

TECH

Kids Love These YouTube Channels. Who Creates Them Is a Mystery.

Almost anyone can upload videos to YouTube—but the difficulty identifying kids content creators fosters a ‘lack of accountability,’ a critic says



Screenshot from ‘Bath Song’ on YouTube’s CoCoMelon channel—a video that has been viewed 1.4 billion times.

By Yoree Koh and Betsy Morris

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The most popular YouTube channel for children features a video of animated toddlers in a bubble bath singing along to the “Baby Shark” melody. The video, on the CoCoMelon channel, has been viewed 1.4 billion times and has generated millions of dollars in advertising revenue.

Other top 10 kids channels feature “unboxing” videos of children unwrapping presents and shrieking with joy, and reviews of popular toys.

These video channels all share one thing in common: It is almost impossible to find out who is behind them.

YouTube doesn’t require content providers to identify themselves, and many don’t provide clues beyond the country where they are located. Even then, it isn’t clear whether the information is accurate: On the “Kids Diana Show” channel—where a little girl pretends to play with toys like a hot-pink Barbie car or gets surprise deliveries of Disney toys—the “about” page says it is located



YouTube is under pressure to take responsibility for its kids content, yet many creators of children's videos remain practically anonymous. PHOTO: LEWIS GEYER/DIGITAL FIRST MEDIA/BOULDER DAILY CAMERA/GETTY IMAGES

in the U.S. but includes links in Russian. Efforts to reach anyone at Kids Diana Show were unsuccessful, as were efforts for many of the other top shows.

Since Google's purchase of YouTube in 2006, it has mushroomed into the world's dominant online-video site. One of its signature charms is that it allows almost anyone to upload content, regardless of their qualifications or motivations.

That model is increasingly under fire, as consumer advocates and lawmakers press YouTube and other social-media platforms to take more responsibility for their content. The issue is particularly fraught surrounding kids, who don't receive the same protections on video-streaming services like YouTube as they do with traditional broadcasting.

A YouTube spokeswoman said that is one reason the company in 2015 launched the YouTube Kids app, which allows parents to handpick content like Sesame Street and PBS Kids for their children to see. "Protecting kids and families is a top priority for us," she said.

The company says it doesn't want kids using the main YouTube platform, but experts say that the larger platform remains the default destination for video consumption by most kids. YouTube has been criticized in recent years for the main site's lack of controls. Most recently, in February, YouTube said it would disable comments on videos featuring minors, after a creator posted a video calling attention to the prevalence of sexually suggestive comments and other inappropriate content alongside those videos.

TOPS FOR TOTS?

Top 10 children's channels on YouTube, ranked by analytics firm Silver Blade according to number of video views in the 30 days ended March 13.

- CoCoMelon
 - Vlad and Nikita
 - Like Nastya Vlog
 - Toys and Colors
 - Kids Diana Show
 - Ryan Toys Review
 - El Reino Infantil
 - Toys and Little Gaby
 - Family Games TV
 - TocToc Toys
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The difficulty in identifying creators of these kids channels “adds to the lack of accountability,” said Josh Golin, executive director of Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood, which has long been critical of YouTube.

Others say the anonymity provides cover for so-called content farms—production companies that generate huge volumes of videos that some say are designed to entrance young children rather than engage them.

The videos often feature recycled content and follow the same few themes—countless versions of “Wheels on the Bus” and “Baby Shark,” real-life toddlers “pretend playing,” a pair of hands teaching about colors with piles of M&Ms or Skittles.

One video featured dropping Mentos candies into Coca-Cola and watching them erupt. “I was waiting for the mother to say, ‘Do you know why this happens?’ But she didn’t,” said Renée Chernow-O’Leary, an educational consultant and former research director for Sesame Street. “What they lack is an intent to educate.”

YouTube says anyone with a Google account can upload content; it requires creators to verify details such as address and phone number before they can collect revenue. The company said it focuses on monitoring content rather than creators themselves and offers guidelines on how to produce family-friendly videos.

The Wall Street Journal was unable to speak with nine of the top 10 YouTube kids channels, as ranked by analytics firm Social Blade. Seven channels either didn't respond to emails and phone messages or couldn't be found; two declined to be interviewed. The 10th, a Spanish-language nursery rhyme animation channel called El Reino Infantil, is run by Roberto Pumar, chief executive of Buenos Aires-based Leader Entertainment. He said he has been in the music business for more than three decades and has more than 60 employees—but “that's not true of all creators, some of who just hit the right formula and all of a sudden became popular.”

A top channel can be big business. CoCoMelon, the top-ranked kids channel, pulls in as much as \$120 million a year in advertising revenue, Social Blade estimates. And their influence goes beyond their own traffic: The most popular channels spawn hundreds of copycats mimicking their videos in hopes the YouTube algorithm will steer viewers to them.

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YouTube tends to reward channels whose videos increase “watch time,” upload new videos frequently and satisfy keyword searches, according to algorithm and search-engine experts.

The abundance of free content—hundreds of hours of video are uploaded to the site each minute, the company says—has made YouTube something of a digital baby-sitter for a generation of parents. A Pew Research Center survey last November found 81% of parents with children age 11 and under allowed them to watch YouTube; 34% said their children watch it regularly.

Historically, parents and others have cared, often fiercely, about the makers of children's programming. The Christian-themed show “Veggie Tales” stirred controversy more than a decade ago when it was edited to tone down religious references to comply with network television standards. “Teletubbies” drew complaints from parents who worried that the show lacked educational value or that one Teletubby was gay.

Some YouTube creators of kid-focused content have been revealed to have troubling pasts. One popular unboxing channel was run by a former porn star. Other creators have been accused by authorities of abusing the children featured in the videos.

Some parents say they find certain YouTube content disturbingly effective in enrapturing young children.

Johanna Peyton, an Austin, Texas, mother of three, said she initially welcomed YouTube as a distraction for her children—until her daughter, then nearly 2 years old, became fascinated with

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videos of adults and children opening eggs with surprises inside.

“It was disturbing to me that somebody was working so hard on the videos—intricately editing them and using so many

eggs. I remember thinking, ‘What was their agenda?’ ” Ms. Peyton said. “It just felt odd that somebody would be doing this.” She no longer allows her kids to watch YouTube.

The CoCoMelon channel joined YouTube on Sept. 1, 2006, according to its “about” page, which says its goal is “to make learning a fun and enjoyable experience for kids by creating beautiful 3D animation, educational lyrics, and infectious, toe-tapping music.”

SHARE YOUR THOUGHTS

How important is it for you to know who created the videos that your children watch on YouTube? Join the conversation below.

The business took off last year, when its view count jumped to 1.96 billion views in October 2018 compared with 123 million views a year earlier. It now has 43 million subscribers, according to Social Blade.

As with other channels, it isn’t clear who made the videos so irresistible. Two messages sent through the website went unanswered. Treasure Studio Inc., based in Irvine, Calif., is named in CoCoMelon’s terms of service as the corporate parent, but three phone numbers associated with the person behind Treasure Studio were either disconnected or went to the wrong person. Messages sent to a man named in the company’s articles of incorporation drew no response, as did queries to about a half dozen of its workers who cited the firm on Facebook and LinkedIn.

—Arian Campo-Flores and Jim Oberman contributed to this article.

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