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YouTube as an Innovative and Pivotal Platform

YouTube, when invented, was a one-of-a-kind and innovative video sharing platform. Previously, it was a laborious task to share large video files. YouTube allowed for this process to be consolidated into one seamless, and easy to do, experience. Now anyone can upload a video directly to the site using the embedded technology and share it with a simple copy and paste of the link, or even through streamlined share buttons that are linked to other social media accounts. As a website, YouTube is the second most visited site in the world behind google, bringing in tens of billions of visits every month (McLachlon). While the original goals of YouTube may have been to share content, they have vastly transformed to the point that there are now millionaires who have risen from the platform, whose videos have billions of views. As a social media platform, YouTube excels in its multifaceted approach, allowing for auditory, visual, and textual formats to be used separately, or in unison. These abilities can be defined and further explored by using Nancy Baym’s seven key concepts of social media. These concepts are interactivity, temporal structure, social cues, storage, replicability, reach, and mobility. These terms will serve as keys in explaining the magnitude of what YouTube is capable of as a media platform. Therefore, YouTube is a platform that far exceeds the capabilities of traditional media sources and has allowed for a new era of entertainment and education through its platform. It serves as a pivotal point of innovation and evolution in the media environment.

For the bounds of the research, children are defined as 13 to 18 years old. This is due to the Children’s Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA) and how it limits access to online information of people under the age of 13. By limiting the research to this age group, it also limits the possibility of unsupervised consumption of media being the primary cause for negative outcomes in a child’s behavior. At this age, children are more capable of supervising themselves and acting upon previously established moral backing and habits formed. They also have the mental capacity to be able to distinguish right from wrong and real from fake through a more logical and analytical approach.

Nancy Baym’s seven key concepts of social media highlight what the platform is capable of as a social media artifact, as well as what differentiates it from traditional media sources. YouTube, more than Google, is for many teens the main search engine. It is a platform that offers teens not only entertainment but also generates a sense of community (Pires). The interactivity of the platform allows for more personal connections to the creators, as well as making viewers feel like they are a part of the community. One route by which this occurs is that of interpellation. Through this process, a creator can give an identity to their viewership and add a communal aspect to the interaction of users. By saying things like, “make sure you smash that like button to show your support” or “leave a like, comment, and subscribe to stay updated, it would mean a lot” a creator creates a sense of comradery between viewers. While there are ways to interact with members of traditional media, they typically are a lot harder to do than with YouTube.

The interactivity of the platform is directly impacted by the temporal structure of the content. Viewers interact differently whether they are watching a live stream, a scheduled upload, or randomly uploaded content. A phenomenon that has gained popularity is the idea of a first comment or first like. Creators will occasionally share someone’s post on other social media sites that reference their achievement of being the first to interact. This incentivizes others to interact in the same manner and serves as a form of competition in which viewers can challenge themselves to be as early as possible to the video. This establishes a clear reward, whether it be the gratification of the reciprocated interaction from the creator or knowing that other members of the viewing community will see the earliest comments if they are also early viewers, and even the fact that early comments are more likely to become top comments on the video. A key feature of YouTube is the notification bell that so many creators highlight. By enabling notifications, viewers can be notified the moment a video is uploaded, allowing them to be able to be as early as possible in the interaction. With traditional media, the only way to interact with media personalities is to contact them through some form of social media, or to try and get in contact to their team and people they are connected with. A viewer also has to align their schedule with that of the broadcast if they are not using streaming services.

Live streams offer a different type of interaction where the viewers can respond in real time to the contents of the stream, and where the creator can view these comments live. This can allow for responses to immediate questions as well as suggestions that revolve around the content being shown. In the realm of gaming, this allows for creators to receive immediate feedback and suggestions to help improve the experiences of the viewer and creator. For example, in sports games, particularly Madden, a creator can get advice on play calling, which players or teams to use, as well as being able to answer any questions regarding those choices and expounding upon any relevant information. However, YouTubers do not solely control their fan communities, and a form of collaboration between the YouTubers and their fan community still occurs, which can make fans feel more invested (Tarvin). This type of creator-user connection also develops deeper bonds, as a frequent commenter will be more easily recognized by the creator, and may even receive shoutouts because of it, further influencing people to attend more streams and interact more often. It also allows for a raw and unedited connection to the creator, where they can no longer edit out mistakes or create content centered around the highlights, rather it is more of a direct stream of consciousness and interaction. Traditional media has events like viewing parties, but even then, they are typically very exclusive and limited in access and interactivity with the creator or actor in question. As Nancy Baym highlights, this relationship has positives and negatives. By allowing that type of access to the creator, it can also mean an influx of comments that become too abundant to sort through, meaning many of the comments will be lost or skipped over.

The themes of community on YouTube have evolved over time because of the innovations in technology as well as the push for a sense of community for the sake of marketing and profit. Nickelodeon and nick nation capitalized on this idea in the 90’s which helped propel their popularity (Banet). YouTube took this idea and amplified it, building on the ideas creators produced by referring to their fanbases as friends, family, or their community. Creators even go as far as giving their subscribers a specific name, or as Emily Tarvin details, a demonym. Now every channel with a certain number of subscribers and amounts of other metrics can post to a community tab on their channel. Here they can post links to their merchandise, pictures for the viewers, as well as any updates that they do not want to make in video format. Additionally, they can set extra content behind a paywall that gives more access to the community and subsequently the creators. A few of these uses are custom videos that the general viewers do not have access to, the ability to use custom stickers in streams to stand out more, or a badge near the subscribers’ usernames that shows various things such as the length of the subscription. This type of consumer citizenship is available through the YouTube platform itself, or through the creator and whatever platform they decide to use for the extended access.

Even if the creator does not like the platform’s tools, they can create a discord server for their group that has even more functions. These ideas encourage fans to have an active role in the community and to remain active over time. The most active users are the first to be considered for moderator positions, as well as other positions within the community, even if the only perks are a different color for the presentation of the username, or an arbitrary title next to it. This type of tag makes someone stand out more than the other users and gives them an imagined sense of power such as real-life things with arbitrary titles that do not necessarily reflect the capacity of the user, but rather the length of their subscription, though creators may choose people with similar personalities, or with similar moral codes. Sometimes these extra perks can be accessed directly by paying the creator through third party sites like Patreon.

The social cues available are largely dependent on the type of content produced, the main distinctions are dependent upon the combination of audio, video, and text use, or whether one is the only one used. If a video combines all three, then there are ample cues available, however when one is missing, it becomes difficult to ascertain the exact meaning. For example, in the realm of gaming, some people intentionally choose to never show their face. This is done for many reasons like privacy or just being uncomfortable with so many cues present. However, another reason to avoid the visual cues could be to limit the amount of meaning derived from the creators themselves and to focus the emphasis on the content. As Vivien Burr details, socially constructed ideas can shape the way in which we view specific texts. By removing race and the construction of physical standards, it limits the categorization of the creator. Categories like Black, “Neck-Beard,” nerd, etc… can segment a creator’s viewership and force them into a certain demographic. Though this method has its benefits, a combination of all three of the aforementioned cues allows for a level of connection that is more pronounced than it is in traditional media. You can see the reactions of the person playing the game and have a more empathetic response. This distinction can be seen clearly in the gaming community when the creator plays a game that is frustrating, whether pleasantly or not.

This was one of the reasons for the distinction in the age group for the research. While a child younger than 13 may see any reaction to a frustrating game as justified, an older kid may be able to perceive an emotional response as exaggerated or irrational. Raging videos are a subset of the gaming genre that have been very popular on YouTube. For me, they were entertaining because at some point I had played a game so frustrating that it invoked a physical response. It allowed the sympathetic connection of knowing just how frustrated the creator was, because at some point I had been there. Subsequently, I was also better able to distinguish an over reaction from the genuine ones and developed a more refined ability to tell when someone was overreacting through pretending versus when someone genuinely had problems controlling their frustration. This is what swayed me away from YouTubers like Markiplier and PewDiePie, as I saw them as acting out anger for the sake of entertainment. I believe this is why their viewer base appeared much younger than other people I was watching at the time. The younger kids may not have been able to distinguish the difference due to their lack of regulatory competence as well as their perceived appearance to reality (Hogan). That lack of cognitive function is one of the biggest concerns when it comes to YouTube, especially when advertising is involved.

These ideas highlight the importance of age restrictions and content moderation. With a lack of regulation, people may fall into bad viewing habits. One may end up watching more anti-social media than pro social media because of its physiological effects, as well as the entertainment value of it. Violence is glamorized in America, which can be seen in its fixation on contact sports and the number of movies and television shows that center the plot around violence. The best examples come from superhero movies. In one scene, Peter Parker can reminisce on the advice from Uncle Ben, “That great power comes with great responsibility,” but then have the same character beating someone to near death in the next. Batman, arguably the most notable superhero in the same league as Superman, can be interpreted as a child who never got over his grief and lives his adult life enacting vengeance instead of coping in a healthy way. Some of these ideals protrude their way into YouTube, especially in the realm of gaming.

This is an area in which YouTube fails to separate itself from traditional media, though it is typically through the exacerbation and accessibility of other forms of media. Gaming videos provide ample amounts of media violence, whether it be the commentator lashing out aggressively in raging videos, trolling, or the content of the game itself. A game like Call of Duty is designed around war and the killing of so-called enemy players, with YouTube allowing people to view the content before they are technically old enough to play the game itself. This is a problem that YouTube pushes onto the creators, as they are the ones responsible for tagging content as for kids, or age restricting it to people over 18. YouTube also does not verify the age of its creators, allowing people under 17 to upload content from video games that are rated Mature, for 17+. With monetary incentives to play these games and upload content, it becomes increasingly difficult to stop kids from consuming them. Similarly to a lot of traditional sports, e-sports require years of practice, which usually starts below the age of 17.

Around 2007 to 2008, Machinima, a company who would allow creators to upload and create content specifically for their channel in a mutually beneficial way, started to pay the creators for the content they produced (Savino). This led to an explosion of content surrounding gameplay commentary, which subsequently led fans to want to get to know the gamer on a more personal level. One of the people mentioned in the Savino article is WoodysGamertag, a creator that I used to watch a lot of growing up. He was a grown man who has a family and multiple kids. He would occasionally bring his family onto the channel, and later would even do vlogs to give a more personal account of his current life experiences. This meant he was well suited to discuss life and to share his experiences with the viewer base who was typically much younger than himself. One of the segments he had on his channel was Mail Monday, where he would take questions he received via email and answer them by giving life advice on the topic. This was incredibly helpful, especially since he would talk about topics that at the time, I had no experience with and benefitted a lot from. While it was helpful for me personally, Woody received some backlash for some of his Mail Monday videos, particularly ones involving advice about sex. Since a large portion of his viewers were children, people critiqued the explicit advice and said it was not appropriate for kids. On one hand it is easy to say what he was doing was wrong, but on the other, it provided kids with sexual education that they may have never received otherwise. Regardless of the effect, the intent was good advice and profit due to the increased viewership and connectivity with the viewers. There are countless other YouTubers who also followed the path to fame by creating content based on things they enjoyed as hobbies, as well as creators whose goal was to show off their skill with the hopes of reaching professional levels.

Trick shots and montages were one of the most prominent methods for showcasing skill in the early gaming years on YouTube. Players could upload these highlight reels for people to enjoy, as well as for them to learn from. In a way, these montages functioned in the same way an athletes hudl or highlight tapes would. Sports clips and highlights are widely available on the platform, and it has even become a staple for young players trying to make a name for themselves. The Lions and the Patriots, two NFL teams, gave try outs to kickers who made a name for themselves by uploading kicking trick shot videos to YouTube. YouTube gives people more control over their own career, allowing them to develop a brand that is independent of mass media pressure, though it can have repercussions on their “professional” careers. One such case is that of Deestroying, or Donald De La Haye Jr. During the peak of his college football career, he decided to start a YouTube channel and upload content. This derailed his NFL dreams in one way, but in others, gave it more likelihood than ever. He ended up playing for a team in the CFL, though his tenure did not last long. Similarly, video game players can earn themselves try out spots on professional E-sports teams by showcasing their talents in trick shot montages. These abilities are fostered by the game itself.

There is a reason that certain games become more popular than others, and that is usually because they are more challenging without being too difficult to enjoy. They also follow the standards of good video games as described by James P. Gee. Throughout his article “Good Video Games and Good Learning,” he discusses the many similarities that good learning should have when compared to good video games, and YouTube is the perfect platform to put these ideals to the test and to be able to see their results. Even if a creator is extremely talented at a specific game, the comments will let people know the actual accessibility of the skills being shown. One of the most important functions is that a video game should be pleasantly frustrating. This gives people a goal that is not easily attainable but also is not impossible. This will be different for everyone, but YouTube serves to level the playing field by offering plenty of advice and tips through the platform, whether it be explicitly through tips and tricks videos, or if it is more subtle through social learning which includes observation, imitation, and modeling.

As James P. Gee details, good video games should be pleasantly frustrating as a tool, though everyone may react to the stimuli differently. This highlights another aspect of YouTube that exceeds the typical experience of mass media, the sheer diversity in the realm of creators. One can search the same specific topic and get results from hundreds of different people in the vastly diverse pool of creators. This allows you to find the most pleasurable viewing experience for yourself, whether it be a creator with an energetic demeanor, or one with a smooth, mellow voice who generally does not get too excited. Search algorithms may change the results and reproduce a certain type of creator. Anyone who views YouTube regularly and seeks out their own content past what is simply recommended knows the stereotypical, enthusiastic voice. The one that goes, “Hey guys, welcome back to another video, do not forget to leave a like, comment, and subscribe!” These algorithmic results are common among the first few search results, and while they may not be the best for everyone, they are generally good in terms of content information. However, algorithms increasingly learn and self-sharpen, often causing unintended side effects and amplifying discrimination, refracting and sharpening classed and gendered bias (O’Neil). These results are inevitable when it comes to a search engine algorithm, as it will typically be reflective of larger social ideologies and exacerbate them in many ways. It can be as subtle as people believing men are more knowledgeable in fields that are typically male dominated, or even someone trusting a white creator more than others because of their social position of power in real life.

Gender is a specific topic of interest when it applies to YouTube. Sitewide, about 54% of the users identify as male while about 46% identify as female (McLachlon). While the Overall userbase is relatively split in terms of gender, there is not a lot of data on the demographics of creators sitewide, though of the top ten earners, one of them is a seven year old girl who details her life and has videos with prosocial learning topics (Brown). Data other than earnings is hard to find as it is on YouTube to release that data. Similarly, there is a lack of user data when it comes to the streaming platform twitch as well. This may be due to the focus on profitability by the sites and how they want to keep a hold on their respective markets. If they were to release all of their data, then it would be easier for other sites to try and take away from their market share, capitalizing on the same statistics that YouTube uses to maintain their place in the social media hierarchy. Although YouTube does not produce content, it does actively mobilize its algorithms to manipulate content creators towards cultural outputs that gain the attention of desirable audience segments and demographics (Gillespie). This is similar to the way that traditional media targets specific demographics, like the pre-World War II era of targeting the traditional, white nuclear family. Now YouTube can target a multitude of demographics based on the search queries, as well as watch history and cookie data from other websites. These types of targeted ads are reaching viewers at far greater rates than any other type of advertising can hope to achieve. Google and YouTube may know someone better than they know themselves and that is reflected by the ads and search results. This can be apparent in the types of videos that show up, as well as in the level of understanding those videos portray.

Levels of knowledge on the topics also varies and there are creators for the various levels of understanding. In gaming, there are people who play casually, competitively, professionally, as well as other levels in between. Depending on the type of content desired by the viewers, the level that is sought after will change. Even a pro may take pleasure in watching a beginner take on the challenge of the field. Conversely, a beginner may want to watch better players in order to get tips and strategies to become better at the game they are watching. In traditional media, almost everyone is a professional or someone who is popular in their field. It would be unfair to say they are at the top of their field because they reached the mass media, as they could have had more privilege than others on their journey. On YouTube, this same issue persists though not to the same degree. While production quality and better equipment serves to separate exceptional creators from satisfactory ones, it is not as pronounced of a determinant as it is with traditional media. Better equipment on YouTube serves to make producing content easier and having more money and time to invest means that you can produce higher quality content more easily.

This is representative of the costs and barriers to entry as they relate to YouTube versus traditional media. Previously, an actor or creator would not only have to pay for equipment, but also for the schooling and connections necessary to become an established member in their respective field. People without the necessary financial backing or connections are unable to take the traditional routes to the mainstream. YouTube attacks these ideas as they can rely more heavily on their ability and personality to guide them to success. Their route to success can also vary as it may be because of their personality and entertainment value, their expertise in a particular field, the quality of their production, or a combination of all of those qualities and other factors. A combination is typically how the most successful YouTubers attain their following, and how they use the momentum to continue growth. The bigger a channel gets, the more it needs to invest in itself to continue to grow the brand.

A perfect example is Mr. Beast, a YouTuber whose brand has elevated itself above the platform and has become established across many fields. He now owns Mr. Beast Burger, a satellite burger company, and a line of chocolate bars. By using YouTube as a platform to gain popularity and recognition, he was able to thrust his brand into the mainstream, amassing $54 Million in 2021 (Brown). Furthermore, his videos are viewed just as much as, and sometimes more than, traditional media. His recreation of squid game gained 139 million views in a week, compared to the 111 million in the first month for the actual squid game. Mr. Beast is able to afford these videos through the money he makes from the platform, his many brands and products, as well as sponsorships. These sponsorship deals are mutually beneficial to the brand of the creator and to the brand of the sponsor themselves.

Since YouTube is a social media platform, it can be hard to trust a creator as someone who presents entirely accurate depictions of themselves, or of the information they are conveying. Having the backing of an established brand can help to accredit a creator as viewers might see a brand they saw in the realm of more established media and trust the creator because the brand does as well. Conversely, a brand benefits from the creator in a similar way. Fanbases can be extremely loyal, especially in the community centric environment of YouTube, so fans are inclined to use the same products as they people they enjoy watching. For a company, it may be safe to assume that a consumer will consume the company brand in proportion to how the same viewers consume the brand of the creator. As Stanfill says, “Consumption is expected or obvious for fans” (Stanfill). Subsequently, the bigger the fan someone is, the more likely it is that they have purchased the creators merchandise or the brands that they promote. If Dollar Shave Club, GFuel, or SeatGeek sound familiar, then that may be the result of YouTube, as they are some of the most popular brands who give deals to creators. This relates to the single sponsorship model of traditional media sources, where there is one sponsor for each video that can change depending on the content.

The ideas of trust and reliability are brought into question, especially when dealing with anything internet related. Despite this fact, YouTube is second only to google when it comes to its use as a search engine, with more search queries than Bing, Yahoo, Ask, and AOL combined (Global Reach). This shows the scale of the platform as a source of information and as a place people go to find it. There are YouTubers who are more qualified than professionals in their respective field, but also many smaller channels who may not have the same professional training, though they still have a plethora of valuable information and things they have learned through experience. Trades, and other activities that can be learned as the result of training and practice, are prominent on YouTube. Simple searches could lead someone to being able to complete their own home repairs, as well as being able to diagnose problems that occur with anything that is used frequently. Personally, I use YouTube as a primary source of information rather than text only options. It is incredibly helpful to be able to see exactly what you are trying to get help with. I have used it for anything from car repairs, to learning how to wire outlets in my home. If someone is ever skeptical of what they are seeing, they can cross reference the video with many others.

Related to the ideas of community, the comment section is also a stage for cross reference and providing a multitude of opinions. People do not only group up respective to a specific creator, but they will also group up in regard to specific topics. These communities can be incredibly helpful and welcoming, as well as gatekept and toxic. The attitudes of the members are typically due to the type of content itself. A community built around the usage of guns for fun and sport will probably be exclusionary to someone who believes in harsh regulations on guns, and even if they do not outright exclude, they will try to “educate” and change the opinions of users who do not conform to the identity of the group. This is different in a lot of communities with niche interests, as they are typically smaller and benefit from more users engaging. Rather than exclude, they celebrate new members who show interest in the topic, and allow others to maintain their own opinions within the group, regardless if it differs from the main body or not. Each community has experts who will interject when content is uploaded within their community that is simply untrue, though some may extend that to the content that does match the consensus within the community. This makes the comment section of any video a place that can provide extended details and even corrections to the video, so much so that creators will even address mistakes and credit the commentor for the correction.

YouTube has an unfathomable amount of content, with more content uploaded in a few days than someone could watch in their entire lifetime. According to Susan Wojcicki, the CEO of YouTube, 500 hours of content is uploaded to the site every minute (Wojcicki). Assuming people are getting an average of 8 hours of sleep a day, it would take 1,875 people streaming constantly to be able to keep pace. In the grand scheme of things, there are more viewers than creators so this is not a problem for the masses, but an individual could never hope to achieve that goal, unless they had access to 1,875 computers and more internet bandwidth than is accessible to most people at a time. When searching any one topic, thousands of videos can pop up in the search results. There are 694,000 hours of video streamed each minute, compared to Netflix which clocks in at 452,000 hours (McLachlan). Netflix is locked behind a paywall which YouTube is not, which can be an explanation for the difference, but it is likely due to the content available on the platforms themselves. TV shows are usually about 20-25 minutes or 40-60 minutes. YouTube videos can range anywhere from one second to many hours at a time.

The rest of Nancy Baym’s concepts are indicative of how YouTube amplifies all of the topics that were previously discussed. YouTube has an enormous reach, as made apparent by the hours being watched daily and the number of uploads. Its spread is amplified by the storage aspects of the platform, meaning once a video is uploaded, it is there forever unless it is taken down by the user, or if the platform restricts it for breaking community guidelines, and even then, it may be reuploaded by other users. Expanding on reposts, contents’ replicability means that other creators can use someone else’s content for parody, or even for a reaction. At first, reaction videos received a lot of backlash and were seen as lazy content, but now people love the ability to see what their favorite personalities think of things they have previously watched. Additionally, it can serve as a way to introduce people to content they may have never found themselves. If a viewer sees their favorite creator giving a positive reaction to content, then they know that they would probably enjoy the content just as much. A perfect example of parody done right is the Dragon Ball Z Abridged series made by TeamFourStar. They took everything that made the original series great, condensed it, and exaggerated the characters in a comedic way that is just an extension of the ways the characters normally act. They kept the popularity of the series alive during a time when it was fading fast. Some users even think the abridged series is better than the original, and I am inclined to agree. The mobility of the platform allows people to watch this unfathomable reserve of content from anywhere. It is such an innovative and influential platform, that it has even found its way into a lot of classrooms. YouTube clips were played in every single one of my classes this semester, and many in the past.

The biggest issue that may present itself with YouTube is the lack of regulation. As previously mentioned, the idea of targeted ads is more specific than any traditional media source could ever hope to achieve. YouTube knows its users’ viewing habits, as well as their browsing habits on other sites. This can become a serious problem as advancements in technology are outpacing the ethical and moral discussions that run parallel to it. The very idea of targeted ads is a COPPA violation with the blame being deflected to the user for lying about their age, or onto the parent for allowing the unsupervised use of the platform. The algorithm, while helpful, can be flawed and show harmful videos. It is hard to believe that the algorithms can be so precise and yet fail to realize the actual age of the users of the platform. YouTube and Google have already had to pay millions of dollars in fines for violations, but that is just a tiny fraction of their overall profits.

In conclusion, YouTube excels as a social media platform, as well as an alternative to traditional media sources. Its multifaceted approach combining audio, visual, and textual formats allowing for an all-encompassing experience, or the ability to choose any combination of the three for an intended effect. Nancy Baym’s seven key concepts serve as a way to highlight the extent of these capabilities and to provide a framework for how the platform, creators, and viewers can take advantage. Advertisers can reach billions of people through the platform and have many incentives to sponsor creators. Conversely, creators have everything to gain by taking on a trusted sponsor whose products match the ideals of their channel. There is a reason YouTube is so popular, so much so that some people do not even consider it social media, which can be considered the true transformative power it has as an innovative and pivotal platform. It is teeming with information and entertainment for people from any and every background. The autoethnographic style of content creation allows for extremely deep and personal connections to the creators, especially when they use community tools and label their fanbases with specific demonyms. There is a lot of data that YouTube keeps private to maintain is dominance in the world wide web, but it controls a unique juxtaposition when compared to traditional media sources. The future is uncertain and YouTube can go in many different directions, though the most likely appears to be to the forefront of the media environment.

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