

YouTube to Your TV: The Shift of YouTube Content Creators to Network Television

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Abstract

YouTube's development from a small company acting as a mere repository of home videos that allowed users to share their memories operating under the tagline "Broadcast Yourself" to the frontrunner of a multi-billion dollar industry has been nothing short of remarkable. As some content creators have now escalated in popularity to the level of pop culture and social icons, many have begun or even completed the transition to the traditional major media industries. While some have been successful, particularly in the shift from YouTube to the music industry, of which the most iconic is that of Justin Bieber, others have found the transition to be challenging. Content creators like Lucas Cruikshank, the developer of "Fred" on YouTube, and Dane Boedigheimer, author of the "Annoying Orange," have both made the shift to cable and have not seen the public reception that they enjoyed within the confines of YouTube. This paper explores the issue of why certain types of content shift seamlessly to traditional media while others do not, and why YouTube content creators have recently struggled in transitioning to traditional media outlets. This paper is a meta-analysis of prior market research on YouTube uploader demographics, the market they are attempting to shift to, and other rival online video markets like Hulu which exhibit an opposing shift of traditional media content onto the Internet. Network video content is shifting to the Internet partly in order to capture a market that has eluded them since the introduction of online video (namely young audiences). This paper explores why user-generated content creators are shifting in the opposite direction to network television. Interestingly, these opposing shifts indicate a similar understanding of the media market from the perspective of content creators, both professional and amateur. Both seek to capitalize on the segment of the population that they struggle to reach through their established method of content distribution. However, YouTube content creators find traditional media a tough market to enter, as the shift to network programming does not allow them to tailor content to their viewers' needs in the way that YouTube allows, and the difference between the YouTube format and a traditional thirty minute segment makes the shift even more difficult for them. Because of the differences in the two formats, it is likely that YouTube creators in the current market will continue to find challenges in attempting the shift to network programming.

Keywords: YouTube, Shift, Television

1. Introduction

The media industry in the United States for the past few years has exhibited trends that potentially indicate a major shift in content distribution from traditional professionally generated content to an influx of user (or amateur) generated content. The hallmark of the user generated content is YouTube, which has developed into a multi-billion dollar industry now under Google's supervision. Initially, the "Broadcast Yourself" website was merely a place where users could deposit their personal videos with the intention of using the site merely as a home video

repository. Very quickly, however, the site began to transform into a platform that could be used to distribute amateur videos and an alternative to broadcast media¹.

Upon the acquisition of YouTube by Google in 2006, the site began a transformative season, initially becoming more oriented toward the development of user content generators and creating a space for distribution. However, from 2008 onward the site continued shifting in a new attempt to lure professionally generated content². In this way, YouTube began to work to befriend the exact companies that had made great strides to shut it down previously – namely the major networks – due to copyright infringement issues. By allowing professional content to be distributed through the YouTube website, Google was able to capitalize on an agreement that would counteract two major problems facing the site. With the addition of professional content, copyrighted content would be less likely to be infringed through unlawful distribution by users of the site, which is tempting for users as professional content draws a majority of views on YouTube currently³. Additionally, Google would be able to create partnerships with the very companies that create the most competition for YouTube, and user generated content sites in general; namely, professional generated content distributors, or the major television networks.

Thus with the cooperation of the major networks and the inclusion of more professional content on the YouTube site, YouTube began to look more like television than ever before, even dropping the tagline “Broadcast Yourself” and shifting to capitalize on a market that had previously eluded it⁴. Likely, this decision was crucial in the recent explosion of popularity that YouTube has enjoyed, making it currently the second most visited website internationally with over nine hundred million estimated unique monthly users, falling behind only Google’s primary site⁵. Due to this tremendous popularity, successful YouTube uploaders have become popular culture icons, with some even enjoying celebrity status among their fan base. One notable example is Justin Bieber, whose remarkable ascension to superstardom began with a humble YouTube page.

There have been numerous successful transitions of YouTube celebrities to careers outside of YouTube, including Justin Bieber, Soulja Boy Tell ‘Em, Brooke Brodack, and Greyson Michael Chance. This seems to have spurred a new phenomenon of YouTube celebrities using YouTube merely as a springboard to launch a career in professional media industries. However, although some celebrities have made the shift effectively, others have found the shift difficult. Two cases in particular, Lucas Cruikshank, the author and producer of “Fred,” and Dane Boedigheimer, the author of “The Annoying Orange,” have shown how difficult the transition can be from YouTube to networked television. Therefore, an emerging question is coming to attention. Why is it that some YouTube celebrities can shift to professional media seamlessly while others seem to struggle? Likely the issue is not in the author or the network, but in the type of content the author produces. Authors of music or comedy content, or content that can be presented live without any format changes to the material can make the shift away from YouTube, while authors of content that follows a storyline, more typical of content available on networked television, struggle in adapting to the shift from YouTube.

2. Youtube Culture

In order to understand the nature of the shift from YouTube content to traditional media content, an understanding of the culture of YouTube is essential. The YouTube audience still looks to this site for user generated and amateur content, as it is still the primary distributor of amateur material even though there have been strides to incorporate professional content into the site. In total, YouTube houses over 2,649 years of aggregated video length from 47.3 million uploaders, and has over 1.5 trillion views, and 9.9 million years of total viewing time⁶. This amount of content is immense, and clearly exhibits that YouTube has grown from a repository of home video content into an unrivaled collection of material that has never before been aggregated into a single location.

In “Broadcast Yourself: Understanding YouTube Uploaders” by Yuan Ding, Yuan Du, Yinkai Hu, Zhengye Liu, Lugin Wang, Keith Ross, and Anindya Ghose, the authors underwent an evaluation of YouTube material in order to better understand what kind of videos were being uploaded and what was popular for YouTube users. They found that when “focusing on the uploaders who upload[ed] more than 100 videos ... about 20% of the uploaders only upload to a single category, and more that 85% of uploaders upload more than 50% of their videos to their top category”⁷. When they increased their evaluation to the top three categories uploaded to, these categories encompassed nearly all of the content creators’ material. Therefore, uploaders typically create material for a niche market, much like networks create material that appeals to the market to which they provide. Adversely, it can likely be assumed that viewers have preferences that are exhibited through their selection of material to watch, and which content creators they prefer. Therefore, content creators are tailoring their material to the niche market that seeks out their channel (or YouTube page) for entertainment.

Additionally, the authors explore the proportion of uploaders that provide user generated material versus professionally generated content or user copied content, categorized by the infringing publishing of professional content by an amateur. They found that “77% of random uploaders are UGC uploaders. Thus most of the users in YouTube are indeed publishing user generated content”⁸. Therefore, even after the efforts of Google in implementing professional content into the site, the site is still primarily used by uploaders for the purpose of amateur content. Interestingly enough, they also found that in the group of videos that they evaluated called the “popular group,” or videos that had generated a large number of views, “the UGC uploaders on average attract[ed] more than twice as many views as the UCC uploaders, even though many of the popular UCC uploaders publish professionally generated videos”⁹.

Users therefore, still flock to user generated videos as opposed to user copied videos. However, professionally created content actually drives more traffic per video than the average amateur video when uploaded by the copyright holder. This can be seen in uploads of popular music videos compared to video remakes or the use of the same music in the background of other amateur videos. Professional music videos for major artists will generate millions of views, while amateur videos will generate far fewer.

In “The Tube over Time: Characterizing Popularity Growth of YouTube Videos” by Flavio Figueiredo, Fabricio Benevenuto, and Jussara Almeida, the authors analyze the trend that videos exhibit over time after their upload. They discuss the breakdown of view counts of YouTube videos, broken down into three categories: Top videos, YouTomb videos (a data collection of deleted material from YouTube, mostly due to copyright infringement), and Random videos. They found that “all three types of videos tend to experience some burst of popularity on a single week” and that “60% of Top videos receive at least 50% of their views on their (first) peak week”¹⁰.

These findings say something else interesting about the YouTube culture. YouTube videos have a very short span of time, particularly if they will become popular videos, in which they will receive the majority of their views. Content on YouTube is very short-lived, and most viewers will experience a video during the time when it is most popular. This can be understood in a number of different ways when evaluated against different types of popularity among YouTube uploaders. Firstly, there are videos that become incredibly popular, called viral videos, that then are forgotten by most viewers over the course of time and the uploaders are never given any particular lasting fame for the content. Viral videos easily make sense with the information from Figueiredo, Benevenuto, and Almeida, as they are quickly spread around the Internet via social media, email, and word of mouth. Thus, the majority of views for this classification of videos would occur during the peak week that they are being advertised.

Secondly, popular uploaders have a following of viewers that will view new material quickly upon its release. In the case of Ray William Johnson, the writer and producer of the popular YouTube show “=3,” many of his videos receive millions of views within a few days of release. His most recent video, published four days ago titled “Massive Snowball Fight” has already received over 1.7 million views, while his video “Skydiving Accident” published eleven days ago has just over 2 million views¹¹. This shows a trend of viewers closely following a content creator in order to view material as it becomes available. YouTube fosters this closeness through email notifications of uploaded material and home page notifications of uploads from subscriptions. In this way, these popular videos receive the bulk of their views within the first week of their release, as opposed to viral videos which can be unpredictable as to when they will receive the most public exposure.

The authors also discovered that the most important sources for moving traffic toward a particular video are the internal mechanisms within YouTube and search features of YouTube and Google, as opposed to external features¹². A large number of views stemmed from the “related videos” column displayed to the right side of the current video and from search queries. Therefore, YouTube provides effective means for moving traffic through its site using these methods, while external features like embedded videos within another site, referrals from other sites, and featured videos or advertisements are not as effective at providing traffic. This is also an important feature about the YouTube community, as in many ways it is self-sustained. Viewers access the site in pursuit of material that they already know about, be it viral videos or subscribed content providers, and then are free to explore the site using internal features.

3. Combination Culture

Market pressure resulting from the massive popularity of YouTube and other user generated content distribution sites has reshaped the way that network television operates. One such way that networks have begun to adapt is in the utilization of the online atmosphere, capitalizing on social media’s ubiquitous nature in today’s society. Network television has begun to place emphasis on the interactivity that Twitter and Facebook can provide, creating a new content provision design that some are calling “Social TV”¹³. *The Walking Dead*, for example, has made great success using social media as a way to interact with the audience during air time, allowing the audience to interact

with the characters and the actors throughout the show. In this way, television viewing has changed from a simple distribution of finalized media and consumption by the audience to an interactive experience in which the audience can communicate with other viewers as well as the cast of the show throughout the show's airing.

Additionally, professional media outlets are now using the Internet for the distribution of their material in conjunction with traditional means. Many networks now post shows after their initial airing on cable and satellite on their websites. Viewers that are unable to view material during the initial airing are able to access it via this means as well as viewers who wish to view the material again. This satisfies the on demand nature of cable programming today, as viewers are demanding more control than ever as to when and where they wish to consume media material. Many programs are also uploaded to sites like Netflix or Hulu as well, which are third party sites that distribute professional media content for a fee. These methods of distribution provide multiple benefits to networks, most importantly the on-demand ability for consumers to access content. Additionally, YouTube (as well as Netflix and Hulu) has a "much broader international reach than whatever American network might have"¹⁴.

Therefore, online distributors are both adversaries to traditional networked television, as well as methods for networks to reach viewers in unprecedented ways. Because of their ability to distribute professional content in a similar fashion, Hulu and Netflix are likely the major adversaries to YouTube. However, YouTube provides different material than its competitors in that it is the most popular source of user generated content on the Internet, which certainly appeals to a different audience. This means that YouTube and Hulu follow very different methods of advertising, distribution, and format in order to appeal to slightly different markets.

In "Online Video Business Models: YouTube vs. Hulu" by Juan Artero, the author is interested in the competition between YouTube and Hulu and seeks to understand which may have the better video market strategy. At the time of the article's writing, neither had proven to be more successful than the other, and the online video streaming market was still young. According to Artero, "YouTube is a vehicle for individual public expression... [and] encourages the development of subcultures around a certain sense of community"¹⁵. He also states that YouTube is unique in that it has a social aspect, while Hulu's function is the distribution of material produced professionally by the major networks which stems from the initial creation of Hulu by television networks NBC Universal and News Corporation¹⁶. Therefore, the two sites were created in different ways in order to appeal to entirely different audiences; namely audiences seeking amateur content and audiences that are looking for professional content in an on-demand location. The creation of Hulu was a necessary step for these networks as "young spectators [were] abandoning television in favor of the Internet, given the pleasure to be derived from appropriating content in their own way"¹⁷. The creation of Hulu can be understood as a direct consequence of market pressure applied by online video sites like YouTube, which had already become popular under the supervision of Google by the time Hulu was established.

The shift to the online space by networks was intensely influenced by online sites like YouTube. However, that does not mean that YouTube is entirely separated from the influence of these sites, as well as from network programming. In fact, the channel format that YouTube now utilizes in its organization can be attributed to the influence of networks. In the current YouTube format, users have a "channel" from which they broadcast and users visit content creators' channels in order to view their material. Additionally, YouTube's adoption of professional material onto the site further exemplifies the need for YouTube to capitalize on content that helps to corner another aspect of the media market previously untouched by YouTube but directly under the jurisdiction of other sites like Hulu.

Therefore the gap between YouTube and Hulu, as well as to network television is shrinking. Networks are working to become more social, utilizing tools like Facebook and Twitter, while Hulu directly adapts professional material from networks, and YouTube adapts more professional content and has reformatted into channels. There is still a gap between each player in this media triangle, however. Networks still produce professional content and are restricted to what they can do within a live cable programming framework. Hulu can only adapt what content is allowed by networks or can be produced within the confines of the Hulu network. YouTube is restricted as to how much professional content is allowed onto the site, but provides an immense quantity of user material which varies in quality.

YouTube still has one major feature that sets it apart from the other two, which has allowed it to become the largest producer of media content today. Co-creation, or social product development, is a feature of YouTube that truly makes the platform unique. "Co-creation denotes a product development approach where customers are actively involved and take part in the design of a new offering"¹⁸. Because of the social aspect of YouTube, viewers are able to actively take part in the development of material that they will then consume. Users are able to view material published by a content creator and then are able to request changes to the material, future projects, etc. through the use of the comment system. Content creators are able to respond to these requests both through responses in the comment system and through integration of these ideas in future material. Therefore, there is a co-

creation of material being produced on YouTube channels, and an interesting dynamic appears between the producer and consumer in the YouTube sphere that is unlike anywhere else. The producer and consumer are able to communicate and collaborate in an unprecedented way through the YouTube system, and material can be customized to the needs of a particular channel's viewers.

This truly sets YouTube apart from Hulu or the major networks, which are able to respond to viewers but in a much slower fashion. YouTube provides an immediate feedback system that content creators can choose to respond to, while networks are typically working in advance prerecording material and cannot respond to viewer requests in an efficient and timely manner. In much the same way, content creators can respond to other creators in an efficient manner as well. In "Visual Memes in Social Media: Tracking Real-World News in YouTube Videos" by Lexing Xie, Apostol Natsev, John Kender, Matthew Hill, and John Smith, the authors explore the use of "visual memes" in YouTube. Visual memes are a way to classify popular material on YouTube with a specific focus on the redistribution or reposting of material¹⁹. They found that content creators would repost video segments of images and users "tend[ed] to create/curate selections based on what they liked or thought was important"²⁰. Users would repost, sometimes without editing and sometimes with minor editing, in order to endorse the material. The authors stated that reposting of material is considered a stronger endorsement as it requires more effort than "simply viewing, commenting on, or linking to the video content"²¹. In this way, uploaders are actually able to respond to one another in much the same way that uploaders and viewers are able to communicate through the YouTube framework.

Because of these features, YouTube is unique in that it creates a community unlike anything created by the networks previously. Therefore, the transition of YouTube celebrities from the YouTube culture to the culture of networks is not as simple as merely transitioning material into a new forum. Material must be created without the community co-creation allowed by YouTube, and the YouTube framework that steers views from one video to another is lost. Therefore, content creators need to be exceptional enough to drive traffic on their own without the aid of their viewer community.

4. Shift To Cable

There have been numerous success stories of YouTubers moving to professional media, as stated previously. Justin Bieber is likely the best example of this transition, starting out with homemade videos of himself singing which eventually garnered millions of views and eventually gaining the attention of Usher who would sign him to Island Def Jam Recordings²². Upon signing the record deal Bieber's fame would soar to superstardom. Other artists like Soulja Boy Tell 'Em and Greyson Michael Chance also found similar popularity, although falling somewhat short of the massive popularity of Justin Bieber. There has emerged a trend of success stories from Youtube content creators, but notably a vast majority have been in the music industry. This may be due to the direct adaptability of YouTube content into the professional media format. Music artists can publish a video onto YouTube that can directly be adapted into a live show or reworked professionally while following the same music video format. Therefore, the skills necessary to become successful, particularly in the music section of YouTube, is directly adaptable to success in professional media spheres.

Other forms of media, however, have proven to be much more difficult to transition. Lucas Cruikshank, the creator of the YouTube channel "Fred," signed a deal with Nickelodeon Studios in order to transition his popular YouTube persona over to the network²³. Beginning in November 2012, the show *Marvin Marvin* began airing to a national audience through Nickelodeon, and to critics' delight, by April 2013 the show had been cancelled. Before its cancellation, the show had accumulated a score of 2.3 out of 10 based on 778 user reviews on the popular IMDb website – an abysmal score²⁴.

Dane Boedigheimer hoped for a better public response when he signed with Cartoon Network in order to begin a new show based off his popular YouTube show, *The Annoying Orange*. Over the first two years of publication, his YouTube show obtained more than 800 million views on YouTube, and so Boedigheimer decided to pursue a television program²⁵. At first, he struggled to find a network that would take his idea, so he took an unorthodox measure and created his own pilot episode, which lured Cartoon Network into a deal that began the television series, *The High Fructose Adventures of Annoying Orange*. By the time that the first episode aired, the YouTube channel had surpassed a billion views, and Cartoon Network's Rob Sorcher, chief creative officer at Cartoon Network stated that he was "excited about the prospect of bringing Annoying Orange to TV, in part because so much of the work of amassing a following [had] already been done online"²⁶. Executives were optimistic about the switch from YouTube to cable, and were interested in how business could potentially be conducted in the future.

Much to their delight, *Annoying Orange* premiered as the top rated telecast of the day among boys six to eleven, and was successful among young audience upon its debut²⁷. Currently the show is still on the air, but reviews show that the initial feedback was short lived. Reviews for the show have been on a downward slide since its inception, now holding an IMDb rating of only 2.6 out of 10 based on 979 reviews, only marginally better than *Marvin*, *Marvin* which was cancelled in April 2013²⁸.

Lucas Cruikshank and Dane Boedigheimer both completed a transition to network television, and both of them struggled in the effort to capitalize on a market previously untapped by their content. Other Internet adaptations to network television like “\$#! My Dad Says,” a comedy based on a blog, and “Quarterlife,” a show derived from a Web drama, were cancelled within a single season²⁹. In addition, Ray William Johnson, owner of the currently most subscribed YouTube channel and author of the popular YouTube show “=3,” has recently announced a television deal with FX Networks³⁰. As of yet there is no set date for the first airing of the show, but the failures of previous famous YouTubers in transitioning to network television may foreshadow the new deal. Therefore, it is essential for any YouTube celebrity that proposes to transition to network television to understand what needs to be done to effectively complete the transition.

Likely, the issue is simple. YouTube celebrities have more than proven that it is possible to introduce their material into the professional media market; however this has only been effectively completed by those with specializations in industries that can appropriate their material with little or no changes to format. Therefore, YouTube celebrities with specializations in music or comedy may be more successful in transitioning that those in categories that are adaptable to television sitcoms or dramas. Because YouTube culture and network culture is much different, YouTubers that have come to rely on the YouTube community in shaping the way that their shows progress and are formatted will have to adapt. Only those content creators that are able to make material through their own creativity and personal drive will be able to succeed in the network culture. They also need material unique enough to drive traffic to their show without the aid of YouTube’s architecture, which has been proven to successfully drive traffic.

5. Conclusion

Content creators that can adapt to the change in culture will likely be able to find success in the transition from YouTube to network television. However, this is not a certainty by any means. The frontrunners in YouTube have paved their way and have proven themselves worthy of views from an audience that seeks user generated material. This audience likes to collaborate in the creation of material, and will support content creators that are willing to work with their community in providing material that the community desires. Network television works in a much different format, where views are becoming harder to obtain through a national migration away from cable providers, and the competition between professional content creators has been developing for decades.

However daunting this transition may seem, it is still of note that this migration from YouTube to television is still a very recent trend. Although there has been very little success in effectively completing this transition so far, by no means does that imply that this cannot be done. YouTubers need to understand what this transition will require, and those who will need to adapt to the traditional thirty minute network format must discover a way to adapt their material from the unrestricted time slot allowed by YouTube to this format. Almost unquestionably, in the near future someone will discover a way to make this transition successfully, and they will set a precedent that may well shape the way that network television recruits, develops, and operates moving forward.

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