



# Circulation Gatekeepers: Unbundling the Platform Politics of YouTube's Content ID

Dustin W. Edwards\*

*University of Central Florida*

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## Abstract

This article explores how circulation flows are shaped by the politics of digital platforms. The author introduces the concept *circulation gatekeepers* to consider the infrastructures (people, institutions, technologies, discourses, etc.) that control and direct the flow of how, or if, matter moves in particular rhetorical ecologies. Focusing on YouTube's Content ID as a case in point, the article explores how YouTube exercises circulation gatekeeping power by blocking some circulation flows and boosting others. It traces how Content ID aligns itself—materially through its computational procedures, economically through its monetization practices, and rhetorically through its published legal positions and community guidelines—with a view of copyright that privileges the interests of corporate rightsholders and neglects those of everyday users. The author shows how these interests are embedded in copyright discourses and regimes of property control, suggesting systems such as Content ID have broader implications for digital writing in an age where platform infrastructures determine authorship and ownership status. In addition to discussing why rhetoric and writing scholars should care about circulation practices on YouTube (and other corporate platforms), the article closes by calling for more work that considers the role other circulation gatekeepers play in networked economies.

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Writing does work on the world through its dynamic circulations. Through circulation, writing catalyzes publics and counterpublics (e.g., Farmer, 2013; Sheridan, Ridolfo, & Michel, 2012; Trimbur, 2000), attunes bodies with other bodies (e.g., Chaput, 2010), and sustains cultures and communities (e.g., Ridolfo, 2015). But what about writing that doesn't move—writing that *can't* move? In networked economies, writing can experience circulatory blockages and occlusions where circulation is obstructed and sometimes obliterated. At the same time, writing can also experience circulatory boosts where circulation intensifies via opaque computational processes and monetized transactions. While circulation does important work in the world, its promise is not a sure bet. There are many barriers—rhetorical, material, cultural—writers must navigate before their work can move in networked economies, even if such barriers go largely unacknowledged or unexamined.

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\* Department of Writing and Rhetoric, Colbourn Hall Room 301 Orlando, FL 32816.

E-mail address: [Dustin.Edwards@ucf.edu](mailto:Dustin.Edwards@ucf.edu)

When writers circulate content not only do they have to contend with questions of audience, purpose, culture, kairos, and so on, but they also have to contend with questions about larger infrastructures and systems of circulation. They have to negotiate how particular digital platforms guide, direct, and/or suspend writing through stated policies, discourses, and algorithmic procedures. And they increasingly have to be aware that third parties might monetize their writing as it circulates. Put simply, it's not enough to claim that writing increasingly has the potential to circulate. We need to begin more thoroughly investigating the logics and mechanisms by which digital writing flows. Thus, my aim here is to encourage scholars, teachers, and writers interested in circulation to think not just about that which moves, but also think about that which promotes or impedes movement. I argue such an aim requires us to think about *circulation gatekeepers*—people, institutions, technologies, and/or other infrastructures that control and direct the flow of how, or if, content moves in particular rhetorical ecologies.

Increasingly, researching circulation gatekeepers in digital environments requires attention to the increased “platformization” (Helmond, 2015) of the web. In simple terms, as José Van Dijck and Thomas Poell (2016) noted, the term platform refers to “online sites that facilitate and organize data streams, economic interactions, and social exchanges between users” (p. 2). Though platforms share common technological and economic characteristics, each are entangled in different histories and discourses and operate under different business models, interface architectures, and algorithms. As such, to understand circulatory movement in digital spaces necessitates in-depth analyses of particular platforms at particular moments in time. Such an approach requires researchers to unbundle what Tarleton Gillespie (2010) has called the “politics of platforms”—understanding that platforms are not mere intermediaries for content distribution and circulation; rather, platforms guide, filter, and direct participant activity based upon multiple, sometimes competing, constituencies. While circulation is dynamic on digital platforms, it is nonetheless choreographed by the politics of the platform. Unearthing the economic, cultural, and legal reasons behind these choreographies can provide better insight into circulation practices that often appear black-boxed or opaque.

Taking a platform-specific approach, this article focuses on one particular circulation gatekeeper: YouTube's Content ID. I focus on YouTube because it is a highly recognizable, accessible, and circulatory platform. It is the premier source for sharing videos online and is regularly referenced as a catalyst for video culture and participatory composition (e.g., Arroyo, 2013; Burgess & Green, 2009). Yet, for a video to circulate on YouTube, it must be filtered through Content ID, a copyright database that determines how—or if—a video will circulate, and who will profit from its spread. Content ID shapes circulation flows through platform decisions that are enfolded in copyright debates and discourses. It thus guides circulatory activity, in part, by coding an authorship hierarchy into its system where corporate authors (Lunsford, 1999; Reyman, 2009) have the upper hand in monetizing and/or suppressing the circulation of content and, in turn, undermine opportunities for authors composing transformative work to claim Fair Use. This authorship hierarchy is supported through the ways in which Content ID operates, but it's also supported through arguments YouTube embeds in its statements and policies regarding copyright.

My purposes here are two-fold. First, and more broadly, I aim to deepen discussions of circulation by issuing a call to pay attention to digital-material systems that support *and* constrain digital flows of content. Second, and more particularly, I aim to show how Content ID exercises gatekeeping power by aligning itself—materially through its computational procedures, economically through its monetization practices, and rhetorically through its published legal positions and community guidelines—with a view of copyright that rewards corporate intermediaries and neglects those of everyday users by threatening to lock down creativity by suppressing claims to Fair Use. Both of these aims work in concert. Fair Use is, of course, a copyright issue, but it is also a circulation issue. When it becomes increasingly difficult to circulate compositions that make fair uses out of copyrighted materials, digital cultures become more constrained to critique and build off of already existing content.

In this article, I begin by grounding my discussion in scholarship that examines the control and flow of writing in digital spaces, paying particular attention to how circulation is often coupled with intellectual property concerns. Next, I offer a short history of YouTube's implementation of Content ID, describing how Content ID regularly falls short in accommodating Fair Use, and, more distressingly, has elicited many instances of copyright abuse. Framing Content ID as a circulation gatekeeper, I then show how mutual forces have aligned to justify Content ID, including (a) the privileging of corporate authorship, (b) the framing of unauthorized use as legally and ethically transgressive (particularly as a form of piracy), (c) the reframing of legal pressures and DMCA ambiguities into a “win-win” for multiple parties, and (d) the development of an intricate, platform-specific discourse on copyright. In addition to discussing why we should care about circulation practices on one of the largest proprietary platforms on the social web, I close by considering the role other circulation gatekeepers play in our daily lives.

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