The business of influence with MKBHD

Marques Brownlee is one of the best reviewers I know, and also one of the most savvy and successful YouTubers. And he's been in the game for a long time: he started the channel MKBHD in 2009 when he was just a teenager making videos about his new HP laptop. Since then, he's grown it to one of the biggest tech channels on YouTube, with 13.5 million subscribers, a podcast, and a growing support team.

But what looks effortless and fun to the viewer is often the result of careful planning and investment. YouTubers are entrepreneurs, and Brownlee — my guest on today's episode of *Decoder* — talks that talk with the best of them.

I am fascinated by the business of influence, and so I wanted to talk to Marques about the day-to-day operation of a YouTube channel where he plays every role from business development to ad sales to actually reviewing the phones. We talked about what he can and can't scale, how he thinks about his dependency on YouTube as a platform, and what the future of his business looks like. Here's a little news: he's launching new channels very soon.

This transcript has been lightly edited for clarity.

Marques Brownlee from MKBHD Inc. Welcome to *Decoder*.

Thanks for having me. Sorry in advance for all the noise. There's going to be random noises.

That's fine. What's the random noise?

We're in a building surrounded by other random tenants who

make noises and have construction sometimes. So it just happens.

How does that work for you when you're shooting your videos?

Oh man. Well, usually it's quiet until I turn the mic on or hop on a podcast like this, then they make lots of noise and we just kind of wait until noises stop. It's not ideal.

You've got to embrace uncertainty.

Exactly. I'm very used to it.

So you run a very popular YouTube channel. It's your channel. You started it when you were a teenager in your parents' house. I think a lot of people listening to this kind of know your story, but give folks the quick version of that journey.

So I was a teenager in high school and was always into tech, but I had to make a big purchase: I had to buy a laptop. So I watched a whole bunch of YouTube videos on which laptop to buy. When I finally bought a laptop and saw some stuff with the laptop that I didn't see in those videos, my natural response was to turn on a webcam, talk about those things, and upload it to YouTube, just in case someone else was watching videos to choose what to buy. That kind of snowballed into just making all kinds of videos with the laptop, and then the software, and the cooler and the mouse and keyboard, and my channel just turned into a tech YouTube channel. And here we are.

So that was a very early version of YouTube, right? I don't want to make you go back into your brain and imagine yourself as a teenager, but the instinct to make a video on YouTube then and the instinct to make a video on YouTube now feels very different. Everyone's motivations are very different across that sweep of time. What was your instinct? How did you choose that as the best way to share what you knew rather than say, a blog post?

Yeah, you're right. I don't think there's a lot of kids in 2009 who bought a laptop and decided to make a video about it on YouTube. I think there's something about all those videos I was watching that I really enjoyed and they helped me a lot in my purchase decision. I couldn't believe I was finding something that I didn't see in those other videos. So I was like, the obvious answer is to add to that collection of information, so when someone else is choosing what to buy, they can make a better choice than I did. They can watch my video and realize something they wouldn't have seen in the others. Video was the natural medium. I've never been much of a writer, so video just felt like the place to start.

You were making those videos because you wanted to help people out. Now you run a fairly large operation, and I actually just saw your tweet, you're hiring like six people. How big is your business? How many people does that have and how many people do you want it to be?

I think a lot of people, when they imagine a YouTube channel, don't imagine very much work behind it. We put out over 120 videos last year. So it's a team of five currently in the studio, which is a 7,000-square-foot empty box that we filled up with video gear. It's me, Andrew, Vinh, Brandon, and Michael. That's a combination of cinematographers, set designers, motion graphics specialists, and myself.

Adding to that is both proactive and reactive. I think we want to do more, but we also want to do better. So we're adding writing talent and more editing talent and to take some of the work off of my shoulders, but also to be able to scale up. We're making a weekly podcast now and we're planning to start a couple of new YouTube channels this year.

So there's a lot more going on, but I think the teamwork of it all is something that can be pretty underrated. There's a lot going on behind the scenes to make the videos.

One of the challenges with a channel like yours versus ours — we run a channel, too — is we have lots of people on our channel. We have a big cast of characters at *The Verge*. MKBHD, that's just you. You are a pretty unscalable property. That group of people you're bringing in and hiring, is that to help you spend more time in front of the camera or is that an attempt to scale you in a different way?

It's a little bit of both, actually. We look at the MKBHD channel one way, and I think that will still be me in front of the camera, but we also are planning on starting other channels that have a different look, where there's multiple people on camera. So the scalability part comes from kind of building a smart business in a way. You can just continue making videos like normal and that can grow, and that's fine. But I think there's a lot of really fun stuff that's enabled by what we have going here and we want to take advantage of that.

You said you're going to launch new channels. What are you launching?

Do I give away my cards this early?

Yes.

We have the *Waveform* podcast. I'm in the studio right now. You can see it behind me. It looks very pretty. Nobody ever sees it. We're launching a video version of the *Waveform* podcast. That's going to be fun. That'll be its own YouTube channel.

And we're launching one other channel that I'm going to keep a secret, but that I'll tell you will have a lot more faces on it. It will have a lot more casual content and things that people have wanted to see but haven't seen from the MKBHD channel. And that's going to be a lot of fun. That's going to launch this year, too. And then maybe some more. Maybe we'll find some other ideas, too.

That’s both this year. First half of this year? We’re talking in the first weeks of 2021.

I think spring for both. That’s the plan.

It’s really interesting because you and I have known each other for a while and I remember one of my first conversations with you. You were just intently focused on completing a motion graphics course that you had been taking. And now it’s several years later and you’re not that deep in the weeds. You’ve just hired a motion graphics person and you’re talking about scaling your business and using your facilities in a different way.

So I always ask people, what’s your decision-making framework? But I think a different version of the question for you is, how has that changed? You’ve just been working for yourself since you were a kid. Now you’re running a large business and there are people who depend on you. How has your framework changed and how is it growing?

So here’s the way I like to think about it, and maybe this is a weird analogy, but stick with me. First, being a YouTuber is a bunch of different jobs in one. Let’s say you’re a tech YouTuber. Part of your job is writing, part of your job is being on camera, part of your job is shooting the video, part of your job is editing the video, and part of your job is promoting, uploading, sharing, and content strategy. I thought of myself as this business that was growing and as I was making these things, kind of like an octopus where I have one arm doing one thing, another arm doing one thing, and some are more precious than others. Like being on camera, writing, and editing are very important to what makes an MKBHD video.

But it turned out that I was able to find talented people, [and] I could cut off one of my arms and hand it to them and they could do a way better job with that part of it — whether it’s being behind the camera or cinematography or motion

graphics — and really take it to the next level. So the entire channel and the entire project benefits from me not having to control every single part of it. But hiring is still a bit of a process for me. We're looking at it like hiring unicorns, where I could hire any editor, but you also want an editor that understands the tech world, understands YouTube, and understands what makes a YouTube edit versus something for the BBC or CNN.

There's still a learning process to finding the right people for these different places, but the end goal is to find those people and keep cutting off those arms. I don't even know what analogy I'm building now, but I want to kind of be an octopus with arms chopped off.

It's an octopus with no arms, like a jellyfish situation.

Exactly.

That's a really interesting way of thinking about it, because that's how normal organizations scale, right? You delegate some chunk of the work to someone else, you put them in charge, you hold them accountable for it. It's still your face on the channel, though. So even if you send work out, you've still got to manage it and hold people to your standards. The thing you said about finding people who understand YouTube is really interesting to me because those people tend to be YouTubers, but they don't necessarily get to be YouTubers and then come work for you. How do you manage that dynamic?

That's definitely something we think about a lot. So part of it is, you find people who are either already YouTubers and willing to put that skill towards something new. And we also highly encourage people to just do their thing, freelance, and run their own channels on the side. But it's kind of tough finding that right person. That's why it's taken so long. We have five people here now. I'm sure I would have been hiring all year last year if there wasn't a pandemic. It's definitely

a process trying to find the people who will actually be dedicated to the exact thing you're trying to do.

It's interesting, you've said "we" a couple of times. Who's the "we" in your equation?

So I still have a couple of my precious arms. I still edit 99 percent of everything. I have the motion graphics artist and cinematographer, Vinh and Brandon, who will just go in on eight hours of editing for the first seven seconds of the intros and fun stuff like that. But I'm 99 percent of the edit, I'm writing everything, and I think at the end of the day, it's still my face and it's still my presentation of my ideas. Andrew is sort of a co-producer and assistant. We share the vision of how the thing grows and what we want to make. But I really say "we" because I just like to give credit to the people who've made it possible.

When the pandemic started, it felt like a throwback where it was just me making things again. I gave everyone the chance to get home and stay safe. And I realized, this is kind of how it started and it's really hard to make the stuff you want to make this way. It's a team process and I like to give credit for that.

We've basically shot all of our videos with my directors on Zoom and I'm just like, "man, this is not even close." It's very fun, and then that novelty fades and you just miss having everybody there. It sounds like you've got people back in your studio, you're working as a team again.

As a small business owner, what have your COVID protocols been? Is it just hoping you're working off the best information you can get?

Basically. And hopefully the vaccine comes as quickly as possible. At this point, we're not traveling for anything. If you'd seen our travel schedule in the couple of years leading up to 2020, it was a lot. And actually we traveled for almost

all six of the first six weeks of 2020, but we haven't done any of that since. We're just coming into the studio, making, and heading out.

There's also *Retro Tech*, our YouTube original series happening behind the scenes. So that'll all come out later in 2021, but that also has its own set of protocols with parts of that team coming to the studio and getting COVID tests every week. So that's a little different.

I'm required to disclose now that *Retro Tech* is produced in partnership with Vox Media Studios. I have nothing to do with it, but I am told their COVID protocols are pretty hardcore.

One question from our video team that I thought was really interesting: as you've been on the path of growing bigger and bigger, you haven't had a boss. How do you grow and improve when the audience is overwhelmingly telling you that you're great? Where do you find the incentive or the self-criticism to improve? You've obviously wildly improved over time, but where does that really come from?

Oh, thank you. From the beginning, I've always had sort of a driving light to make what I would want to watch. And you can expand that into running a channel that I would want to subscribe to. I watch a lot of YouTube. I watch a lot of tech videos, and I watch a lot of all kinds of other videos. I get inspiration from all kinds of places. So it is great to see comments, and people enjoying the videos, and enjoying the higher frequency of videos, and the better production, and learning more from the *Explained* series. But at the same time, there's a lot more that I see that I'm inspired by and more stuff that I want to make. So that's ultimately what drives me.

It's just an internal driving light of like, let's try things, let's do more, and let's do better. I think it's sort of a moving goalpost where we do improve and we achieve goals that

we set out for ourselves, and then as we arrive at that horizon, we look forward and we see some other cool stuff we could do, and so we attack that, too.

Give me a sense of those goals. There's some goals that are very quantitative, like we're going to increase view counts. There's some goals like just sheer number of videos on the channel, we're going to produce more. And then there's obviously qualitative goals, like we're going to attack this format and be really good at it. How do you set and define those goals?

Because we're on YouTube, it's a little bit driven by the platform. Honestly, a lot of it is tracking metrics and viewer retention and making sure you can quantitatively confirm the quality of a video. We've never really set view count goals, but we did have a goal to make 100 videos in the calendar year and we did end up doing that, which is great. A lot of that stuff that we're aiming for is more, I guess qualitative is the word, but it's hard to define. We watch stuff and we're inspired by things we watch off of the platform. We just had this whole conversation this week with the team about how we can do *Retro Tech* season 3 even better than *Retro Tech* season 2.

So a lot of things are just sort of an "eye test" really. It's a visual medium, we're making stuff for people to watch and we end up getting goals about more things we want to watch. And I think as a creator, a lot of people have that same experience. Your taste is a little bit above your actual ability. So we go out and shoot for a whole week and make a car video and we watch all our footage back and we're like, "I think we need a camera car." So you do the best you can with what you got, but I think you're always looking up.

We've talked about your business as a YouTube business in a pretty focused way. Let's just dive into that for a minute. How do you make money on YouTube?

Oh, this is the number one holiday family reunion question.

Oh, good. You're well-practiced at it.

I mean, there's the simple answer and there's the long, business answer. I'm sure you'd probably like both. So, YouTube ads is the primary, fundamental way that YouTubers make money. You upload a video, there's ads somewhere on it or in it, and the YouTuber gets paid for the placement of those ads because they brought the eyeballs to the video.

The deeper understanding of that is, there's different types of ads. There's the ads that are built into YouTube through the AdSense program. That's one version of it. You don't really get to control those ads, but you can still have banner ads, you can have pre-rolls, mid-roll video ads, things like that. And there's a whole ecosystem there where you try to find a balancing act between how many ads do you place? Do you put mid-rolls in your videos or not?

But then there's also the integrations that you do control, which can be inside the videos. Sometimes it's a pre-roll, you say "this video is sponsored by…" You have an integrated section inside of a video or a post-roll. You get control over that, which is often very beneficial because that's way better targeting for the company who's trying to talk to somebody. And then there's all kinds of other alternate ways that YouTube channels make money. For example, we have a merch store. You can buy apparel that has our cool designs on it. We also have a podcast that's its own format of how it makes money. I'm sure the podcasting world is familiar with that. Generally, the fundamental building blocks of making money as a YouTuber, and for me, come from AdSense built into YouTube, sponsored integrations built into the videos and on the channel, and merch stuff, too.

Everyone wants that merch store to be the biggest one and it's always the third biggest one. It's like the dream is "now I

run Supreme and I make videos on the side."

So AdSense, that's the YouTube ad program. That's where Google goes out and sells the ad inventory and then you give them slots in your video. You've mentioned mid-rolls. You can either say there's a mid-roll slot for Google to put an ad into or not.

Yeah. You can get as many as you want.

And then you can just get a cut of that, but you don't actually sell that directly. And then, the sponsor integrations, that's where you sell it directly. And famously, I think every tech YouTuber has a Dbrand deal. So, in the middle of all your videos you say—

You're welcome. All of you.

But that's where you say, in the middle, "Check out this Dbrand skin." Or "This other product who sponsored my video." Who makes that deal? Because that's your deal. YouTube doesn't get any of that money, right?

Exactly. That's my inbox. That's me going, "This is a product that we believe in and that we think is actually really good and worth sharing." And the funny part of that is, a lot of these products or companies are so good that I would want to share them anyway. So, it's kind of funny trying to negotiate what's a great way to promote their product because it's like, "yeah, it's good. It's going to end up in a video anyway, but let's work on something."

Something like Dbrand is perfect because it's not a conflict of interest, where I'm sponsored by a thing that's also reviewed on the channel. But it's very adjacent. It's obviously a skin or a case for a product, and we've worked closely with that company for a couple of years now. So yeah, we'll find something good and work with them directly.

So, your inbox is full of sponsorship offers from other companies. You say, "Okay. I think this is appropriate." Who makes the deal? Who writes the contract? Who negotiates the rate?

I negotiate the rate. The contract is usually built by my agent. I work with WME. And so, their lawyers will look over the contract and negotiate the terms, so I'm not literally reading the contracts. That's an arm I chopped off. I used to do that, too. They take their cut, obviously, for also bringing some of those contracts and companies to my inbox. But at the end of the day, if you could see the amount of stuff we say no to — it's just like a constant flow of, "We want to be on the channel. We want to be in a video" — to find the stuff that really makes sense. And then, that's just me going, "Let's see how we can make this work best."

So you said WME. WME is William Morris Endeavor. It's one of the biggest talent agencies in the world. I think I have to disclose that Vox Media is repped by WME, too. I always err on the side of over-disclosing. That's a company that, when you started, did not have an influencer relations department, was not making brand deals on YouTube, and now you're saying they run your contracts for you.

What is the process of growing up inside of a company that's also learning how to do this work? Did they just come to you and say, "We're ready for you?"

A lot of stuff like that is new because we've been on the forefront of it. There's a lot of things that YouTubers didn't do before 2014 or 2017, that [are] sort of regular and commonplace now. With WME, they had a couple ideas about how to translate and we've gone back and forth over time about how to work better together, and that's been a multiyear process. It kind of comes down to saying "no" to a lot of stuff and telling them why, until we finally get it right.

So, what just strikes me in this conversation is, you're describing a lot of management work. Even a conversation about how to make *Retro Tech* season 3 better is time that you are not reviewing a phone. It's time you're not in front of the camera. It's time you're not in the edit. How do you manage your time?

I live inside of Google Calendar and Google Tasks. I would be a lost human without those things. I kind of think about this a lot — how much time I spend doing the thing versus managing how we make the thing. And it turns out that the management part has become a lot more of my job, but almost necessarily, to make it a better thing. I find that there are arms that I can cut off, if I could just exhaust this analogy —

We're just going to go for it.

There's arms I can cut off that are easily able to be taken up by very skilled people, and that's wonderful to see. The management part of it is kind of not one of the arms. It's one of the — octopi have three hearts. It's one of the hearts of the octopus. So when people watch an MKBHD video, they're watching me on camera, but they're watching a lot of my words and my experiences being translated into a video form. And a lot of them aren't really thinking about that they're watching an edit, or they're watching a review process, or they're watching any of that other stuff.

The core stuff, like management, I have had to learn over time. How to be a better boss, a better manager, and a better accountant. But the fact that I can put time into that and it doesn't feel like I'm taking away from the edit or whatever other arms I've chopped off is definitely a luxury that we've built in over time.

I used to ask everybody who came for a *Vergecast* interview, how do you manage your time? And the reason I would ask everybody that is because I struggle with it so much. And I

have the same problem as you. I host this podcast, I manage our team. I have found that I need to be extraordinarily selfish with my creative time. I need hours, just uninterrupted hours, to think about the thing I'm going to make. And then I can actually make the thing quite quickly, but the time I spend thinking about what I'm going to make is very precious. I don't like to be interrupted. That's one way of doing it. There are other people who just multitask all the time. How do you come out?

I think I'm closer to you. I try to give my team here somewhat of a nine to five, to make it a reasonable workplace environment. But I don't really ever turn it off. There's some exceptions. There's no team sports this year, but I play Ultimate Frisbee, and that's my weekend. And I don't really mix the two. But as far as my calendar, I'm very much into scheduling everything. And then they go home at five and I'm just going to be here editing for a couple more hours and just making the thing, or writing, or preproduction or whatever it is. So, some stuff doesn't mix, and some stuff does.

I mean, you have clients, right? You have an inbox, you have people who want to make you deals. Clients are notoriously quite demanding in the advertising world. Are you just as pushy with them?

I kind of have to be. Sometimes WME gets to be the bad guy. But I like to keep it very short and sweet. I think I tweeted a couple of weeks ago how many emails I get that are just like, "Hey, this is us. We've got this idea. When can we hop on a call?" But I don't really want to do that. If you can't get your idea down in a couple sentences in an email, it's probably not a good enough idea.

Maybe that's harsh, but we have to be very efficient with this stuff. We say no to 99 percent of the things that we get offered to do. But that last 1 percent of things, we think very deeply about, and work with a lot of people to try to

make the right decisions and pull it off well. So that might turn into merch, that might turn into *Retro Tech*, that might turn into any number of interviews we do or projects on the channel.

What's your revenue split, in a general sense, between AdSense, sponsored integrations, merch, and the other stuff?

Revenue is probably about 40 percent from YouTube AdSense, strictly those ads that get placed. Probably 50 percent sponsored integrations that we build into the channel and the videos. And the last 10 percent is miscellaneous. That includes the merch, that includes licensing, that includes random other appearance fees. Sometimes I'll hop on another show. Stuff like that. It's mostly those two big buckets.

When you think about growing your revenue, you're hiring people, you use fancy cameras — you got Red cameras. I think we're all jealous of your cameras. Those are costs. How do you think about growing your costs versus your revenue?

Do you think, "I want to buy this camera and I have to make 10 videos to pay it off?" I'm assuming it's more sophisticated than that.

It used to be kind of like that. And luckily our output versus our costs is phenomenally efficient. It used to just be me and a camera. I didn't have a studio, I didn't have a team, I didn't have employees. It was literally just me doing it in my spare time, after a college class. So, my expenses were food and more gear, and my cleats for that weekend. I didn't really have a process back then.

Today, it's a little more of a balancing act. So now we do have the overhead of the studio. Taxes might be my biggest expense, honestly. But we have equipment to buy. And again, it's not even necessary equipment, but what will help a project? What will help this team work well?

We don’t think of revenue on a per-project basis, but I imagine it more on a monthly input / output, where if we, say, don’t do any sponsored integrations for a month and just have this much AdSense coming in, what’s the difference between that and how much we’re going to have to pay for salaries and studio and equipment? And if we can spend that, great. If we can put it back into videos, even better.

So, if you’re not cost per project, which makes sense. The standard TV network executive way of thinking about cost is cost per minute of video. That’s how a TV show would get its costs measured versus revenue.

Is that more of where you’re at? We’ve made 100 videos, it costs this much to make, we made this much money, we’re ahead for the month?

I don’t know about per minute. I think it’s still pretty broad on a per month, per quarter basis. Quarter one, we will probably not have nearly as much room to work with and put back into videos as quarter three or four. But none of it is ever so negative to the point where I have to think hard about it and make business decisions based on that.

Now this might change, because we’re hiring a bunch of people and we’re thinking about building the space up. This might eventually be a thing where we need the money back. But at the moment, we haven’t had to think too hard about it.

Well, one thing that’s really interesting is, you don’t have a slot. A TV network executive thinks in 30-minute increments. So once you have that fixed through the day and you’ve got a bunch of producers competing for those slots, you can see how they ended up at cost per minute, right? And you just end up there through the run of the day. You have, effectively, infinite slots on your own little network.

Right. But the thing about those slots is, their value changes way more fluently and on different factors. The cost of an ad

spot on the channel has changed over time, based on the things like the sentiment of the channel or the channel growing. Or even what that video is about. If it's a positive or a negative video, how tied in is that integration to the video itself?

There's a lot of science, more than math, that goes into how much an ad spot is worth. In a TV world you can know how many people you can get or how many you can pay for. I think that's really different from YouTube where like, how closely can we work with this company? How good of a thing are we enabling? What can we actually make? Those are different questions that don't necessarily get asked as much in that TV environment, that I think touch everything we do.

This kind of gets into one thing that I personally was very happy to see on your channel. You made an entire video about your ethics policy and what you will and won't do with advertisers. Just to draw the stark contrast, I have almost nothing to do with the revenue of *The Verge*. I'm a very traditional journalist in that mold. Like, I know who our sales team is and sometimes they parade me out in front of executives to seem fancy.

But I don't know what our rates are. I'm very insulated from sales. It's your inbox, it's your deals, you're setting the rates. How do you balance that tension, because it's a very YouTube-specific tension in one way, but I think we're seeing it across the entire kind of creator ecosystem?

The way you phrase it is interesting. I think our rates for an ad in a video are pretty fluent. But it's a balancing act, because you don't want to overdo it or pick the wrong thing or not consider some part of this that should be considered. You want to make more, so that you can pay for that camera car. But the other end of that seesaw is a channel that does way too many ads. It comes down to what I would want to watch. When I'm watching a YouTube video and there's three mid-rolls,

that feels a lot worse than zero or one mid-roll.

Wait, wait, wait. You don't pay for YouTube Red? Come on, man.

Well, I do. But like I said, I have to consider that. If I didn't have it, I would really dislike three mid-rolls. So, despite having YouTube Red, I never put three mid-rolls in a video. It's zero or maybe one. That applies to the ads that we build in and make ourselves, too. If it's a bad product, it's not worth doing it at all, even if we would've made a ton of money. If it's a bad integration or if it's a bad company to work with, I have to say no, because it just doesn't fit. So that fit is often more important than the math of the per-minute or per-project basis.

You said Dbrand was great because it was adjacent, but it's not something you review. Have you done deals with companies whose products you review?

I've done deals with companies whose other products I've reviewed, but I've never done a review that is sponsored. And the closest I've ever come is doing a sponsored video of a Lenovo laptop, where I didn't review it, but I've reviewed Motorola phones in the past and Lenovo owns Motorola.

So it's tech stuff, but once I do a sponsored bit with that tech, I'm not reviewing it. I've even seen channels where they can review that thing, but they can also disclose their relationship and past sponsor projects with them. I have a couple of friends that have their entire channel sponsored by a company and review all of that company's products. As long as the audience knows about it, it's fine. So everyone draws their line in the sand in a different place. But for me, I've never reviewed a thing and done a sponsorship with that thing.

You have an ongoing relationship with Motorola, you get their next phone, and you're like, "This is a bad phone. I'm going to give it a bad review." Do you consider the negative commercial implication of that bad review on your sponsorship

business going forward?

That’s one of the most interesting, weird areas on YouTube. I didn’t realize that people thought that way until it started happening to other people. So I’ve given lots of bad reviews in the past to things I really don’t like, and that has never had any effect on my relationship with the company that made that thing. At least as far as I know, maybe internally they’re all raging at their screens.

But the access to the product, the way the review program works, none of that has ever changed. I don’t think I’m blacklisted from anywhere. But I don’t think that is necessarily true for every channel of every size. So that’s a decision that others have to deal with more than I do. For me, if a Motorola product comes out and it’s bad, the most important thing for me to say is exactly how bad it is so you can make your decision, but also so that you know I’m telling the truth and that I’m honest.

There’s a lot of stuff we’ve given negative reviews and then the next product that comes out from that company, they are twice as eager to get it in my hands because, “Look, we improved the thing that you talked about, you definitely want to see this.”

That’s our experience, too. *The Verge* is big now, but it used to be small and we used to feel that pressure. One thing that’s really interesting as we’ve gotten bigger — I’m curious for your read on it — is the pressure has gone away and it’s expressed in a different way.

It’s expressed how you’re describing. They fix the one thing you complained about. So now they definitely want the positive review this time. Did that change for you as you got bigger? Or was it always the same because you were on that early curve?

I think the more I think about it, it’s definitely shifted a

little bit. I guess maybe it’s part of the way I structure reviews, but there’s always some sort of an overarching theme or you get a motif or something that’s repetitive through the video.

So even if there are only three or four bad things about that product, if they’re all bad for the same reason, that just sort of lingers after you watch the video, that this product is bad for this overarching reason, not just the one little thing.

A lot of times they’ll fix one little thing, but the other parts of that overarching bad review are still there. You find yourself trying to give credit where it’s due: “Look, they did fix the thing,” but also, “Here’s the big picture.” You have to paint the whole picture for everybody every time.

I just try to stay as honest as possible. Sometimes you do see companies sort of change their relationship with a publication for a negative review or a video they didn’t appreciate. I hate seeing that and I hope we stop seeing that. It’s a really strange environment that I haven’t had to deal with, luckily, so far.

How do you think about yourself? I mean, you describe yourself as a YouTuber a lot. It’s very clear I’m a journalist, and I get all the baggage of saying that word and I get some of the benefit. Do you think of yourself as a journalist? Are you a creator? Are you an influencer? What is your category, do you think?

Well, there’s some weird words in there. It really depends on who I’m explaining this to. For most younger people I can say YouTuber and they’ll get it. To most older people or maybe people in business, I don’t say YouTuber very much. I also hate the word influencer. I feel like we all hate that word. So I think the word creator applies best to cover what’s happening, but it’s a little more broad and it comes with the

baggage of having to explain what that is and then, the “how do you make money doing that” questions?

But I think my most common answer, if I’m on a flight, or someone’s just like, “Hey, what do you do?” I say video producer, and usually that is the end of the line of questioning. Basically, I’m trying to end the conversation. So if I say tech reviewer, which I am, that is a job that I do, it’s not usually very well understood. I don’t know if I would say journalist, I think that’s often in a different medium. So I think creator. Creator is probably the one.

That’s interesting. Our group of reporters who cover the platforms, we call them the creators desk. We feel like we understand what that word means. Jake, our editor of the creators desk, his line for what they cover is how people use platforms and how platforms use people. It feels like a complete idea. But yeah, we take that out in the world, and we’re like, “We cover creators,” and no one knows what we’re talking about.

But I want to push on not calling yourself a tech reviewer. You said that’s just one of your jobs. You did put out a video about your ethics policy. Like you have some claim to doing the journalistic work of traditional reviews, but you don’t think that encapsulates your entire role?

I think when I break it down, it’s really two distinctly separate jobs that have to connect and talk to each other. I would say one is the reviewer part of it, where you have an ethics policy, or you have your standards. That’s one job.

The other job is the content strategy, the YouTube growth strategy. There’s other words I’ve used for this before, but that whole creator side of it, which includes all of the stuff that goes into making a YouTube channel and building a video channel is a very distinctly different job.

So when I describe who I am or what I do, it feels like I’m

picking between those things. If I'm a creator, I guess that's more leaning into the YouTube side of it. But if I'm a tech reviewer, that's obviously leaning hard into the other side. So I don't know if there's any one word that fully explains everything that I do.

We've talked a lot about YouTube. You said AdSense is 40 percent, sponsor integration is 50; that means YouTube is 90 percent of your money. What is your relationship with YouTube like? I mean, you've seen the whole platform come up. It goes through its periods of scandal and then relative calm and then scandal again. How beholden to YouTube do you feel?

That is a great question. I feel strangely very beholden, but also not at all. It's hard to explain. Basically, the audience follows the character MKBHD in a variety of ways, on different platforms, whether it's Twitter, or Instagram, or TikTok. All of those platforms have different formats and different reasons to follow them, and that's by design. Some people post the same thing everywhere and that's fine.

So I feel like if you removed one of those channels, the MKBHD character or brand would continue to live on, but the money, like you said, mostly comes from one of those platforms. So the smart, business-savvy professional that I claim to be, who went to business school, is diversifying streams of income that aren't entirely dependent on one platform. That's something we are actively working on.

I've had a lot of conversations in the past year or two working directly with companies — and not in an advisory role, but almost helping out with products and launches and things that I think are a good idea. And they're not even in the tech space, they're just all other things I'm interested in and that's been really fun.

But my relationship with YouTube is great. It's a very turbulent environment to be on for a lot of channels, but not

for me. Not for a tech YouTuber who doesn't curse and doesn't do anything crazy or talk about conspiracies. It's been very reliable and that's definitely a luxury, but there's a whole part of my brain that's dedicated to building this thing beyond just one or two platforms.

I was talking to Taylor Lorenz at *The [New York] Times* about TikTok stars and how that universe is growing. She said, "Every TikToker wants to be a YouTuber." YouTube is the gold standard. It's the most mature platform, it's got the most monetization options, it has the widest range of potential formats, it's the most stable company, it's Google. You're on the gold standard. Where's the place you want to go next? Is it build out the Instagram revenue stream? Is it be a TikToker, or do you not think of it that way?

The way I think about it is, right now, if I'm going to contribute, I go back to the beginning. I'm contributing to this wealth of information about a product so you can make a purchase decision. That's the fundamental thing that I'm doing. If the answer to the question, "Where should I go to find this information?" ever changes from, "Let me just go look it up on YouTube," then I'll be there.

Other platforms, I think, have a distinct advantage in other things. Like if I wanted to make a Netflix series, that wouldn't be me reviewing things, that would be very different. But I think the bread and butter of what we do is reviewing things and YouTube is the place people go for that.

I'm constantly looking at the way this landscape changes and new platforms bubble up and disappear. I keep my eye on that stuff, but I don't see the answer to that question changing very quickly or drastically for a while.

I always remind people that Google is the world's number one search engine and YouTube is the world's second biggest search engine. For that thing you're talking about, I need to type

in, “iPhone review.” There are two boxes people are going to type that into, and you need to win at one of them.

You talked about not being controversial on YouTube, and not going through this turbulent time. You did make a video about Black Lives Matter. You have tried to change your audience over time and be a little bit more expansive. How did that video do — were you just called to do it, or do you want to use your platform to accomplish other goals as well?

I think a lot about what I use this platform for, because it wasn’t always a platform. But we’ve built a subscriber base over time, and I’ve distinctly never really used my platform to do anything other than the tech world stuff.

And I think that over time I’ve realized that I do want to do more with the platform, whether that’s giving back to charities or giving back to organizations I’ve been a part of in the past that have built me up to where I’m at today. Sometimes that’s speaking out about injustice in this country. I think a lot of that sort of has bubbled up and I’ve realized that I do actually have a platform to speak out about it.

But I’ve also personally always had a view that I never look up to someone for anything more than the reason that they’re looked up to. So for example, Michael Jordan, the basketball player. I know celebrity culture is different in everyone’s heads, but I look up to Michael Jordan the athlete and nothing else about him. You might look up to Marques the YouTuber or the tech reviewer, but ideally nothing else about me is on your radar as far as celebrity culture goes. I realize not everyone thinks that way. So I try to make the best of it and use my platform for positive work rather than negative.

It’s interesting because I think that’s how Michael Jordan wanted people to think about him, but that is not how LeBron James wants people to think about him. The internalized conception of celebrity for people with platforms that size

has definitely shifted over time. Is that a path that you're on? You're like, Marques at 40 is going to be like, "I built a school," or is that—

It's something I've realized. Like, I personally have had this one channel. I'm a golfer. I look up to Tiger Woods the golfer—

You should not look up to Tiger Woods for any other reason than golf.

Exactly. So I'll bring up Tiger all the time as a personal inspiration and there's all kinds of other reasons why you shouldn't look up to Tiger. For me personally, I've realized that that's my one-track mind, but I understand that athletes like LeBron have used their platform to accomplish incredible things. I see that as an inspiration and I feel like me realizing that's more how people see celebrities makes me want to use it for good.

You said reviews are about helping people make a purchase decision, which is how I think about reviews, too. It's the core service a review provides to the world. If you're not doing that well, then you might as well not think about doing anything else.

But I think of it a little bit more expansively because we also cover all the other bits and bobs of Google. I don't know how to cover the state of Android right now without talking about the fact that Samsung is effectively a monopoly provider of Android phones and Google doesn't have a lot of competition. Or that Qualcomm is effectively a monopoly provider of chips. There's a whole antitrust conversation in this world and with a review, I can say, "I added up all this other stuff I know, and your phone is a seven," right? Or I can weave that all in and say, "Here's this purchase decision, but there's this larger set of forces in the world that have led to this product."

The example I always give everybody is the answer to "Why does my iPhone drop calls?" Which starts with "The United States government exists," right? You have to pull it all the way out to spectrum auctions and network capacity. Some of that stuff feels very political when we do it, but it's necessary to explain some of the products. Do you think that you need to engage on that policy side, which opens you up to a world of political opinion?

That's part of actually why I'm building the team up this year. We want to cover more stuff. I think the actual breadth of what I talk about has pretty dramatically expanded over time, though it's still obviously in the tech world.

But if you look back, I started with the HP Pavilion dv7t and my first hundred-something videos were all about software and accessories for that one laptop. Right? But then the iPod comes out and now there's the iPod Touch and now I'm talking about handhelds. Which led me to the smartphone world and smartphone hardware.

But there's also tablets and TVs. I didn't talk about most of that stuff until the last couple of years, and now there's electric cars, and now there's 5G, and it's all been growing pretty steadily because there's a lot of stories to tell to help the viewer understand.

Part of my goal is to expand that to not just help people make a decision about what to buy, but to help people better understand the tech world, which I think is hard to understand. So it helps to have writing and research help. That is a pretty new goal for me: the idea of helping people better understand what's happening in the tech world, why it's happening, whether they should care. Things like that. And hopefully that can help them live their life a bit easier in the future.

Let me ask you a hard question. We know that facial

recognition systems are often biased against Black and brown people. They literally just don't see us as well. Do you weave something like that into one of your reviews? Because that's something *The Verge* team would cover. We have reporters to do that work. And then when Dieter or Becca and I go to make the review on the channel, we just get to say it and put up our own headline, and the work is done. I know for a fact that we have negative sentiment about that stuff. We get comments about that stuff. But that's the totality of *The Verge* brand. Is that a place you would go in your reviews or is that too political, or are you building the capability to be there?

A little bit. I have a little bit already, and a lot of that comes from my personal experiences and not as much from research about others' personal experience. And part of that comes from the reviews mentality where it's like, I reviewed this thing. Mine didn't break. Even if someone else's broke, I didn't talk about how this thing broke because mine didn't break.

So I don't have the extra experience or reporting to know that stuff. But pretty recently in my blind smartphone camera test, I talked about the way these cameras handle taking pictures of people with darker skin. They do different things to faces than they would with someone with fairer skin. I don't know that I've seen any negative reaction to that, but I like the idea of being able to dive deep into others' experiences with the same thing and loop that into my coverage. But as of right now, for the last 12 years of videos, all of it comes from what happened to me when I use the thing.

So that would be an interesting new leaf to turn, and I think it would be a good one to start getting into.

One of the things I hear from YouTubers all the time is, "It's a grind. This is one of the best jobs you can have, it's one of the worst jobs you can have. You go a week without making a video, you've got less money in your pocket." You've obviously

scaled an infrastructure around you in a much more sophisticated way than a lot of YouTubers I talk to. But you're launching another channel with other faces; do you see yourself 10 years from now making 100 videos a year on your main channel and with a network around you, or are you eventually going to become a media executive and not have to actually make this stuff yourself?

So my answer to that has always been, as long as I really enjoy making videos, I don't see myself stopping.

Are you going to keep doing this for 10 years?

I will be making a lot of videos in the future, but I think the thing about starting a new channel with new faces is you get to play with different ideas that aren't necessarily going to land on the main channel. And maybe those turn into projects that end up being a whole lot of fun and become a recurring series. I think the bottom line is, as long as I enjoy making stuff, that's what I'm going to be trying to do. There's probably different versions of that in the future, but I like making stuff.

The way I see YouTube is, it's kind of like driving for Uber. If you stop driving for Uber for a week, you won't make any money that week. And I think adding more people to this team makes it feel like putting that Uber on autopilot so I'm not doing quite as much of the lifting, but it still has to drive.

I could live in this metaphor with you for another hour. There's a lot in that metaphor, just a lot in that metaphor.

Let me pull you all the way back to the beginning. So you're a teenager again, you picked a popular laptop. You got lucky. If you picked an unpopular laptop, I don't know that you'd have this career.

That's a good point, yeah.

But you get your laptop right now, you get a new MacBook Air M1, and you're 17 years old. And you're like, "I found something about this laptop that I didn't see on anybody else." Where would you make your first video?

Maybe it's out of force of habit, but just because it's my gut reaction. I would make it on YouTube.

You'd still be a YouTuber?

I would still be a YouTuber. Obviously, there's a ton of platforms available today that all have different languages, and if I'm 17, maybe I go straight to TikTok. Maybe there's a seven-second bit that I just want to show and maybe that's the way to get the message out there. But I think my fundamental beginning decision was, people are going to be looking for this. It's not so much passive entertainment. It's more active, seeking out information. So I'm going to put it where people can find it. And for me, that's still YouTube.

I'm sure teenagers ask you this all the time, but do you still see YouTube as a viable career path? Can you still start at the bottom and make your way to the top?

That is actually one of the toughest questions, because I struggle to give any advice to people starting today, because I started in a very different time.

Ninety percent of the kids you ask, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" They're like, "Well, yeah, I want to be a YouTuber." They know what the world is. They know how that works. They're familiar with it. But like I said, it's so saturated and it's so difficult to stand out, but at the same time, it's never been easier to start. So if you are cool with starting and making 100 videos and never making a dime, and it's just fun, that's never been easier. So I'd say, do that.

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