Ethnographic Study of Online Entertainers

Ali Alkhatib

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Abstract

TODO? ahhhh

Situation

In the past decade online video sharing and streaming sites have increasingly taken on characteristics of Deweyan publics [3, 4]. The "YouTubers" and "streamers" who use these platforms have come to rely both on the technical infrastructure these platforms provide *as well as* the sociality of the venue itself. These sites have in some sense democratized media and entertainment for online performers by making the avenues to large audiences substantially more accessible. In these transformations into publics, these sites have grown into bustling hubs for artists to engage with audiences and practice their trade.

Problem

Recently, tensions between 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]. [al2: now i want to say something like "these are all just symptoms of the fact that YouTube and these other platforms aren't the public spaces they were originally perceived to be; in fact these are carefully controlled spaces, and we need to better understand this stuff"]

Insight

Studying contemporary developments through an established lens can be a helpful way of making sense of the phenomena we've seen so far, and provide us with some grounding to make predictions and inform future design decisions. We've done this before, studying crowdsourcing and gig work as an instantiation of *piecework* [1]; this new framing of an existing domain with historical context not only provided us with guidance toward some of the major threads of research in the field of crowdsourcing, but also informed some of the potential futures of crowdsourcing and the even faster–growing gig work labor markets.

To some extent, we can liken online performance art on YouTube, Twitch, and other platforms to street performances. Online performers — streamers and YouTubers in particular — 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

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