

# YouTube's copyright strikes have become a tool for extortion

## *Scammers are threatening to shut down channels – unless the owner pays up*

By [Shoshana Wodinsky](#)

An anonymous blackmailer has caught at least two YouTube creators in a scheme involving cash ransoms and esoteric copyright laws.

Last week, both creators shared stories of how their channels were being threatened with a third copyright strike — and the possible termination of their channels — from an anonymous extortionist. The scammer offered to reverse the strikes in return for payment to a bitcoin wallet (which, as of this writing, [remains empty](#)) or to an adjoining Paypal account (that has [since been deleted](#)).

“Once we receive our payment, we will cancel both strikes on your channel,” the blackmailer [wrote](#) in a Telegram message to one creator — ObbyRaidz — who runs a small channel dedicated to Minecraft walkthroughs. “You are free to charge back if we don’t, but we assure you we will.”

“We’ll give you a very short amount of time to make your decision,” they added.

**“ONCE WE RECEIVE OUR PAYMENT, WE WILL CANCEL BOTH STRIKES ON YOUR CHANNEL”**

Copyright strikes serve an important purpose for YouTube, preventing protected material — from pop songs to movie clips — from being used without authorization. YouTubers served with one or two strikes automatically have the offending videos deleted, and can also have certain channel features, like the ability to monetize, restricted in the long term. Getting those privileges back [can take months of work](#), especially for smaller channels that are often overlooked in favor of their larger or more popular counterparts.

Three copyright strikes in a three-month period can take a video down for good. In a [short clip](#) posted to his channel on January 29th, ObbyRaidz described it as “basically extortion.” “If I don’t pay this dude,” he said, “he’s going to strike a third one of my videos down.”

This isn’t the first time that [Youtube’s less-than-perfect copyright system](#) has stabbed creators in the back. The platform’s hands-off approach to moderation has allowed copyright trolls to thrive [for years](#) — not only to extort money, but to doxx, slander, or troll. They can also be used to suppress negative news; some companies have [served comedians with copyright strikes](#) in an attempt to stifle any videos mocking their brand.

Troublemakers have also used YouTube’s copyright system to phish or doxx smaller channels. In order to submit a counterclaim, [YouTube’s policies](#) dictate that a creator must provide their personal information to the channel filing the claim, which can open the door to real-life harassment.

## **“IT’S A STATUTE FROM A MORE INNOCENT, OPTIMISTIC ERA IN THE HISTORY OF THE INTERNET”**

This isn’t the first time we’ve seen extortionists take advantage of the platform. Similar cases of smaller channels being conned out of cash through the platform’s strike system have cropped up [more than a few times](#) on the site’s help forums. When official channels stall, those forums are often the only recourse victims have.

In his video, ObbyRaidz mentions that his attempts to contact YouTube personnel have all come up short, and any attempts at repealing the strikes were denied.

Those who are able to appeal the strikes don’t have it much easier. The process, when successful, can take at least a month — and during that time, “you can’t upload at all,” according to Pierce Riola, a voice actor whose YouTube channel been hit by similar extortion scams in the past.

Some creators — including Pierce — have reported that YouTube’s algorithm can [“punish”](#) channels that take breaks from uploading for an extended period of time, relegating them to the back of the feed where their content is less likely to surface. A smaller channel that’s stuck battling malicious copyright claims instead of uploading, he added, could suffer almost as much damage as if the channel was deleted outright.

Whatever strikes the extortionist brought on have now been reversed, according to a series of tweets aimed at ObbyRaidz and another creator, KenzoOG. “Both strikes are resolved and the videos reinstated,” [YouTube said](#), in a thread on ObbyRaidz’s twitter account. Reached by *The Verge*, the company confirmed that the strikes had been resolved.

## “UPON REVIEW, THESE TAKEDOWN NOTICES WERE ABUSIVE”

Asked for comment on their policies surrounding this kind of copyright abuse, a YouTube spokesperson pointed to a prior statement. “Upon review, these takedown notices were abusive,” it reads. “We have zero tolerance for the submission of fraudulent legal requests, so we also terminated the channels that submitted these.”

Still, the incident raises real concerns about YouTube’s ability to respond to copyright blackmail attempts. ObbyRaidz was unable to flag YouTube’s attention until [thousands of retweets](#) and [hundreds of Reddit comments](#) brought attention to the incident. Even channels with more than a million subscribers have only been able to get the platform’s attention [in response to a viral tweet](#).

The biggest problem is the structure of YouTube’s copyright system, which places most of its scrutiny on the accused rather than the accuser. As one Reddit user [pointed out](#), this extortionist was able to carry on an extortion scheme from a recently created YouTube channel with no videos, made from a throwaway email address, easy to create and easy to identify as suspicious.

The platform works under the good-faith assumption that only users with pilfered content would bother making these claims. The [instruction page](#) for users looking to file claims even warns them not to misuse the process. “But that’s not the world we live in in 2019,” says Annemarie Bridy, a University of Idaho law professor specializing in copyright. “It’s a statute from a more innocent, optimistic era in the history of the Internet.”

As Bridy put it, the problem is incentives: YouTube has a lot more to lose from angry copyright-holders than angry users. Movie reviewers on the platform who have found their channels [bombarded with copyright strikes](#) from Universal Pictures, for example, after including clips or stills from a particular Universal film in their reviews. Even after claiming that these clips were protected as fair use, some found that YouTube ultimately sided with the company rather than the creators.

“It’s the little folks who get lost in the shuffle,” says Bridy. “That’s a shame, because it’s actually the accumulated little folks who make YouTube worthwhile.”