

YouTube tells impersonation victim: No, you're not being impersonated

reader comments

51 with 40 posters participating, including story author

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How long does it take someone to have a YouTube impersonation claim reviewed, confirmed, and enforced? That kind of data is hard to piece together across such a giant video-sharing platform. But in the case of one user, Penguin Books author Celeste Ng, the process took a little over one full day—and required a big pile of public shaming in the process.

Ng's ordeal began when she discovered someone had created an account with her first and last name that primarily posted racially and culturally insensitive videos—including apparent dog-whistling mentions of mixed-race marriages. This appeared to be a targeted impersonation attempt, as Ng has previously been targeted by online communities for marrying a non-Asian man.

You have GOT to be kidding me, @YouTube. Someone is using my name and my photo to post hateful, racist videos, but you say this isn't impersonation? Let me spell it out for you.
pic.twitter.com/2JNe1hUDSJ

— Celeste Ng (@pronounced_ing) December 6, 2018

She took to Twitter to ask her followers how to report impersonation claims on YouTube. After filing a Wednesday impersonation report, which included her government-issued driver's license, her published book's jacket sleeve photo, and screenshots of the offending, fake YouTube account, Ng received a Thursday response from YouTube: her report did "not meet our impersonation reporting guidelines."

A quick scan of YouTube's reporting page includes a request for "a clear, readable copy of your valid driver's license, national ID card, or other photo ID" as an attached image. Ng's posts did not confirm whether her book's jacket photo was YouTube's point of contention, nor whether that photo was used to demonstrate an issue with the fake account: that it had lifted a publicly available photo (from a book's jacket sleeve) to pretend to be Ng.

Three hours after posting screens of YouTube's response and Ng's own proof-of-identity submissions, the author confirmed that YouTube had corrected course and taken the offending impersonation account down. She confirmed that the process included "having my publisher start to look into it"—a liberty, she noted, that many targeted online users cannot lean on. In the meantime, more fake Ng accounts had appeared on YouTube, though these also appear to have been taken down as of press time.

Back to Twitter

Ng returned to Twitter to post her story, both to "make an example" out of the incident and to call attention to other users who face similar roadblocks when posting apparent violations of a site's terms of service.

"I'm fortunate: I have a big megaphone to speak about this and am sure I can get this fraudulent account taken down," Ng wrote. "But for someone with a smaller platform? They're probably SOL. That's wrong. YouTube should apply its terms of

service, whether you have 90,000 followers or two.”

Though Ng mentions in her posts that online impersonation is a crime, that is only true in nine US states. Its criminal designation varies in intensity, with California’s version counting as either a third-degree felony or a misdemeanor.

Ng’s example followed a late-October *mea culpa* from Twitter, when it issued a formal apology to a former US Congress press secretary, Rochelle Ritchie, for dismissing her harassment report. Ritchie had reported threatening messages (complete with attached, invasive photos of Ritchie) sent by suspected bomber Cesar Altieri Sayoc before he had been charged for mailing pipe bombs to various Democratic party politicians and staffers.

This report has been updated to clarify language about Ng’s initial report to YouTube.

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