

YouTube is taking away more than a checkmark



Editor's note: Less than two hours after this story was published, YouTube almost entirely backtracked on its planned changes to verification in response to criticisms from creators. This story details those criticisms and speaks to why YouTube reversed course. The original story continues below.

Verification badges on YouTube are more than just a checkmark to creators. Those tiny marks are a sign that after years of building a channel, they're seen as a valuable member of the community.

That's why when YouTube suddenly sent out a flood of emails to creators who have picked up verification badges over the years, alerting them that they were due to have their badge revoked as part of an overhaul to the verification system next month, it hurt. Numerous creators with verified checkmarks spoke to *The Verge* about feeling demoralized after receiving the email. Many creators also said this was just another example of YouTube seemingly turning its back on endemic

creators who helped build the site into what it is today.

Having a verification badge isn't just a cosmetic advantage for creators. There are some practical advantages, too, including search benefits and being able to leave a comment as a verified creator.

"I want to like this website and the people that are running it, but they just keep putting their time and attention on these things that are the opposite of what everybody wants," Een, of popular YouTube channel Nerd City, who received an email about losing verification, told *The Verge*. "We don't want YouTube picking the winners and losers because they fucking suck at it. And this is what they're doing."

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YouTube's new verification policy is more in line with how companies like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter approach handing out a checkmark. The company wants to ensure that if people are looking for a specific account, like cooking magazine *Bon Appétit*'s popular YouTube channel, it pops up. The result will be that big celebrities, brands, and the 1 percent of YouTubers who have to worry about impersonation will be verified, but a large sect of other creators won't.

This is meant so that if someone searches for *Bon Appétit*, they'll come across the magazine first. But it now means that YouTubers who are no longer notable enough to earn a badge may be less likely to appear right away in search results if they produce videos on similar topics.

The company knew that removing verification statuses would upset creators, but YouTube felt it was a necessary step to battle impersonations of top accounts. That's why certain steps are being taken to help creators who were told they're losing verified statuses but want to contest it. YouTube is going to try to manually review every single appeal that comes

from creators before the verification policies change in late October, according to the company.

Creators ranging from beauty guru James Charles to top gaming creator Sean “Jacksepticeye” McLoughlin condemned YouTube’s decision. Comedian Gus Johnson called the move unnecessary and baffling. Charles called it pointless. McLoughlin called it a slap in the face.

“For some people [verification] is entirely cosmetic, but for a lot of people I think it definitely plays into feeling like you’ve become a great established person on the website making content,” says James, who goes by his first name and operates The Right Opinion, a popular YouTube commentary channel.

To our creators & users—I’m sorry for the frustration & hurt that we caused with our new approach to verification. While trying to make improvements, we missed the mark. As I write this, we’re working to address your concerns & we’ll have more updates soon.

– Susan Wojcicki (@SusanWojcicki) September 20, 2019

The policy change received so much pushback from creators, that just one day after it was announced, YouTube CEO Susan Wojcicki issued an apology and said that adjustments would be made. “As I write this, we’re working to address your concerns & we’ll have more updates soon,” she said.

The last couple of years have seen YouTubers contending with a number of issues – most notably, demonetization problems, which limited their ability to run ads and make money. There have also been rising concerns about YouTube’s commitment to content made by amateur creators as more and more polished productions like late night TV clips are featured on the site. YouTubers now regularly say that the platform no longer feels like a democratic space where the best content wins; it now feels more like one where YouTube tips the scales in favor of

what works best for advertisers. Justin Whang, who has more than 435,000 subscribers on his channel where he dives into strange stories from the internet, says the change to verification is a further step in that direction.

"I think this is just another move towards them wanting to make YouTube more like TV," Whang said. "So it'll be the Jimmy Kimmels and Ellens who are verified, these TV people that you should be watching on YouTube, according to YouTube."

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The loss of verification also brings with it a communication problem for creators. Popular YouTubers will often find people impersonating them in the comment sections of others' videos. The verification badge has allowed them to control what is considered a "real" message from a specific creator. With people losing those badges, it gives bad actors a chance to harm creators' reputations.

"Verified badges help people in this community know who's commenting on videos," Whang said. "It helps keep that line of communication open. That's a very practical thing that comes with verification and is key to the YouTube experience. Especially when it comes to networking with other creators, know who's listening and who's watching your shit – and even people that you could potentially collaborate with in the future. Now those messages will get lost."

Everything about the announcement read as nothing short of a disaster to the YouTube community. While the company understands that creators are upset, it's hoping people give it the next month to sort everything out before policies shift. The true test is whether creators have any more patience for a company they continue to see as turning on them.

"We don't want your curated decisions, and choosing who

YouTube is for,” Een said. “We just want this thing to function as a level playing field where anyone can succeed based off of the democracy of the internet. That’s how it used to be, but it hasn’t been that for some time.”

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