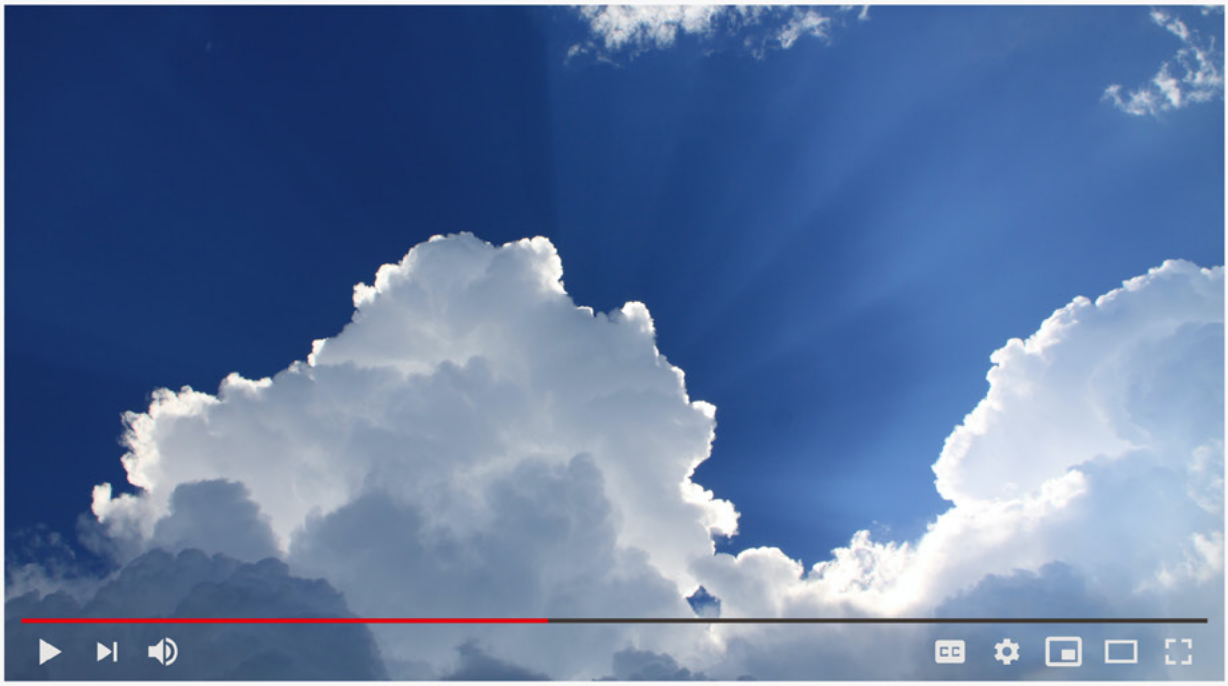
YouTube's Climate Denial Dollars



How Google is breaking its promise to stop profiting from ads on climate denial videos

Climate Action Against Disinformation

The Climate Action Against Disinformation (CAAD) coalition is a growing and unprecedented effort of over 50 organizations committed to addressing one of the largest barriers to addressing climate change: misleading and false content that perpetuates false narratives on our environment and dilutes productive conversations on the climate.

From reports on platforms' inability to mitigate false content, to monitoring the most dangerous false narratives perpetuated at the yearly global climate conference, CAAD relentlessly pursues accountability and a good faith dialogue around our environment that leads to real and equitable climate solutions.

Center for Countering Digital Hate

The Center for Countering Digital Hate is a US-headquartered international nonprofit NGO that disrupts the architecture of online hate and misinformation.

Digital technology has forever changed how we communicate, build relationships, share knowledge, set social standards, and negotiate and assert our societies' values.

Digital spaces have been colonized, and their unique dynamics exploited by malignant actors that instrumentalize hate and misinformation. These movements are opportunistic, agile, and confident in influencing and persuading people.

Over time these malignant actors, advocating diverse causes – from hatred of women to racial and religious intolerance to denial of science – have formed a digital CounterEnlightenment. The disinformation they spread to bolster their causes has socialized the offline world for the worse.

The Center's work combines both analysis and disruption of these networks. CCDH's solutions seek to increase the economic, political, and social costs of all parts of the infrastructure – the actors, systems, and culture – that support and profit from hate and misinformation.

In the United States, Center for Countering Digital Hate Inc is a 501(c)(3) charity. In the United Kingdom, Center for Countering Digital Hate Ltd is a non-profit company limited by guarantee.

Executive Summary

YouTube profits from ads on climate disinformation videos with tens of millions of views

- Researchers identified 200 YouTube videos containing climate misinformation and disinformation with 73.8 million views in total as of April 17th, 2023.
- The videos have all featured ads, and contained either outright denial of climate science that violates YouTube's existing policies or other forms of climate disinformation.

YouTube is breaking its promise not to profit from ads on climate denial content

- YouTube's policies state that ads are not permitted on videos "contradicting authoritative scientific consensus on the existence of and causes behind climate change".
- Researchers identified 100 videos breaching this policy that have carried ads, with videos amassing a total of 18.8 million views. They included claims that:
  - "Every single model [the IPCC] ever have put out is wrong".
  - "In summary, there is no link between CO2 and temperature".
  - "Climate hysteria is just another rebrand, a Trojan horse for anti-white anti- Western communist tyranny".
- Videos carried ads for brands including Costco, Politico and Tommy Hilfiger.

YouTube profits from more climate disinformation falling outside its narrow definition

- Researchers identified a further 100 YouTube videos that meet the Climate Action Against Disinformation coalition's definition of climate misinformation and disinformation.
- These videos have amassed a total of 55 million views and carried ads from brands including Nike, Hyundai and Emirates.

Google must stop profiting from climate disinformation on YouTube and elsewhere

- Repeated research projects by the Center for Countering Digital Hate show that Google has repeatedly broken its promise not to profit from ads on climate denial content:
  - Tests indicate that 63% of popular climate denial articles still carry Google ads.
  - Google allowed Daily Wire to run ads on searches for "climate change is a hoax".
  - YouTube videos promoting climate denial with millions of views still have ads.
- Google must start enforcing its promise not to profit from climate denial, on YouTube and on its other advertising platforms.
- Google should expand its policy to cover other prevalent forms of climate disinformation.

YouTube is still profiting from climate denial videos with millions of views

YouTube is still running ads on climate denial videos racking up millions of views, despite Google's promise to stop monetizing them.

In October 2021, Google announced that it would no longer allow its ads to run on content contradicting established climate science, making clear that this policy extends to the tech giant's YouTube platform where ads run before, beside or on top of videos.[1]

YouTube's climate denial ads policy

This content will earn no ad revenue [...] Contradicting authoritative scientific consensus on the existence of and causes behind climate change (e.g. climate change is a hoax, global warming doesn't exist, human activity is not responsible for climate change).[2]

Now more than a year since instituting this policy, analysis by the Center for Countering Digital Hate and the Climate Action Against Disinformation (CAAD) coalition shows that Google is still profiting from ads running on climate denial content with millions of views.

Researchers identified 100 videos that carry ads and contain climate disinformation that breaches YouTube's existing policies. In total, the videos have amassed 18.8 million views and include ad-supported videos such as:

- A video from the Timcast IRL channel that promotes false claims that "The IPCC is just a corrupt industry, every single model they ever have put out is wrong".
- A video from the The Heartland Institute channel that promotes claims that "climate change science really isn't a science at all".
- A video titled "Introduction to Climate Science" from the Cutting Through The Noise channel, promotes the false claim that "there is no link between CO2 and temperature".
- A video from the Paul Joseph Watson channel that claims "Climate hysteria is just another rebrand, a Trojan horse for anti-white anti-Western communist tyranny".

Some of America's biggest brands were found to be running on the videos, including Costco, Politico, and Calvin Klein.

Ironically, other climate denial videos were found to be carrying ads for green businesses or charities, including ads for solar panel installations and products with endorsements from the Rainforest Trust.

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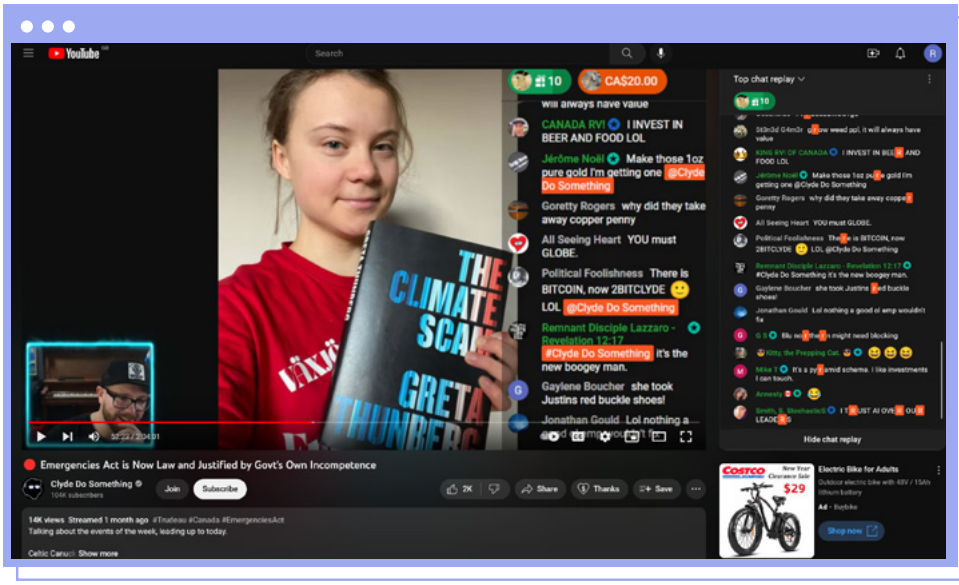
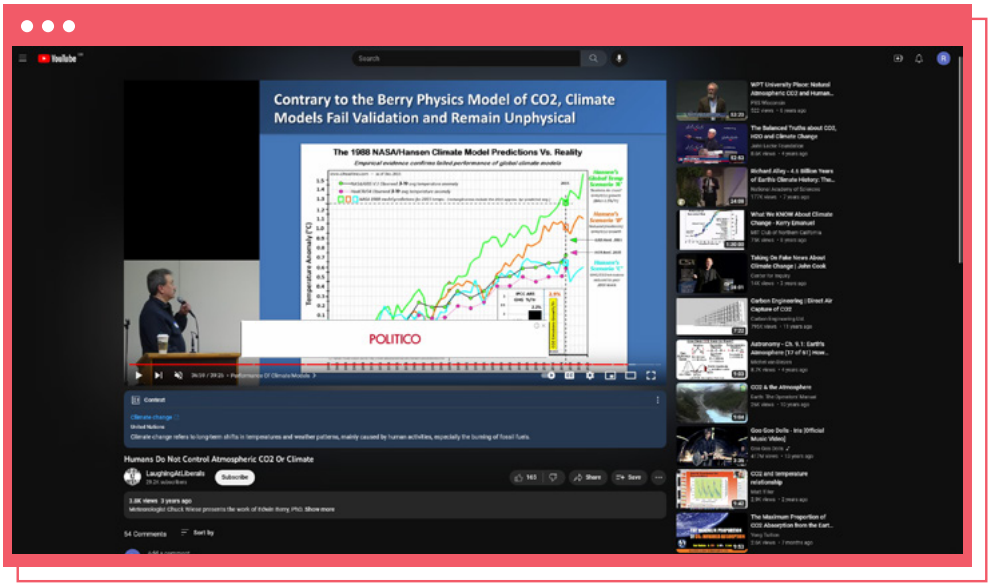
[1] "Updating our ads and monetisation policies on climate change", Google, 7 October 2021, https://support.google.com/google-ads/answer/11221321

[2] "Advertiser-friendly content guidelines", YouTube, retrieved 14 April 2023, https://support.google.com/youtube/answer/6162278?hl=en-GB



Examples of ads running on content breach YouTube's policies on climate denial



YouTube profits from more climate disinformation falling outside its narrow definition

As well as breaking its promise to stop running ads on videos containing climate denial, YouTube is profiting from ads on videos promoting other forms of climate disinformation that have amassed tens of millions of views.

The Climate Action Against Disinformation (CAAD) coalition has worked with leading climate academics, experts and non-profit organizations to create a universal definition of climate disinformation and misinformation.

This three-part definition is intended to capture forms of climate disinformation that go beyond outright denial of climate change, such as "discourses of delay" that promote false solutions to climate change or falsely claim that tackling climate change is simply impossible.

CAAD definition of climate disinformation and misinformation

Climate disinformation and misinformation refers to deceptive or misleading content that:

- 1. Undermines the existence or impacts of climate change, the unequivocal human influence on climate change, and the need for corresponding urgent action according to the IPCC scientific consensus and in line with the goals of the Paris Climate Agreement;
- 2. Misrepresents scientific data, including by omission or cherry-picking, in order to erode trust in climate science, climate-focused institutions, experts, and solutions; or
- 3. Falsely publicizes efforts as supportive of climate goals that in fact contribute to climate warming or contravene the scientific consensus on mitigation or adaptation.[3]

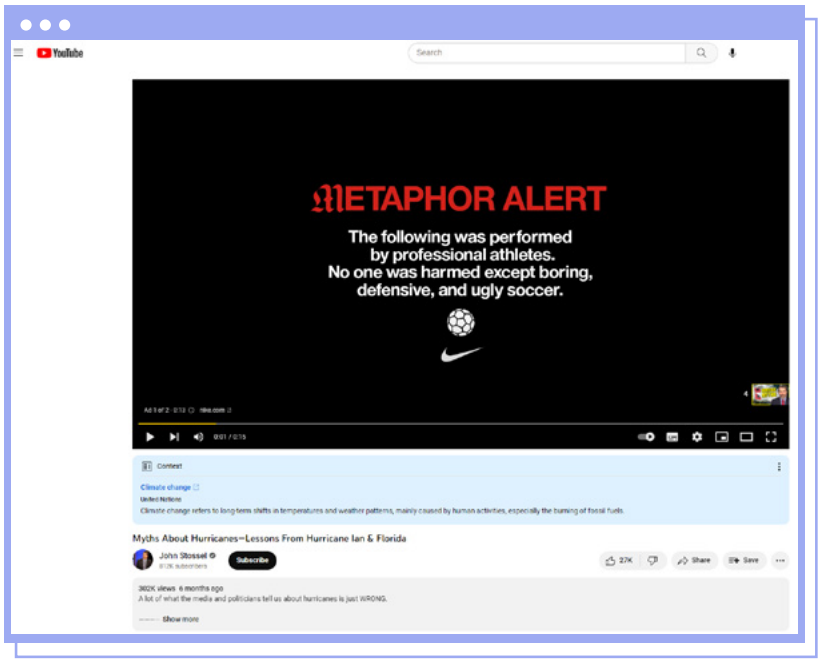
[3] "What is climate mis/disinformation?", Climate Action Against Disinformation, retrieved 14 April 2023, https://caad.info/what-is-climate-disinformation/

Researchers identified a further 100 YouTube videos containing content that fit one or more parts of the CAAD definition and carried ads. In total these videos have amassed 55 million views and include ad-supported videos such as:

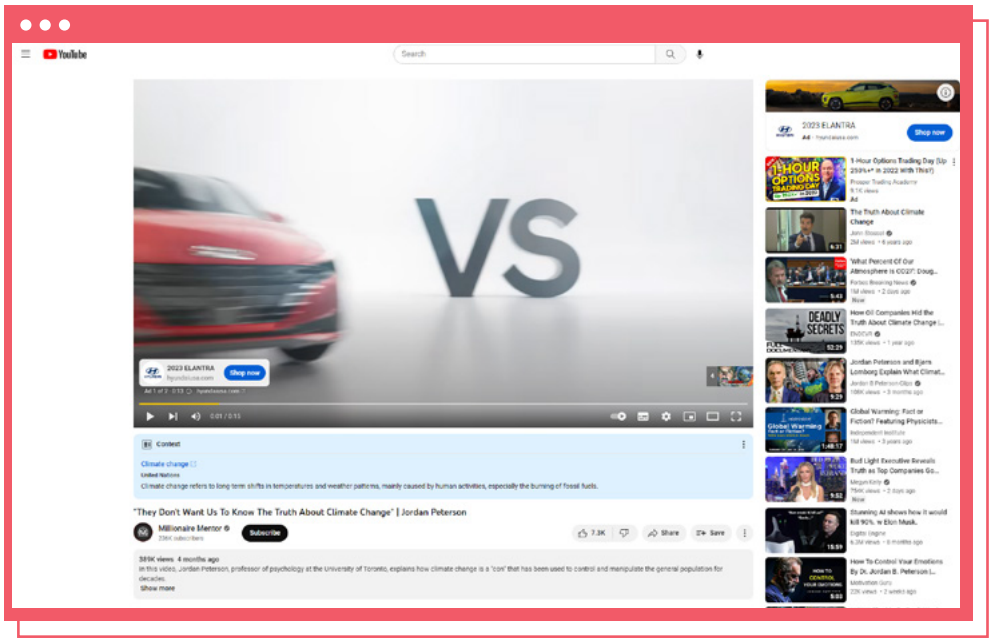
- A video from the Natural Allies for a Clean Energy Future channel that greenwashes climate pollution as a climate solution, claiming that "Clean, reliable U.S. natural gas is the key to reducing global emissions and reaching our climate goals".
- A video from John Stossel that undermines the impacts of climate change, claiming "myth number three is that because of climate change, hurricanes are getting worse".
- A video from the Millionaire Mentor channel which misrepresents renewables to attack climate solutions, claiming that "The two renewable energy technologies favored by the vast majority of environmental activists are intermittent or unreliable".
- A video in which Alex Epstein claims "you need to look seriously at… the greening benefits" of CO2, and "be open" to the false claim that "warming could be good overall".

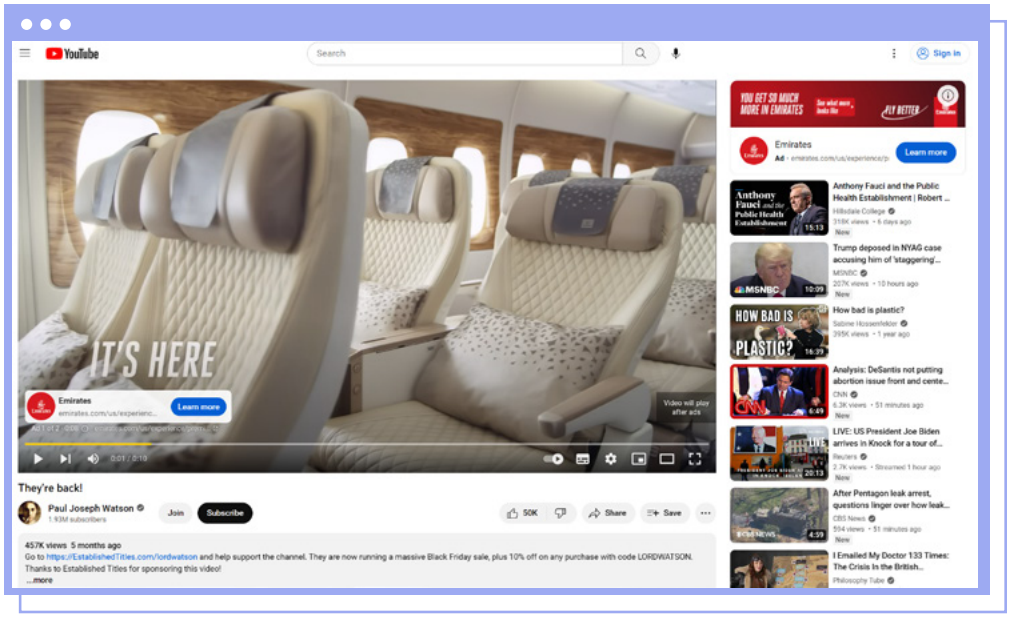
These videos again featured ads from big brands, including Emirates, Nike, and Hyundai. As a result, these brands were inadvertently helping YouTube profit from climate disinformation.

This demonstrates that YouTube is currently profiting from a much broader range of climate disinformation than is covered by its narrowly drawn policies. The platform should close this loophole to ensure it does not profit from climate disinformation that creates a distorted and false view of climate science and solutions, posing a major threat to climate action.



Examples of ads running on other climate disinformation





Recommendations:
YouTube must stop profiting from climate disinformation

This research shows that YouTube is failing to keep its promise to stop profiting from climate denial, and is profiting from a wider range of climate disinformation that falls outside of its existing, narrowly-defined policy.

This is part of a broader failing on the part of YouTube's owner Google, which promised in October 2021 that it would no longer profit from ads containing climate denial or from ads running on climate denial content.

Existing research from the Center for Countering Digital Hate shows that Google is also failing to keep this promise with respect to ads running on popular climate denial articles. Analysis of widely-shared climate denial articles shows that 63% still carry Google ads. [4]

Nor has Google kept its promise to stop running ads that directly promote climate denial. The Center for Countering Digital Hate has found that Google accepted $421,000 to run ads from the Competitive Enterprise Institute making claims that "climate campaigners hype the risks of global warming". [5]

The Center's research has also revealed that Google allowed the Daily Wire to run ads targeting users searching for phrases like "climate change is a hoax" and "the climate change scam". [6]

1. Google must start enforcing its promise not to profit from climate denial

Every time Google is tested on its promise not to profit from climate denial, it is found wanting. Whether it is ads on Google Search, Google ads embedded in climate denial articles, or now ads running on climate denial videos on YouTube, this promise is just not being kept.

On hate, misinformation, and harms to children, we see tech platforms repeatedly making promises that they do not keep. Platform policies only have meaning if they are enforced. One year on from making its promise not to profit from climate denial, Google must start enforcing it in a proactive and systemic manner reflective of its size and available resources. If we can find this content, so can Google.

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[4] "Google fails to block adverts on 'climate lie' sites", The Times, 20 January 2023, https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/google-fails-to-block-adverts-on-climate-lie-sites-dvnfdxm7j

[5] "Greenwashing on Google", Center for Countering Digital Hate, 3 November 2022, https://counterhate.com/research/greenwashing-google-big-oil/

[6] "Google let Daily Wire advertise on 'climate change is a hoax' searches", The Guardian, 27 January 2023, https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2023/jan/27/daily-wire-google-ads-climate-crisis-deniers

2. Google's policy should cover the most popular forms of climate disinformation

Even if Google were adequately enforcing its policy on climate denial, this covers just part of the broader category of climate disinformation. Our research shows that videos promoting climate disinformation are racking up tens of millions of views which are monetised with ads.

To follow through on its ambition not to profit from content that distorts public perceptions of climate science and undermines action on climate change, Google should incorporate the full Climate Action Against Disinformation (CAAD) definition of climate misinformation and disinformation into its policies.[7]

3. YouTube splits ad revenue with many channels hosting climate denial content

In some cases, YouTube splits revenue from ads displayed on a video with the channel that posted it, reportedly handing 55 percent of revenue to the content creator while retaining the remaining 45 percent. [8]

Analysis of code on YouTube's website suggests that ad revenue raised by 158 of the climate denial videos analyzed by this report were shared with the channels that posted them. Further detail on our methodology for this finding is available at the end of this report.

While all videos analyzed by this report have at some time carried ads, YouTube removed ads from just eight videos during the period in which our research was conducted. This included two videos that were flagged with YouTube directly, and another six videos that the platform acted on independently.

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[7] "What is climate mis/disinformation?", Climate Action Against Disinformation, retrieved 14 April 2023, https://caad.info/what-is-climate-disinformation/

[8] "Chasing Their Star, on YouTube", New York Times, 1 February 2014, https://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/02/business/chasing-their-star-on-youtube.html

METHODOLOGY

Researchers identified videos containing climate denial, climate disinformation, or climate misinformation by conducting English-language searches on YouTube and filmot.com for targeted terms like "climate hoax" and "climate scam" used often in disinformation.

Each video was then assessed by at least two researchers against YouTube's policy on climate denial content and the Climate Action Against Disinformation definition of climate misinformation and disinformation to determine a classification for each video.

YouTube refers to its programme of splitting ad revenue with content creators as "monetization".[9] To determine if the YouTube channel that posted each video is splitting ad revenue with YouTube, we right clicked on the channel header, selected "View Page Source," and searched for "is_monetization_enabled". If "value" is "true", then the channel is splitting ad revenue with YouTube. [10]

[9] "Monetization Policies", YouTube, 18 April 2023, https://www.youtube.com/intl/ALL_us/howyoutubeworks/policies/monetization-policies/

[10] "Learn How To Check If A YouTube Channel Is Monetized Or Not", Socioblend, 19 January 2023, https://socioblend.com/blog/learn-how-to-check-if-a-youtube-channel-is-monetized-or-not/19/01/