STITCH THIS!

Content Creators and Prospects for Social Justice Communications

SPITFIRE
SPARK CHANGE

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SPITFIRE SPARK CHANGE   **Impact Guild**   MacArthur Foundation

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Video platforms like TikTok and YouTube are the next frontier of media and in spite of their reported precarity at times, they will continue to be a means by which millions of people receive information. Content creators are the engines that make them run. Creators who make, edit and post videos on these platforms are building authentic relationships with audiences online that lead not just to high view rates, but sustained engagement. At a time when people across the political spectrum can't seem to find common ground and trust in traditional news media is at an all time low, social justice movements need to lean into partnerships with these content creators to educate and activate audiences on pressing social issues.

Spitfire partnered with Impact Guild, supported by MacArthur Foundation to conduct a landscape review with organizations, connector hubs and content creators on the state of creators' engagement on social issues today. We were curious about what content creators need to do more of this work and to do it well, how to ensure it's sustainable for them given that for many content creation is their livelihood and how they might be able to deliver content at scale.

We surveyed a diverse group of more than 50 content creators and interviewed 17 experts in the field to help answer these questions and map the existing ecosystem at the intersection of social justice and the creator economy.

Key findings include:

1. Content creators get started for different reasons and care about a variety of issues, but many are in-spired to make an impact.

2. Content creators are most likely to post about social justice issues when they care about an issue, have access to trusted information on the topic and have financial support to create engaging content about it.

3. There are many structural barriers that make it hard for content creators to post about social issues, including platform precarity, ever-shifting community guidelines and online harassment.

4. While social media platforms have democratized information, in the end the mega media companies that own them make the rules – deciding what can be posted and by whom. This has serious implications for content creators, especially for creators who post about social justice issues and who come from marginalized communities.

5. Clearly creators feel they could accomplish more with adequate, sustained financial resources but the rhythmic provision of information, facts, expertise and thought partnership from nonprofit organizations is equally important.

6. There is substantial room for growth for social justice organizations to partner effectively with content creators, including investing more resources into partnerships with content creators and being more flexible with messaging.

7. Content creators need long-term support and sustainable ecosystems to thrive and make a bigger impact. Some models exist, but additional investment and innovations are needed to take the field to the next level.

Building on our research findings, we have identified a number of promising efforts that could help take the field to the next level. Recommendations fall into five buckets:

1. **Gather:** actions that foster community, allow for cross-pollination of ideas, becoming programmatic. Example: virtual social justice TikTok House.

2. **Catalyze:** actions that support content creators to make social justice content at scale. Example: create fellowships for content creators to take deep dives into an issue, like affordable housing.

3. **Expand:** actions that tap into the energy of existing efforts, with "guardrail organizing." Example: invest in models that are already working, like Better Internet Initiative, so they can grow their reach.

4. **Upskill:** actions that help nonprofits and social justice organizations partner effectively with content creators. Example: provide trainings for nonprofits on how to effectively partner with content creators.

5. **Unite voices:** collective actions that push social media platforms to change policies and practices so they're more fair to content creators. Example: create a Content Creator's Bill of Rights.

It's clear that whichever actions the field decides to pursue, they need to center equity, in both what (content) and who (content creators) we invest in, offer opportunities for content creators to build community and support long-term trusting partnerships between content creators and social justice organizations.

If we work together, we can change the game—making it easier for content creators to do their work while sparking change on the most pressing issues of our time.

To learn more about this research and our findings, please contact creatorlab@spitfirestrategies.com.

INTRODUCTION

Could partnerships between content creators and social justice organizations change the game?

Content creators are powerful messengers. But are we helping them help us?

Picture this. You're swiping through TikTok. You scroll by dance videos and makeup tutorials and stumble on a post by @eco_og. In the video, Gabrielle, a PhD student at the University of Georgia and popular TikToker, shares that she asked her followers, "What does plastic pollution look like to you?" She got the typical answers, like "plastic on the beach" and "turtles choking on straws."

But Gabrielle points out that what most people didn't know is that "plastic pollution also looks like this …" and shows a photo of pollution spewing from stacks at plants in a part of Louisiana coined "Cancer Alley."

"This alley is an 85-mile stretch of 45,000 residents that are predominately Black. It's home to over 150 oil refineries and petro-chemical plants," she explains. In this simple video, a little over a minute long, she educates viewers on this issue and encourages them to take action to protect people, especially Black communities, from this kind of pollution.

The video received nearly 50,000 likes, was shared 11,600 times and received 1,550 comments (as of Feb. 9, 2023). Many organizations dedicated to addressing climate change and environmental racism can only dream of that kind of engagement on their content.

So what makes content creators like @ego_og so compelling? Authenticity.

Content creators painstakingly build an online community built on realness — or at least the perception of it. They pull back the curtain to share with their followers everything from their daily routines, to emotional challenges, to issues they are passionate about. At a time when people across the political spectrum can't seem to find common ground and trust in traditional news media is at an all time low, content creators are the trusted messengers we need to bridge the gap and bring new audiences into the fold.

"Content creators are on the leading and bleeding edge of the media industry right now," explained Colin M. Maclay, Research Professor of Communications and Executive Director of USC Annenberg Innovation Lab.

"Generationally shrinking attention spans and changing tastes mean the future isn't traditional longform content. Audiences appreciate the authenticity of creators and prefer the aesthetic of their offerings over mainstream media. With so many people learning from these creators and their communities, we need to engage them in thoughtful conversations around pressing challenges and social change," he said.

Commercial brands are leaning into partnerships, but nonprofits are largely just curious.

Commercial brands have already learned the power of content creators and have started investing big in marketing campaigns that include creators in their field. According to data from TikTok, creator ads achieved 91% higher two-second view rates versus non-creator ads (12%). But nonprofits and social justice organizations have been slower to follow suit.

The opportunity gap is huge. According to Adobe's "Future of Creativity" Study, the creator economy grew by 34 million new content creators in the United States alone in 2020.

> **Nearly all (95%) of those content creators take action to advance or support causes that are important to them. That means that there are literally millions of content creators who could help organizations reach audiences on social issues."**

As asserted in "The TikTok Gap," by New Media Ventures, despite millions of videos about social issues being posted every day by content creators, "the institutional Left is completely disconnected from homegrown creators on platforms like TikTok and YouTube." The vast majority of social justice campaigns are focused on Facebook, Twitter and, to a lesser extent, Instagram, despite a shrinking share of their target audiences actively using those platforms.

When organizations partner with "creatives" to reach new audiences and increase engagement in their work, they often turn to big-time celebrities like Alicia Keys, Glenn Close or John Legend. While "micro-influencers" may not have the same level of reach as celebrities, they generate 60% more engagement. This is in part because the connection content creators have with their community is much deeper and more authentic. And in fact, big names often feed on the micro-influencers content.

The reach of creators will only grow, so now is the time for nonprofits to make a shift.

The platforms and features will likely change, but the dominance of social media and content creators over how we find and share information, express ourselves, connect with others and find entertainment will not. If organizations really want to see transformational change on core issues, they must lean in. That means now is the time for social justice organizations to learn how to adapt quickly to new platforms — starting with TikTok and YouTube — and partner effectively with content creators who can help them reach target audiences.

There is a clear need for infrastructure and resources, rooted in equity, to help content creators have greater impact.

Recognizing the opportunity for the social justice organizations to partner with content creators for greater impact, we set out to better understand the current landscape. We were curious about what content creators need to do this work and to do it well. How can we, as a field, ensure content creation about social issues is sustainable, given that it is the livelihood for many content creators. How do content creators' experiences on these platforms vary across race and other identities and what does that mean for efforts to support them? We also wanted to better understand what models already exist to support content creators, educate them about social issues and help deliver their content at scale.

By surveying a diverse group of more than 50 content creators and interviewing people who support them, we learned that there is a clear and urgent need for infrastructure and resources to help content creators successfully engage audiences about social issues. What follows is an overview of our findings and recommendations for models the field should pursue to better support and partner with content creators for the greater good.

NOTE: What follows is not meant to serve as a comprehensive overview of the field (that would take hundreds of pages to fully articulate). Instead, this report is a curated overview of the field and considerations for future growth based on what we heard from the content creators and experts whom we spoke with.

LAY OF THE LAND

Within the past two decades, online video has become ubiquitous across virtually every social media platform. YouTube was the pioneer of social media video in the early 2000s. It has since evolved into a full-on entertainment and social media platform hosting millions of hours of long-form content. The inspiration app Pinterest now allows the upload of video onto its platform to be shared to pinboards. Meta's Facebook, which was once just an app meant for sharing photos and updates among classmates, has an entire video product integrated in its platform, Facebook Watch, with original programming from well-known celebrities. Instagram has explored multiple iterations of social video over the years, with the latest being Reels, which is essentially its own version of TikTok.

THE EVOLUTION OF SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS

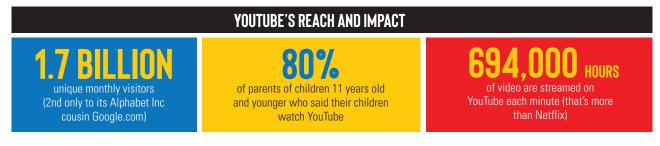**This report focuses on YouTube and TikTok, as they are the preeminent social video platforms dominating the internet.** YouTube is the reigning monarch of long-form multimedia, whereas TikTok has taken over short-form video. TikTok came onto the scene in the past five years and rose to prominence in the past three. Its unprecedented growth and popularity have democratized content creation in ways other platforms haven't. YouTube, which has been around for nearly two decades, set the pace for the video creator economy as we know it today. In recent years, both platforms have enabled individuals and organizations to earn a living, raise awareness about important issues and launch large-scale careers far beyond what existed years ago. Before we get into our findings, let's understand the history of how each of these platforms came to be what they are today.

YouTube: The OG of online video

YouTube, a global online video sharing and social media platform, launched in 2005 and was purchased by Google a year later. In the decade that followed, YouTube rose in popularity, becoming a major source of information and entertainment for people of all ages, but primarily young people by way of gaming and tutorial-based content. As described in an article by The Verge, YouTube offered independent creators, who weren't exactly

suited for Hollywood, their own platform to create content and forge relationships with niche online communities. The "Golden Age" of YouTube saw YouTubeOGs like Lilly Singh, Tyler Oakley, Jenna Marbles and AmbersCloset blow up online and earn their living solely from creating videos on the platform. This was a huge moment for internet creative entrepreneurship.

YOUTUBE'S REACH AND IMPACT

1.7 BILLION
unique monthly visitors
(2nd only to its Alphabet Inc
cousin Google.com)

80%
of parents of children 11 years old
and younger who said their children
watch YouTube

694,000 HOURS
of video are streamed on
YouTube each minute (that's more
than Netflix)

These pioneering creators, and many others like them, have since shifted to more-traditional entertainment opportunities, like Lilly Singh, who hosted her own late night show. Some of them have become live streamers, like Tyler Oakley, who said goodbye to YouTube two years ago and has since turned to Twitch, a live-streaming video platform.

But many of them, like AmbersCloset, have expanded to other platforms and still continue to create on YouTube. Today, YouTube sees 1.7 billion unique monthly visitors (for reference, there are approximately 8 billion people on the planet) and it's the second most-visited website after Google.com. A 2020 study by Pew Research Center found that 80% of parents of children 11 years old and younger said their children watch YouTube. There are hours upon hours of news, sports, music, original children's shows, cooking, challenges, vlogs and more! You could watch a popular creator review the video game they just bought and the following week watch them play it for hours on end. Put modestly, YouTube has something for everyone, as long as it's allowable by YouTube Community Guidelines.

So, where does social justice fit into the picture? In recent years, video essays and explainers of social justice issues have become more popular among creators. They sit in front of their camera and break down complex social issues for the duration of an episode. For example, in her Internet Analysis series on YouTube, Tiffany Ferguson (pictured above) discusses things relevant to social issues and media. She's covered mental health, feminism, wealth and class, sustainability and housing, to name a few. She, and other creators like her, raises awareness about relevant issues in our world and offers a thoughtful analysis, sometimes with an accompanying solution.

TikTok enters the picture

Dancing videos. Lip-syncing videos. It was practically Vine reincarnated, but different. Vox reported, "[TikTok] is actually the second iteration of Musical.ly, an app that's identical to TikTok in most major ways, and which was launched in 2014 by Chinese entrepreneurs." The company Musical.ly was acquired in 2018 and fully absorbed into the TikTok we know today.

In 2020, the short-form social media app named for the sound an analog clock makes, seemed ubiquitous. Given furloughs and stay-at-home orders, people turned to their phones to escape the reality of the global pandemic and usage of the platform grew exponentially.

TikTok became the new digital town square. Doctors and nurses on the front lines of the pandemic documented their experiences. The summer of 2020 saw a racial reckoning following the murder of George Floyd, which played out on TikTok. Political activists used TikTok as a vehicle to connect with their communities.

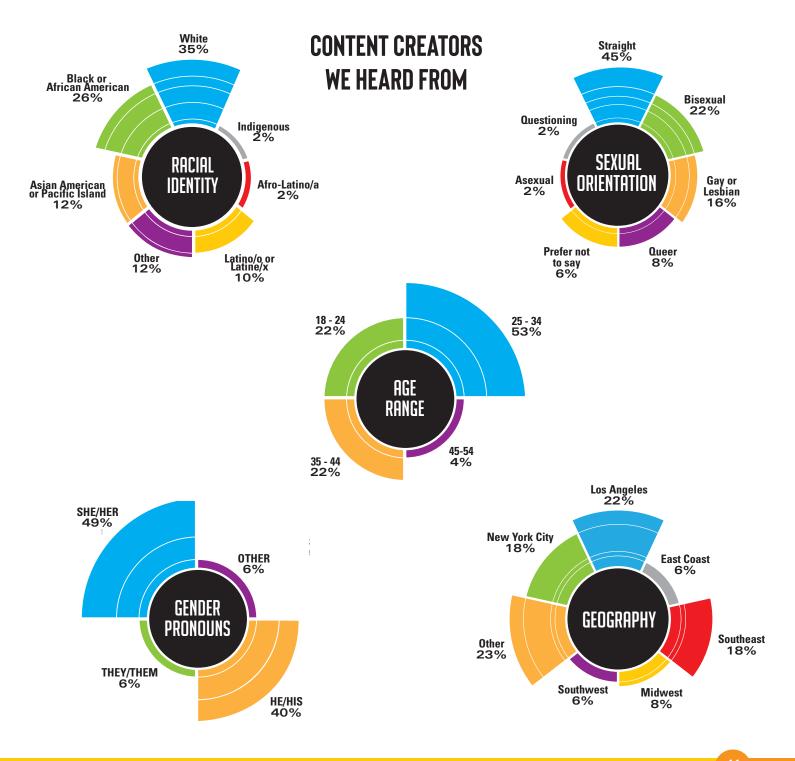| TIKTOK'S REACH AND IMPACT		
3 BILLION downloads of the TikTok app	**10.85 MINUTES** Average user session, making TikTok the most engaging of social media apps.	**80%** of TikTok's users are between the ages of 16-34.

Although it was once thought to be just the latest fad in digital entertainment, TikTok's profound impact on our culture and society cannot be denied. The app has been downloaded more than 3 billion times. TikTok is the most engaging of the social media apps, with an average user session of 10.85 minutes. Though it is only five years old, TikTok is the 6th most-used social platform in the world. And we have the millions of creators who dedicate hours to producing engaging video content to thank for that.

What do we mean by "content creator"?

The term "content creator" was originally developed and marketed by YouTube beginning in 2011 as an alternative to the "YouTube star" moniker, which really applied to only a small group of people who were able to make videos full time because of their wide success.

For the purposes of this report, we use the term "content creator" to mean individuals who write, edit and post videos.

For some people, it is their full-time job. For others, it's a side hustle that adds to their income or until they can make enough money for it to be a full-time job. To be clear, being a creator is a prerequisite for being an "influencer." Not the other way around. An influencer, as defined by Wired, is someone who has grown an online following to the point that they are able to affect the buying habits of their followers. They post photos and videos to Instagram, TikTok, Twitter and other social media platforms. They began posting organically, maybe out of enjoyment. But over time they grew a following and began connecting with brands that pay them to create content that promotes the brand's product or service. The influencer might also have their own blog that discusses niche topics in long-form posts replete with affiliate links to products from which they'll get a kickback if their audience follows the link and purchases. Ultimately, they've monetized their online presence through content creation, likely to the point of making it their full-time career.

CONTENT CREATORS WE HEARD FROM

RACIAL IDENTITY

- White 35%
- Black or African American 26%
- Asian American or Pacific Island 12%
- Other 12%
- Latino/o or Latine/x 10%
- Afro-Latino/a 2%
- Indigenous 2%

SEXUAL ORIENTATION

- Straight 45%
- Bisexual 22%
- Gay or Lesbian 16%
- Queer 8%
- Prefer not to say 6%
- Asexual 2%
- Questioning 2%

AGE RANGE

- 25 - 34 53%
- 18 - 24 22%
- 35 - 44 22%
- 45-54 4%

GENDER PRONOUNS

- SHE/HER 49%
- HE/HIS 40%
- THEY/THEM 6%
- OTHER 6%

GEOGRAPHY

- Los Angeles 22%
- New York City 18%
- Other 23%
- Southeast 18%
- Midwest 8%
- Southwest 6%
- East Coast 6%

NUMBER OF FOLLOWERS

(Note: not all respondents have a presence on both platforms.)

Tik Tok

- Between 100k - 500k followers (40%)
- <100k followers (38%)
- >1M followers (13%)
- Between 500k - 1M followers (4%)

YouTube

- <100k subscribers (50%)
- Between 500k - 1M subscribers on YouTube (8%)
- Between 100k - 500k subscribers (6%)
- >1M subscribers (0%)

This report is focused on content creators who address social justice issues in their content on TikTok and YouTube, though some of the people included could be categorized as influencers given their level of popularity and influence, which has attracted the attention of brands who want to work with them.

For the purposes of this research, we scoured TikTok and YouTube for profiles belonging to users who upload content regularly. The content needed to fall into at least one of the following categories at least 25 percent of the time: racial justice and equity, gender/sexuality, environment, health, democracy, disinformation and housing/cost of living.

We were intentional about including creators who represent a variety of identities, races, ethnicities, cultures, gender identities, ages, body types and abilities. Also, given that creators' experiences on the platforms varies dramatically based on the size of their viewership, we included creators of a wide range of follower and subscriber counts.

KEY FINDINGS

Overview

At Spitfire, we're always thinking about how we can better support our partners and the field to spark change on the most pressing issues of our time. That means getting creative and thinking about new ways to reach audiences and engage them meaningfully in solutions. Enter TikTok.

As communication professionals, we couldn't help but notice the virality of simple videos on the platform. DIY tutorials and dance videos were getting millions of views. TikTok content creators were building highly engaged communities online.

Inspiration hit. What would it mean for a video about climate change or racial justice to get that kind of engagement? What would the future look like if content creators had the tools and resources they need to communicate effectively about social issues to their ever-growing audiences? What does equity in online communities and platforms look like?

With these questions in mind, we partnered with Impact Guild, supported by MacArthur Foundation to conduct a landscape review with organizations, connector hubs and content creators on the state of creators' engagement on social issues today. We were curious about what content creators need to do more of this work and to do it well, how to ensure it's sustainable for them given that for many content creation is their livelihood and how they might be able to deliver content at scale.

To answer these questions, we reached out to more than 250 content creators and received responses from 51 people. We wanted to find out about their work, livelihood, inspiration, barriers to making content and the business side of content creation. Respondents represented a diverse subset of the creator community.

We also conducted interviews with several creators to gain a better understanding of their experiences beyond what we could glean from a questionnaire and with 17 experts in the field who support or work with content creators in myriad ways, including organizations that run creator fellowships (e.g., Better Internet Initiative, Social Good Club), social media researchers and talent managers.

What follows are the key findings from our research.

Note: Not all respondents answered every question. On some questions, respondents could choose multiple answers. Percentages are rounded.

Content creators get started for different reasons and care about a variety of issues, but many are inspired to make an impact.

How they got started.

A career as a full-time content creator differs from the traditional 9-to-5 job in that you can set your own hours, be your own boss and exercise a good deal of creative freedom. At the same time, it's a lot like any other career or small business; those who are successful have a wide range of prior experiences that lead them to exploring this path in the first place. This is particularly interesting because, although it is the aspiration of many kids today, this career didn't exist 15 years ago the way it does today with seemingly unlimited earning and growth potential.

Each of the people we surveyed had a unique story behind their journey to being a content creator. Nonetheless, their reasons can be categorized into at least one of a few buckets. Some creators started making videos as a hobby or by accident and it grew from there. Others were persuaded to give it a try because they knew someone else creating content.

Amber Whittington's (AKA AmbersCloset) YouTube success was the result of a combination of both of those. She started creating after her sister, Ashton (AKA AshtonsCloset), invited her to do a sister tag video in 2012.

"In the comments everybody was, like, you need to make a channel," Whittington said. She did some research and learned that there is limited representation of creators like her on YouTube.

"When I started doing research, I was like, wow, there's no representation … for the things that I was looking for … or the questions that I had specifically about my sexuality," she said. "I didn't see it at all."

Several survey responses indicated that creators began making videos in 2020 as a way to escape the boredom and uncertainty of the COVID-19 pandemic. That same year, many folks turned to TikTok to voice their opinions after seeing repeated injustices against marginalized groups.

Comedian Che Guerrero (@myundocumentedass) is one example. In 2020 he was working as a nursing assistant and following his dream to become a full-time comedian. "I was working during a global pandemic, and then the government still wanted to deport me. [That] kind of broke me," he said.

Guerrero leaned into creating on TikTok to remain active in entertainment as a comedian. "I found that talking about the situation I was having with my [immigration] status … a lot of people on the internet were resonating with it," he said.

Guerrero is also a good example of a creator who started creating videos to make complex issues, like the immigration process, accessible to everyday social media users.

Some creators get into this industry as a result of their personal experiences and an interest in advocacy. Ariana Jasmine turned to TikTok after watching her mom's life change drastically after a stage four metastatic bone cancer diagnosis. In an interview, she explained that her mother lived the American dream, but when she fell ill, the systems that are supposed to provide a safety net failed her.

"Out of nowhere, within the span of two months, [she] lost everything," she said. "At the time, I had about $5,000 in my savings… And I was like, whatever, I'm just gonna start doing social advocacy on TikTok." Ariana posts about her experience as an Iranian-American and politics in the Middle East, among other issues.

However they got their start, the creators we spoke to were all driven to make a difference by raising awareness about social issues on their platforms. Of the issues we categorized, 80% of respondents indicated that racial justice/equity was the issue they most cared about. Immediately following that was gender/sexuality at 59%. **It is important to note here that, despite the cross-section of racial groups with which the respondents identified, racial justice/equity was the top issue of concern and the issue immediately following was also based on identity.**

Why they got started

As you can tell, how creators get started varies widely. Why they become content creators does too, but we identified a few key themes that resonate across the board.

Educating audiences

Many creators do this work because they want to educate people on important issues. One example of this is Qasim Rashid, who said in a survey response, "I wanted to make my written scholarship more accessible." He's a human rights lawyer who has been creating content online for many years. His TikTok videos offer commentary on political issues with a focus on international relations in the Middle East. Often, creators like Qasim are filling information gaps online -- highlighting issues or perspectives that are otherwise overlooked.

Connection and action

People crave connection! We heard from many creators who create content based on their own identities and who want to advocate for others in their shared communities. We also heard from folks who find real value in helping those in their audience. Alaina Wood (@thegarbagequeen) said:

> "I define success as my audience telling me my videos helped them, reaching more than just my followers and getting people to take action against climate change."

TikTok has given rise to hyperniche topics that users wouldn't otherwise find in their everyday lives.

Another creator, Charlotte Clymer (@charlotteclymer) said she posts LGBTQ+ content to combat the hateful rhetoric and actions that have surged in recent years. "The trans and nonbinary [communities] are especially under attack, and my past year has revolved around fighting back against anti-trans disinformation that fuels discrimination toward us," she said. Creators are connecting in a real way with audiences who are facing the same discrimination. This is an important reason why they are inspired to take action to make a difference.

Flexibility

Creators cited flexibility as one reason they enjoy doing what they do. When millions of Americans have been laid off and are disillusioned with the 40-hour work week, creating short online videos about an issue you're passionate about can be a great option.

FINDING 2

Content creators are most likely to post about social justice issues when …

To some extent, anyone with a presence on any social media platform is a content creator in their own right. When you think about the content you post, how do you decide what makes sense coming from you given your background, experiences and expertise? What makes you pause before hitting "post"? What issues would you not dare touch at all?

Creators, like celebrities, are just like us.

They go through these calculations every day, but with the magnified pressure of having a following that trusts them, brand partnerships that contribute to their livelihood and a personal brand they have carefully curated to make both of those things a reality. To put it simply, the stakes are high.

With what feels like a different and deeply nuanced social justice crisis unfolding before our eyes every day, it's understandable that creators may pause when creating social justice content, especially if it feels outside of their niche or typical content. Likewise, it's important to know the conditions that make it easier for them to feel comfortable speaking out. Below you'll find the four conditions we heard that make creators most likely to venture dipping their toe into what can be polarizing and risky waters.

1. **When they get paid for their work.**
   When asked what would make it easier to post about social issues, nearly all (90%) of creators agreed: SHOW ME THE MONEY! We delve into that topic in Finding 5, but it's important to recognize that content creation, like all forms of work, is just that: work. And while there may be some willingness to negotiate rates for nonprofits working in causes they care about, the creators we spoke with do not feel like they should have to create content for free.

2. **When it's an issue they care about.**
   Based on our survey responses, we found that creators are more likely to post about social issues with which they have direct experience. Often, these are also issues that they are passionate about, have a lot of knowledge about, and are directly connected to their content niche or interest area. While some consider the timeliness and urgency of an issue when posting, others are focused on issues that are important to them but that are too often overlooked by mainstream media.

Over the past year, which social issues did you post about the most? Why?

Maya Abdallah
@mayuhnaise

"Immigration rights because it's not talked about nearly enough. I am very close to the subject as my mother, father and all [my] relatives are immigrants. Immigrants are still fighting every day for basic human rights in America."

Armiel Chandler
@armielchandler

"I think I covered gender and sexuality most with my content this year because I love to talk about how clothes have no gender and how society has created a shift when it comes to clothes… As a plus-size guy, a lot of things aren't accessible to me so I've always had to get creative and play around in the men's and women's section with clothes. Little did I know it started a conversation."

3. **When they have access to trusted information and sources on an issue.**
   While many creators have personal experience with or expertise on the social issues they post about, some do not. When asked what additional resources would be helpful to help them learn about or stay up to date on social issues, the majority of respondents said access to people with lived experience or opportunities to participate in issue-specific events/conferences/meet-ups.

When it comes to learning about or staying up to date on social issues, what additional resources or support would be useful to you?

▬▬▬▬▬	**75%**	Access to people with lived experience
▬▬▬▬▬	**75%**	Opportunities to participate in issue-specific events/conferences/meet-ups
▬▬▬▬	**71%**	Issue briefings
▬▬▬▬	**69%**	Access to new issue-area research
▬▬▬	**51%**	Issue-specific messaging guidance
▬▬▬	**47%**	Office hours with issue experts
■	**8%**	Other

In addition to financial compensation, these supports represent the value-add social justice organizations can bring through partnerships with content creators.

4. **When the content helps them achieve their goals.**
   Engagement is top of mind for every content creator. Their reach and livelihood often depend on it. So it follows that content creators are more likely to post about social issues if they think it helps them reach their goals for their community and personal brand. For many creators though, we learned, it's not all about metrics (e.g., views, likes).

   According to our survey, creators measure success in the communities they build, the freedom they have in their careers, the value and respect they earn for their craft and the positive impact they can have on the world through behavior change or education. While metrics and monetization matter, they were notably not the top metric of success we heard from creators. Feedback from followers that demonstrated impact, learning, inspiration, or behavior change were often more important than views and likes. These creators explain this clearly when asked to define success.

How do you define success as a content creator? Why?

**Samuel Everett
@samerubi**

"Holding an engaged audience without losing the passion you have for creating. At times, creatives get caught up in the numbers of it all and it really just comes with the job. I say, as long as you are able to keep that creative fire in you going and doing good things with it, then that is success!"

**Alaina Wood
@thegarbagequeen**

"I used to define my success on views only, but because of the algorithms, my views are all over the place. At the end of the day I got into this work to help push for climate action and others deal with their climate anxiety, so any progress towards that is a win in my book."

Some nonprofits want to see actions and reach for the campaigns they invest in and therefore may prioritize metrics more than creators do, as with the proverbial "how many eyeballs" question. Partnering with content creators may take a more nuanced understanding of the importance of trust between creators and their communities and understanding that engagement rate is a better indicator of a content creator's reach than follower count.

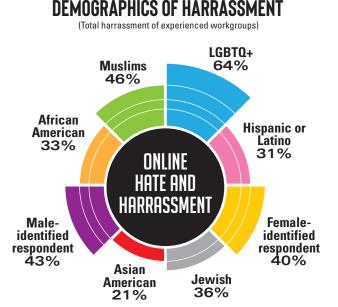**There are many barriers that prevent content creators from sharing social justice content.**

When we asked creators what barrier/s prevent them from creating content about social issues, **the top answer was concern about getting harrassed, receiving backlash or getting called out for posting about a topic.**

In the age of cancel culture where the use of the wrong term, an old tweet, unclear narrative or poorly constructed joke can make you lose your following overnight, the fear of backlash is understandable. Creators' following and platform is often their livelihood, making the risk that much higher.

Beware of trolls

Backlash and harassment can also come in the form of trolls. Roughly 41% of Americans experience some type of online harassment, so it is safe to assume the share is higher for people with a larger online presence.

Online harassment is prevalent across all platforms, largely unregulated, and can significantly impact mental health. While this impact is severely understudied, we know that hate is not distributed equally. 2022 data from the Anti-Defamation League showed that 33% of its survey respondents reported identity-based online harassment and 28% reported race-based online harassment, with African-American respondents reporting a sharp rise in race-based online harassment, from 42% in 2021 to 59% in 2022.

DEMOGRAPHICS OF HARRASSMENT
(Total harassment of experienced workgroups)

- LGBTQ+ 64%
- Muslims 46%
- African American 33%
- Hispanic or Latino 31%
- ONLINE HATE AND HARRASSMENT
- Male-identified respondent 43%
- Female-identified respondent 40%
- Asian American 21%
- Jewish 36%

The creators we spoke to are not immune.

> *Gabrielle Langhorn (eco_og)*: *"I sometimes won't post on instagram if the content has to do with race or racism because people on instagram tend to be much harsher."*

> *Stephanie (@winenchill)*: *"I post about social issues but do have to brace myself for the trolls."*

We know (see Finding 2) that a top motivator for creators to post about social justice is having direct experience with an issue. In a world where systemic inequity is embedded in every structure and system we encounter, more often than not a creator with firsthand experience of a social justice issue has a marginalized identity. This can make enduring the emotional toll of creating this type of content, and the inevitable hate they will receive, too big of a burden to bear.

> **Samuel Everett (@samerubi):** *"As a person who experiences intersectionality and has mental health struggles, it honestly is just up to my energy level if I am able to post."*

Connectors echoed this concern. Jacqueline Devine, of The Soze Agency, shared that creating social justice content can often be "very emotionally laborious, particularly for those who are directly impacted by the issue that they're creating content about. That's why we always ask 'what do you feel comfortable doing?' because we don't want to perpetuate that challenge of carrying something that is already really heavy."

On the flip side, those who do not have marginalized identities can be unsure about whether it's appropriate for them to speak out on it.

> **Austin Archer (@yourpal_austin):** *"I know about the issue but I am not part of the racial or cultural demographic most affected by it and I am not sure if it is my place to speak about it."*

In both cases, this content is not being created, posted and shared, creating a gap in content where the need for visibility is urgent.

Platforms aren't designed to protect creators from harm.

While we didn't hear this concern explicitly from the creators we spoke to, it's worth noting that fewer people who experienced physical threats online reported them to social media platforms in 2022 than in 2021 and those who did reported that platforms were doing less to address their safety.

In fact, 41% of respondents to the Anti-Defamation League survey who experienced a physical threat said that the platform took no action on a threatening post, an increase from 38% in 2021.

Online hate and harassment can and does move offline, so it is not an exaggeration to suggest it may be unsafe for creators to post about social justice content, especially content that is seen as particularly polarizing, especially for creators who have any marginalized identities.

Some fear of potential threat to brand partnerships.

Backlash can also come in the form of getting turned down for brand deals. When we asked about barriers, 26% of respondents said that they understand the issue but are worried about posting about social issues because it could

limit their ability to partner with brands. However, respondents also said they wouldn't be quick to work with a brand that was counter to their values in the first place.

> **Samuel Everett (@samerubi):** *"I do not fear harassment or losing branding opportunities. I would rather not work with a brand who doesn't support what I stand for anyway, you know?"*

Several connectors echoed this sentiment, explaining passion for the cause and the issue as a main driver of excitement among creators and what allows connectors to negotiate lower rates than traditional paid brand partnerships to work with creators.

Creators don't know what they don't know.

In addition to fear of backlash and harassment, 40% of creators shared that not feeling like an issue expert (26%) or not knowing much about an issue and lacking time to do research (14%) posed significant barriers to posting about social issues. This is why having access to the right information and vetted sources is so important to content creators. We all know disinformation on social media platforms is rampant. Even the most well meaning creators may unintentionally contribute to disinformation or be swayed by it in ways they don't realize (see Finding 4 for more on content moderation).

Sharing accurate content about social issues requires time-consuming research and fact-checking, which many creators may not know how to do. The connectors we spoke with noted this was a real challenge. Tiffany Fisher-Love from the Better Internet Initiative shared that young creators have a hard time differentiating between primary and secondary sources and fact from opinion. Even knowing where to look and identifying good sources are challenges.

> *"Most individual creators don't have fact-checking infrastructure. They don't have financial guidance. They don't have access to legal advice. How are they going to fund their social justice content creation? How are they going to avoid defamation? How will they ensure their personal safety? If you're gonna put yourself out there as a social justice advocate, you're gonna need levels of security that also cost money. And I'm running into that now." - Abbie Richards, Content Creator and Co-Founder of EcoTok*

Content creators on TikTok and YouTube are in some ways on the front lines of the fight against disinformation. By partnering with content creators and sharing their expertise on specific issues and/or research, nonprofits can help ensure content that spreads online is factual and prevent the amplification of false narratives.

Platforms make the rules, and they have a profound effect on content and the people who make it, especially Black, Brown and trans creators.

While social media has democratized the spread of information in many ways, the truth is that platforms are run by media megacompanies that get to decide what is shared on their platforms and with whom. Talking to content creators and researchers alike, it's clear that this framework makes it challenging, and sometimes impossible, for creators to post about social issues and make a living wage.

Platform precarity

Elon Musk's purchase of Twitter was a stark reminder of the precarity of social media platforms. Overnight, the self-proclaimed "champion of free speech" implemented drastic changes to the platform, including firing more than 4,000 employees, including content moderators, and reinstating Donald Trump's account after he was suspended in 2021 for spreading harmful misinformation about the 2020 election. The shift in leadership had many users (including nonprofits) and advertisers wondering if the platform was still viable.

Meanwhile, concerns about how user data is used on TikTok abound, given its Chinese ownership. In December, Congress passed a spending bill that banned government employees from using the app on their work phones. This came after several state bans and a CIA probe into the company.

All of these big-picture shifts affect day-to-day use of these platforms by content creators and users. They may also argue for creators being inventive about capturing their followers via other means, like website links and email sign-ups, lest they lose what they built on these platforms.

Shifting rules

In addition to an ever-shifting landscape of ownership and regulations, the features, functionality, algorithms and community guidelines on each platform are also constantly changing. This means creators must continually adapt to ensure their content reaches audiences. In an interview with the Verge, Jack Conte, co-founder and CEO of Patreon, describes it this way: "With one change, [platforms] can cut my traffic in half. I'm left as a creator with suddenly half the views, half the ad revenue, and none of the control. Now I've actually lost touch with half of my audience."

While content moderation on social media is critical to limiting the spread of harmful mis- and disinformation and removing hate speech and violent content, factual posts about social issues often get caught in the crosshairs.

For example, leading up to the 2022 midterm elections, content creators noticed that videos on TikTok that included the words "voting" or "voter" were getting suppressed by the algorithm, likely in an effort to curtail voting disinformation. As a result, creators had to get creative with their get-out-the-vote efforts. For example, Zactivist replaced the word "vote" with "peach" to urge fellow Georgians to turn out. Creators whose content is often flagged as "controversial" or "political" or "inappropriate" use euphemisms like this to fly under the radar.

Yes, shadowbanning is real

Another way platforms control the game is through a type of moderation called "shadowbanning." Shadowbanning is a type of censorship where platforms don't take down or flag content, but the algorithm makes it nearly invisible by limiting the number of people it reaches. Platforms won't admit to this practice, but a recent survey by the Center for Democracy and Technology found nearly 1 in 10 Americans on social media suspect they've been shadowbanned. Content moderators and algorithms created by coders have biases. There's evidence that Black, fat and/or LGBTQ+ creators are much more likely to have their content shadowbanned or or taken down than their white, thin, straight, cisgender peers. This was confirmed by the creators we surveyed.

Che Guerrero
@myundocumentedass

"At times, when a content creator of color talks about an issue, it's suppressed quicker than when their white counterpart goes off. So if the algorithm can work on those biases, it'll make my work easier."

Portia Bunch
@portia.noir

"The biggest issue would be the addressing of the blatant suppression of the voices of Black people, Indigenous people, and other People of Color. It is not secret that our voices are naturally suppressed due to systemic racism, this is compounded by talking about social issues. It's two things against us off top."

Black TikTokers Fight Back Against Censorship

In 2020, Black TikTokers launched a 24-hour "Black Out" to protest biased algorithms on the platform. The idea for the protest, called the #IamBlackMovement, was started by Black Lives Matter Utah founder, Lex Scott, who posted a video asking Black creators to change their profile photos to a Black power first, like and follow Black creators and share an awareness video about how Black creators are censored on TikTok while white supremacists are allowed to thrive. The protest was scheduled for May 19, Malcolm X's birthday. On the day of the "Black Out," thousands of accounts changed their profile photos, including non-Black allies supporting the cause. Videos using the hashtag #blackvoicesheard reached more than 6 million views and Black creators saw significant gains in followers.

The issue of ownership

There's also the issue of ownership. Platforms can not only take down or shadowban content, they can also ban an account altogether. In an instant, content creators can lose the community they've built unless they take painstaking efforts to capture followers' handles, collect emails or generate sign ups on their own website. As such, creators are standing in quicksand. If their account is suspended or taken down for any reason, they lose everything, including (for full-time content creators) their livelihood. This prevents many creators from wanting to post about anything that could be seen as controversial. It also means they have to build up their following across myriad platforms to limit their losses if one of their accounts gets banned.

"On YouTube, [creators] worry about demonetization if we use specific language for "controversial" issues which involve social issues. It can be hard to speak about these things because we have to use euphemisms."

Tiffany Ferguson
@tiffanyferg

Pushing platforms to take action

We asked creators what steps the platforms could take to make it easier for them to do their work, and the responses were not surprising.

Gabrielle Langhorn (@eco_og): *"A better, more consistent algorithm would help a lot.'"*

Conscious Lee (@theconsciouslee) : *Community Guidelines not being so rigid for progressive content around power and education."*

Alaina Wood (@thegarbagequeen): *"...Not having climate and social issue-related content get suppressed by the algorithm. Not always having my account at risk of being banned because climate deniers report my account, and including climate misinformation as a violation that can be reported."*

Robbie Scott (@robbiesmoonmusic): *"If the platform would stop unfairly censoring people who speak out against bigotry and controversial topics. Talking about controversial topics and condemning actions when they're ethically and socially wrong or disproving them with fact and personality is not something that deserves censoring."*

Organizations at the intersection of technology and civil rights also believe that platforms need to change. Many civil rights organizations and even some businesses have tried to push the platforms to take steps to better protect users, curb the spread of harmful disinformation online and be more transparent about what data they collect and how they use it.

There have been efforts by Congress to rein in social media giants by restricting ads they can show to kids under 16 and creating other protections for young people using their platforms. These efforts were spurred by the Facebook papers, in which a whistleblower revealed that Facebook meticulously tracked the real-world harms resulting from content shared on its platform.

The Biden Administration also threatened a US ban on TikTok if the Chinese owners don't sell its stakes in the company citing national security concerns.

Content moderation on social platforms is under scrutiny by the U.S. Supreme Court. In February 2023, the Court heard oral arguments in Gonzales v. Google, a case about whether YouTube can be sued because its algorithm recommended videos created by the terrorist group ISIS to users. If plaintiffs are successful, the ruling could limit Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act, the federal law protecting websites from being liable for third-party content generated by users, which experts say could "reshape the internet as we know it."

Interestingly, none of these efforts to make platforms more accountable focus on the needs of content creators. "One curious thing we found in our research is that no platform executive has gone up to speak before Congress and mentioned creators once," explains David Craig, Clinical Professor at USC Annenberg (and a faculty affiliate with AnnLab). "You know why? They know that once politicians discover that there are reportedly 50–100 million creators worldwide making some form of revenue across these platforms, they will start asking questions. None of them have any labor protections. You are changing your algorithms, policies, and service conditions overnight to benefit yourselves to their detriment? I'm desperate for people in Washington DC to understand this and start asking questions."
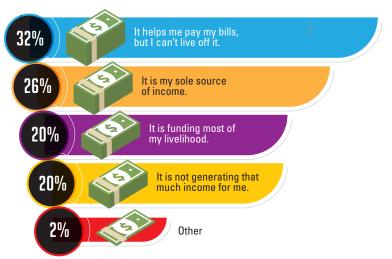
Given the non-traditional work environment and unclear landscape of workers' rights, creators have made various attempts to unionize as the industry has grown. Just last year, the Screen Actors Guild-American Federation of Television and Radio Artists, better known as SAG-AFTRA approved an "influencer agreement" that would allow content creators to join. While there is no follower count requirement to become a member, SAG-AFTRA does require that a creator's platform be monetized through advertising partnerships with brands to join. Notably, while the union represents creators in negotiations with brands, it is not able to negotiate directly with the platforms themselves, leaving creators on their own in regard to platform-based challenges or abuses.

Previous Love Island UK contestant-turned-creator Amy Hart generated some buzz by starting the conversation on unionizing to get protections from platforms. "*I do think there needs to be a creators' union, because a lot of us make a living off of social media…. I just think that it needs to be fairer with the actual social media networks, because on Instagram, as soon as you hashtag ad, the algorithm shows it to a lot less people. I wouldn't mind paying a monthly or yearly fee to use Instagram if we got a fair algorithm. There should be standardized pay scales, and fairer treatment from the networks themselves.*"

Providing financial resources to create issue-specific content is a huge motivator for creators, but creators still prioritize community over compensation.

As noted in Finding 3, when asked what would make it easier for creators to post about social justice content, an overwhelming majority (90%) said financial resources. When asked more broadly what other kind of support would be useful, 100% of creators said financial (e.g., grants, paid partnerships).

HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE THE INCOME YOU MAKE AS A CREATOR?

32% It helps me pay my bills, but I can't live off it.

26% It is my sole source of income.

20% It is funding most of my livelihood.

20% It is not generating that much income for me.

2% Other

While compensation often relies on hitting certain metrics and is undeniably important to sustain their livelihood, creators also measure success by the connection with their audience and the community they build and sustain over time.

Creator Ariana Afshar (@theprogressivebrat) explains this tension well, saying "society and brand deals tell you that success lies within the numbers and how high you can reach in analytics. I started my platform because I wanted to change the world - I still do. But monetization became a key factor in actually being able to develop my brand. I would say a combination of my social impact and analytics would be my answer. I wish I could just say impact, but unfortunately the bills need to also get paid."

How creators make money

Successful creators often monetize their platforms; this means they make money for creating content. Many go the partnership route seeking brand deals, paid partnership and advertising opportunities and affiliate links. However, in recent years many have started to shift to more direct monetization by building subscription businesses on Patreon, OnlyFans, Instagram's relatively new subscription model that charges a monthly fee to follow an account, or programs like YouTube's AdSense or the TikTok Creator fund.

> **To enter the TikTok creator fund, creators must be at least 18 years old and have at least:**
>
> **10,000 followers;**
>
> **100,000 views on your videos within the last 30 days;**
>
> **Adhere to community guidelines (which, as noted above, are constantly changing); and**
>
> **Must produce original content (not cross-posted or otherwise repurposed**

Simply being in the fund does not guarantee compensation. The amount of payment depends on the number of views, authenticity of views and engagement rate for any given piece of content. Essentially, creators are acting as independent contractors who get paid by TikTok for the views they accrue every month. TikTok knows it is nothing without the creators who keep people coming back to the platform, so this is its way of paying creators for this service. However, it is widely shared by creators in the fund that their earnings from it are minimal and do not sustain their livelihood. In our survey, only 16% of creators said they received any revenue from creator funds.

WHAT ARE YOUR TOP REVENUE STREAMS?

%	Revenue stream
74%	Paid partnership
25%	Consulting work
22%	Speaking gigs
22%	Other *(e.g. Patreon)*
16%	Creator fund
12%	Ads

Brand deals

The more likely way for creators to make a living is through paid partnerships. Roughly 74% of the creators we surveyed shared that paid partnerships was their top source of revenue. As noted above, companies are far ahead of nonprofits in understanding the consumption and action power of creators' followers. They have invested in influencer marketing as part of their larger marketing strategies. How much creators can actually make from brand deals varies dramatically depending on a variety of factors including the industry's fast growth and limited regulations.

Mark Ciampittiello from Influint, a company that manages content creators, explained it this way:

> "I'd characterize the 5 years leading up to 2020 as the Wild West of influencer marketing. People were spending a lot of money but didn't really know what they were doing. A lot of folks were testing, throwing money around. But in the last two years, things have started to get a bit more tight. Big players in space know what they're doing. As the Wild West phase ends, we will shift into a more data-driven, well-established workflow for the industry."

However, opportunities for paid brand partnerships are not equal for all content creators. Research by MSL U.S. in 2021 found a vast racial gap in influencer marketing that mimics the pay gap in other fields. According to this research, the racial pay gap between white influencers and Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) influencers is 29%. The gap between white and Black influencers is 35% – the largest pay gap identified in any industry. Clearly, brands have to do better. Much better. But the gap also highlights an opportunity for social justice organizations to even the playing field and showcase their commitment to equity by investing in partnerships with BIPOC creators.

There is substantial room for growth for social justice organizations to partner effectively with content creators.

It's clear that there is so much opportunity to explore in this space. Creators have the ability to provide invaluable exposure and awareness to important social justice issues. But nonprofits have a lot of work to do to engage content creators effectively in their work and campaigns.

About 70% of the creators we surveyed said they've partnered with a social justice organization in some capacity before. Some noted that they have ongoing contracts with organizations, while others created content for a one-off campaign. While content creators' interest in working with nonprofits is high because of a shared belief in the work, their experiences have been mixed.

Nonprofits need clear objectives.

We spoke to a number of agencies that foster relationships between nonprofits and content creators for purpose-driven campaigns. One thing became clear: A successful partnership requires a clear campaign objective and tactics. We spoke to Malia Fisher, CEO of Vocal Media, a mission-driven creator marketing agency that facilitates mission-driven content campaigns with creators and nonprofit organizations. She said: "People need to have their tactics down right when they're reaching out to creators. They need to go in with an appropriate pitch language and it should be very simple and very direct and very clear."

Creators agree. We heard from several creators who talked about their experiences working with nonprofits that wanted to collaborate, but didn't have a clear ask.

> **Maya Abdallah @mayuhnaise:** *"I think transparency and clear language is important. Don't try to beat around the bush with what your goals are for this campaign."*

Sometimes nonprofits aren't sure about their ask because partnering with content creators isn't the right strategy in the first place. Jacqueline Devine, from The Soze Agency, made this point. "I think it's

about identifying talent as the right engagement for the campaigns. We need to first ask, why? Why do you want to work with influencers? How do influencers fulfill the objectives of the campaign?"

This is not unique to working with content creators; it's communication strategy 101. Start with what you want to achieve and who you need to reach, and then determine the activities that will best help you get there.

Nonprofits must allow content creators to do what they do best — create content.

Social justice organizations care deeply about their messaging — trust us, we know. We work with hundreds of them every year to craft messages that spur action. But sometimes the need to control the message gets in the way of working effectively with content creators.

What makes content creators so powerful is their authenticity. Their audience has a clear understanding of who they are, how they talk and what they care about. Sending a content creator a script or asking them to repost a video does not capitalize on the value they have as a messenger. Content creators also know what works and what doesn't on the platforms. Remember, they post daily and follow the trends better than anyone else, because their livelihood depends on it.

As creator Cecelia Gray put it, "There's often a certain level of control and a tone that the organization wants but that doesn't always play well on social media."

Content creators also noted that nonprofits' process for revisions and approvals is very cumbersome. Endless edits and back and forths makes it hard for content creators to do their best work and eats away at nonprofits' limited budgets.

The best collaboration between content creators and nonprofits is one of mutual trust and true collaboration.

Connectors echoed this sentiment and the need for nonprofits to create the simplest process with the clearest guidance. Malia Fisher of Vocal Media, recommends that nonprofits present a maximum one-page creative brief that includes a short, direct message, bare bones talking points and a call to action. "They do not need a lot of verbose messaging or heavy talking points," she said. "And then they need to be good at corresponding with the creator's and move through edits and feedback very quickly."

Jacqueline Devine, of The Soze Agency, also shared this sentiment. "It's not giving creators a script and saying, 'Hey, can you read this on camera?'" She explained that organizations need to approach creators from a place of trying to build a relationship and understanding what they think or would want to say on a certain issue. They can and should back it up with facts and talking points, but it's "making sure that the creators feel connected to that campaign in a way that feels good to them and to their audience."

One group has already put this strategy into practice. Social Currant, a firm that matches creators with social impact brands and causes, collaborated with Community Change Action (CCA), an organization that builds the power of low-income people, launched a partnership with TikTok creators in 2022. They set out to inform new audiences about the Child Tax Credit ahead of the midterm elections. Representatives from their teams explained in a presentation at frank 2023 that the teams collaborated to develop a brief to share with creators that included a consolidated policy and messaging strategy written in CCA's voice that was approved by external stakeholders. From there, creators were empowered to write, shoot and produce content in their own voice that was in alignment with the brief.

Nonprofits need to invest in this work and prioritize it in their budgets.

A lot of work goes into creating. Creators dedicate considerable amounts of time to coming up with content ideas, researching and fact-checking, planning the content, preparing to film and then filming, editing and completing post-production tasks. A single video can take many hours to produce, depending on the amount of information that is packed into it. Creators understand their value and expect to be compensated fairly for their labor.

Ariana Jasmine (@arianajasmine): "Sometimes they don't see the point in investing into social media so they expect creators to do content for them for free (or as low as $25). I am all about changing the world and I am not doing it for the money but I have bills to pay too."

While compensation is key, creators understand the reality that nonprofits cannot pay the same rates as some of their major brand partners and are willing to negotiate with nonprofits for causes they care about.

> *Alaina Wood (@thegarbagequeen): "Budget. I get asked, more often than not, to consult or create content for free. As a young, freelance climate communicator & sustainability scientist I cannot afford to volunteer my time at this point. I have lower rates for working with nonprofits, but most still try to get me to work for free."*

Nonprofits need to allow flexibility in contract and payment structure.

Creators often don't have the expertise to navigate contracts, invoicing and legal compliance issues. This is a high priority because it is how they get paid and how they protect themselves in an agreement with any paid partner. While nonprofits likely cannot take on solving this in-house, experts we spoke with noted that there are some things they could do to make the process easier for creators to work with them.

Some organizations have large, complex operations departments and 30-day (or even 60-day) payment terms, which is much slower than the industry standard creators are used to. As Malia Fisher of Vocal Media shared, "These sorts of things really don't mesh well with the creator industry. Creators like to have simple contracts that have very specific language around things like how long content needs to be posted on their page, or how content can be reused by an organization and for how long… and most organizations are not able to provide that so they're working with some sort of standard subcontractor contract. It's just confusing for everybody." She said this was such a huge need for her nonprofit clients that Vocal actually started providing this service to clients. It now offers contracting and payment processing for organizations because organizations constantly run into roadblocks with contracting and paying creators.

Catalyzing content creators means long-term support and sustainable ecosystems to thrive.

If social justice movements want to have a bigger impact, they need to get better at reaching and activating people from all walks of life. Content creators on TikTok and YouTube have a huge role to play in helping organizations and activists do that, but it's not going to happen by accident. If, collectively, the nonprofit world wants to harness this incredible force for good, creators need long-term support and sustainable ecosystems, both formal and informal, to do their work and to thrive. While some experimental models exist, as the industry grows exponentially, so will the ecosystem.

Current models

With content creation taking off as an industry, more-formal support for content creators has too. It is not unusual for content creators with big followings to have management teams complete with agents and publicists. However, those teams typically do not have social justice expertise or know how to support creators who want to explore creating social justice content and partnering with social justice organizations that drive the causes they care about.

To fill this gap, several models have emerged. Some are self-organized centered on community, some are funded by foundations, and some developed as their own for-profit firms and businesses aimed at achieving social impact. Based on our research we've grouped existing approaches into four different models.

Creator-led Models

When we asked creators what kind of support they're looking for from the creator community, the top answer was community/mentorship (78%). Talking with other creators, learning from each other and jumping in to support when someone is getting pummeled in the comments is a key part of success and well-being. Creators also want to collaborate with their peers on content (61%) and get tips on how to support themselves financially as a content creator (61%).

Nearly all of the creators we surveyed (96%) said they very often or sometimes talk to other creators and share tips, challenges and insights. Creators meet like-minded folks in a variety of ways, most often organically on the platform through direct messages (DM) or in comment sections. Many creators noted that they intentionally share things they've learned on their channel/page because they want to help other creators learn and grow.

> **Portia Burch (@Portia.Noir):** *"It's not an official group, but I have four other creators that I regularly communicate with. We share expertise about different topics, we provide encouragement for the times where [content] suppression is very high."*

EcoTok is a collective of environmental educators and activists who use TikTok as a platform for good. The collective started as an informal group chat in July 2020 for creators talking about environmental issues to build community and get advice from their peers. Later that year, the group was approached by TED Countdown to work on a series of videos about climate change, and things took off from there. Realizing that they could be more powerful together than alone, EcoTok was born. Today, the collective includes 19 creators—scientists, students, activists, environmental educators and civil servants—with a common goal: to save the planet. EcoTok hopes to empower the younger generation to do something about climate change by teaching them about science, activism and ways to make changes in their own life.]

"I am part of EcoTok. We create content primarily about environmental issues, but we also discuss social issues and misinformation. We get invited to a lot of large meetings. It has connected me to so many amazing opportunities I would not have had as an individual content creator."

Gabrielle Langhorn, @Eco_OG

Creators are essentially individual brands and small business owners wrapped into one which can be a heavy burden to carry alone. Several creator-led models have emerged to try and create some structure around this for creators, by creators. EcoTok is a great example of a creator-led community.

Gen Z for Change is another noteworthy creator-led model. Founded by creator Aidan Kohn-Murphy, Gen Z for Change is a coalition of approximately 500 creators spanning platforms making content about social justice issues and mobilizing their peers to take action. Kohn-Murphy and his 20 volunteer organizer staff members connect creators, share scripts and talking points and provide research and editorial support for their campaigns. With an influencer network on TikTok that has more than 500 million followers, Gen Z for Change is garnering significant attention and has even caught the attention of the White House, helping organize briefings between administration staff and creators to drive change. Of their efforts, Kohn-Murphy shares, "We

want to be able to advocate and to push for the policies that Gen Z believes in. Not to be revolutionary, but there's a lot wrong with the world, and if we can use our platform to make positive change and leave the world better than we found it, then we'll have done our job."

Platform-led Models and Accelerator Programs

Platforms also recognize the need for community among creators. Meta, for example, has a platform-led group called We The Culture. One creator we spoke to explained that it is "a funding program featuring 122 Black content creators creating content and growing their brands. Being a part of the program has opened up a lot of doors and provided opportunities to model and grow my brand to be a household name." Accelerator programs have also emerged both from platforms and other sources with a vested interest in content creation. NBC has a creator accelerator program to support content creators in developing scripted and unscripted series. TikTok in partnership with the National Screen Institute has an accelerator program for Indigenous creators that offers courses and support to help them grow their followings.

Nonprofit Connector Models

Given the experimental nature of this relatively new convergence of the creator industry with the social justice movement, many nonprofit organizations often funded by foundations are intrigued by this work's potential for impact and several have started to invest in this type of collaboration through fellowship programs.

One example is the Better Internet Initiative (BII), a program supported by Fellow Americans Education Fund, that helps creators and influencers make educational content for their audiences about issues of importance. The fellowship started in 2021 with a year-long program for a group of 35 creators, and in 2022 it grew to 50 creators with a goal of producing more than 450 videos that reach at least 55 million subscribers among YouTube creators and another 75 million by TikTokers.

One distinguishing factor of BII is that it intentionally seeks creators for whom the vast majority of its content is not "on-the-nose" social justice content. Rather, it tends to be woven into the content of that creator's other topics – for example, yoga content that may veer into conversations about women's health.

The fellowship consists of monthly meetings, focused cohorts grouped by issue area of interest, a Slack channel where creators can be in regular communication and ping ideas back and forth and an annual 2-day in-person event in Los Angeles that incorporates time for mental health support and relaxation. Because creators are starved for spaces like this, the event has become very popular and creators ask to return every year. BII also plays the role of both translator and matchmaker, matching creators to nonprofit campaigns that may be a good fit for them and their issue of interest and translating often-wonky complex organization talking points into messaging creators can understand and connect to their own audiences.

The Cooperative Impact Lab (Collab) has a similar approach. In 2020, Collab ran its first Digital Innovation Fund, seeing the urgent need for organizations to upscale their digital organizing in light of the pandemic. It

incentivized organizations to invest in creator collaboration for digital campaigns by giving them the funds to do so and has started to analyse the impact of this model. Understanding the learning curve for nonprofits on this work, Collab also provides training and coaching to organizations to "rethink the way they approach these kinds of relationships that they have to relinquish some control."

Harness works to connect the entertainment industry with racial justice, gender justice and civic justice movements. Rather than investing in individual creators, it creates space and specific initiatives to connect industry leaders, influencers and content creators with power, connections and the ability to drive impact to movement leaders to ensure an intersectional, culturally competent approach to shifting narratives. Supported by funders across the movement space, it uses these cultural organizers to educate, inspire and co-create action to shift culture.

Organizations' In-House Creators

It is not unusual for big brands to invest in in-house content creators. Anyone on TikTok recognizes DuoLingo as one of the best brand TikToks in the game, using its friendly green owl mascot as its on-camera talent and a staff person unafraid to jump into the comment section of any likely viral video. The Washington Post has an in-house creator, Dave Jorgenson, whose persona has become immediately recognizable with the brand on the platform. Creator Jake Corbett has been vital to NPR's Planet Money brand on TikTok, managing to make explainers on the economy engaging, educational and funny.

Nonprofits have been slower to take this approach. One standout is the Milwaukee Public Library, which has become "TikTok famous" by posting creative content about books and authors featuring its staff, like this spooky homage to Stephen King on his 75th birthday.

Agency Connector Models

Recognizing the impact of social justice content for various social justice movements and the need for nonprofits to invest in and understand this work more deeply, several agencies have emerged to fill this gap in the market. We spoke to the Soze Agency, Vocal Media, Influint and Social Good Club, all of whose business models focus on building long lasting, trusted relationships with creators.

These agencies see themselves as both educators and translators. They educate nonprofits on how the process works and why ensuring creator autonomy is essential. These agencies serve the role of educating creators on the often-complex issues involved in the campaign and translate wonky or jargony talking points from an organization into something more high level clear, and tangible for creators to understand.

As businesses that depend on creator engagement, these agencies prioritize building deep and meaningful creator relationships, and the best way to do that is to ensure the process of engaging in nonprofit campaigns is as smooth as possible.

While all of these models have seen promising results, more sustainable and coordinated support for social justice content creators is needed for real impact.

RECOMMENDATIONS:
TAKING THE FIELD TO THE NEXT LEVEL

So now what? How can we take what we've learned and put it into practice to make a bigger impact in social justice movements? How do we organize the potential of creative content better? With our findings and landscape analysis in mind, a few key themes came into focus as we thought about recommendations for the field.

It's clear that sustainable models for supporting content creators to pursue social justice content must center equity, in both what (content) and who (content creators) we invest in, but also in how we advocate for a more just and safe ecosystem online.

Any efforts that aim to support content creators should include opportunities for them to build community. Too often, creators feel like they're an island unto themselves. Along the same vein, supports need to meet content creators where they are — seeing them as whole people who have everyday stressors and need time and space to be creative.

And the field needs to really invest in this work (through time, expertise and resources) for it to be successful. That requires building long-term, trusting partnerships with content creators and prioritizing these partnerships in campaign budgets.

Below are some recommendations we crafted as potential models to pursue..

GATHER

Actions that foster community and allow for the cross-pollination of ideas to become programmatic.

TikTok House for Social Justice. The notion of collaborative TikTok and YouTube creator "houses" is not new. But having one with social justice content generation in mind would be. Such a house could take a number of forms. From having a creator house for one month or a few months and rotate the cohort – less time, more voices. There could also be houses dedicated to specific topics, for example, a one-month immigrant rights creator house filled with creators from different immigrant backgrounds, getting briefed by immigrant rights organizations, etc, creating 100 new videos or pieces of content.

Another variation of this is to have a creator house for one month or a few months and rotate the cohort – less time, more voices. There could also be houses dedicated to specific topics, for example, a one-month immigrant rights creator house filled with creators from different immigrant backgrounds, getting briefed by immigrant rights organizations, etc, creating 100 new videos or pieces of content.

An even shorter, less costly experiment of this type is to have a gathering of 12–15 content creators for 4–5 days to rough out concepts for the following 3 months and then have them go home to create those pieces and work out collaborations. This is similar to Red Bull Music Academy, where the energy drink company invites emerging musicians and vocalists to be housed together for a week to work on new music projects, with production equipment, sleeping arrangements, meals and mentorship sessions with high-profile musicians included.

Virtual TikTok House. This is similar in concept to the in-person house above, but done remotely. As with in-person vs remote situations in learning or gathering (e.g., classrooms, conferences, skills-based trainings), this would require a rigorous curriculum with lots of check-ins, discussions and deadlines related to material and such. It might also require an allowance for creators to improve the production value of the content they generate. The upside of this model is that it might allow creators from a wider geographical range to participate more easily, as well as people with other real-life situations that make in-person attendance complicated (e.g., school, employment, inability to leave kids for so long).

CATALYZE

Actions that support content creators to make social justice content at scale.

Artist Fellowship/Creator in Residence. The notion of artist fellowships is not new. In fact there are hundreds of them of varying levels, and emphases and criteria. But again, not so much for TikTok or YouTube or Instagram creators. The Better Internet Initiative has a creator fellowship program (which is looking to expand in 2023), but the creators involved have content around social justice issues as 15-20% (at most) of their overall content. That's a strategic decision and there is a very good upside to this approach. But a fellowship for a creator who wants to do a deep dive on, say, affordable housing (almost like a Super Size Me-type series for housing and cost of living) would be a different thing.

Open Call for Treatments. This is probably more of an action that can be taken by nonprofits or a coalition of like-minded groups based on a certain set of topics or themes or a particular issue campaign. This approach is likely best facilitated with a collaborating connector who works regularly with social impact creators. Like open calls for artists in other disciplines, it needs to build in clear financial incentives and protections for creators. Decisions should be made by a respected jury of other creators and cultural organizers, not solely the organizations' staff and leadership, or it risks producing the content that creators told us is not a "win-win."

EXPAND

Tapping into the energy of existing efforts, with "guardrail organizing."

Make Your Own Dream RFP for Connectors. Many of the connectors described in this report are capable of taking on more work and expanding their networks of creators to generate more pieces about social issues content. Connectors as in creator collectives or agencies representing creators. Why not take the "hustle" aspect out of their

work and ask them what they want to work on and how they would do it, rather than waiting for "the right deal" to come their way as a business transaction? BII is already hoping to expand to 100 more creators in its 2023 cohort of fellows. Social Currant would probably love to take its 2022 model of civic engagement and start recruitment in key swing states for 2024 now, rather than waiting for an organization to come along in a panic in late summer of 2024. Why not ask these connectors, if they had their druthers, what they would do? Pick a decent six-figure number, invite them to draft a proposal and include guardrails with a light touch.

Regrant to Individual Creators or Creator Collectives. Regranting is not new where an organization holding large donations from a foundation or multiple foundations in a common pool sets up an operation to regrant those monies (in smaller allocations) to multiple grantees or partners. But in this realm, not so much. Pop Culture Collaborative has used this approach to stoke interesting projects related to pluralism in pop culture by supporting writers' rooms in Hollywood, social issues organizations doing creative work and more. And there are many other organizations especially well-suited for TikTok or YouTube creator development for social good, like Impact Guild, Better Internet Initiative, Harness and Center for Cultural Power.

Leveraging and enhancing by matching funds from other interested organizations for a given fund would make this model even more effective. For example, if $200K was in a common pool, and $10K of that was earmarked for economic justice content and another $10K is matched by a donor, the creator (or team of creators) would have $20K to work with and the available funds would grow to $400K.

UPSKILL INTERNALLY

Actions that help nonprofit and social justice organizations partner effectively with content creators.

Ongoing Training for Organizations. Develop and provide ongoing year-round training for leaders, spokespeople, comms directors, organizing directors and rank-and-file members of organizations to become effective creators with intentionality. For example, offer a one-day boot camp for people at different levels of the organization, like C-suite, directors and other members for an issue (e.g., bail reform, food insecurity). Imagine the benefit of an environmental funder investing in and offering training like this for its grantees.

Content Creators Partnership Guide. This would be a guide designed for organizations and activists to be good collaborators, smart funders and terrific information providers for content creators. This material could also manifest as a series of trainings, in-person or remote. Step by step. With exercises and advice from creators and connectors. This could be a take-home item from the ongoing training efforts described above, as well as an interactive website. An example of this can be found in the Spitfire-led project for communicators on disinformation called JustTruthGuide.org. It could stand alone or be customized to a series of geography- or issue-specific events or trainings where activists demonstrate what works, leading to new experiments.

UNITE VOICES

Collective actions that push social media platforms to change policies and practices so they're more fair to content creators.

Call for a Level Playing Field. Funders or nonprofit investing in strategies that focus on holding accountable the owners and corporations that drive social video platforms. This could come in the form of an organization or coalition. It could be in the form of legal support for creators or crowdsourced pushbacks when a creator thinks they've been unfairly banned, shadowbanned or had posts deleted. It could issue a call to action around the necessary changes to community guidelines to improve access to social justice content.

Support a Creators Bill of Rights. As UNC-CH communications professor Alice Marwick noted, "Influencers are producing free content for a commercial platform that is making money off them. The platform is extracting the value of their labor." And we're all watching it. David Craig, professor at USC, crafted a Creators Bill of Rights designed to correct this imbalance. Creators will review it again and add more ideas in spring 2023, but support for it would surely raise some new questions about content creators as employees or sales managers of these platforms. Better treatment of content creators leads to more voices being able to promote social justice issues with confidence.

TALK TO US

If you're concerned about not only uniting voices for social justice but amplifying them in these platforms, this report includes a lot to process. There could be more questions. There could be more interviewing and surveying to do. Or good old fashioned match-making between creators, connectors and organizations. There might be an idea sparked for you here with these recommendations or new ones to contemplate. We'd like to hear about any of it and partner on maximizing the potential of these platforms for progress. Let's talk about it and figure out the best path, whether you are a creator, connector, organization, or funder. Send a note to creatorlab@spitfirestrategies.com.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS