

It's Time for YouTube to Stop Promoting Animal Abuse

[Nina Jackel, Earth/Food/Life a project of the Independent Media Institute](#)

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The scene is shocking: a tiny puppy wriggling desperately against the coiled grip of a python's deadly squeeze, as fellow puppies look on in terror. In a cinematic ending, a man arrives just in time to "save" the squealing puppy from the snake's crushing grasp. This might sound like a happy ending to a terrifying ordeal, but in reality, the whole life-threatening situation was staged for a monetized YouTube video—one with more than 1.6 million views and 7,200 likes.



A snake attacking a dog in a staged animal "rescue." Credit: Lady Freethinker/YouTube Screenshot



A snake about to attack kittens in a staged animal "rescue." Credit: Lady Freethinker/YouTube Screenshot

YouTube, which has more than [2 billion monthly users](#)—who view more than [1 billion hours of content daily](#)—is one of the most popular internet search engines in the world, [second](#) only to its parent company, Google. This popularity translates to massive financial benefits for the platform, with YouTube's 2019 ad revenue topping [\\$15 billion](#), according to the Verge. Yet, with great power comes even greater responsibility, especially when innocent victims are involved.

YouTube's platform financially incentivizes views, so when dangerous trends go viral, the company becomes directly responsible for both funding and profiting from potential harm or violence, including animal abuse. My advocacy group, Lady Freethinker (LFT), [carried out a study](#) from April to July of 2020 and [discovered](#) about 1 billion views for more than 2,000 YouTube videos depicting animals being harmed for human entertainment.

According to United States and United Kingdom laws, fighting involving dogs or roosters, animal torture and hunting with dogs are considered illegal, yet much of this content was left unaddressed for months despite being flagged during the LFT [study](#).



A baby monkey hit by a car, posted as entertainment on YouTube. Credit: Lady Freethinker/YouTube Screenshot



A cockfighting event posted on YouTube. Credit: Lady Freethinker/YouTube Screenshot

[YouTube's own community guidelines](#) prohibit “violent or graphic content,” similar to what we uncovered in our investigation, from being uploaded on the platform, even citing many of the [specific](#) instances of animal abuses we cataloged like dogfighting, cockfighting and cruel or illegal forms of hunting. Yet, a simple search for animal fighting, eating animals alive, or monkey torture on YouTube will lead to multiple results and will also provide additional suggested video options.

The images from animal abuse videos that I viewed on YouTube still haunt me: tiny kittens with frightened eyes cowering in the corner of a cave, as they are about to be attacked by a Komodo dragon; a monkey staring at the rope around its neck and the pool of excrement under its feet; the whole body of a crying animal trembling as it waits to be “rescued” by humans in the nick of time, all for views.

Our investigation [documented](#) 146 channels promoting harm to animals with a total audience of 30.8 million subscribers—a substantial market for animal torture voyeurism. Based on an average taken from a [Business Insider survey](#), YouTubers stand to make nearly \$15 million if every animal cruelty video we discovered were monetized. The company itself could potentially rake in more than \$12 million in ad revenue alone. Unless YouTube takes definitive steps toward eliminating and punishing those who attempt to profit from the viral shock value of illegal animal torture, other content creators of animal cruelty videos will continue to emerge and the site will forever be a host for them.



Trapped monkeys in a cage posted for entertainment on YouTube. Credit: Lady Freethinker/YouTube Screenshot



A how-to video demonstrates how to trap a monkey using Fanta soda. Credit: Lady Freethinker/YouTube Screenshot

In response to [the Guardian's coverage](#) of our investigation in December 2020, a YouTube spokeswoman, who was quoted in the article, had [stated](#), “We routinely remove videos and comments flagged by our community that violate those policies, and in many cases, we terminate the accounts of users who violate our guidelines.” But should others be subjected to viewing and flagging animal cruelty before these steps are taken? Facebook and Instagram have similarly passive protocols in place. [A spokeswoman for the two companies, Liza Crenshaw](#), who was quoted in an Insider article, “said that Facebook proactively detects 99 percent of graphic content prior to it being reported by users,” but “[t]he companies won’t ‘actively report’ recorded instances of abuse to law enforcement... [unless] they are made away [sic] of a criminal case against a user.”

The responsibility to curb animal torture for profit should not fall on the shoulders of good Samaritans. LFT researchers can attest to the heavy psychological and emotional tolls of having to watch these videos of animal torture and abuse in order to carry out an investigation that might bring some attention to the matter. Unlike all top-performing social media outlets that offer potential platforms to these purveyors of click-bait shock porn, YouTube needs to step up and prove that its desire for profit stays within the limits of the law.



Kittens about to be attacked by a snake in a staged animal "rescue." Credit: Lady Freethinker/YouTube Screenshot

So far, their efforts have been less than impressive. Of the 2,053 videos of animal cruelty that our investigators identified in April and May of 2020, YouTube had only [removed](#) 185 by the time we followed up in July 2020. We know YouTube can—and should—do better.

In a 2019 New York Times [article](#), YouTube CEO Susan Wojcicki said that the company “wants to remove the content that violates its policies more quickly and effectively.” After the [Tide Pod challenge](#) went viral in 2018—leading some teenagers to reportedly eat the colorful detergent packets—YouTube spokeswoman Jessica Mason said it would “work to quickly remove flagged videos that violate our policies.” A year later, when a former YouTube content creator posted a video [claiming](#) that pedophiles were using the site to coordinate their efforts through the comments section, “YouTube [turned] off comments on millions of videos over a holiday weekend,” the New York Times [reported](#). In March 2019, when the mass shooting in New Zealand [flooded](#) the site with disturbing footage, YouTube disabled search functions and used its computer system to automatically flag and take down the videos.

[LFT has organized a petition](#) to hold YouTube accountable for the platform’s animal rights violations and has already received more than 72,000 signatures supporting it. In addition, if concerned YouTube

visitors come across a video of animal abuse and flag it through YouTube but there is no response, sending screenshots and links to the Federal Bureau of Investigation is another course of action.

We know that YouTube can take more meaningful steps to better monitor and remove videos promoting animal abuse. The question is, will they?

Nina Jackel is the founder of [Lady Freethinker](#), a nonprofit media organization dedicated to exposing and stopping the suffering of animals, humans and the planet. Find them on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#) and [Instagram](#).