

# 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 [9, 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 [10, 11]; YouTubers meanwhile struggle to defend their unconventional performance work [5] and individually and collectively field accusations of misconduct of various forms [8]. 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.

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.

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 Proposal

### Broader Impact

Formally recognized art forms have assimilated emergent genres and types of performance art in the past, and we should expect that they will continue to do so. Jazz was born out of what largely "... was recognized ... as being but one species of the genus, ragtime played by ear by fakers..." [7]. Even further back in history, 17th century street performance in Japan blended "... every imaginable genus and species of popular song and dance..." and kabuki, in its early years, "would hardly have been recognized or condoned [by traditional performers]" [6].

[al2: something like: if this continues, then we should infer that the future of this type of performance art will bear heavily on the direction and trajectory of digitally mediated entertainment and performance]

**Demonstrate viability**

**Expected outcomes**

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