

Something is wrong on the internet



James Bridle [Follow](#)
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I'm James Bridle. I'm a writer and artist concerned with technology and culture. I usually write on my own blog, but frankly I don't want what I'm talking about here anywhere near my own site. Please be advised: this essay describes disturbing things and links to disturbing graphic and video content. You don't have to read it, and are advised to take caution exploring further.

As someone who grew up on the internet, I credit it as one of the most important influences on who I am today. I had a computer with internet access in my bedroom from the age of 13. It gave me access to a lot of things which were totally inappropriate for a young teenager, but it was OK. The culture, politics, and interpersonal relationships which I consider to be central to my identity were shaped by the internet, in ways that I have always considered to be beneficial to me personally. I have always been a critical proponent of the internet and everything it has brought, and broadly considered it to be emancipatory and beneficial. I state this at the outset because thinking through the implications of the problem I am going to describe troubles my own assumptions and prejudices in significant ways.

One of the thus-far hypothetical questions I ask myself frequently is how I would feel about my own children having the same kind of

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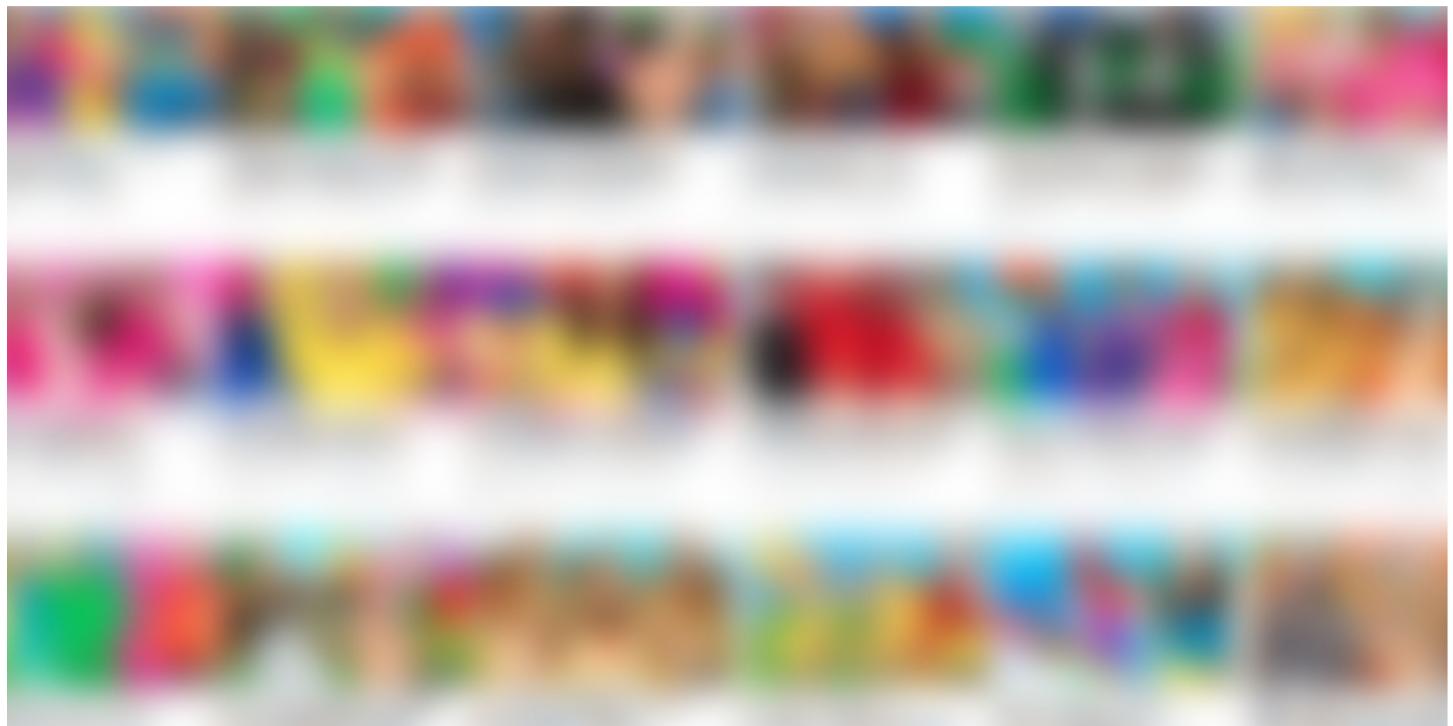


Play Go Toys' channel consists of (I guess?) pirated Peppa Pig and other cartoons, videos of toy unboxings (another kid magnet), and videos of, one supposes, the channel owner's own children. I am not alleging anything bad about Play Go Toys; I am simply illustrating how the structure of YouTube facilitates the delamination of content and author, and how this impacts on our awareness and trust of its source.

As another blogger notes, one of the traditional roles of branded content is that it is a trusted source. Whether it's Peppa Pig on children's TV or a Disney movie, whatever one's feelings about the industrial model of entertainment production, they are carefully produced and monitored so that kids are essentially safe watching them, and *can be trusted as such*. This no longer applies when brand and content are disassociated by the platform, and so known and trusted content provides a seamless gateway to unverified and potentially harmful content.

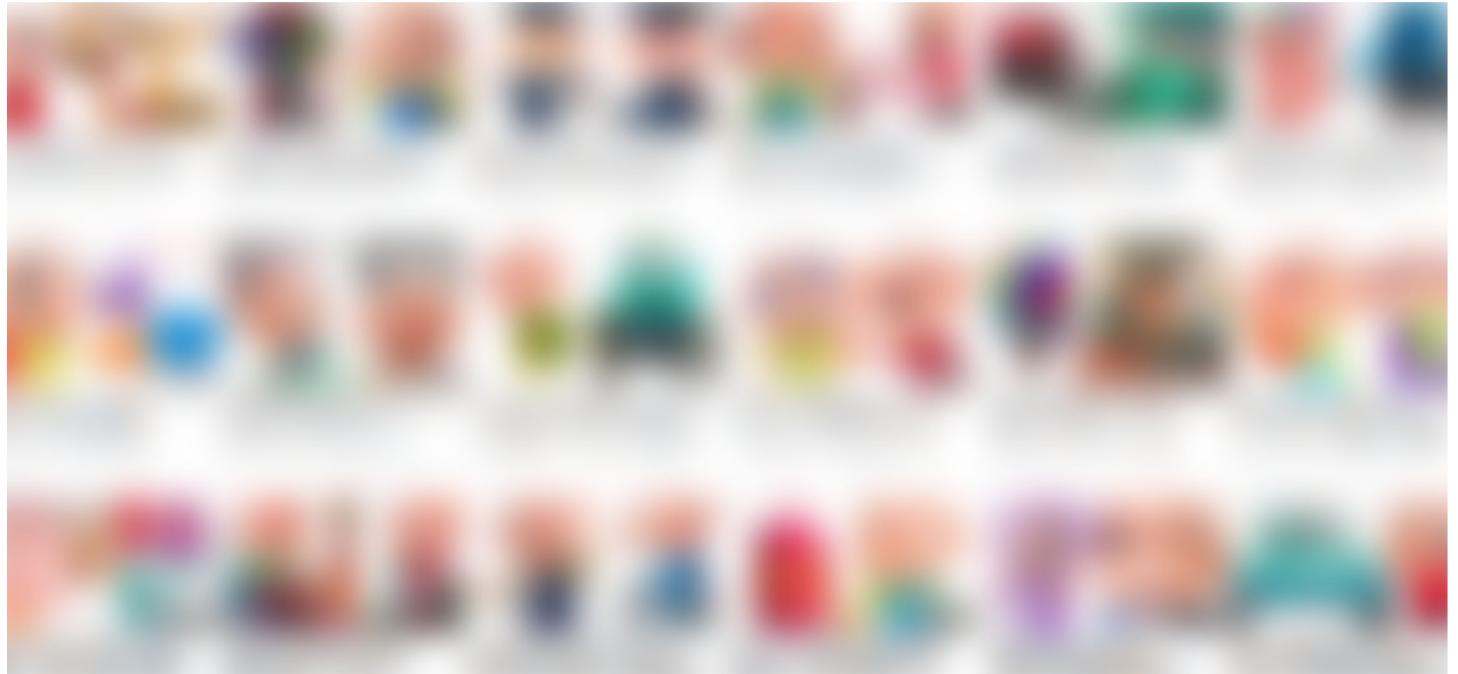
(Yes, this is the exact same process as the delamination of trusted news media on Facebook feeds and in Google results that is currently wreaking such havoc on our cognitive and political systems and I am not going to explicitly explore that relationship further here, but it is obviously deeply significant.)

A second way of increasing hits on videos is through keyword/hashtag association, which is a whole dark art unto itself. When some trend, such as Surprise Egg videos, reaches critical mass, content producers pile onto it, creating thousands and thousands more of these videos in



What I find somewhat disturbing about the proliferation of even (relatively) normal kids videos is the impossibility of determining the degree of automation which is at work here; how to parse out the gap between human and machine. The example above, from a channel called Bounce Patrol Kids, with almost two million subscribers, show this effect in action. It posts professionally produced videos, with dedicated human actors, at the rate of about one per week. Once again, I am not alleging anything untoward about Bounce Patrol, which clearly follows in the footsteps of pre-digital kid sensations like their fellow Australians The Wiggles.

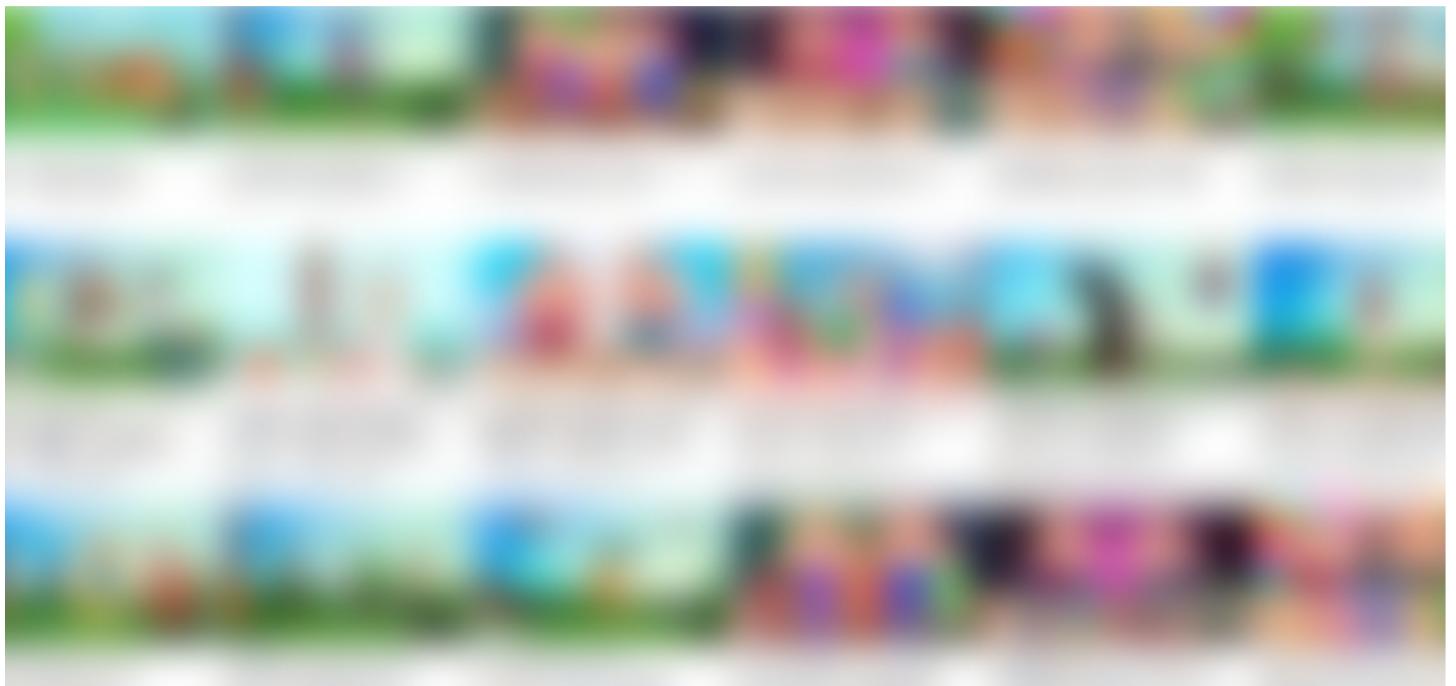
And yet, there is something weird about a group of people endlessly acting out the implications of a combination of algorithmically generated keywords: “Halloween Finger Family & more Halloween Songs for Children | Kids Halloween Songs Collection”, “Australian Animals Finger Family Song | Finger Family Nursery Rhymes”, “Farm Animals Finger Family and more Animals Songs | Finger Family Collection - Learn Animals Sounds”, “Safari Animals Finger Family Song | Elephant, Lion, Giraffe, Zebra & Hippo! Wild Animals for kids”, “Superheroes Finger Family and more Finger Family Songs! Superhero Finger Family Collection”, “Batman Finger Family Song — Superheroes and Villains! Batman, Joker, Riddler, Catwoman” and on and on and on. This is content production in the age of algorithmic discovery — even if you’re a human, you have to end up impersonating the machine.



Other channels do away with the human actors to create infinite reconfigurable versions of the same videos over and over again. What is occurring here is clearly automated. Stock animations, audio tracks, and lists of keywords being assembled in their thousands to produce an endless stream of videos. The above channel, Videogyan 3D Rhymes — Nursery Rhymes & Baby Songs, posts several videos a week, in increasingly byzantine combinations of keywords. They have almost five million subscribers — more than double Bounce Patrol — although once again it's impossible to know who or what is actually racking up these millions and millions of views.

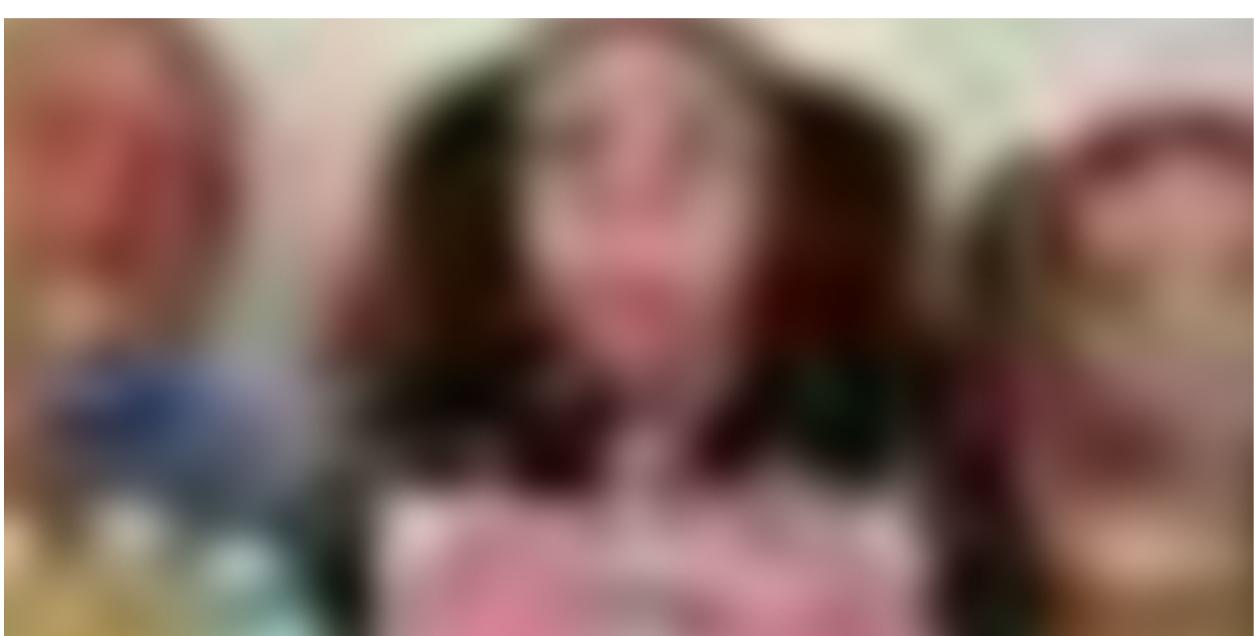
I'm trying not to turn this essay into an endless list of examples, but it's important to grasp how vast this system is, and how indeterminate its actions, process, and audience. It's also international: there are variations of Finger Family and Learn Colours videos for Tamil epics and Malaysian cartoons which are unlikely to pop up in any Anglophone search results. This very indeterminacy and reach is key to its existence, and its implications. Its dimensionality makes it difficult to grasp, or even to really think about.

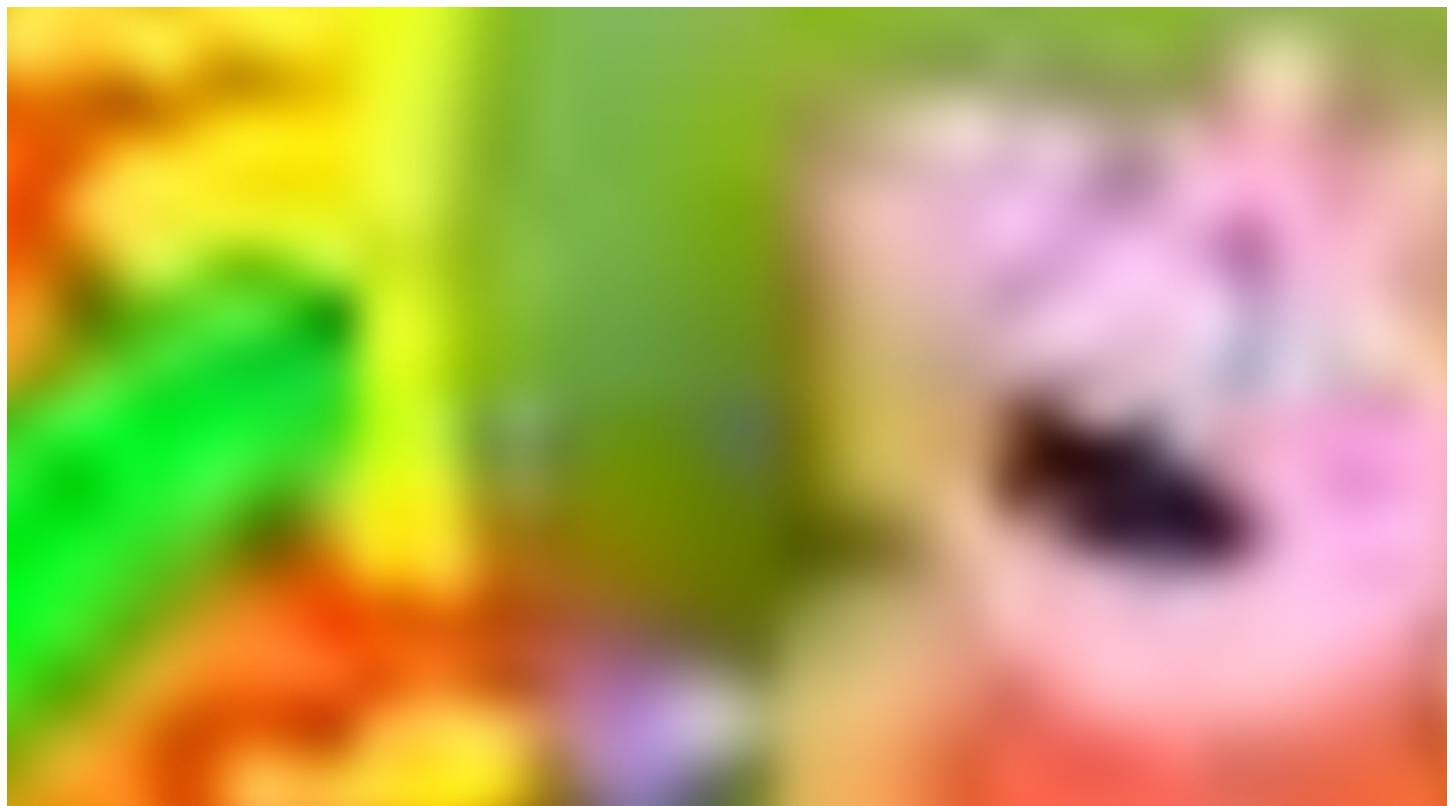




The video's creator, BABYFUN TV (screenshot above), has produced many similar videos. As many of the Wrong Heads videos as I could bear to watch all work in exactly the same way. The character Hope from Inside Out weeps through a Smurfs and Trolls head swap. It goes on and on. I get the game, but the constant overlaying and intermixing of different tropes starts to get inside you. BABYFUN TV only has 170 subscribers and very low view rates, but then there are thousands and thousands of channels like this. Numbers in the long tail aren't significant in the abstract, but in their accumulation.

The question becomes: how did this come to be? The “Bad Baby” trope also present on BABYFUN TV features the same crying. While I find it disturbing, I can understand how it might provide some of the rhythm or cadence or relation to their own experience that actual babies are attracted to in this content, although it has been warped and stretched through algorithmic repetition and recombination in ways that I don't think anyone actually wants to happen.



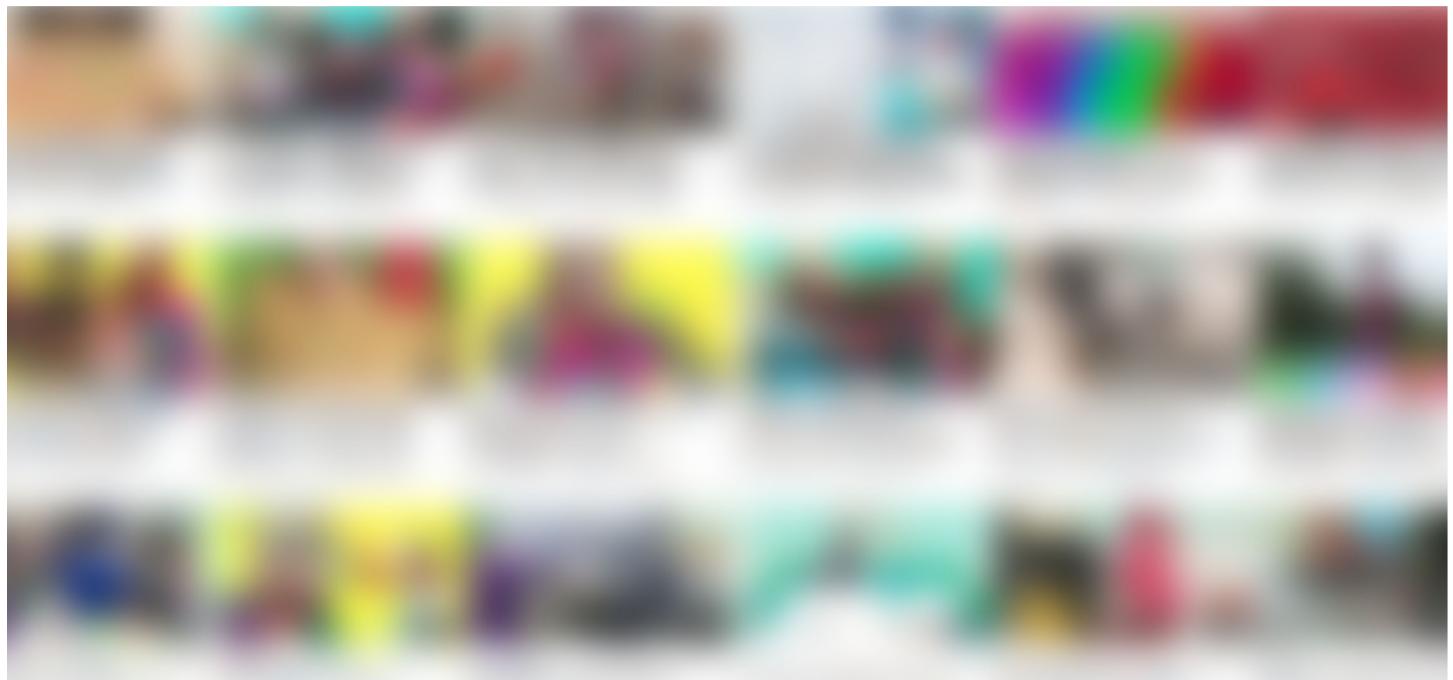


A step beyond the simply pirated Peppa Pig videos mentioned previously are the knock-offs. These too seem to teem with violence. In the official Peppa Pig videos, Peppa does indeed go to the dentist, and the episode in which she does so seems to be popular — although, confusingly, what appears to be the real episode is only available on an unofficial channel. In the official timeline, Peppa is appropriately reassured by a kindly dentist. In the version above, she is basically tortured, before turning into a series of Iron Man robots and performing the Learn Colours dance. A search for “peppa pig dentist” returns the above video on the front page, and it only gets worse from here.

[**Edit, 21/11/2017:** the original video cited here has now been removed as part of YouTube’s recent purge, although many similar videos remain on the platform.]

Disturbing Peppa Pig videos, which tend towards extreme violence and fear, with Peppa eating her father or drinking bleach, are, it turns out very widespread. They make up an entire YouTube subculture. Many are obviously parodies, or even satires of themselves, in the pretty common style of the internet’s outrageous, deliberately offensive kind. All the 4chan tropes are there, the trolls are out, we know this.

In the example above, the agency is less clear: the video starts with a trollish Peppa parody, but later syncs into the kind of automated repetition of tropes we’ve seen already. I don’t know which camp it belongs to. Maybe it’s just trolls. I kind of hope it is. But I don’t think



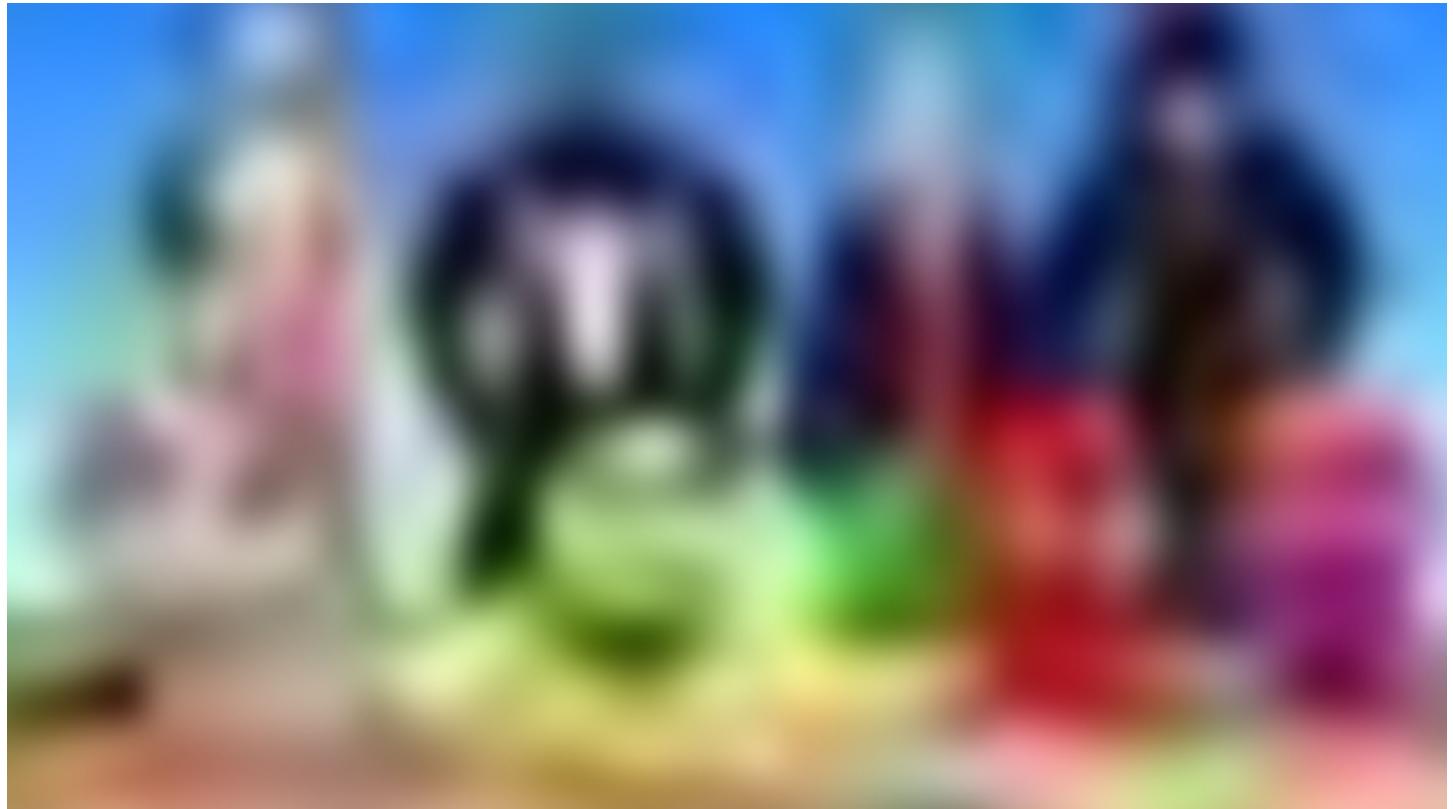
Good Baby Toys channel

Here's what is basically a version of Toy Freaks produced in Asia (screenshot above). Here's one from Russia. I don't really want to use the term "human-led" any more about these videos, although they contain all the same tropes and actual people acting them out. I no longer have any idea what's going on here and I really don't want to and I'm starting to think that that is kind of the point. That's part of why I'm starting to think about the deliberateness of this all. There is a lot of effort going into making these. More than spam revenue can generate — can it? Who's writing these scripts, editing these videos? Once again, I want to stress: *this is still really mild, even funny stuff compared to a lot of what is out there.*

Here are a few things which are disturbing me:

The first is the level of horror and violence on display. Some of the times it's troll-y gross-out stuff; most of the time it seems deeper, and more unconscious than that. The internet has a way of amplifying and enabling many of our latent desires; in fact, it's what it seems to do best. I spend a lot of time arguing *for* this tendency, with regards to human sexual freedom, individual identity, and other issues. Here, and overwhelmingly it sometimes feels, that tendency is itself a violent and destructive one.

The second is the levels of exploitation, not of children because they are children but of children because they are powerless. Automated reward systems like YouTube algorithms necessitate exploitation in the same way that capitalism necessitates exploitation, and if you're someone who bristles at the second half of that equation then maybe



[Edit, 21/11/2017: the original video cited here has now been removed as part of YouTube's recent purge, although many similar videos remain on the platform. The video used animations from the Grand Theft Auto game series overlaid with cartoon characters assaulting, killing, and burying one another.]

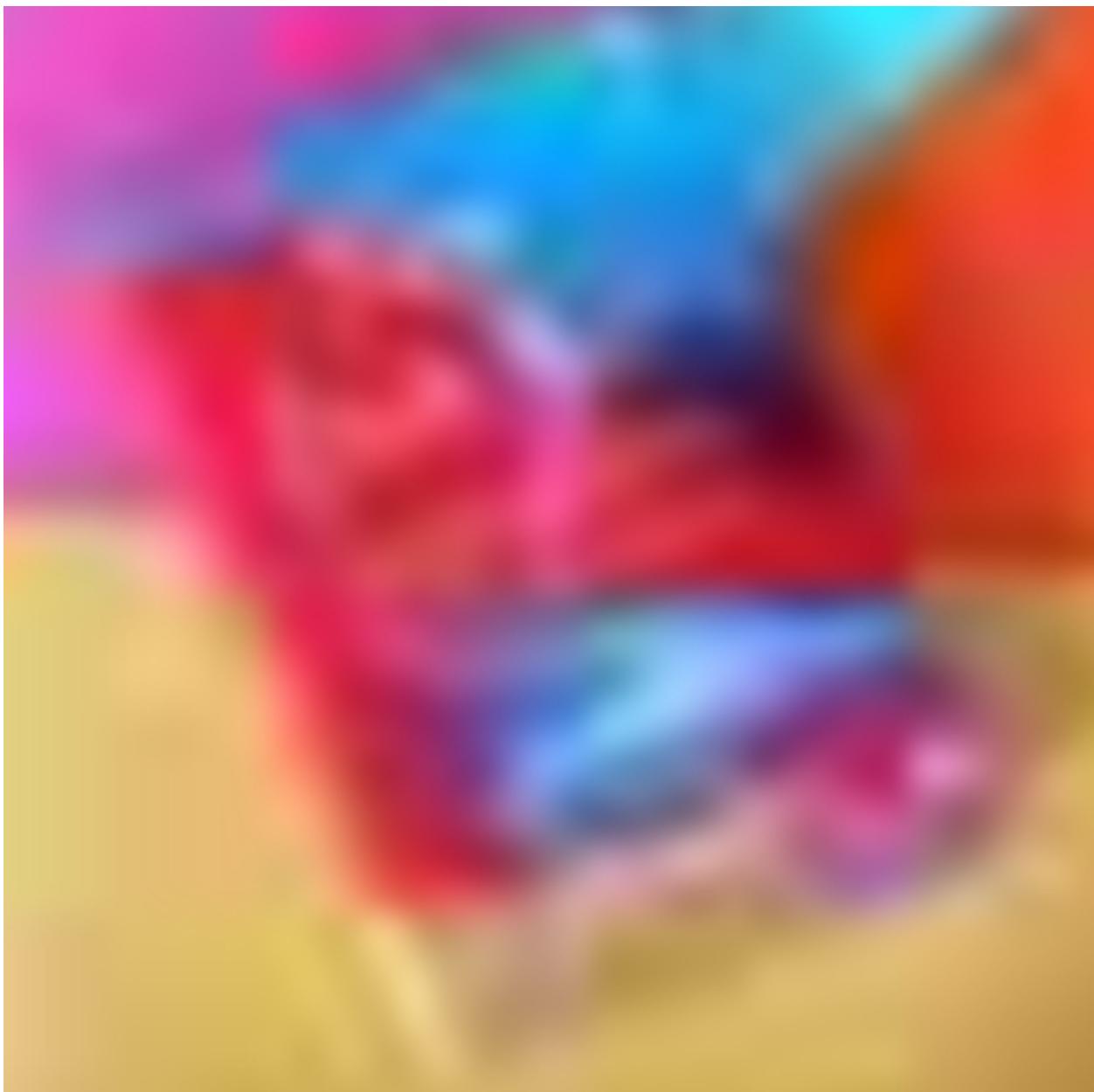
This video, BURIED ALIVE Outdoor Playground Finger Family Song Nursery Rhymes Animation Education Learning Video, contains all of the elements we've covered above, and takes them to another level. Familiar characters, nursery tropes, keyword salad, full automation, violence, and the very stuff of kids' worst dreams. And of course there are vast, vast numbers of these videos. Channel after channel after channel of similar content, churned out at the rate of hundreds of new videos every week. Industrialised nightmare production.

For the final time: There is more violent and more sexual content like this available. I'm not going to link to it. I don't believe in traumatising other people, but it's necessary to keep stressing it, and not dismiss the psychological effect on children of things which aren't overtly disturbing to adults, just incredibly dark and weird.

A friend who works in digital video described to me what it would take to make something like this: a small studio of people (half a dozen, maybe more) making high volumes of low quality content to reap ad revenue by tripping certain requirements of the system (length in particular seems to be a factor). According to my friend, online kids' content is one of the few alternative ways of making money from 3D animation because the aesthetic standards are lower

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This essay forms one strand of my book *New Dark Age* (Verso, 2018). You can read an extract from the book, and find out more, here.



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