YouTube star PewDiePie rails against ‘the media’, but he’s a part of it too now

PewDiePie – the online alias of Felix Kjellberg – is a bit of an enigma. Here is a man who made US$15m (A$19.5m) in 2016 playing videogames on YouTube for his audience of nearly 54 million subscribers, the largest in the world.

Last week, though, PewDiePie’s business partners Disney and YouTube began withdrawing support following an anti-semitic “joke” in one of his video blogs.

PewDiePie’s response was to admit some culpability, but also to attack the messenger – which in this case was The Wall Street Journal, with its print circulation of around 2.5 million and an online reach of 20 million readers a month.

It was, according to Kjellberg, "an attack by the media to try to discredit me, to decrease my influence, and my economic [success]."

PewDiePie’s response to the controversy he caused.

New and old media

Who, exactly, is “the media” here, though? The Wall Street Journal, with a readership of more than 20 million, or the man with an online audience twice that size?

There’s no doubt that the joke was in bad taste. And as Guardian columnist Arwa Mahdawi points out, even jokes can have consequences, such as reinforcing social divisions or normalising unpalatable ideas. She also shows that his “joke” gave fuel to white nationalists, with The Daily Stormer website praising Kjellberg for promoting their ideals.

But PewDiePie is correct, in a sense, to point to the power relationships in all of this: this is also a clash of platforms.

The YouTube video was online for a month before The Wall Street Journal reported on it, and it was the newspaper’s story (and not the video’s posting) that became the catalyst for the censure and pulling of sponsorship that followed.

This kind of incident highlights just how complicated the idea of having a platform in the media industry has become today. Despite PewDiePie’s significantly larger reach, it was the power of traditional media that counted here.

For hundreds of millions of younger people worldwide, though, YouTube is well and truly mainstream media. Its stars are the movie or television celebrities of today.

PewDiePie himself is apparently more influential for young people than actor Jennifer Lawrence. And what we used to think of as the user-generated content of social media platforms has already built a strong cache of cultural legitimacy, high production values and serious financial value. A single video from PewDiePie can assure a videogame’s success, as spectacularly demonstrated by Australia’s 2014 megahit, Crossy Road.

Yet the relationship between traditional media companies and newer platforms like YouTube is not well understood, and is often complex.

PewDiePie’s video on the infamous game Flappy Bird has been viewed over 33 million times (language warning).
Not long after its acquisition by Google in 2006, YouTube started on an inventive path of commercialisation. It has incorporated traditional media through its Channel and Partnership system, which also makes it easier for anyone to monetise content and draw advertising revenue. It is precisely these sort of systems that have benefited people like PewDiePie over the past few years.

Meanwhile, YouTube has also struggled against traditional media copyright holders, which have worked to protect their content. Seven years of litigation between YouTube and media giant Viacom was finally settled in 2013, a decision that in the end favoured YouTube's claim to be “merely” a hosting platform not directly responsible for the content its users post.

This is only multiplied by something like YouTube Red, a subscription service that positions YouTube as a platform more along the lines of Netflix or Amazon. It is this kind of arm's-length involvement with content that YouTube is now using to step back from PewDiePie's work on its own platform.

So YouTube is both interested in content and also not. It’s often supportive of its community of creators facing copyright difficulties, but in this case has decided to protect its YouTube Red brand. But what of even more “traditional” media companies, like Disney?

Well, two years ago Disney bought Maker Studios in a deal worth close to US$1 billion (A$1bn). Maker Studios grew as a network of creators, working mostly through YouTube, and with a combined subscriber base of around 380 million.

Who’s in the media?

Given all of this context, it is difficult to imagine how someone like PewDiePie can reasonably view himself as somehow separate from today’s media industry, or expect to be immune from competition and attacks.

Making a living through partnerships with Disney and providing ad-supported content for a conglomerate like Google would usually qualify most others to be media professionals.

Yet, in another sense, PewDiePie is also right to draw the distinction. As a celebrity media maker of the internet age, he does exist in a different sphere to the likes of The Wall Street Journal, and even in some ways to Disney and YouTube, too.

The fact that media corporations can only sanction PewDiePie via the withdrawal of their partnerships but can’t exclude him entirely is one indication that we’re dealing with a different beast.

The best indication of this complicated relationship, though, is PewDiePie’s future. If, indeed, he was only working for the media, we might expect him to suffer such a scandal by withdrawing and fading.

That, however, seems unlikely. This is a serious blow, but PewDiePie wasn’t working for the media, or at least for YouTube or Disney alone. In today’s landscape, he is the media, and he will continue accordingly.