

'I am so tired': YouTuber Tom Scott ends Things You Might Not Know

Publication Date: 2024-01-05

Author: Alex Hern

Section: Technology

Tags: YouTube, Social media, Digital media, news

Article URL: <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2024/jan/05/youtuber-tom-scott-ends-things-you-might-not-know-series>



Ten years ago, Tom Scott held up his phone camera and recorded a 90-second video about traffic lights on bridleways. In Britain, we have pelican crossings, toucan crossings and puffin crossings, he explained, "and then, because all those are named after flying things, we have this: a pegasus crossing. And that is a thing you might not know." And then, a day later, he posted another "thing you might not know", about Battersea heliport. And then another, about flammable orange oil. And more and more. The cadence settled down to one a week, but the videos kept coming. And then, just as suddenly as they started, they stopped. On New Year's Day, exactly a decade since the first Things You Might Not Know video was published, Scott posted his last. "I've been throwing stuff at the internet since 1999, and for many, many years, that stuff went almost nowhere," he said on the valedictory posting. "I remember thinking so many times during all those years ... will any of this stuff I'm making ever work? Well, this did." He is not the first enormously successful YouTuber to step back from the platform. "Creator burnout" is a regularly discussed topic among influencers of all stripes – though often behind closed doors, as online celebrities have learned that seemingly devoted audiences might be unpleasantly unsympathetic to complaints about the grinding schedule of content generation. It has been five years since the beauty influencer Zoe Sugg posted her last Zoella video to the platform, and in the intervening years all but one of her fellow "Brit Crew" generation of YouTubers have slowly dropped off as well. But Scott stands out in quitting on his own terms. He has more than 6 million subscribers on the platform as well as a popular newsletter and podcast – despite which, some readers may be more likely to recognise him from his showing in last year's Christmas University Challenge for York. "I never got to space. I never got to the ocean depths, and I never got to fly, harnessed, underneath a helicopter. I couldn't find the excuse to do that one. But I never missed a week," he said in the final video. If anything, Scott accelerated into the end, filming videos about the National Grid, training boats for cargo ship navigators, and a 10-minute examination of every mistake he has ever made on the channel. So why stop? "This is my dream job and I have a lot of fun doing it," he says. "I know I'm incredibly lucky, but a dream job is still a job, and it's a job that keeps getting bigger and more complicated and I am so tired. "I could keep making bigger and better things, keep climbing the ladder, build a business, hire full-time employees, and end up as a manager, and that would be great for someone who isn't me. But I know I'm bad at that, and I'd hate every second of it. So option two. I could not do that." Speaking to the Guardian, Scott said the vast changes to YouTube in the years since he started Things You Might Not Know helped settle his choice. "It feels like a lot of people who've been making long-form videos have recently announced ... not retirements but reductions, step-backs. Everyone I know is noticing their views slowly falling, and therefore their ad revenue reducing.

“YouTube is this strange aberration in the history of internet platforms. No other company decided to share so much of their ad revenue with creators. Whoever made that decision, back when the YouTube Partner Programme started in 2007, must have been taking a wild bet. I’ve no idea how it happened. And it paid off! The result was a whole ‘creator economy’, a brand-new medium that could not have existed any other way, and which has allowed artistic creativity that would otherwise have been impossible. “But building your business on the back of someone else’s business is never a good idea – even if it is the only option. Between the decline in long-form viewers, the threat from junk zero-effort generative AI channels that are only going to get better, and the sheer mass of competing video options ... I think it’s going to be a difficult few years.” The internet is very different from when Things You Might Not Know started, but Scott doesn’t think the success he found is necessarily harder to achieve than it was – or easier. “Back when I started, making money from something like this wasn’t really an option, unless you wanted to get hired by some advertising agency or spotted by some talent scout. So while I can’t predict the future, and I’ve been doing this so long that I have no idea what it’s like for people starting out today ... I’m pretty sure passionate people will keep creating stuff anyway.”