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# Governance of labour relations in the platform economy. The cooperation between YouTubers Union and IG Metall

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## Abstract

The article focuses on the factors that explain the emergence and accomplishments of the ‘FairTube’ campaign, which was initiated in 2019 by the YouTubers Union and the German metalworkers’ union IG Metall, and was later established as a formalised German association (“Verein”). While the initial focus of the campaign was on changing the monetisation rules, which YouTube had altered very abruptly in 2017, the initiative subsequently focused on improving the working conditions of content creators. Methodologically, we deploy a mixed-methods design that flanks media discourse network analysis through qualitative content analysis of expert interviews, which helps to identify the interaction between these established and new actors in the governance and interest representation in the digital platform economy. Our findings reveal a ‘hybrid form of governance’ that, by aligning ideologies and combining sources of power, was able to accomplish most of the goals set out by the campaign (avoiding arbitrary

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platform decisions, increasing transparency and communication, securing creators' income). We conclude that new forms of collective action, i.e. the coalition between "old" and "new" organizations, may mitigate particular negative consequences of the platform economy. The study seeks to contribute to a better understanding of platform work and to the concepts of power, ideas, and interests in industrial relations.

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Platforms are a central element of the socio-technical infrastructure of the contemporary Internet. The establishment of online labour markets has been accompanied by changes in the nature of work and employment, with profound implications for both workers and national regulatory regimes (Graham et al., 2017). In its most typical form, platform work is a precarious type of labour that offers neither a decent income nor access to systems of social security (Liang et al., 2022). Much of the existing literature highlights the exploitation of platform work in unregulated online labour markets by powerful platform companies to the detriment of the workers (Hertwig & Papsdorf, 2023).

In this context, massive regulatory gaps are criticised (Chenou & Radu, 2019; Schulz, 2018), while the protection needs of platform workers are not yet fully addressed by the traditional guardians against worker exploitation—the state and trade unions. First, platform workers, who are mostly independent contractors, are not covered by regulations for dependent employees. Second, local and remote platform work lacks key conditions for unionisation, such as co-location and communication in the workspace, group identity, or a shared perception of grievances, making collective union organising difficult (Lehdonvirta, 2016; Wood et al., 2018).

Nevertheless, some collective activities in the platform economy have emerged in recent years (Stuart et al., 2023; Trappmann et al., 2020), for instance the Fair Crowd Work Campaign.<sup>1</sup> Entirely new forms of interest representation have also been developed outside of the scope of the established industrial relations systems, such as internet forums or technical plug-ins (Hertwig & Holz, & Lorig, 2023; Irani & Silberman, 2013). Although there have already been some analyses of these initiatives, there has as yet been little research into the circumstances under which forms of interest representation emerge in the remote platform economy, their prospects for success and durability, and in particular, how these novel forms of interest representation interact with trade unions to govern sociotechnical systems as YouTube.

We explore how the governance – understood here as collective regulation of social conditions (Mayntz, 2004) – of work on platforms can be successful given the hurdles that collective efforts in the platform economy face. We use a broader concept of “governance” to go beyond the strategies of individual actors (like trade unions or employers) and capture a wider

<sup>1</sup><http://faircrowd.work>, assessed 10 December 2023.

societal framework. Empirically, we focus on the YouTubers Union (YTU), which was founded in 2018 to represent video content creators on YouTube and examine its collaboration with IG Metall (IGM)<sup>2</sup> in Germany that began a year later in the so-called 'FairTube campaign' (campaign with its own project team). We use the term 'content creators' here because many 'YouTubers' do not see themselves as workers on the platform, but mostly as self-employed video producers and creatives (Hoose & Rosenbohm, 2024). Being a successful content creator on YouTube often requires a high level of skill. Video content creators do not receive directions from the video platform but may receive content guidelines from external advertisers. Similar to 'gig workers' or 'platform workers', the work often takes place offline but results in a digital end product. Content creators are individual freelancers or one-person businesses with irregular work schedules (Liang et al., 2022). Their digital products (videos) are essential to YouTube's existence and commercial success.

The YTU-IGM cooperation has been remarkable in at least two respects: First, collective action of content creators is regarded as unlikely due to their independent, competitive nature as self-employed video producers in the creative sector, most of whom do not meet or communicate (e.g., Hoose & Rosenbohm, 2024). Their self-employed status, strong self-identity and solo working style discourages solidarity, collective representation or unionisation. Second, a cooperation between a traditional union and a platform movement was rather unusual and potentially hazardous for both IGM and YTU. Nevertheless, the cooperation has been regarded as successful as many of the initial goals could be reached, leading to an improvement in working conditions of content creators. While the basic structures of the YTU have already been highlighted (Niebler, 2020), the collaboration with IGM and the FairTube campaign, as well as the later association, have received little attention.

Against this background, we ask, how can a hybrid regulatory model between an established trade union and an internet social movement emerge and how may it contribute to the governance of working conditions on platforms? Based on social movement research, union revitalisation studies, research on policy networks, and the power resource approach, the empirical aspects have been dealt with in a mixed-methods design intended to facilitate an analysis of network cooperation that takes into account ideas, interests, and sources of power.

We argue that the main factor facilitating the cooperation between the YTU and IGM was a framing of shared ideas and concepts. This allowed their differing organisational logics to be connected without endangering the organisations' core concerns: for IGM, a focus on its traditional constituency and membership together with its institutional influence on collective bargaining; for YTU, its social movement character with its focus on self-employed creatives, rather reluctant to unions. The success can be attributed to the fact that while each of the two organisations lacked power in certain fields, by adding their power resources, they were able to pose an effective threat to YouTube.

The next Section (2) outlines the current debate in the literature, followed by (3) the theoretical framework of analysis and (4) the methodology of the study. Section 5 presents the empirical results, which are discussed in Section 6. The final Section (7) summarises the research findings and offers some reflections on the results.

<sup>2</sup>IG Metall, a trade union with some 2.25 million members, represents employees in the metalworking and electrical industries, as well as in textiles, and wood and plastics processing.

## 2 | WORK AND LABOUR RELATIONS IN THE PLATFORM ECONOMY

Protests and labour unrest by workers of the gig and platform economy are a growing global phenomenon (Umney et al., 2023). These are by no means limited to one type of platform, but can be observed on platforms that offer location-based work, like food delivery, and remote work, like Crowdfunder or Amazon Mechanical Turk. However, it is noticeable that there is a paucity of research that deals with creative or artistic platforms. This is an important point, as the video content creators working here differ from other remote or location-based platform workers. Video content creators see themselves as independent artists rather than workers (Hoose & Rosenbohm, 2024; Pongratz, 2018). However, the nature of their work in relation to the YouTube platform has some similarities to remote platform workers and related platforms. With this in mind, we will first discuss the YouTube platform and provide basic information about video content creators and the platform. We will then look at the current state of research on the regulation of platforms through collective representation of interests and ask to what extent findings from other platforms can be applied to the issue at hand.

### 2.1 | Platform work at YouTube

YouTube was set up in February 2005 and has grown steadily since (Stokel-Walker, 2019). By 2019, it had 2 billion registered users visiting each month worldwide, putting it in second place behind Facebook. A major contributor to this business success are the video content creators who produce and upload videos to the platform. YouTube is primarily financed by video advertising. Although YouTube claims that a significant portion of advertising revenue goes to creators, the specific distribution percentages and criteria remain undisclosed.

It is known that a few large creators generate significant income by monetising videos, selling channel-related products, or securing advertising deals. Their income is variable due to the unpredictability of video views and platform compensation policies, with no fixed salary or compensation. In general, creators' income is difficult to estimate. While smaller creators upload videos sporadically for a modest income, some famous creators have become their own 'brand' with corresponding income opportunities (Duffy & Pooley, 2019).

In principle, content creators act as independent entrepreneurs or solo self-employed; this status is codified in YouTube's terms and conditions, but it also corresponds to the self-image and identity of many YouTubers, who clearly differ from traditional employees in terms of their work identity. As independent creators, they have a high degree of autonomy. As a result, there is no guarantee that the costs of video production will be covered and that a sufficient (side) income will be generated. The system requires creators to develop a strong entrepreneurial mind-set to be successful (Kenney et al., 2019).

Despite the interdependence, there is a clear imbalance of power in favour of the platform, as YouTube is able to set the rules and thus the payment terms. YouTube exploits this power: videos are sometimes classified as 'not suitable for advertising' ('demonetised'), censored, or deleted without prior notice. Even though this form of algorithmic control and arbitrary platform decisions is nothing new for the platform economy in general (Wood and Graham, 2019; Wood and Lehdonvirta, 2023), at YouTube, the situation culminated in March 2017 in the so-called *Adpocalypse*, which ultimately led to massive revenue losses for many creators (Kumar, 2019; Niebler, 2020). The starting point was a scandal that arose when several

corporate advertisements were placed in anti-Semitic or racist videos. As a result of the subsequent ad cancellations, YouTube lost a significant amount of advertising revenue and decided to tighten its video controls. This new type of review, which was largely opaque to creators, involved indirect content moderation that directly affected a video's success and led to massive revenue losses or even channel shutdowns for creators (Kumar, 2019; Niebler, 2020). Attempts by creators to contact YouTube, for example to obtain a review of the blanket channel shutdown exclusions, were unsuccessful. This *Adpocalypse* was the catalyst for the forming of the YTU on Facebook.

## 2.2 | Governance of platforms through collective representation of interests

Overall, two fundamental dimensions of platform labour struggle are emerging in the platform economy. First, regulatory protests, which tend to involve traditional trade unions, and second, distribution protests, which tend to involve grassroots protests and related forms of organisation (Umney et al., 2023). However, there are problematic aspects that hinder the mobilisation of both forms. Current research shows that it is difficult to organise platform workers collectively in associations or trade unions (Lehdonvirta, 2016; Wood et al., 2018). This is because typical conditions for the emergence of solidarity and collective representation of interests do not exist in the platform economy. For instance, a workplace organisation is missing, in which workers interact in a socio-spatial and permanent way and experience themselves every day as a 'group' that is collectively affected by problems. Such spatial separation also exists on YouTube. Professional or occupational identities are also weak. Many platform workers do not see trade unions as an appropriate form of representation (Al-Ani & Stumpp, 2016).

On the other hand, recent research shows that there is indeed a platform trade union movement, characterised by its reliance on the power of associations rather than structural power resources, its prioritisation of legal enactment over collective bargaining, and its lack of workplace unionism (Joyce et al., 2023). There are some examples of forms of protest and collective representation in platform work. First, there are cases where platform workers have established classical interest representation structures; this includes, for example, the establishment of works councils in food delivery companies, sometimes in cooperation with traditional trade unions (Tassinari & Maccarrone, 2017). However, this form of representation is only available to platform workers if they are employed by an employer, which is usually not the case in remote work. Second, trade unions have extended their advocacy services to platform work, as in the case of Germany's service sector union ver.di, which runs a self-employment advice service, or IGM's Fair Crowd Work project (Haipeter & Hoose, 2019). Part of the initiative is to commit the platforms to a 'code of conduct' that codifies certain standards of behaviour. There is also an arbitration board that can be used in case of disputes. These initiatives provide basic support for platform workers but have been little used so far. Third, completely new forms of interest representation have emerged in recent years that go beyond the established structures and institutions of national systems of interest representation (Umney et al., 2023). A prominent example are forums or so-called plug-ins, which strengthen communication amongst platform workers, enable monitoring of platforms and clients, and are intended to reduce the power deficit of platform workers, at least to some extent (Irani & Silberman, 2013). However, no uniform trend of worker representation is visible so far.

### 3 | POWER, FRAMES, AND IDEAS IN THE GOVERNANCE OF PLATFORMS

In this section, we consider trade unions and social movements that could serve as drivers of a counter-movement (Polanyi, 2001) to govern a socio-technical system such as a platform by aligning ideas, as well as by pooling and complementing their power resources.<sup>3</sup> To analyse this, we use a broad notion of governance according to Mayntz (2004). Governance is understood here as the totality of different types of collective regulation of social conditions, resulting in different ways from the interaction of private and/or state actors, as well as from the institutionalised self-regulation of civil society (Mayntz, 2004).

Two actors in a possible counter-movement in the governance process are trade unions and social movements. For established trade unions, the platform economy offers both challenges and opportunities. Faced with structural economic change, trade unions have long had to contend with a loss not only of influence but also legitimacy, expressed in declining memberships and shrinking collective bargaining coverage which fostered strategies of 'organising', together with the scope for 'union revitalisation' (Voss & Sherman, 2000). In this context, Frege and Kelly (2003) argue that the consolidation and expansion of trade union influence can be successful if unions differentiate their strategies, for example by focusing on new groups of workers and adapting participatory and creative approaches to social movements. The accumulation of power resources is often at the centre of the debate, with network embeddedness and narrative resources being emphasised as important elements, amongst others (Lévesque & Murray, 2010). This process also entails new forms of organising such as campaigns.

The FairTube campaign by IGM and the YTU can also be interpreted as such a development. The cooperation with a (web-based) social movement promises to extend IGM's influence into new 'digital' sectors of the economy. Given that workers in the platform economy represent an untapped potential of 'mobilisable' workers, trade unions stand to gain from intensifying their efforts in relation to this social group and the branch they operate in. At the same time, gaining access to this new group of workers and winning their support (and ultimately their membership) poses considerable challenges.

Research on social movements has generally drawn a distinction between loose, fluid 'coalitions' and organised 'social movements' when considering internet-based forms of mobilisation (Dolata & Schrape, 2018). For Kelly (1998), the key to mobilisation lies in identifying grievances at work and framing these as 'injustice' and collective problems; actors who are held responsible for injustices (typically employers); prospects of change and power to achieve changes; as well as leadership efforts. Concerning globally scattered and heterogeneous platform workers, this poses the question as to under what circumstances individual work-related grievances might be perceived as injustices that call for, and are amenable to, a collective response.

While cognitive or perceptual aspects, for instance framing processes, are regarded as the central basis of social movements to emerge and act, industrial relations research has pointed to the importance of power resources. An essential motivation for organisational cooperation in the field of industrial relations can be the strengthening of assertiveness by bundling of power, which we will link to the above considerations in the following.

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<sup>3</sup>An additional driver would be the state that could use legislative means to regulate working and employment conditions.



### 3.1 | Power resources

Power and resources have long served as central categories of analysis in industrial relations research. For our study, we draw on theories of power resources and distinguish four major forms of power and three subtypes (Schmalz et al., 2018). *Structural power* flows from the market power that workers possess due to factors such as their position on the labour market (scarcity and degree of dependence) and their capacity to disrupt economic activity by virtue of their role in the production process. Crucially, structural power needs to be activated by workers (e.g., in the form of a strike) to become effective (Schmalz et al., 2018). *Associational power* arises when workers organise themselves and form a collective, most evidently with the establishment of trade unions but also the setting up of the YTU. *Institutional power* relates to statutory rights to workplace and board-level codetermination, collective bargaining or labour law protections that have been won through the exercise of organisational power over the course of time. *Societal power* encompasses an actor's capacity to win allies outside its immediate organisational boundaries. *Coalitional power* is a subtype of societal power that becomes activated when other actors, such as political parties or civil society organisations, are drawn in. *Discursive power* is a further subtype and is accumulated through influencing public debates or exposing misdeeds (ibid.). This aligns with recent conceptions of *ideational power* which refers to 'ideas, paradigms, and policy proposals; ideology, normative values, and deeply held beliefs and assumptions about the way the world works; and the discourses utilised to legitimate or resist ideas' (McLaughlin & Wright, 2024, p. 98). Effectively foregrounded ideas rely on a shared narrative that allows actors to claim the moral high ground in a discourse while accusing their opponents of failing to fulfil their moral obligations (Preminger, 2020; Wright & McLaughlin, 2021).

However, even though discursive or ideational power refer to ideas, it is important to note the analytical distinction between cultural-cognitive elements (i.e., ideas, world-views, framing) and power resources, which is important here. While the latter refers to the question which resources actors (can) deploy to assert their interests in social exchange (Weber, 1978 [1921]), the first refers to the social construction of ideas, beliefs, and interests they *wish* to assert using power.

As already mentioned, strengthening the ability to assert oneself by pooling power resources is a key motivation for organisational cooperation. While the above remarks on power resources illustrate the different resources that exist, a theoretical approach is also needed that is capable of capturing the actors, their coalitions and their framing processes. To explain the emergent interest representation practices of the actors, we also need to consider cultural ideas and frames as the basis for cooperation between the two organisations. Only through this cooperation can sufficient sources of power be generated to articulate and successfully assert demands against the platform.

### 3.2 | Advocacy coalition frameworks and frames

As already indicated, studies in the field of 'union revitalisation studies' suggest that the consolidation and expansion of union influence may be successful if unions differentiate their strategies (Frege & Kelly, 2003). One specific point here relates to creative approaches that, for example, resemble the approach of social movements or the forging of new coalitions. This process is an on-going negotiation process between a necessary renewal and 'old' structures, in line with the respective trade union identity and objectives of a trade union. The cooperation between IGM and the YouTuber Union in the FairTube campaign analysed here can also be



interpreted as such a development. The cooperation between a trade union and a social movement promises to extend the influence of IGM to new, 'digital' economic segments, but also requires a renewal of the union's activism.

To analyse these new coalitions, a theoretical approach is needed that can explicitly focus on coalitions based on ideas, while at the same time being open to the integration of framing approaches from social movement research. In combination with the above-mentioned power resources, this allows for an in-depth analysis.

We use the 'Advocacy Coalition Frameworks' (ACF) approach proposed by Paul Sabatier (1988). ACF has been increasingly adopted in recent years in studies of profound political change as well as in discourse research (Bandelow, 2015; Jenkins-Smith et al., 2017; Leifeld, 2013). This approach allows processes of meaning attribution and shared references to be unearthed through an analysis of ideas. The core assumption is that coalitions and instances of cooperation are built on shared belief systems. Ideas, actors, and the social practices of framing constitute an interconnected complex. This approach allows a more precise identification of the core thematic references of a movement or a campaign together with ideas that are shared—or not shared—between the actors involved. When analysing new coalitions in a field, as between IGM and YTU, it is useful to focus on how such belief systems emerge and are implemented to capture the ideas that form a coalition's foundation.

From the outset, YTU saw itself as a social (internet) movement acting primarily via social media (Facebook). It addressed a set of tightly defined problems, in that it interpreted and framed events such as the *Adpocalypse* as its source of grievance. Such framing, understood as shared interpretative frames that represent phenomena as unfavourable or problematic, is a key concept in social movement research (Della Porta & Diani, 2006). Social movements engage inactive and unconnected actors through shared beliefs. Different movements use different framing practices to establish shared beliefs. These practices transform issues identified by the movement into grievances, making them recognisable and acknowledged.

Framing processes exhibit a number of characteristic features. First, a movement's *collective action frames* will typically relate to a *master frame* (Snow et al., 1986) consisting of societally accepted ideas or values such as (un)fairness, (in)equality, or democracy. *Frame alignment* then establishes plausible linkages to such master frames. Framing tactics, of various kinds, enable social movements to solve the problem of inducing individuals to identify with their aims and engage in (collective) action. *Frame bridging* is a process through which actors construct cognitive links between their various objectives, such as building a bridge between actors or organisations with congruent interests. Social movement research generally proceeds on the assumption that the success of a campaign will vary in relation to the success of these bridging efforts. This is captured in the concept of *frame resonance* that offers an indicator of how well frame alignment is converted into collective action through the impact of a frame on potential actors.

Overall, the theoretical framework used here is based on macro-theoretical frameworks (Mayntz, 2004; Polanyi, 2001) and two central theoretical pillars (Power Resources Approach and Advocacy Coalition Framework), which are linked by approaches from research on trade union revitalisation and research on social movements. To understand how the governance of labour on YouTube can be successful in the face of existing obstacles, we frame the research object of the YTU's cooperation with the IGM (Fairtube) as a counter-movement in the sense of Polanyi (2001) that has the potential to advance the governance of socio-technical systems (Mayntz, 2004). Actors can achieve this governance by harmonising their ideas and pooling their resources.

## 4 | METHODOLOGY

The study combined discourse network analysis (Leifeld, 2016) of newspaper articles, blog posts, and press releases as well as qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2007) of expert interviews, YouTube videos, and additional information from a Facebook group and websites. This allowed us to reconstruct the emergence of the cooperation between IGM and the YTU, identify ideas and frames—such as the perceptual foundations of the cooperation—and gather data on the use of resources and sources of power. In doing so, we followed the concept of ‘convergent design’ mixed-methods research (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018), in which quantitative and qualitative analyses are carried out separately, but with parallel and equal priority, and brought together when interpreting the data. This allowed us to collect different but complementary data, validated by comparison.

The data corpus of the qualitative content analysis consisted of four problem-centred expert interviews (IGM officials and the chair of the YTU). This involved the background and aims of the campaign, patterns of interaction between the organisations, and the problems encountered in the cooperation. We also analysed the texts of two presentations that our expert interviewees had given. The data collection also included 15 videos relevant to our research question from the YouTube channels ‘Slingshotchannel’ and ‘FairTubeV’, and additional contextual information from the FairTube campaign website and the FairTube/The YTU Facebook group.<sup>4</sup> The videos were transcribed and the additional information recorded in field memos before both types of data were analysed in terms of content analysis. Here, we follow the argument of Uba and Jansson (2021) and Vesnic-Alujevic and Van Bauwel (2014) who argue that online political activism via YouTube is an important component of political decision-making and that the system of industrial relations is also strongly influenced by it.

The basis of the discourse network analysis was 56 newspaper articles, blog posts, and press releases of various actors (in German, Spanish, and English) that were obtained from the FairTube campaign press archive and had been published between 26 July 2019 (publication of demands on YouTube) and 29 May 2020 (flattening of the media debate).<sup>5</sup> In a subsequent step, data collected from the publications archive was tested for gaps and possible political filters, with further publications obtained that complemented the archive.

For Leifeld (2016), discourse network analysis combines qualitative content analysis with the quantitative analysis of network research. The programme DNA was used in a content coding process to focus on shared ideas, interpretations, and demands on the part of the actors involved. This quantification of the articles (into an XML data set and GraphML data set) was the basis for quantitative network analysis.

Discourse network analysis was used as it allows an analysis of the connection between different actors or organisations to shared ideas or other cognitive patterns. If two actors or organisations support a particular idea, this creates a relationship that is characterised by agreement to this idea. A discursive congruence network will emerge where several actors or organisations support an idea. Such a network does not have to feature direct interaction: but neither interaction or communication ruled out and are even probable depending on the field and the idea (Leifeld, 2016).

<sup>4</sup>Some videos are available in English and German. We have transcribed and analysed one of each. We therefore only have 12 transcripts from a total of 15 videos.

<sup>5</sup><https://fairtube.info/en/seite/press-coverage-of-fairtube/> last access: 10 December 2023.

The basic aim of this procedure was to identify connections between actors via the shared ideas that form the basis of the coalition. Two modes are conceivable for any given idea: agreement and rejection. In these instances, two actors are joined by an edge if both agree to or reject a statement (idea, frame) in coded passages of text. Such a binary coding of statements makes it possible to construct a graph (joint agreement or rejection creates a connection agreement) for each relation. Each coded statement in the discourse leads to an edge in the graph (Leifeld, 2016). The result of the analysis is a network map of the actors participating in the discourse who represent or reject the concepts included. The weight of the edges is a measure of the strength of the substantive agreement. This approach provides us with a discourse map (congruence network) on which the clusters can be understood as ‘advocacy coalitions’ (Leifeld, 2013). This provides an intuitive way to conceptualise and measure coalitions at the level of ideas. These results were validated by analysing the other data types in the joint interpretation of all results. To visualise the central discursive and actionist coalition, we have clustered this coalition.<sup>6</sup>

## 5 | EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

### 5.1 | Chronology of events

The founding of YTU was triggered by the so-called *Adpocalypse* incident in 2017, caused by a change in YouTube’s algorithm for creators’ access and payment. A scandal emerged when ads appeared alongside offensive content, leading to ad withdrawal and revenue loss for YouTube. This prompted the company to revise its control system, implementing opaque content cheques affecting creators due to loss of income (‘demonetisation’) and in some cases even channel termination (Kumar, 2019; Niebler, 2020).

In March 2018, a German creator established the Facebook group ‘YTU’ with rapid membership growth, reaching 27,583 members by January 2021, including creators and YouTube users.<sup>7</sup> The group aimed to resist YouTube’s practices and discuss strategies. The YTU’s founder—who had been affected by YouTube’s content control moderation decisions as his channel included devices that YouTube classified as ‘weapons’ under its new rules—became the movement’s prominent ‘face’ and played a central role in communication and management of the group. YTU criticised YouTube publicly and achieved limited success through talks with YouTube at Swiss and U.S. offices, obtaining some informal concessions (Niebler, 2020; E01\_igm; E02\_ytu).

A key event was the German Hans Böckler Foundation’s ‘Labour.A’ conference in September 2018. This event brought together the founder of the YTU and representatives from IGM, who shared concerns about the unequal power in the platform economy due to the platform’s opaque and arbitrary practices (E01\_igm, E02\_ytu). This initial phase of networking led to further discussions. Later on, the joint campaign dubbed FairTube was publicly launched on 22 July 2019. Although the campaign was structurally and financially supported by the IGM, it was free and heterogeneous in terms of personnel. The campaign team consisted of a lawyer, a freelance author, IGM union councillors, and members of the YouTuber union. Against this background, the campaign and its project team can certainly be regarded as an independent entity (E01\_igm).

<sup>6</sup>We used the visone software for this purpose.

<sup>7</sup>At the end of 2023, the group had 25.790 members.

In July 2019, the FairTube campaign presented several demands to YouTube, setting a deadline of August for a response. In a YouTube video featuring the founder of YTU, the deputy general secretary of IGM and a lawyer from the Hugo Sinzheimer Institute, the campaign outlined its demands. These included transparent criteria for video decisions and monetisation, clear rules on demonetisation and channel removal, a designated human contact, an impartial dispute resolution process, and the establishment of a Creators Advisory Board.

The demands were backed up by three potential sanctions against YouTube if it refused to negotiate. First, the campaign could take legal action, claiming that the creators were facing unlawful self-employment. Second, they threatened to file a complaint under the European Union's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). Finally, the campaign warned of massive public action, dubbed a 'shitstorm' (E01\_igm; E02\_ytu).

YouTube initially responded to the requests on 30 July 2019. A subsequent response from Google headquarters, including a three-page letter and an invitation to a meeting, was received by FairTube on 28 August 2019. IGM and YTU agreed to the meeting, but it was later cancelled after Google Germany refused to include YTU representatives. The company argued that the YTU does not have official trade union status and that creators are not considered employees (E01\_igm; E02\_ytu). On 17 and 18 October 2019, FairTube conducted a poll within the YTU Facebook group to decide whether the meeting with Google Germany should go ahead without YTU representatives. The poll showed that most members were against the meeting taking place under these conditions (E01\_igm; E02\_ytu). The campaign began to prepare its legal complaints and organised a number of actions against the platform, mainly in the form of a wide publicity campaign, strikes by creators, and a 'shitstorm' in which several hundred creators submitted letters to YouTube's head office, beginning on 11 November 2019 (Niebler, 2020; E02\_ytu).

As a consequence, YouTube agreed to discuss with FairTube over the issues raised by the campaign. On 9 March 2020, the group once again transmitted concise and specific proposals. This was followed by further discussions with various creators, which was considered a success by FairTube as many central demands had been fulfilled (see Table 1) (E03\_ytu).

Since July 2020, the cooperation obtains legal status as a registered association under German law (FairTube e.V.) and formalised its internal structures. The association is headquartered at IGM in Frankfurt am Main and the main means of contact is its English-language website through which creators can access various forms of assistance (E04\_igm). The media spotlight on FairTube has waned, but the organisation remains committed to the day-to-day concerns of video content creators on YouTube, including filing a complaint with the North Rhine-Westphalia Media Authority (Landesanstalt für Medien NRW) against the platform's shadowbans in 2022.

## 5.2 | The discourse network: Coalitions, belief systems, ideas, and frames

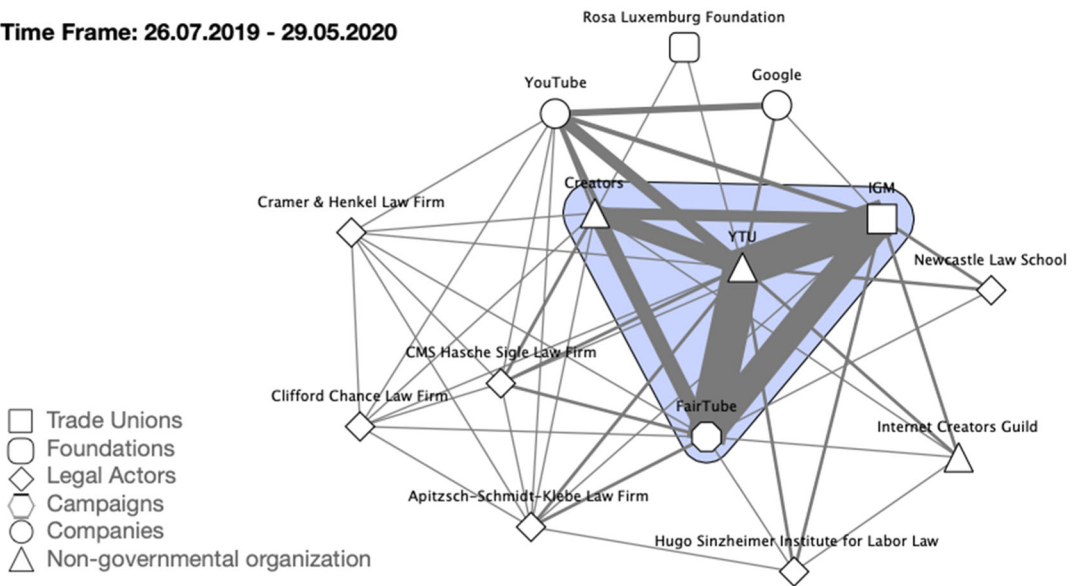
We have argued that social movements, which bring together otherwise heterogeneous organisations, require an ideological basis for cooperation to work. What was the ideological basis of the FairTube campaign? What were the frames that aligned both IGM as a traditional union and YTU as an (internet) social movement? In the following, we turn to the question which 'ideas' have been framed by the different actor groups as an ideological basis for the cooperation (Figure 1).

TABLE 1 YTU's grievances and demands and also YouTube's concessions.

Grievance/demand	Situation before FairTube campaign/critique	YouTube's response/outcome
1 Lack of transparency	Rules and categorisations, evaluations, algorithms, monetisation lacks transparency (e.g., subscribers are not informed, inadequate analytics).	Algorithms are extensively reviewed and discussed. Subscriber bugs are located and resolved through feedback from YTU; analytics are extended.
2 No clear criteria for appropriate video content	Vague criteria for 'permitted' and monetisable video contents ('ambiguous clauses' open to various interpretations); no examples indicated and no reasons provided.	Very substantive enlargement of the monetisation guidelines (with involvement of YTU); announcement of changes to self-certification with feedback.
3 Lack of a human point-of-contact	YouTube managers avoid contact; no communication possible with YouTube.	YouTube's Vice President Creator Products (Ariel Bardin) and other managers introduce themselves publicly and respond to questions. YouTube engages with creators on Twitter. YTU founder (Jörg Sprave) accepted as 'Ombudsman' and mediator.
4 Independent dispute resolution	No influence over final decisions on deletions and demonetisation.	Direct access to top decision makers and 'senior raters'. YTU operates as a new body for reviewing unfair decisions.
5 Participation	YouTube presents creators with a fait accompli – implements no rules without prior notice or scope for discussion.	YouTube joins Facebook group (and has official access to information distributed in the group). YouTube officially requests feedback before decisions or changes.

Source: YTU presentation, July 2020; E03\_ytu.

**Time Frame: 26.07.2019 - 29.05.2020**



**FIGURE 1** Congruence network 26.07.2019–29.05.2020 (visualisation by visone).

Our analysis indicates a clear advocacy coalition of IGM, YTU, the FairTube campaign and the creators (shown in blue). FairTube, even though created by IGM and YTU as the organisational form of their cooperation, counts as a distinctive entity and as a member of the coalition based on its discursive involvement. There are weaker overlaps with the creator group as creators themselves are more of a loose collection of individuals than a collective actor (Dolata & Schrape, 2018). Based on this coalition, demands were made for YouTube to change the terms under which creators work.

Alongside this advocacy coalition, we detected a relationship between YouTube and YTU. This apparent contradictory match can be explained by the fact that during the campaign, YouTube had indicated a willingness for talks with FairTube, leading to the existence of a shared assent to the ‘idea’ of a discursive problem resolution. The somewhat stronger edge weight between YouTube and YTU, when compared with IGM and FairTube, is the result of the fact that YTU and YouTube shared an idea that the activities of YouTube creators should be regarded as ‘artistic and independent work’. By contrast, IGM was sceptical in principle as to whether freelance platform workers should have self-employed status.

Both YouTube and Google as its owner played a subordinate role in this discourse. YouTube was visible in only a small number of press releases and neither Google nor its parent company Alphabet made any media comment. In addition to these actors, the discursive network also included actors who participated in the discourse and shaped it through their own contributions, especially law firms, academic research institutions, and consultancies. However, these actors were mostly ‘pulled into’ the coalition by the main actors, foremost the IGM, which was concerned to underpin and legitimise its arguments and demands by referring to external experts.

Which frames formed the basis of the cooperation? We identify three main thematic fields:

(a) Framing of ‘digital work’ on YouTube

In their interpretations of work on YouTube, IGM and YTU referred to ideas and values that are not only shared in the debates on digitalisation but more widely in relation to



developments in the world of work. In this sense, they refer to existing *master frames* (Snow et al., 1986) to legitimise and support their demands. Frame alignment allows each side to connect with interpretations that can be shared by both organisations and as such constitute the ideological basis of their cooperation in FairTube (see Table 2).

The *first* of these shared interpretations is the *discourse around precarity at work* (e.g., Kalleberg, 2000) that includes more general diagnoses of poor working conditions,

**TABLE 2** Characteristics of cooperation between IG Metall and YouTubers Union.

	IG Metall	YouTubers Union
Framing of YouTube work	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Precarious work (e.g., bogus self-employment, lack of transparency, risks, insecurity)</li> <li>2. Platform company strategies (one-sided dependence of creators that was exploited by the platform)</li> <li>3. Need for new forms of cooperation (meaning and relevance of the FairTube campaign)</li> </ol>	
Aims and demands	<p>Transparency (in response to lack of explanation when algorithms change)</p> <p>Fairness ('partner', 'equal treatment')</p> <p>Conciliation mechanism/'Ombuds Office'</p> <p>Codetermination on 'advisory board'</p> <p>'Negotiations' with YouTube</p>	<p>Clear terms (monetisation, content, deletion of videos/accounts)</p> <p>Communication (contact person)</p> <p>'Discussions' with YouTube</p>
Practices, actions, threats	<p>(Legal) scrutiny of bogus self-employment</p> <p>Complaint for breaches of EU Data Protection Regulations (GDPR)</p> <p>Publicity campaigns</p>	<p>'Shitstorm', collective action by YouTubers</p> <p>Communication to the community</p>
<i>Sources of power</i>		
Structural power	Not available	Creators' 'strike', otherwise very limited
Associational power	Not available	YTU members Organisation of the 'shitstorm'
Institutional power	Not deployable (collective bargaining, works council system)	Not available
Societal power	Campaign/public pressure (fairness of digital platform work); Public backing/Legitimacy of established collective interest organisations	Campaign/Public pressure (fairness of digital platform work)
– Discursive/ideational power		
– Coalitional power	Privileged access to political sphere; lobbying (German and EU institutions) (cooperation with YTU)	(Cooperation with IGM)

Source: Authors' compilation based on interviews and documents.



inequalities of power and dependence, the commercial orientation of the platforms, and the fact that protective regulations provided by national employment law are inapplicable. The *second* relates to specific grievances over the asymmetry of power between internet companies and workers in the platform economy, in general, and the conduct of YouTube, in particular. These addresses problems of automatic content control, discrimination against small creators, and the platform's preferences given to advertiser-friendly content (Wood et al., 2018). Those grievances were framed as collective issues and attributed to a responsible actor, that is, YouTube (Kelly, 1998). A *third* pattern of interpretation is the self-reflexive definition of actors' own cooperation in the FairTube campaign which reflects recent calls for new strategies of collective worker representation in the digital economy. IGM and YTU emphasised that it was important to act collectively and stressed the benefits of cooperation. This directly addressed the logic of trade union organisation—employees standing together in a collective—but also one that is reflected in the YTU as a (internet) social movement.

Overall, there were few divergences of perspective between IGM and YTU. The framing of work on YouTube appeared to be the central point of reference that both participating organisations agreed on and which therefore served as a means of integration in the FairTube project.

#### (b) Demands and objectives

Another factor that enabled cooperation was that YTU and IGM pursued, yet not always similar, but at least compatible goals (Table 2). Both actors called on YouTube to change its behaviour, principally around the concepts of 'transparency', 'fairness', and 'communication'. The call for greater transparency on monetisation or the rules for 'permitted' monetisable content were the core demands related to the initial problem, the *Adpocalypse*. This was also connected to the demand for a 'fair' conduct towards creators that was related both to transparency and also to appropriate monetisation principles. This also included criticism of the culture of communication as the lack of transparency was additionally reflected in poor communication between YouTube and most creators. For example, if YouTube blocked a creator's channel without giving any reasons or referring to generic rules of the platform (lack of transparency), this was also accompanied by blocking their personal account (E02\_ytu). Should this happen, a creator would have no means of contacting YouTube (lack of means of communication) and therefore also no opportunity to have an incorrect decision by the YouTube algorithm reviewed.

However, it was evident that some demands had a greater significance for IGM than for YTU and vice versa which is due to the different organisational logics. Whereas IGM called for 'negotiations' in line with the logic of a trade union, the YTU requested 'talks'. For YTU the issue was not to secure a collective agreement or fair employment contracts as creators value their status as self-employed. Rather, creators wanted an equitable 'business relationship' with YouTube, corresponding to their status as independent contractors. Furthermore, whether discussions between YouTube and IGM, YTU, or FairTube constitute 'negotiations' or simply 'preliminary talks' (before the real 'negotiations') has not been entirely clarified by the parties.

There are also differences concerning some other demands. IGM, out of a trade union logic, regarded an arbitration procedure ('Ombudsman') for conciliation in the event of a dispute or 'codetermination on an advisory board' as important elements. However, those demands were less important for YTU. Conversely, the issue of censorship ('moderation') was central for YTU as this determined the scope for monetising videos (E02\_ytu).

Eventually, ideas and concepts that built the foundation of the cooperation remained generic and of little binding nature. The somewhat vague terminology—precarity, power asymmetry in the digital economy, collective cooperation as a valuable means—eventually helped to blur the latent contradictions between the underlying objectives of the two organisations and so facilitated their cooperation. This is illustrated in the concepts of ‘transparency’ and ‘fairness’, each of which are quite generic categories that leave substantial scope for interpretation. This latitude can be helpful in promoting cooperation, however, as the broadly accepted values they enshrine allow traditional understandings (IGM) to connect with the problems of the new digital world of work (YTU). As long as the actors refrain from proposing concrete activities or success criteria, what these terms mean and what would constitute ‘success’ can continue to be a matter of interpretation (March & Simon, 1958).

Accordingly, the cooperation between YTU and IGM can be regarded as a strategy of ‘loose coupling’ (Weick, 2006 [1985]). Through loosely coupling organisational units and through organisational differentiation (as in the FairTube e.V.), participants can mobilise resources without affecting their organisational core, neglecting traditional tasks and member interests. Therefore, any setbacks or losses in the engagement will only partially affect the organisation as a whole. They do not lead to a loss of resources and legitimacy that could affect traditional areas of activity, which would have been harmful to both IGM and YTU.

### (c) Forms of power

A benefit of the cooperation between YTU and IGM was the pooling and activation of otherwise dispersed power resources (see Table 2). The structural, associational, and institutional forms of power that IGM can activate in its classic domain—the German manufacturing sector – were of little use in the platform economy. Only YTU was in a position to mobilise the structural and associational power that flows from workers’ position in the production process and from its access to its social base, the creators. This consequently created the foundation for collective actions such as ‘shitstorms’ and a creators’ strike.

Nonetheless, IGM’s *coalitional* power resources played a key role. For example, IGM spent several months mobilising its contacts in the political systems of Germany and the European Union over the issue of whether there had been a breach of European data protection law, the GDPR, or whether YouTube might be legally liable for using bogus self-employment, creating a serious and credible threat of court action. Such power resources were not available to YTU.

These differences in access to sources of power evidently formed the basis of a division of labour between IGM and YTU. YTU’s proximity to creators allowed it to function as an immediate point of contact to ‘the workers’. As an outcome of associational power, discussions with YouTube over changes to its terms of service were conducted with YTU and individual creators. The strike and shitstorm were also initiated by YTU.

What is noticeable is the absence of ‘institutional’ power resources (Table 2). This situation not only denies the movement access to legally guaranteed power and is hard to rectify. This is a noteworthy state-of-affairs as much of IGM’s practices in the field of interest representation in its core domain rest on institutional and associational power resources, like the right to collective bargaining and a high degree of unionisation.

## 6 | DISCUSSION

In the digital economy, workers generally suffer from the power imbalance that gives platforms the opportunity to shape the rules of digital marketplaces, which they often use in favour of customers, consumers, or the company that runs the platform itself. YouTube creators' loss in income triggered a movement that constituted a collective upheaval against the YouTube platform. Compared to other trade union movements in the digital economy (Umney et al., 2023), the FairTube case is special in two respects. It concerns both distribution and regulatory protests: the first refers to the remuneration issues that triggered the protest, the second refers to the creators' discontent with YouTube's practice of communication, transparency of rules, and dealing with arbitration (see also Niebler & Kern, 2020). Another specific is the involvement of both a traditional trade union and a grassroots protest with the campaign as its initial form of organisation.

Our study shows that even in the field of digital platform work, where collective voice is unlikely, enduring representational forms can be established that reach beyond ad hoc or temporal movements. The study sheds light onto the question of how it was possible to overcome the hurdles, that is, lack of power and engagement as well as fragmentation of the (remote) workers and heterogeneity concerning identities and interests (e.g., Lehdonvirta, 2016; Wood et al., 2018). We argue that collective action, on the one hand, was possible due to a combination of factors that are highlighted by mobilisation theory (Kelly, 1998), for example, successful framing of grievances as injustice and attributing them to a liable actor, that is, the platform company YouTube; prospects of success of the collective endeavour; and engaged actors, that is, the founder of the YTU who committed much time and resources.

On the other hand, however, our study points to additional factors that appear relevant and exceed previous accounts to collective action on digital labour markets.

### (1) Complementary power resources

The first factor is that the lack of power resources can be successfully compensated by coalition building where each partner contributes complementary power resources. In this respect, our study partly deviates from accounts which state that the platform union movement is characterised by reliance on the power of associations and its prioritisation of legal enactment over collective bargaining (e.g., Joyce et al., 2023). In the FairTube case, *coalitional power* appears to be at the centre of a successful movement because it was the prerequisite for the activation of other relevant power resources. However, this only holds true when the coalition partners bring power resources to the table that prove relevant in the respective context. In the FairTube movement, IGM's institutional powers were rather irrelevant compared to the coalitional resources and legitimacy that allowed them to build a credible threat. This was complemented by *associational power* of the YTU. FairTube reached its goals not by legal action (even though that was a threat), where courts decide over arbitration (e.g., Joyce et al., 2023), but through a form of *dialogue* or *bargaining* that has been regarded largely irrelevant in the platform economy (ibid.). Only later, with the formalisation of the FairTube e.V. association, dialogue and legal measures (lawsuits in case of arbitration) seem to go hand in hand.

### (2) Bridging gaps through framing of complementary interests

While fragmentation of the workforce was overcome by framing the issues with YouTube as a collective and severe matter (*Adpocalypse*) for which YouTube was to blame, a

challenge lay in building the foundation for a cooperation between IGM and YTU. The pooling of power resources required a ‘belief system’, that is, the framing of shared interpretations concerning deprivations and liability, common goals and suitable strategies (Kelly, 1998). This was a necessary condition because the coalition partners starkly differed concerning their organisational logics. This was relevant mostly for IGM, for which the engagement with the YTU meant a deviation from its traditional domain of regular employment in the manufacturing sector.

One of the key factors enabling the cooperation between IGM and YTU was their reference to widely shared and generally accepted values. FairTube highlighted the challenges of digital work, linking them to widely discussed narratives in the context of ‘digital transformation issues’ such as the power of major socio-technical internet companies and precarious work (e.g., Dolata & Schrape, 2018; Wood et al., 2018). This framing underpins collaboration and content alignment, with a particular focus on the precariousness discourse, which resonates with both wider social issues and features of the platform economy. This relation to general ideas as frame bridging (Snow et al., 1986) – connecting with existing socially accepted frames such as unregulated and unfair work in the digital economy – formed the conceptual foundation for the cooperation and served as an important integrating factor.

Choosing the organisational form of a campaign and organisational differentiation was another means to enable cooperation between otherwise different partners without risk of losing credibility and legitimacy from each partners’ constituency. A campaign exhibits a low level of formalisation and is characterised by ‘loose coupling’ (Weick, 2006 [1985]), which organisations pursue to avoid internal disruption. IGM could not engage too intensively in activities that lie outside its core domain (mainly collective bargaining in German manufacturing) and that do not directly concern its social base (trade union members in the traditional branches of the German manufacturing industry). For its part, YTU would have run into serious credibility problems if it had tried to act as a section of a traditional industrial union that was trying to steer the digital economy into the formalised paths of institutionalised employment regulation. In contrast, a ‘campaign’ is a time-bound organisational form of collaboration that requires minimal resource investment. It allows the creation of an ‘attention economy’ without changing the core identity of the participating organisations.

## 7 | CONCLUSION

Digitalisation and new forms of employment have all prompted reactions and newly emerging patterns of social governance (Polanyi, 2001). The starting point of these developments are always the regulatory deficiencies of an existing system, given dynamics of digitalisation and emerging company strategies (e.g., Graham et al., 2017; Liang et al., 2022). Such forms of interest articulation that combine existing practices and resources from different domains, thereby constructing enduring structures, can be regarded as *‘hybrid’ forms of interest representation*. YTU and the FairTube campaign represent an instance of such an emergent order that is capable of regulating at least parts of issues that arise in a new socio-technical system. The empirical evidence shown in the FairTube case suggests that a hybrid model – that is, cooperation between traditional and new actors – is a promising strategy to give workers a voice even if institutional rights are rare in the digital economy. The reason is that hybrid

models allow the pooling of power resources and the transfer of legitimacy through activating legitimacy of established actors while getting a foot in the door to the new groups, their problems and preferences regarding the (collective) representation of interests.

It remains an open question whether the hybrid regulatory model between an established trade union and an (internet) social movement is exemplary for trends of social change within transnational employment systems. Obviously, it requires committed actors and leadership on both sides (Kelly, 1998). Still, cooperation is not easy to achieve, given the heterogeneity of the actors involved. In contrast to previous research (Niebler & Kern, 2020; Schmalz et al., 2018), our study highlights the crucial role of cultural belief systems and the distinct power resources that are brought to bear through collaboration. This addresses a concern raised by many critics of power resource approaches (Refslund & Arnholtz, 2022). The FairTube case shows that power resources do not transform into successful collective action without ideological foundations. It also sheds light on the interrelation between different types of power. In our case, coalitional power can be regarded as an antecedent necessary for other power resources to become effective.

However, the study also reveals the fragility of this arrangement which renders future success uncertain and leaves it an open question, whether the chosen organisational forms will prevail and be effective in the long run. The transformation of the FairTube campaign into a formalised association at the headquarters of the IGM is a noteworthy outcome of a social movement that usually is only effective over a certain period of time (Snow et al., 1986) as it is hardly possible to maintain a high attention level in the long run. The FairTube e.V. association is an organisational form that has been set up to address arbitration and the concerns of creators in a sustainable way, even if it does not achieve the publicity of a protest movement.

A limitation of the study is that it was not possible to conduct interviews with representatives of the participating companies. Our study provides only a 'snapshot' at this stage and should be complemented by further research into the future development of FairTube e.V., its potential for effective advocacy, and analysis of other advocacy activities in the digital economy.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

There are no relevant financial or nonfinancial competing interests between the authors and the actors being researched.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The nonreactive data underlying the discourse network analysis findings of this study, as well as the transcripts of the publicly available YouTube videos, are available upon reasonable request from the corresponding author, Patrick Witzak. Please note that the full audio tracks of the interview data and nonreactive data, which were provided to us in confidence by the experts, are not publicly available as they contain information that could compromise the privacy of the research participants.

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