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Celebrity, Seriality, and Corporate Social Media: Alterations to Video Form and Content in the
Transition to YouTube Red

In February of 2005, former PayPal employees Chad Hurley, Steve Chen, and Jawed Karim launched a simple video-sharing platform intended for uploading and broadcasting home videos. Over the course of the ensuing decade, YouTube became one of the most potent media forces in the world, host to billions of hours of footage and an inextricable component of the global corporate media landscape. “YouTube” means many things simultaneously; it has been at once a major instrument of the Arab Spring, an invaluable tool for educators, a window into the lives of the newly-minted crop of celebrity vloggers and influencers, and the hub of populist movements worldwide. It has become difficult to pass any single sweeping statement that encapsulates its various communities, speaks to its various social, creative, and political potentials, or describes all of the ways innovators have harnessed its simple format to create diverse content. That said, YouTube is not a blank canvas; it has increasingly assumed a curatorial position towards the videos it hosts, and its shifting format has begun to influence the kinds of content which can find an audience on the platform. Guided by the requirements of its corporate advertising partners and the ascendancy of streaming sites as its major competitors,

YouTube has increasingly begun to incorporate the hallmarks of more traditional media broadcasting mediums.

In his article “Trust and Sprawl: Seriality, Radio, and the First Fireside Chat” (2014), Frank Kelleter noted that the serial form seems to be inextricably bound to commercialism; he wrote: “It is an interesting question why seriality, a popular storytelling mode in almost any culture at almost any time, only comes into its own as a ‘reigning principle of cultural reproduction’ in capitalist economies. Narratives generating further narratives, money generating further money: more than analogy holds between these types of serial generation and their respective practices of *continuation*” (Kelleter, 46). As YouTube has expanded, both its ties to commercialism and the standardization of its serialism have become incorporated into its structure. In the period between 2005 and 2006, YouTube as a platform existed more as a loose, democratized free-for-all, host to sundry content that existed on a reciprocal, horizontally organized plane of access. During this period, there were no mechanisms by which to distinguish one creator from another, no monetization schemes or corporate investments to contend with, and no web celebrities with their attendant fanbases. YouTube was initially more a social media in the original sense of the term, the site of an essentially unmediated and egalitarian exchange of data suspended between the axes of “private dyadic conversation” and “public broadcasting” on the model of scalable sociality (Miller, et. al, 3).

It was not until Google acquired YouTube in 2006 and began to involve advertisers in the fabric of the medium, that the platform experienced the first significant alterations to its structure and business model. In his book *Signal Traffic: Critical Studies of Media Infrastructures* (2015), Christian Sandvig noted that “While [J.C.R. Licklider’s] notion of an active audience of users

producing their own media is not dead, it has been merged with the desires of traditional one-to-many broadcasters to form an interesting new technological hybrid. To produce this hybrid the Internet has often been willfully bent to train an interactive, peer-to-peer system toward the older commercial vision of ‘mass communication’” (Sandvig, 236). The transformation YouTube underwent over the last decade exemplifies the process of locating and reproducing this composite space between social media and network programming. Initially, the company didn’t have the resources to mediate the abundance of content uploaded onto the platform, and only assumed a more regulatory role as a reaction to copyright claims. Realizing it would be negotiating for its survival with media giants around the globe, YouTube first sought to curtail the publishing of illegal films and concerts by shortening the maximum possible video length to ten minutes in 2006. A more lucrative solution was devised when YouTube partnered with NBC in 2007, conceding a share of ad revenue in exchange for permission to preserve some of NBC’s original content on the site.

Since this decision, advertising has become incorporated seamlessly into YouTube’s business model; commercials constitute an inextricable component of the platform’s audiovisual flow and strict monetization policies have ensured that creators are only reimbursed for content that falls within the guidelines proposed by invested corporations. The latter point especially has been instrumental in YouTube’s transition from a more pure social media forum to an increasingly curated, centralized medium. Since the inception of “YouTuber” as a viable career with the 2007 Partner Program, the parameters determining which creators might have access to that title have been established by advertisers, promoting the reach of content purportedly deemed to be inoffensive and aligned with the normative values that have for so long governed

the operation of traditional broadcasting media. Many LGBT creators especially have complained that their videos have been demonetized simply because they make passing reference to queer identity or relationships. Ash Hardell, a prominent nonbinary YouTuber and LGBT educator, announced in a May 2017 video called “Grace and I need to tell you something...” that they, like many other queer content creators, would need to begin relying more heavily on crowdfunding sources as a result of YouTube’s implementation of aggressive new demonetization policies. “Consequently,” they said, “my revenue has dropped 80% in the last few months simply because I’m gay and like to talk about it... sounds like workplace discrimination to me” (Hardell, 2017).

Corporate interest has also largely informed the structuring of YouTube’s emergent variation on a multi-tiered star system, enforcing a personality network reminiscent of the marketing strategies of early studio cinema. As YouTube has evolved, corporate preferences for promoting the most widely palatable content have helped to distinguish and designate which creators will serve as the public “face” of the platform. In 2014, YouTube ran a series of television spots and rented billboards across the country to self-promote-- an usual move for a social media, but not one for a streaming service--, featuring on each a photo of an apparently family-friendly, successful beauty, lifestyle, cooking, gaming, or education creator. The upbeat ads echoed the kind of commercial content released by television networks or streaming sites to promote top programs or stars appearing on their platform, further advancing YouTube’s public image in the direction of traditional hallmarks of mass communication and public broadcasting. Before the launch of YouTube Red, this campaign was an early indicator that YouTube viewed

itself as in the process of transitioning from a purely social media platform to one with streaming service ambitions.

The unveiling of YouTube Red in 2015 majorly changed the stated goals of YouTube as a platform and constituted the largest step to date towards YouTube's rebranding as a streaming network. For \$9.99 a month, the service provides a handful of features that ostensibly enhance the viewing experience; the two most notable of these are the absence of in-site advertising and the access to YouTube original content. Previously, features such as original content, monthly pay-for-service models, and elimination of advertisements had been distinctive features of sites such as Netflix and HBO, all integral components of their ability to compete with both traditional television providers and sharing services like YouTube and Vimeo. Once YouTube began to emulate its streaming service counterparts, YouTube creators in turn began to change their content to reflect the new affordances of the platform, by engaging with the new provisions to create sponsored original content, starting to structure their videos in terms of seasons and episodes, and tending towards longer videos that closely approach the format of typical half-hour television programming. The new YouTube model now makes use of the hybrid overlap that Sandvig proposed, existing in the halfway space between old and new media because of the input of new corporate managers like those at Google, who Sandvig described as "radicals and upstarts in that they were not working for old television companies, but they were conservative in that they found the Internet's new architecture and distribution system could not provide the older form of mass television, so they sought to revise it by looking backwards for inspiration" (Sandvig, 239).

In searching for a unique attraction for their original content, YouTube capitalized on the star power of the advertiser-friendly personalities they had groomed for homepage presentation. While YouTube Red has distributed a handful of unremarkable documentary films and scripted comedy series, its most popular programming is organized around a handful of serial fiction-reality hybrids that prominently feature popular vloggers. Joey Graceffa's *Escape the Night* takes the time-honored premise of the murder-mystery dinner party-- already compatible with the serial form-- and furnishes it with YouTubers as host and guests, packaging the plot neatly into twelve twenty-minute episodes. Despite poor critical reviews, the show has clearly landed among its target demographic; each episode has garnered tens of millions of hits and the show has since been renewed for a second season. Another favorite, *Rhett and Link's Buddy System*, follows the titular pair in a fictional supplement to their popular morning talk show. In the case of both shows, YouTube has concretized the loosely serial vlog format to more closely fit classic television standards, re-implementing more traditional applications of cliffhanger, serial figure, cross-over, and organized metatextuality.

While typical YouTube content is inherently a serial medium in that it is predicated upon the organization of a narrative parceled into installments, much of YouTube content has historically lacked many of the hallmarks of the televisual serial form. A given channel might feature many kinds of content connected only by the central thread of personality; the attraction of these channels has typically been more heavily informed by access to an individual than involvement in a linear, narrative arc. Ligía Campos de Cerqueria Lana writes of popular Brazilian vlogger Flávia Cavila and the seriality of the vlog in her article "Postfeminist Heroines: Contradictions of Female Audiovisual Reproduction on YouTube" (2017), noting: "There is

continuity in the themes: on [Cavila's] daughter's birthday, a series of videos showed the celebration's preparations (purchases, orders, food preparation and decoration), the time of the celebration and the days after the event. The channel thus represents a serial logic, composed of independent units that are sequenced during the episodes. The aesthetics of serial narrative, whose origins are associated with modernist literature and to *feuilleton*, seeks to conquer the reader through hooks that motivate the curiosity for following the story" (de Cerqueria Lana, 1361). In the case of vloggers, especially, it is the tension between involvement in a real-life narrative unfolding day-by-day and the spatial fleshing-out of the personality's character that constitutes one of the format's central appeals.

In shows like *Escape the Night*, however, YouTube has clearly sought to provide its viewers with a more traditionally linear serialism, couched in a regular episodic structure and sustained by consistent cliffhangers. These structural features are the result of a logical business decision-- as Scott Higgins described in *Matinee Melodrama: Playing with Formula in the Sound Serial* (2016), the ludic potential of the cliffhanger renders it one of the most reliable and engaging storytelling devices of the serial form. He writes: "The best cliffhangers achieved such visual and spatial clarity that viewers might feel something like the game player's sense of agency, tracing out potential outcomes, or playing through the puzzle in the intervening week" (Higgins, 19). The familiar play-space of the cliffhanger, while generally less pronounced in the YouTube space, is both a recognizable access point across a wide audience and a tested mechanism for maintaining viewer engagement.

Escape the Night plays up the influence of early sound serials, relying heavily on the exaggerated repetition that defined the genre. Each episode concludes with the completion of a

team challenge and the death of one dinner guest, typically by unnecessarily ghastly means: exploding chambers, poisoned food, buried alive, etc.. By incorporating the cliffhanger in such a clichéd manner, YouTube harkens back to the foundational programs of serial programming, casting backwards to sustain its foray into uncharted media waters. Higgins wrote that plot devices such as “Rope bridges, fiery pits, buzz saws, crushing rooms, flooding shafts, and sacrificial altars are physical traps with clear operational boundaries: story potential is embedded within concrete space” (Higgins, 19). These elements are not identifiable visual touchstones of the YouTube tradition, but YouTube and Graceffa here are still able to harness the familiar outlines of these devices as a kind of narrative shorthand; because of the ubiquity of early serial patterns, most viewers will immediately understand these items’ significance and operation within the story arc.

Additionally, both *Escape the Night* and *Buddy System* offer effective premises because their protagonists have been established as modified serial figures throughout their earlier YouTube careers. *Buddy System* especially plays upon the tension and intrigue between actuality and fictionality that is embedded in all YouTube personalities, exposing the gap that necessarily exists between the two personae. Because Rhett and Link, individuals who purportedly present their authentic personalities in most of their content, prove to be transplantable to a distinctly fictional extension of their universe, YouTube is able to concretize and exploit their status as serial figures throughout the first season of *Buddy System*. In “Marvel Comics’ Frankenstein: A Case Study in the Media of Serial Figures” (2011), Shane Denson provided the following definition of the serial figure: “The series character exists *within* a series, where he or she develops or evolves; the serial figure, on the other hand, exists *as* a series-- as the concatenation

of instantiations that evolves, not within a homogenous diegetic space, but *between* or *across* such spaces of narration” (Denson, 536). While the title “serial figure” is generally reserved for fiction, over the years, Rhett and Link have developed the kinds of on-camera personae that satisfy the developmentally stagnant, ‘flat’, and transplantable characteristics of the serial figure.

In typical YouTube content, many successful vloggers have established themselves as variants of the serial figure model, assuming larger-than-life, caricatured personalities mapped out across various forms of social media. While real-life personalities can never fully assume the immortality and renewability integral to the serial figure, some vloggers, like Caspar Lee, Tyler Oakley, and Mamrie Hart closely approximate this status, forming themselves into stable characters and finding success in collaborative crossover. Indeed, one of the most successful YouTube genres is the “collab” video, which not only allows creators to double the reach of any given video and access new audiences, but also helped to provide cross-universe fodder for fanfiction, one of the key ludic aspects of the vlogging world. Fanfiction, in turn, does its part to solidify these characters as governed by discrete and consistent laws of their universes, existing outside the video box of their own channels. In focusing on creating content like *Buddy System*, YouTube is adapting its particular mode of serialism and fan culture to a broader frame, molding its prominent personalities into the kinds of figures which have garnered the most popular success in conventional broadcasting.

While YouTube Red’s original content has demonstrated YouTube’s efforts to harness the unique attractions of the medium for a mainstream audience, Sandvig’s hybrid format is also being formed from the other end, as content creators across the platform begin to emulate certain features of the original content. The typical vlog over the years has lengthened from four-to-ten

minutes to over twenty, becoming more easily recognizable as a televisual block of entertainment. Over the last few years, many more creators are also exploring the season/episode structuring format, assuming the framework of more traditional broadcasting composition. Furthermore, savvy corporate investment has ensured that product placement, originally absent or subtle within social media forums, plays an overt and integral role in structuring celebrity vlogger content. While it's difficult to say what the future holds for YouTube as a platform, it's almost certain that vlogger content and YouTube Original content will continue to increasingly resemble one another.

As the company rolls out new services and programming, YouTube continues to define itself against the rubrics of both social media and mainstream broadcasting. The space that it occupies in the present moment is highly unique: no longer a democratized sharing platform, but not quite yet a centralized streaming service, YouTube is reaching both into the past and the future in order to situate itself within the larger framework of serialized mediums. The mode of seriality embodied by YouTube content over the last decade has to an extent evaded the lexical apprehension of media theory, flirting with tradition while continuously innovating new patterns of presenting narrative. As corporations have become more invested, however, YouTube as a platform has begun to make alterations to maneuver its creators towards more recognizable, unilateral patterns of broadcasting. YouTube Red especially has been instrumental in standardizing YouTube's chaotic narrative designs, creating a product which is both more generally consumable by a mainstream audience and more appealing to advertisers. In many cases, this process has involved taking many of the features which attract audience members to the platform, such as deep access to personality, metatextuality across social media, the ludic

potential of the crossover, and play between person and persona, and injecting them into a standard melodrama or reality television show format. The next few years will be instrumental in determining YouTube's eventual structure as a platform, and will serve as an interesting testing ground for determinations about the future relationships of corporations to social media and the appropriate curatorial role of the social media platform.

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