Ethnographic Study of Online Entertainers

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Abstract

TODO? ahhhh

Situation

Online video sharing and streaming sites have garnered the attention of audiences around the world in the span of little more than a decade. So widely used are these platforms that it would be fair to call them "publics" in the Deweyan sense [3, 4]; content producers — "YouTubers" and "streamers" — have begun to make their livings on these sites. Indeed, these performers have come to rely on the technical infrastructure these platforms provide as well as the access to audiences that these platforms provide as well. In doing so, these sites have in a real sense democratized media and entertainment industries by making the avenues to large audiences substantially more accessible. And thus, in these transformations into publics, what started as a recreational hobby has become a bustling hub for professional artists to engage with audiences, practice their craft, and hone their skills [7, 11].

Problem

But recently, tensions between these online performers and the platforms on which they work have shaken people's assumptions regarding the nature of the space they're using. Performers on now–defunct Vine demanded — unsuccessfully — to be better compensated [9, 10]; YouTubers meanwhile struggle to defend their unconventional performance work [5] and individually and collectively field accusations of misconduct of various forms [6]. These events fundamentally speak to the contentious politics of an emerging form of expression and art, and specifically to the uncertainty regarding the status of these artists who tend to subvert not just the norms of their chosen arts, but also orthodox labels of performers in the first place.

Insight

Studying contemporary phenomena through an established framing can be a helpful way of making sense of what we've seen so far, as well as providing us with some grounding to make predictions. We've done this before, studying crowd work and gig work as a modern instantiation of *piecework* [1]. This positioning of an existing subject in historical context not only provided us with guidance toward some of the major threads of research in crowdsourcing, but also informed some of the potential futures of crowdsourcing and the ever growing gig work labor markets.

We can liken some aspects of online performance art on YouTube and Twitch to street performance and busking, allowing us to relate ostensibly new phenomena to robust scholarship. As is the case with street performance, online performance isn't restricted to classically trained professionals; instead, performers (both online and in the streets) practice more experimental drawing on their candid interaction with their audiences, which can change from one performance to the next.

Online performers tend not to have the formal training of many conventional performers and artists, instead growing in proficiency and becoming more skilled principally through their practice; in much the same way, street performers are Online performance artists have the ability to engage directly with their audiences and tailor their performances to the desires of the crowd — YouTubers call upon their audiences to like, dislike, and submit comments to the video, while streamers literally change their performances on the fly to suit the whims of those watching and chatting; meanwhile, the most successful street performers typically engage participants, drawing them into the performance itself, even bantering with passersby. Finally, online performance has increasingly become a site of political engagement and activism, sometimes subverting authority — in these cases online moderators and algorithms — in the process of or for the purpose of making a point; the history of street performance as a channel for political action and advocacy has been deeply studied (see, for example, [8, 2]).

Incomplete!

Proposal

- Online streaming, which started as a recreational hobby [7, 11], has become a growing industry for entertainers. Further, it has "democratized" entertainment, providing people with a public space (e.g. YouTube, Twitch, Vimeo, etc…) to explore unconventional performance art
- Our research into crowdsourcing and gig work has yielded a compelling framework for these phenomena as an instantiation of piecework. We've found that this approach — that is, drawing parallels with historical phenomena — can generally give researchers of sociotechnical systems substantive framing of a research space.
- To some extent, this can be likened to **street performance** inasmuch as
  - the public space allowed non–experts to engage in their craft without commitment, formal training, etc…
  - entertainers could get more direct feedback from their audience than other avenues could afford them
  - entertainers could (and did) subvert authorities (offline, that was the police; online, that's YouTube's moderator team)
- **But** there are questions about the politics of (grassroots, potentially subversive) performance art. [al2: need a clearer **research question**?]
- When we look at this dimension of online performance art, the metaphor begins to break down:
  - policies and rules are enacted and enforced opaquely, seemingly arbitrarily on private settings
  - the notion of the public in this instance is broken, as the phenomenon of shared experience doesn't translate online
  - communication between the performer and the audience is carefully mediated (and literally moderated) by the platform itself
  - online performances are (generally) more permanent than street performances [al2: technology has thrown a wrench into this lately, with cameras allowing us to record street performances and tools making it impossible (or at least difficult) to save online streams, but *let's not worry about all that*.]
- So while there are compelling parallels between online performances and the street art of busking, this has only taken us partway in answering important questions about a rapidly growing field.

Research Plan

References

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