digital technologies could enable new forms of collective participation and knowledge production by transforming the ways communication and cultural memory are recorded and transmitted. In this perspective, platforms such as YouTube appeared capable of fostering decentralized media environments in which ordinary users could communicate freely outside the constraints of

## CONTACT

Yungwook Kim (Ph.D., University of Florida, USA.) is Ewha Fellow Professor, Division of Communication & Media, Ewha Womans University, South Korea.

**\*Corresponding author's email:** kimyw@ewha.ac.kr

traditional media institutions. The platform's early slogan, Broadcast Yourself, symbolized this vision of participatory communication and creative autonomy.

However, scholars soon began to question whether these participatory media environments could remain independent of broader economic and political interests. Historically, communication technologies that initially appear to expand participation often become integrated into existing systems of capital accumulation. The acquisition of YouTube by Google in 2006 marked a crucial turning point in this transformation. As the platform became embedded within the global digital advertising infrastructure, user participation increasingly became a key resource for profit generation.

This transformation has frequently been analyzed through the concept of the prosumer, referring to individuals who simultaneously act as both producers and consumers of media content (Andrejevic, 2010). In platform environments, users generate value not only through content consumption but also through the continuous production of data, engagement, and attention. Building on this insight, critical political economy scholars have emphasized the growing importance of digital labor in the platform economy. Fuchs (2014a), for example, argues that everyday online activities such as posting, viewing, and interacting with content generate behavioral data that platforms monetize through targeted advertising systems.

Subsequent research has further examined the cultural and affective dimensions of this process. Duffy (2017) shows how social media participation often takes the form of aspirational labor, in which individuals invest substantial time and emotional energy in the hope of achieving visibility and potential economic rewards. Similarly, Banet-Weiser (2012) highlights how authenticity has become a strategic resource in digital media environments, where users perform intimacy and self-disclosure in order to attract attention and maintain credibility. Other scholars have emphasized the growing importance of data labor, demonstrating how platforms capture value from behavioral data generated through everyday interactions (Wu & Taneja, 2021). These studies collectively show that the contemporary platform economy relies heavily on user activity as a source of economic value. This article argues that understanding YouTube requires moving beyond labor extraction alone to examine promotion struggles, defined as platform-organized competition for visibility, attention, and monetization.

While current perspectives have significantly advanced our understanding of social media economies, they primarily explain platform

participation in terms of labor extraction. Although this perspective is crucial for understanding how value is generated from user activity, it does not fully capture how contemporary platforms actively organize competition among users as a mechanism of accumulation. In platform environments such as YouTube, participation is increasingly structured around intense competition for visibility, attention, and algorithmic recognition. Creators must continuously compete for views, subscriptions, recommendations, and engagement metrics that determine their position within algorithmically curated visibility hierarchies.

To conceptualize this dynamic, this article introduces the concept of promotion struggles. Promotion struggles refer to competitive interactions among users who attempt to secure algorithmic visibility, audience attention, and potential economic opportunities within platform ecosystems (Kim, 2025). On YouTube, creators are not simply engaged in producing content as a form of digital labor. Rather, they participate in continuous struggles to promote themselves and their content within a highly competitive attention economy.

These struggles are intensified by the platform's algorithmic recommendation systems. Metrics such as views, likes, shares, and subscriptions function as indicators of visibility that determine whether content is amplified or marginalized by the platform's algorithms. As the volume of available content increases, creators are compelled to engage in increasingly strategic forms of self-promotion and audience engagement in order to maintain visibility. In this environment, social interaction itself becomes structured around competitive promotion.

This dynamic generates a self-reinforcing cycle within the platform economy. Increased participation produces more content, which intensifies competition for visibility. In response, creators adopt more aggressive promotional strategies in order to attract audience attention. These interactions generate vast amounts of behavioral data and engagement metrics that can be monetized through targeted advertising infrastructures. As a result, YouTube converts social interaction into a continuous process of competitive promotion that ultimately fuels platform profit.

From this perspective, YouTube can be understood as an infrastructure that transforms social interaction into a promotion-driven exploitation chain. Whereas traditional media commodified audience attention, platforms such as YouTube commodify the competitive interactions among users themselves. By encouraging individuals to promote themselves in pursuit of visibility, the platform captures the value generated

by these promotional struggles through algorithmic recommendation systems and advertising markets.

This transformation reveals a fundamental contradiction at the core of YouTube's platform model. On the one hand, the platform continues to present itself as a space for participatory creativity and free expression. On the other hand, its economic model increasingly relies on organizing user participation into competitive promotion struggles that generate engagement, data, and advertising revenue (Burgess, 2015). In this sense, the original promise of Broadcast Yourself gradually evolves into a new imperative: Promote Yourself.

By developing the concept of promotion struggles, this article aims to extend the political economy of communication beyond the framework of digital labor. It argues that the central mechanism through which contemporary platforms generate value is not simply the extraction of labor from users but the systematic organization of social interaction as competitive promotion. Understanding this mechanism is essential for explaining how platforms such as YouTube convert everyday communication and participation into the economic foundation of digital capitalism.

## **From Audience Commodity to Prosumer Commodification**

The theory of the audience commodity emerged as a critique of communication research that focused primarily on media texts while neglecting the economic role of audiences within capitalist media systems. Smythe (1977) argued that commercial media institutions do not merely distribute cultural content but organize audience attention as a commodity that can be sold to advertisers. In this framework, media programs function primarily as instruments for attracting and reproducing audiences whose watching time is exchanged in advertising markets (Smythe, 1977).

This argument was further refined through the concept of watching labor. Jhally and Livant (1986) suggested that watching advertisements is not simply a passive activity but a form of labor because it contributes directly to the valorization process of media capital. They distinguish between necessary watching, which generates the revenue required to sustain media production, and surplus watching, which produces profit beyond these costs. From this perspective, commercial media institutions are structurally oriented toward increasing both the duration and the intensity of audience exposure to advertising in order to expand surplus value (Jhally & Livant, 1986; Jhally, 1987).

From a Marxian perspective, these dynamics can be interpreted in terms of absolute and relative surplus value. Expanding advertising time resembles the extraction of absolute surplus

value, while improving the efficiency of advertising exposure resembles the extraction of relative surplus value (Marx, 1976). In traditional broadcasting systems, however, both strategies faced structural limitations. Advertising time could only be expanded within the finite structure of program schedules, and the ability to target specific audiences remained relatively limited.

Digital media have fundamentally transformed these conditions. Through continuous surveillance, behavioral tracking, and data analytics, platforms can monitor user activities in real time and tailor advertising exposure with unprecedented precision. Under these conditions, the traditional concept of the audience commodity evolves into a broader process of prosumer commodification. Digital media users are no longer merely audiences who watch advertisements. They also produce content, circulate information, and generate behavioral data that can be monetized by platforms (Fuchs, 2012, 2014c; Terranova, 2000). In this environment, users function simultaneously as producers and consumers, becoming prosumers whose everyday participation contributes to the accumulation of platform capital.

Recent research has shown that this transformation is closely tied to the broader platformization of cultural production. Digital platforms no longer function simply as distribution channels but operate as infrastructures that organize relationships among creators, audiences, advertisers, and other market actors. Through recommendation algorithms, monetization policies, and data analytics, platforms increasingly shape the conditions under which cultural production occurs (Nieborg & Poell, 2018). As a result, user participation generates economic value not only through content production but also through engagement metrics, behavioral data, and algorithmic optimization.

Digital labor in platform environments extends beyond traditional media production to include everyday activities such as viewing, liking, commenting, sharing, and searching. These practices generate economic value by sustaining engagement, producing behavioral data, and improving advertising efficiency (Fuchs, 2014a). As Altenried (2022) notes, much of this labor remains dispersed and largely invisible behind automated digital infrastructures. At the same time, platforms intensify data extraction by converting everyday social interaction into monetizable behavioral information (Mejias & Couldry, 2024). Prosumer commodification therefore refers not simply to users acting as both producers and consumers, but to the broader incorporation of social life into data-driven systems of capital accumulation.

Despite these developments, the classification of online user activity as productive labor remains contested. Some scholars argue that user participation cannot be considered free labor because access to content functions as a form of compensation (Jhally, 1987). Others suggest that platform profits arise primarily from financial mechanisms or advertising markets rather than from the direct exploitation of user labor (Arvidsson & Colleoni, 2012; Robinson, 2015). From this perspective, digital platforms operate as intermediaries that capture rent from advertising markets rather than directly exploiting user labor (Bolaño & Vieira, 2015).

Nevertheless, this article takes the position that these arguments underestimate the central role of audience attention and user activity in the digital media economy. Even when profits are realized through transactions between platforms and advertisers, those transactions fundamentally depend on the commodification and sale of user attention and behavioral data. Advertisers pay digital platforms precisely because they can access measurable audiences and behavioral profiles generated through user activity. In this sense, the labor of watching, clicking, searching, and interacting remains essential to the valorization of digital platforms (Fuchs, 2010, 2014c, 2015).

Research on YouTube reflects these broader debates. Postigo (2016) identifies three major perspectives on user activity within the platform. One approach interprets user participation primarily through the concept of immaterial labor, emphasizing how user-generated content becomes a source of profit for capital (Terranova, 2000). A second perspective highlights the voluntary and creative aspects of participation within participatory culture (Jenkins, 2006). A third perspective integrates these approaches by arguing that participatory culture and capitalist exploitation coexist within platform environments (Andrejevic, 2010; Postigo, 2016).

Following this third perspective, participatory culture and exploitation should be analyzed together. Platforms actively encourage participation because it generates content, engagement, and behavioral data that can be monetized through advertising systems. Participation therefore becomes a central mechanism through which value extraction operates in platform capitalism.

Digital labor encompasses multiple forms of value-generating participation within platform environments rather than a single mode of exploitation. One dimension is watching labor, rooted in the audience commodity tradition, in which economic value is generated through viewing, clicking, and sustained audience attention. A second dimension concerns the labor of being

watched (Andrejevic, 2002), where users generate value through the behavioral traces and personal data extracted via continuous surveillance and platform monitoring. A third dimension involves identity labor, in which users invest creative, emotional, and aspirational effort into constructing online identities, cultivating audiences, and pursuing future visibility or monetization opportunities. These distinctions suggest that digital labor primarily explains how platforms extract value from user activities, attention, and data. However, the increasing competitive organization of participation in platform environments suggests an additional dynamic that cannot be fully captured through labor extraction alone. The concept of promotion struggles shifts the analytical focus to how platforms organize competition among users for visibility as a distinct mechanism of accumulation.

On YouTube, advertising is not merely a revenue source but also a governance mechanism that shapes creator behavior and content strategies (Joseph & Bishop, 2024). The transformations discussed in this article reflect a broader shift in the political economy of media: from the commodification of audience attention in traditional broadcasting to the extraction of user activity and behavioral data in digital platforms, and ultimately to the organization of competitive struggles for visibility in contemporary platform environments such as YouTube.

Traditional broadcasting primarily commodified audience attention through watching labor. Digital platforms expanded this logic into prosumer commodification, in which users generate value not only through attention but also through content production, behavioral data, and social interaction. Digital labor scholarship has clarified how these activities become sources of economic extraction. Yet contemporary platform environments such as YouTube introduce a further transformation: platforms do not simply extract value from user activity, but actively organize competitive struggles among users for visibility, recognition, and monetization. In this sense, promotion struggles represent a shift from the extraction of labor alone to the governance of competition as a distinct mechanism of platform accumulation. The next section examines how recommendation algorithms, advertising infrastructures, and governance mechanisms transform participation into a systematic process of value extraction.

## The Exploitation Structure of YouTube

The previous section demonstrated how digital media environments expand the commodification of audiences into broader forms of prosumer commodification. Platforms extract value not only from watching labor but also from user-

generated content, behavioral data, and engagement metrics. These dynamics become particularly visible in the case of YouTube, which represents one of the most developed infrastructures of the contemporary platform economy.

Reports on the creator economy illustrate the pressures embedded within this system. Even highly successful YouTube creators often experience severe burnout due to the constant demand to produce content in order to maintain visibility within the platform's algorithmic recommendation system (Yurieff, 2019). Research has similarly shown that YouTube's algorithmic environment encourages continuous self-optimization, visibility anxiety, and precarious forms of creator labor (Bishop, 2018; Duffy et al., 2021). The platform's algorithm rewards frequent uploads, sustained audience engagement, and continuous interaction, thereby encouraging creators to maintain a constant cycle of production. Under these conditions, participation becomes inseparable from competition for visibility.

From a Marxian perspective, this dynamic reflects a transformation in the relationship between labor and technological systems. Marx (1976) anticipated the possibility that machines could come to regulate the conditions under which labor takes place. In digital platform environments, algorithmic systems increasingly perform this coordinating role. Rather than users controlling digital infrastructures, platform architectures shape the conditions under which users produce, interact, and compete (Fuchs, 2016). More recently, the rise of YouTube Shorts illustrates how creators must adapt their labor to shifting platform priorities. As YouTube increasingly promotes short-form vertical video to compete with TikTok, creators face pressure to modify content formats, production strategies, and audience engagement practices in order to maintain algorithmic visibility. Also, generative AI has begun to reshape YouTube's creator economy by lowering barriers to content production while simultaneously intensifying competition for visibility. AI-assisted scripting, voice generation, editing, and thumbnail production allow creators to accelerate content production, but they also increase content saturation, making competition for audience attention even more intense.

Understanding YouTube's political economy therefore requires examining the specific mechanisms through which the platform generates profit. Participation in the YouTube Partnership Program constitutes the most visible mechanism through which creators can monetize their activities. Once creators meet minimum thresholds for subscribers and watch time, they can generate revenue through advertising, channel memberships, merchandise shelves, live-stream donations such as Super Chats, and revenue shares from YouTube Premium subscriptions (YouTube, 2026). Live-

streaming features further intensify these dynamics by transforming audience attention into immediate monetization opportunities. Through mechanisms such as Super Chats, channel memberships, and real-time donations, creators are incentivized to sustain prolonged audience engagement while continuously performing visibility and interaction in real time. Despite the diversity of these mechanisms, advertising remains the dominant source of revenue within the platform ecosystem.

The centrality of advertising reveals the structural role played by audience attention in YouTube's business model. Display advertisements and overlay advertisements generate revenue through user clicks, while video advertisements generate revenue through viewing time. Consequently, the platform's profitability depends largely on maximizing the amount of time users spend watching advertising content. From a Marxian perspective, this process can be interpreted as the extraction of surplus labor from both creators and viewers. Creators provide unpaid or underpaid creative labor by continuously producing content, while viewers generate value through watching labor that produces advertising revenue for the platform.

The expansion of digital platforms has also intensified the role of data extraction in the profit-generation process. Unlike traditional broadcast media, YouTube does not rely on linear programming schedules. Instead, users actively search for and curate the content they consume, leaving behind extensive behavioral traces. These data enable advertisers to target specific audiences with increasing precision and allow the platform to optimize recommendation systems and advertising placement in real time (Andrejevic, 2010; Nieborg & Poell, 2018).

Another important dimension of YouTube's political economy involves the management of copyright and intellectual property. Copyright disputes were initially perceived as a potential threat to the platform's development because user-generated content frequently incorporated copyrighted material. However, the introduction of legal frameworks such as the Digital Millennium Copyright Act (DMCA) and technological systems such as automated copyright detection tools enabled YouTube to manage these conflicts while continuing to expand the circulation of content (McDonald, 2010). Rather than fundamentally limiting the platform's growth, copyright management became integrated into the broader economic infrastructure of the platform.

In practice, large copyright holders increasingly cooperate with YouTube because the platform offers unparalleled opportunities for distributing and monetizing content. Through licensing agreements and revenue-sharing

arrangements, traditional media companies and copyright holders can monetize the circulation of their content on the platform. These arrangements create a mutually reinforcing relationship between legacy media institutions and the platform economy, further consolidating YouTube's role as a central infrastructure of digital cultural distribution.

More recent legal and regulatory debates have expanded beyond copyright management to broader questions of platform accountability, including content moderation, algorithmic transparency, creator rights, and the governance of AI-generated content. These developments suggest that YouTube's legal environment increasingly concerns not only intellectual property management but also the broader governance of platform power.

The interaction between content producers, advertisers, and platform infrastructures generates a powerful feedback loop. Content attracts audiences, audiences generate engagement and behavioral data, and these data enhance the efficiency of targeted advertising systems. As advertising revenues increase, the platform attracts more creators and media companies, which in turn expand the volume of available content. In this way, YouTube's profit-generation system relies on the continuous expansion of both content production and audience engagement.

From a political economic perspective, YouTube therefore exploits multiple forms of user activity simultaneously. Creators contribute creative labor by producing content, viewers generate value through watching labor, and all users contribute behavioral data that can be monetized through targeted advertising systems. This multi-layered extraction of value reflects a broader transformation in the political economy of media in which social interaction itself becomes integrated into processes of capital accumulation (Altenried, 2022; Mejias & Couldry, 2024).

However, YouTube's exploitation mechanisms cannot be explained solely through digital labor or data extraction. The platform actively organizes user participation as competition for visibility, audience attention, and monetization within an algorithmically structured hierarchy. By encouraging creators to compete for scarce attention, YouTube continuously stimulates content production, intensifies engagement, and transforms participation into strategic self-promotion.

Understanding this dynamic requires moving beyond the framework of digital labor alone. While labor exploitation remains central to the platform economy, YouTube's exploitation structure depends on the interrelation among creative labor, watching labor, and behavioral data extraction. Promotion struggles function as the organizational mechanism that integrates these

different forms of extraction: creators compete for visibility by producing content and cultivating audiences, viewers generate watching labor and engagement metrics, and these interactions produce behavioral data that can be monetized through advertising infrastructures. These struggles shape how creators produce content, interact with audiences, and position themselves within the platform's algorithmic hierarchy. The next section therefore examines how competition among users becomes a central mechanism of value extraction within the YouTube platform economy.

## **Promotion Struggles and the Competitive Organization of Attention on YouTube**

Traditional accounts of digital labor have provided an important framework for understanding how digital platforms extract value from user-generated content, behavioral data, and watching activities (Fuchs, 2014a; Terranova, 2000). Yet the YouTube case suggests that this framework remains incomplete. While digital labor theory explains how user participation generates economic value for platforms, it does not fully capture how platforms actively organize competitive environments in which users struggle for visibility, recognition, and monetization opportunities. While similar visibility competition can also be observed on other platform ecosystems such as TikTok and Instagram, YouTube provides a particularly clear and institutionally mature case in which creator monetization, recommendation systems, and advertising infrastructures are tightly integrated. What distinguishes YouTube analytically is therefore not the existence of promotion struggles per se, but the visibility and structural clarity with which these dynamics operate.

Promotion struggles refer to platform-organized competitive processes in which users continuously compete to capture, stabilize, and monetize scarce attention. Unlike digital labor, which primarily focuses on the extraction of value from users' time, activities, and data, promotion struggles highlight how platforms organize competition among users as a central mechanism of value production. Promotion struggles differ from related concepts such as aspirational labor and attention capital in important ways. Aspirational labor primarily emphasizes individuals' self-investment, affective effort, and hopes for future recognition or economic reward (Duffy, 2017), whereas promotion struggles foreground the platform-organized competitive structures that shape these efforts. Similarly, while attention capital highlights attention as an economic resource, promotion struggles focus more specifically on the competitive social processes through which users

attempt to capture, stabilize, and monetize scarce attention within algorithmically governed environments.

In such environments, self-promotion is no longer an optional activity but a structural condition of participation. Visibility, recommendation, and monetization opportunities are distributed through competitive metrics such as watch time, engagement rates, and subscriber counts. In practice, these dynamics are shaped by concrete platform signals such as click-through rates, watch time retention, viewer engagement metrics, and recommendation rankings, all of which influence whether content is amplified or marginalized within YouTube's algorithmic ecosystem.

On YouTube, creators therefore do not merely upload content; they must continuously compete for algorithmic recognition, audience retention, and advertising compatibility. Contemporary YouTube creator culture provides visible examples of this dynamic. Large-scale creators such as MrBeast have normalized increasingly expensive, high-intensity, and spectacle-driven content production, creating competitive pressures for other creators to escalate production values in order to remain visible within recommendation systems.

The emergence of promotion struggles is rooted in the structural scarcity of attention. In digital environments, the supply of content expands continuously while the cognitive capacity of audiences remains limited. Herbert Simon famously noted that a wealth of information creates a poverty of attention, making attention itself a scarce resource in an information-rich environment (Davenport & Beck, 2001). Under conditions of bounded rationality, individuals cannot process all available information and therefore rely on simplified heuristics to navigate information-rich environments. This structural limitation transforms attention into an economic resource that can be captured, accumulated, and monetized.

In digital media environments, attention operates through two complementary mechanisms: bottom-up attention and top-down attention (Nelson-Field, 2020). Bottom-up attention refers to involuntary attention triggered by external stimuli such as striking visuals, emotionally charged cues, or sensational headlines. Top-down attention refers to intentional and sustained engagement in which individuals deliberately seek out particular information or content. In highly competitive digital environments, creators often rely initially on bottom-up mechanisms to capture fleeting moments of audience awareness. However, fleeting exposure alone has limited economic value unless it can be converted into sustained engagement.

This transformation constitutes the process of attention monetization. Creators attempt to convert unstable moments of attention into durable assets such as subscribers, watch time, recurring viewership, searchable visibility, and reputational capital. Achieving this transformation requires strategic planning, continuous content production, and long-term audience cultivation. Yet this process is inherently unstable. Attention can shift quickly toward competing content, and creators must continually overcome information overload, algorithmic opacity, and audience fragmentation. Promotion struggles therefore involve not only the initial capture of attention but also the ongoing labor of stabilizing, maintaining, and expanding it.

Platforms play a decisive role in structuring these dynamics. Digital platforms function as infrastructures of interaction in which network effects determine success (Srnicek, 2017). Once a platform reaches a critical mass of participants, participation itself becomes a powerful incentive for further participation. Users join not only to consume content but also to build reputation, gain visibility, or pursue monetization opportunities. In such environments, self-promotion becomes a central organizing principle of participation. Users willingly invest time, creativity, and emotional labor into producing content and cultivating audiences. Through these activities they generate attention flows and behavioral data that sustain platform economies.

Importantly, this labor is intensified not primarily through direct managerial control but through competition among users themselves. Promotion struggles transform participation into a mechanism through which the volume of content production, audience engagement, and data generation expands continuously. As competition intensifies, attempts by individuals to secure economic rewards or reputational advantages often produce expanding forms of unpaid labor (Jakobsson & Stiernstedt, 2010). From the standpoint of platform capital, this represents an exceptionally efficient system for increasing surplus value extraction.

Promotion struggles also reshape subjectivity within platform labor. Rather than functioning as passive sources of appropriated labor, users actively construct online identities, cultivate audiences, and seek to convert visibility into economic or symbolic capital. In this environment, users are interpellated as entrepreneurial subjects who must continuously transform themselves into promotable assets. This form of agency stabilizes and intensifies exploitation. As individuals internalize the need to compete for visibility and recognition, they voluntarily invest greater amounts of labor into producing content, maintaining relevance, and

cultivating audiences. Competition thus becomes a mechanism through which exploitation is reproduced and intensified.

Promotion struggles also contribute to the formation of broader sociocultural and governance structures within digital media environments. Platform governance increasingly operates through algorithmic recommendation systems, monetization policies, visibility metrics, and community guidelines that shape user behavior. Creators frequently adjust titles, thumbnails, language, and even thematic choices in response to advertiser-friendly policies and demonetization risks, demonstrating that competition for visibility is closely tied to competition for monetization. Advertising infrastructures themselves function as forms of governance that regulate content production and platform conduct (Joseph & Bishop, 2024). Through these mechanisms, platforms influence how creators design content, manage audiences, and perform their online identities.

Seen from this perspective, promotion struggles are not peripheral to YouTube's political economy but constitute one of its defining organizational principles. The platform integrates creative labor, watching labor, and behavioral data within a competitive regime structured around attention capture and visibility. Creators compete to attract attention, audiences generate engagement and data, and platforms convert both into advertising revenues and algorithmic insights. Promotion struggles therefore operate as the mechanism through which these processes are coordinated and intensified.

This analysis highlights a broader transformation in the logic of exploitation under platform capitalism. In industrial capitalism, labor

discipline was imposed through hierarchical management and workplace surveillance. In platform economies, control increasingly operates through the construction of competitive arenas in which users struggle for visibility, reputation, and economic reward. Platforms do not need to force participation directly. They need only provide infrastructures that encourage users to compete with one another.

In summary, the concept of promotion struggles clarifies an important limitation in existing discussions of digital labor. While digital labor research has primarily focused on the extraction of value from users' time, activity, and data, it does not fully explain how platforms organize competitive environments in which users struggle for visibility and monetization opportunities. Promotion struggles highlight that exploitation in the platform economy increasingly operates through competition rather than through direct extraction of labor time alone. In such environments, users continuously attempt to transform scarce attention into economic and reputational assets by producing content, cultivating audiences, and managing their online identities. At the same time, these competitive practices contribute to the formation of broader sociocultural norms and governance structures shaped by platform algorithms and monetization systems. Platforms do not simply extract digital labor; they organize promotion struggles through which users compete to transform attention into economic and reputational assets. The following table summarizes the historical shift in the mechanisms of labor exploitation from the industrial economy to the digital and YouTube platform economies, highlighting the emergence of competitive promotion struggles among users (see Table 1).

Table 1: Historical Transformation of Exploitation from Industrial Labor to Promotion Struggles

| Era                             | Primary Mechanism of Value Extraction         | User Role          | Mode of Control                          |
|---------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|--------------------|------------------------------------------|
| <b>Industrial economy</b>       | Wage labor/ surplus value                     | Worker             | Hierarchical/managerial control          |
| <b>Digital Platform economy</b> | User activity/ data extraction                | Prosumer           | Participatory/surveillance-based control |
| <b>YouTube Platform economy</b> | Competitive promotion/ attention monetization | Creator-competitor | Algorithmic competitive governance       |

## Conclusion: Promotion Struggles and the Political Economy of Platform Attention

This study has argued that the political economy of YouTube cannot be adequately

explained through existing frameworks that focus solely on digital labor or participatory culture. While previous research has shown how digital platforms extract value from user-generated content, behavioral data, and watching activities, this article demonstrates that exploitation in the

YouTube economy increasingly operates through a different mechanism: the competitive organization of attention among users. To conceptualize this process, this study introduced the concept of promotion struggles.

The concept of promotion struggles contributes to the literature in three main ways. First, it extends the digital labor perspective by highlighting that exploitation in platform environments is not limited to the extraction of labor time and user activity. Instead, platforms actively organize competition among users for scarce attention, visibility, and monetization opportunities. Second, the concept emphasizes the role of subject formation in digital capitalism. Users are not simply passive sources of labor or data but are encouraged to become entrepreneurial actors who continuously transform their identities into promotable assets. Third, promotion struggles illuminate how platforms integrate user competition, algorithmic governance, and advertising infrastructures into a single system of value creation. In this sense, promotion struggles provide a conceptual framework for understanding how platform capitalism mobilizes user rivalry as a productive force.

The case of YouTube illustrates how this mechanism operates in practice. The platform integrates multiple forms of labor—including creative labor, watching labor, and behavioral data production—within a competitive regime structured around attention. Creators compete to capture viewers' attention, audiences generate engagement and data through viewing and interaction, and the platform converts these activities into advertising revenue and algorithmic insights. As more creators participate, the volume of content expands, increasing viewing time, engagement, and data production. These data further refine recommendation systems and advertising infrastructures through signals such as watch time retention, click-through rates, and engagement metrics, reinforcing the platform's capacity for value extraction (Bishop, 2018; Covington, Adams, & Sargin, 2016). Promotion struggles thus function as the organizational mechanism that links user participation to the accumulation strategies of platform capital.

Understanding YouTube through the lens of promotion struggles also helps clarify the limitations of debates that focus primarily on whether digital media platforms expand or undermine the public sphere. Earlier discussions often framed YouTube either as a democratizing medium that enables new forms of participation or as a threat to journalistic standards and quality communication (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013; Castells, 2015; Kenix, 2011). While these debates capture important transformations in communication

practices, they overlook the economic structures that shape how communication occurs on platforms. Political content creators on YouTube operate within the same attention economy as entertainment creators. Their visibility depends not only on informational value but also on their ability to compete successfully for algorithmic attention. As competition intensifies, creators must escalate the emotional intensity, frequency, and spectacle of their content in order to maintain visibility, potentially transforming political communication into another domain of attention competition driven by monetization incentives.

From a broader historical perspective, promotion struggles reveal a transformation in the organization of labor and exploitation under digital capitalism. In industrial capitalism, labor discipline was imposed through hierarchical management and surveillance within the factory. In digital platform environments, control increasingly operates through the creation of competitive arenas in which users are encouraged to intensify their own labor in pursuit of attention, reputation, and income. Platforms do not need to compel participation in the traditional sense. Instead, they construct infrastructures—metrics, algorithms, monetization systems, and visibility hierarchies—that encourage users to govern themselves as competitors.

These dynamics also have significant implications for the public sphere and the broader conditions of public communication. When YouTube first emerged, many observers hoped that digital media platforms would enable more open and participatory forms of communication. However, as Habermas argued, media can sustain a genuine public sphere only when communication is not subordinated to economic imperatives (Habermas, 1991). Platforms that depend heavily on advertising revenues inevitably prioritize attention capture and profit generation. In the case of YouTube, the platform's integration into Google's advertising ecosystem has intensified this tendency, transforming the platform into a powerful infrastructure for the commodification of attention. Under these conditions, visibility is increasingly distributed through algorithmically structured competition, encouraging forms of communication that prioritize engagement, visibility, and promotional performance over deliberative exchange. Political communication, in turn, becomes subject to the same competitive attention dynamics that govern entertainment content. The concern, therefore, is not simply the commercialization of communication, but a broader structural shift in which communicative visibility becomes increasingly dependent on platform-compatible forms of promotion rather than public relevance or deliberative value.

At the same time, the dominance of platform capitalism does not eliminate the possibility of alternative digital communication structures. As Fuchs (2014b) suggests, contemporary social media environments are shaped by multiple antagonisms, including conflicts between users' privacy and corporate data extraction, between democratic accountability and surveillance infrastructures, and between the formation of public spheres and their corporate colonization. These tensions reveal that digital media remain contested spaces in which different models of communication and governance continue to compete.

One possible response to the commercialization of digital communication is the development of digital commons. Scholars have argued that non-commercial communication spaces are necessary to counterbalance the dominance of corporate platforms (Murdock, 2011, 2014). Such spaces would allow individuals to exchange information, cooperate, and deliberate without requiring their activities to be converted into monetizable attention. However, building and sustaining such spaces is difficult because commercial platforms benefit from strong network effects, massive data infrastructures, and financial resources.

Addressing these dynamics requires more than individual adaptation by creators. Because promotion struggles are structurally embedded within platform infrastructures, any meaningful response must involve institutional efforts to reorganize the conditions under which digital communication operates. This includes greater transparency in recommendation systems, alternative non-commercial communication infrastructures, and institutional arrangements that reduce dependence on monetized attention economies. Although such alternatives face substantial structural constraints, including network effects and platform concentration, they remain important if digital communication is to retain its public character rather than becoming organized primarily around competitive accumulation.

Nevertheless, the current dominance of commercial platforms should not be interpreted as technologically inevitable. The internet itself was originally developed as a non-commercial communication infrastructure. The transformation of digital networks into profit-generating platforms reflects political and economic choices rather than technological necessity. Challenging this dominance therefore requires not only technological innovation but also new institutional arrangements and forms of collective action that can reassert the public character of digital communication.

Beyond the specific case of YouTube, promotion struggles help explain a broader transformation in contemporary platform economies.

Rather than viewing user participation simply as digital labor or voluntary self-expression, the concept highlights how platforms organize social interaction as competitive processes that generate value for capital. The transformation of YouTube from a participatory video platform into a central infrastructure of the digital advertising economy reflects a broader shift in digital capitalism, in which exploitation increasingly operates through the competitive organization of visibility and attention. Understanding this transformation is essential for analyzing the future governance of digital communication and the prospects for preserving its public character.

## ORCID ID

Yungwook Kim: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2764-7907>

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