Ethnographic Study of Online Entertainers

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Abstract

[al2: something along the lines of: online performers are becoming a big deal, and these performers are possibly the forerunners of a new type of expression and art. The frustration and turmoil they're experiencing — both interpersonally and with the environment on which they "work" — demands to be better understood if we hope to make informed design decisions that empower these people. We propose to conduct ethnographic fieldwork of this domain, initially informed by a historical framing, but ultimately studying how digitally mediated publics such as these affect the politics of this group of performers.]

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, 12].

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, 11]; YouTubers meanwhile struggle to defend their unconventional performance work [5] and individually and collectively field accusations of misconduct of various forms [6]. These events highlight the politics of an emerging form of expression and art, and specifically the sometimes controversial nature of the experimentation that performers engage in.

One issue frustrating this potential research area is that the platforms have changed so dramatically in as few as 5 to 10 years that it can seem as though researchers are trying to wade through shifting sands. Scholarship on content creators loses bearing rapidly when economic factors motivate aspiring professional entertainers to join the community [7]; the tension between these entertainers experimenting with content remixing and the holders of the copyright of the source material (for example, see [8]) shifts dramatically when the platform's copyright enforcement mechanisms advance not just incrementally but substantially [10].

We recognize that *historical analysis* can be a helpful way of making sense of contemporary phenomena. As we found in a recent paper framing crowd work and gig work as a modern instantiation of *piecework*, scholarship from a parallel or similar domain can provide us some grounding to make sense of what we've seen, as well as inform predictions [1].

To that end, 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.

This connection has purchase, but it has flaws, mostly owing to the unique nature of "networked publics" [2]. For one thing, most video sharing websites keep videos in perpetuity — that is, unless a complaint over copyright infringement is filed, in which case the lifespan of that "performance" can be cut short. The public that congregates around a performer, too, has similar permanence that offline busking doesn't; YouTube comments linger for years after they're made. And these say nothing of the different nature of algorithmic enforcement of rules and policies, and the near–perfect ability of these platforms to redirect revenue and even people's focus instantaneously.

Research Plan

[al2: Basic plan:

- contact YouTube channels that have more than 1M subscribers (and have mentioned YouTube policies at some point (suggesting maybe passing interest in discussing meta topics)?)

- Reach out by any contact methods they provide (if none, then skip)
- Semi–structured interview guiding towards:
  - interaction with platform & its designers
  - engagement with audience
  - coordination with other YouTubers (if any)
- tentative questions include:
  - platform questions
    1. when did you switch to (streaming/YouTubing) as primary career?
    2. what's YouTube's relationship with you?
    3. if you were telling a new YouTuber how to get started, what would you say they should know about YouTube (the system, the company, etc. . .) that's not immediately obvious?
  - audience questions
    1. how do you interact with audiences?
    2. what sorts of comments do you get?
    3. do you reply?
    4. do you change your future content based on feedback in the comments?
  - peer questions
    1. what's your sense of the community as a whole?
    2. how many other YouTubers do you know (let's say you've had a chat with them in the last month and will probably do so again in the next month)?
    3. are you all cooperative? competitive? what's the culture like?

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