

Trolls and conspiracy theorists are making the YouTube shooter a free speech martyr

Earlier today, San Bruno police said that a woman who shot three people at YouTube's headquarters yesterday was probably motivated by anger at the platform. The family of 39-year-old Nasim Aghdam, who died of an allegedly self-inflicted gunshot wound, said she complained that YouTube "ruined her life." On a personal webpage, she wrote that there was "no free speech in [the] real world," and that YouTube intentionally suppressed her videos on veganism and animal rights. Aghdam's evidence for this claim of individual censorship was limited: YouTube had pulled ads from some of her videos and put one behind an age-restricted filter. But amid a larger debate over how YouTube should treat its users, some people are all but blaming YouTube for provoking Aghdam, portraying her as a martyr for the cause of free speech.

"Nasim was a victim of these 'political activist' companies like @YouTube," reads one tweet in the recent #CensorshipKills hashtag, populated significantly – but not exclusively – by apparent right-wing accounts. "A SILENCED VOICE IS A DANGEROUS THING. I was just locked out of Twitter for 12 hours and I felt violent," reads another. "So... are we learning that taking away free speech leads to violence yet?" asks a third. Some tweets include dramatic renderings of the shooter with her eyes and mouth slashed through with the hashtag's name.

These are small accounts, and, as with plenty of hashtags,

#CensorshipKills is boosted by people criticizing the hashtag. But higher-profile figures are expressing a similar sentiment. On the NRA's streaming TV network, for instance, a correspondent claimed that YouTube's decision to "censor content here and there, whatever, actually opens them up to liability, and it opens them up to a lot of hatred from people around the world." News outlets like *InfoWars* and *Drudge Report* have put more weight on the idea of YouTube censorship than they have on the actual shooting, with headlines like "YouTube attacked for censoring free speech" and "Oppressive YouTube Censorship Policies Spill Over to Violence," which reads like YouTube itself is committing the violence.

Many people are legitimately discussing the issues that allegedly motivated Aghdam. Her claims echo widespread complaints that YouTubers are getting videos demonetized and filtered in ways that reduce their reach and financial success. YouTube has admitted this is a real issue; last year, it said it had changed its flagging algorithm to restrict fewer videos. There are also people who complain that YouTube cracks down on specific topics or viewpoints. YouTube's human moderators have allegedly flagged right-wing accounts and videos that didn't violate the site's rules, and one conservative group sued it for demonetizing its videos. (The suit was thrown out last month.)

But Aghdam subscribed to a particularly extreme and conspiratorial version of that theory, in which YouTube stepped in specifically to stop certain videos from getting too many views. Even beyond the fact that we don't have hard proof of Aghdam's direct motives, there's also a difference between saying a shooter was motivated by an issue and suggesting that their attack was a logical or inevitable response to it.

YouTube moderation is a fraught issue, and yesterday's shooting will likely make it even more sensitive. There are also real questions about the relationship between YouTube and

its community. But this narrative, which effectively portrays YouTube as the aggressor in a violent incident, may end up sticking around as well.

<https://www.theverge.com/2018/4/4/17198774/youtube-headquarters-shooting-censorship-free-speech-martyr>