

2017

# ThemTube: commercializing the digital public sphere

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## Recommended Citation

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Jamie Bellomy Maher

# **ThemTube**

Commercializing the Digital Public Sphere

28 April 2017

Media Studies Senior Project

First Reader: William Hoynes

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To Professor Bill Hoynes, for assuring me that it would all get done, and that it was going to be okay. Your class was the most rewarding I've taken at Vassar, and motivated me to create this.

To Professor Alex Kupfer, for saying, *yeah, it'll get done, but when?*

To Professor Phil Scepanski. I'm sorry this isn't really about television.

To Sally Josephine Keller Roberts. Even after nearly seven years, your empathy never ceases to touch my heart, and intellectual curiosity never ceases to inspire me.

To Gaby Dunn, Allison Raskin, Akilah Hughes, and all the independent YouTube creators—you are seen, you are heard. I'd like to keep it that way.

And to many others. (See: the credits of episode 3.)

I hope to work on *investigating the similarities between BuzzFeedVideo's production strategies and methods popularized on older, commercialized media* because I want to know more about *the development and influence of corporate authorship on YouTube* so that my readers may better understand *how discourse within supposed "public spheres" changes when capital eclipses conversation.*

The most popular site for sharing Internet videos, YouTube characterizes itself as an equalizer for content creation. The opening of the "Community Guidelines" on the site's About page read as follows: "Remember that this is your community. Each and every person on YouTube makes the site what it is, so don't be afraid to dig in and get involved."<sup>1</sup> The site holds the promise that anyone with access to the Internet and a camera can have their voice heard or become a star. As with the internet in general, cyber-utopian rhetoric surrounding YouTube—which its CEO echoes<sup>2</sup>—paints the site as a wholly democratic public sphere, where people from all backgrounds can share opinions and art. In his book about YouTube, Professor Michael Strangelove states that the site enables a "transformation of who is saying what to whom;"<sup>3</sup> on YouTube, ordinary people can access an audience of millions, and engage in dialogues with strangers living thousands of miles away. In older media, the few spoke to the many. Now, on YouTube, the many converse with each other. As Google CEO Eric Schmidt

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<sup>1</sup> YouTube, "Community Guidelines," accessed 29 Jan 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/yt/policyandsafety/communityguidelines.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Kai Ryssdal and Bridget Bodnar, "The CEO of YouTube on her 'lightbulb moment' about video," podcast, *Corner Office from Marketplace*, published 24 Oct 2016.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Strangelove, *Watching YouTube: Extraordinary Videos by Ordinary People* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010), 9.

said, “the goal of the company isn’t to monetize everything. The goal is to change the world.”<sup>4</sup>

However, as with so many forms of media (radio is perhaps the most relevant), with increasing popularity comes increasing commercialization. Both external companies and the site itself have cashed in on the opportunities presented by the massive audience. YouTube is no longer ad-free, and the site contracts popular vloggers, who generally start out with better equipment, training, marketing capabilities, etc. than the majority of creators. Perhaps more pressingly, production companies (who, needless to say, have access to greater resources than the majority of independent creators) co-opt the vloggers’ style to effectively infiltrate the YouTube community. Content created by paid (read: employed by YouTube itself) creators and external corporations eclipses independent creators’ content in terms of viewership.

This shift towards a one-way flow of content, as seen on TV (and other older media), has altered the power dynamics on YouTube—and when the barrier to entry for producers ceases to be democratic, it follows that the nature of the conversation would change in turn. My Media Studies capstone project seeks to characterize that change. How is the supposed “public sphere” of YouTube ideologically shifting as its most influential participants become commercialized? Whose voices and narratives are amplified? Has YouTube shifted from a participatory community to a consumption-based fandom? And, given all these changes are taking place, to what extent can a space dictated by capitalism function as a public sphere?

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<sup>4</sup> Richard Koman, “Google CEO: We Don’t Know How to Monetize YouTube,” *Newsfactor*, published 26 June 2016, accessed 29 Jan 2017, [http://www.newsfactor.com/story.xhtml?story\\_id=60275&full\\_](http://www.newsfactor.com/story.xhtml?story_id=60275&full_).

For my capstone project, I have created a series of video essays that delve into these questions. Building upon a foundation of multidisciplinary theory—including sociology, broadcast studies, film studies, and digital media studies—I have aimed to characterize the contradictory, ambiguous status of YouTube, a site that claims to level the playing field for video creators and while promoting certain users over the others. I look into a particularly successful production company that publishes multiple short videos onto YouTube every day, and dissect the familiar nature of their production model. In comparing the company’s work with that of an outspoken former employee, I ask if a sphere fostering corporate monoliths alongside independent underdogs can be truly “public,” and to ultimately attempt to answer the question: who is the “you” in “Broadcast Yourself”?

### **“The Punk Version of Television”**

To say that YouTube saved my life would only be a slight exaggeration. I’m a YouTube native. Over the years, I’ve become deeply invested in particular communities on the site, the adorably named “Nerdfighters” led by brothers Hank and John Green being the most notable. I’ve watched newsworthy events captured by bystanders, I’ve laughed with Grace Helbig and Mamrie Hart, I’ve learned math from Khan Academy, biology and chemistry from Crash Course, sex ed from Laci Green, and pilates from Cassey Ho. When I consider making a change in lifestyle, I head to YouTube for testimonials.<sup>5</sup> I know from experience that the site can be both socio-politically constructive and personally fulfilling. I honestly cannot imagine my life

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<sup>5</sup> Just a few weeks ago, I went to the site in search of reactions to the “No Poo” method—meaning no shampoo. Apparently, it’s not as gross as it sounds.

without it—and that statement was true long before I became entrenched in this project. Some might say that such overreliance on a particular platform is dangerous, and I wouldn't disagree with them. But I'd also argue that due to the structure of the platform and the resulting community it fosters, YouTube is particularly transformative in terms of the open discussion that occurs on the site.

Dr. Michael Strangelove would agree. In his book *Watching YouTube*, my primary theoretical text concerning the nature of the site, Strangelove attempts to characterize the values embedded in YouTubers' conversations, and the style with which they communicate. Strangelove admits that, due to the expansiveness of the site, it's impossible to typify a particular community or style within YouTube and do justice to the whole; as such, "no one text can authoritatively represent the people, communities, and culture of the 'Tube in their entirety."<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, *Watching YouTube* is an ambitious and overall optimistic attempt at both defining the medium specificity of Internet video and characterizing YouTube as a "public space."<sup>7</sup> To Strangelove, YouTube offers content that is unique to the site, content that is fundamentally different from television or film. Though Strangelove recognizes the site as fundamentally capitalist ("they [YouTubers] are the tenants, YouTube is the landlord and village cop"<sup>8</sup>), he sees great power—perhaps even revolutionary potential—in the new medium's ability to grant ordinary people the opportunity to produce video. Recognizing the need for inquiry into the "democratization of the lens,"<sup>9</sup> Strangelove chooses to focus his discussion on video

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<sup>6</sup> Strangelove, *Watching YouTube*, 5.

<sup>7</sup> Strangelove, *Watching YouTube*, 4.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, 191.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, 178.

diarists, more commonly called vloggers: the people who sit in front of a camera and discuss their lives, or whatever's on their minds.

Strangelove claims the current cultural movement that relishes “deliberate unartiness” (as described by Shields in *Reality Hunger*<sup>10</sup>) has found a home on YouTube: “YouTube’s rapid transformation into a mass medium is partially explained by the perception that amateur video offers something that television does not. That something is often described as more real.”<sup>11</sup> In other words, “video diaries are the punk version of television.”<sup>12</sup> Strangelove details vloggers’ (his term is “video diarist”) tendency to forgo polished editing and involved storytelling to retain what he says is the most highly regarded quality in the YouTube community: authenticity. This communally enforced “realness,” in which the social norms of the site encourage each YouTuber to be as unfiltered as possible, encourages frank and empathetic conversation about particular issues and identities. I believe this “naturalist” aesthetic has become integral to many popular YouTuber’s style because it’s humanizing: viewers feel like they are seeing the unadulterated, unfiltered person behind the camera. It’s intimate, it’s engaging, and as Strangelove points out, it’s what’s specific to online video. Rarely do we see such supposed candidness on television or film. A YouTuber offers her viewers an intimate look into her life. She breaks out of “formulaic narrative molds” provided by older media to tell her own story.<sup>13</sup> Her viewers see her flaws, her worries, and her opinions, they are given a chance to understand her and respond to her. The empowerment in

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<sup>10</sup> David Shields, *Reality Hunger: A Manifesto* (New York: Random House, 2010).

<sup>11</sup> Strangelove, *Watching YouTube*, 65.

<sup>12</sup> Strangelove, *Watching YouTube*, 82.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, 128.

showcasing mundanity,<sup>14</sup> in revealing one's everyday life to others; the collaboration ("co-production") resulting from creative exchange between vloggers and their audience;<sup>15</sup> vloggers' and commenters' self-reflexive discussion of the nature and norms of their community<sup>16</sup>—these are Strangelove's preoccupations, and what might be lost if the site continues its trajectory of increasing commercialization.

The commercialism on YouTube today is surprising in light of the vlogger community's strictly anti-commercial roots. By creating and watching content, YouTubers assert the value of the layperson's voice within public conversations, which are dominated by corporate media. But, as Strangelove points out, while discussing the site as a potential democratic and/or liberating space, one must not lose sight of the fact that YouTube itself is, first and foremost, a corporation. "The irony of YouTube," says Strangelove, "is that, as an advertising-driven commercial enterprise, it demonstrates the strength of the audience's desire for an alternative to commercially produced content."<sup>17</sup> Though much of the independently produced content on YouTube situates itself in opposition to corporate media by its low-tech and confessional nature, YouTube's primary clients are not everyday users, but advertisers.<sup>18</sup> As with the rest of Google, we the users are the product being sold. But despite the site's basis as a moneymaking venture, Strangelove seems certain that the YouTube community will inherently reject creators that produce YouTube videos for money: citing Oprah's failed initial attempt to join the YouTube community, he says that "YouTube is a dangerous place for brands."<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Strangelove, *Watching YouTube*, 15.

<sup>15</sup> Strangelove, *Watching YouTube*, 77.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, 121.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, 7.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, 108.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, 112.

This is where Strangelove's book shows its age—he fails to account for the increasing commercialization in YouTube content production that was arising when *Watching YouTube* was published in 2010.

Before Google bought it, the site wasn't raking in dollars, but after the acquisition, Google (now Alphabet) harnessed a number of different monetization strategies. YouTube became a capitalist space slowly and steadily so as to not provoke its most adamantly anti-commercial tenants. First, there were ads—playing before videos, popping up at the top of the suggested videos for users. There were pay-for-play deals with creators, and higher level “partnerships” between the site and channels. The result: a kind of capitalistic lubricant, making it easier for users to accept the corporate takeover of their supposedly public community. Now, the most subscribed YouTuber on the site—the 27-year-old gamer PewDiePie—makes approximately \$15 million a year off his videos.<sup>20</sup> Production companies like BuzzFeed and Cracked, along with YouTube-paid “partners,” now dominate the site in terms of viewership. In this new, competitive market-based framework, viewership becomes channels' main concern. As such, the relationship between viewers and creators is fundamentally altered: a democratic exchange between equals becomes a hierarchical fan-celebrity dynamic. Viewers are no longer active thinkers that creators seek to engage, but passive consumers to be roped in by catchy titles and intriguing thumbnails, and held by entertaining yet benign content. Effectively, Internet video becomes like television, a medium in which “the best possible ideal type of viewer are those who never bring their participation in this practice into their conscious

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<sup>20</sup> Madeline Berg, “The Highest Paid YouTube Stars 2016: PewDiePie Remains No. 1 with \$15 Million,” *Forbes*, published 5 Dec 2016, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/maddieberg/2016/12/05/the-highest-paid-youtube-stars-2016-pewdiepie-remains-no-1-with-15-million/#2cf784aa7713>.

awareness.”<sup>21</sup> Given the shift towards a corporately dominated YouTube, the following statement from Strangelove is more evident than ever: “with a growing portion of the audience taking on the role of producer, the audience...is active in a productive way... Yet such increased activity in itself may not liberate the audience from the influence of corporate media.”<sup>22</sup>

### **Media, the Internet & the Public Sphere: A (Very) Brief Literature Review**

My areas of interest are recent developments and have thus not been thoroughly covered by previous scholars. This was one of the reasons why I was initially interested in the project, but it also posed a problem when attempting to construct a theoretical foundation for my arguments. To supplement the lack of directly relevant literature, I turned to a combination of two approaches: first, to situate my argument in the framework of Habermas’s public sphere theory (and responses to that theory); second, to apply wider discussions of the Internet to YouTube.

Habermas and his successors define the public sphere as an arena for conversation among private citizens: “The bourgeois public sphere may be conceived above all as the sphere of private people come together as a public; they soon claimed the public sphere regulated from above against the public authorities themselves.”<sup>23</sup> An ideal democratic public sphere would be separate from both governmental and economic control. As I discuss in my first episode, scholars have dubbed various media as potential public spheres, only to see their hopes quashed by commercialization. The historical

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<sup>21</sup> McGrane Gunderson, *Watching TV is Not Required*, 21.

<sup>22</sup> Strangelove, *Watching YouTube*, 163.

<sup>23</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into the Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991).

development of broadcast media (i.e. its decidedly public beginnings and steady transition into private control) appears to parallel the current trajectory of YouTube and other Internet outlets for creative content. This parallel indicates what's at stake: the layperson's ability to participate in a mediated public sphere, once considered a right but now lost to most broadcast users.

Alongside the rise of the Internet, cyber-utopians ensured that scholarly history would repeat itself, claiming that the web would serve as such a powerful public sphere that corporations will quake in its presence, and all oppressive structures would inevitably crumble. Such dramatic hopes for the Internet pops up in scholarship more recent than one might expect. In the largely cyber-utopian *Friends, Followers, and the Future*, journalist Rory O'Connor claims that social media will put the power of information in the people's hands without addressing the effect of commercialism on Internet platforms; O'Connor declares that journalism is becoming increasingly liberated from the "self-ordained priesthood of professionals."<sup>24</sup> Even Strangelove, who frequently acknowledges the limitations of YouTube given the site's corporate status, has his cyber-utopian moments: claims that the "Internet is evolving into a television-like medium but is doing so without the same structural, economic, and power relations that made television a tool of economic and political power."<sup>25</sup> (I confront this quote directly in episode 3.)

Professor Robert McChesney seeks to complicate the arguments of cyber-utopians (as well as their counterparts—people who believe the internet will destroy humanity) in his book author of *Digital Disconnect*, a work that has provided the

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<sup>24</sup> Rory O'Connor, *Friends, Followers, and the Future: How Social Media are Changing Politics, Threatening Big Brands, and Killing Traditional Media* (San Francisco: City Light Books, 2012), 15.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, 8.

theoretical backbone to my application of public sphere theory to digital media. McChesney has made a career of writing about the ideological pitfalls of media operating within a capitalist system. *Digital Disconnect* is an adamantly practical guide to the capitalist Internet takeover, as McChesney explicitly seeks to give “political and economic context” that past Internet theorists lack.<sup>26</sup> *Disconnect* addresses that media conglomerates have dominated the Internet, once an “anti-commercial” space. In terms of who is seen or heard on the Internet, there’s no contest: companies dominate every network, and have been able to maintain and strengthen their stranglehold thanks to lax regulatory policy.<sup>27</sup> McChesney sees the current historical moment as a “critical juncture” in the development of the Internet, meaning the events that occur and the policies enacted within the next few years will define the medium’s structural relationship to capitalism.<sup>28</sup> I read *Digital Disconnect* as a call to arms, and framed my project as a response.

## **The Project**

### *Popular, Not Viral*

When I first began this project, I intended to discuss viral videos. However, while reading Nahon and Hemsley’s *Going Viral*, I realized what now seems glaringly obvious: virality and popularity are distinct phenomena. For a video to be classified as viral, it must undergo “viral growth”: slow initial viewcount growth, a period of rapid growth, followed by a slow decline in growth. (Nahon and Hemsley describe this as the “slow

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<sup>26</sup> Robert W. McChesney, *Digital Disconnect: How Capitalism is Turning the Internet Against Democracy* (New York: The New Press, 2014), 22.

<sup>27</sup> McChesney, *Digital Disconnect*, 124.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*, 68.

quick slow” model.)<sup>29</sup> Thus, a video can go viral without being incredibly popular, and many popular videos never go viral. Given this definition, I became more interested in investigating popular channels—that is, producers who make videos with consistently high view counts. These creators build up wide-reaching influence, and are consequently the “loudest” voices on YouTube over extended periods of time. By these standards, the BuzzFeedVideo channels are blaring; though not all BuzzFeed videos go viral, all BuzzFeed videos are undeniably popular based on viewcount. BuzzFeed is thus an appropriate starting point when considering the influence of the growing Internet video industry on the nature of the most popular web video content.

### *Why BuzzFeed?*

In approaching the changing landscape of YouTube, I knew that I needed a corporation to illustrate what I saw as an overall trend of commercialization. My own experience with YouTube mirrors the commercialization trend: I once spent the majority of my time seeking out the videos of vloggers, but I increasingly drift to branded production studios that publish their videos on YouTube, like Cracked, CollegeHumor, and most of all, BuzzFeed. I know the video team members’ names, their personalities, their relationships to each other. What company better than one that produces daily videos that I’ve spent hours upon hours watching, that displays such consistent iconography and relies on such consistent storytelling formulas as to be considered its own genre?

If you’ve spent your fair share of time on any social media, you’ve more than likely come across a product of BuzzFeedVideo. As of 2016, video—formally named

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<sup>29</sup> Karine Nahon and Jeff Hemsley, *Going Viral* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013).

BuzzFeed Motion Pictures—is the most profitable division of BuzzFeed, garnering over 50% of the advertising revenue for the company (growing from a mere 14% in 2014), a number expected to increase to 75% by 2018.<sup>30</sup> As of 2015, their videos were viewed a total of 5 billion times on YouTube;<sup>31</sup> a current estimate (that I calculated by adding the viewcounts of each of their ten channels) puts the production company at over a whopping 21 billion views on YouTube, and that’s not including views on other social sites like Facebook. The production unit is based in Los Angeles, where the team is divided among twelve different YouTube channels, though employees occasionally work across channels. BuzzFeedVideo producers become recognizable faces to fans, as they not only execute all technical and creative aspects of film production, but also appear in videos.

According to Andrew Gauthier, executive producer of the video team, the production of these videos is actively aimed towards mimicking the informal, relatable quality of vloggers: “we approach...the viewer from the standpoint of being their ally or their proxy. As we develop storylines, we want viewers to say, ‘That’s so me’ and really see themselves in the characters.”<sup>32</sup> As Gauthier mentions, BuzzFeed uses data analysis to drive their productions, zeroing in on topics and presentation that will yield the most views and shares. Ze Frank, a former long-time YouTuber<sup>33</sup> and current president of BuzzFeed Motion Pictures, seconds Gauthier’s description in his talk to YouTube

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<sup>30</sup> Sydney Ember, “BuzzFeed Regroups as Media Turns Video Centric,” *New York Times*, published 5 Sep 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/06/business/media/buzzfeed-regroups-as-media-industry-turns-to-video.html>.

<sup>31</sup> YouTube Advertisers, “YouTube Brandcast 2015: Ze Frank, BuzzFeed Motion Pictures | YouTube Advertisers,” YouTube, published 11 May 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rEWBQacYAWo>.

<sup>32</sup> Eric Blattberg, “The Secret to BuzzFeed Video’s Success: Data,” *Digiday*, published 24 Sep 2014, <http://digiday.com/media/inside-buzzfeed-video/>.

<sup>33</sup> Frank joined the site in 2006 and, though the most recent video on his personal channel zefrank1 was posted two years ago, he has almost 2 million subscribers.

advertisers in 2015, claiming that the company is “obsessed” with figuring out why certain types of content is so widely shared. Frank points to on “identity sharing,” when people “use media to share a part of [their] identity.”<sup>34</sup> This fixation on identity comes back to what was already proven by popular vloggers: that intimate, personal storytelling can be widely impactful. From their data analysis, BuzzFeed has structured their productions around a form that was created, developed, and refined by YouTubers. Their content thus ends up looking and feeling similar to independent vloggers’ works. Effectively, BuzzFeed co-opts the vlogging style.

It’s no surprise, then, that some YouTube creators have reacted negatively to BuzzFeed’s work. Akilah Hughes, a comedian and activist who I discuss in my project, is perhaps one of the loudest voices in the conversation about BuzzFeed. She started a hashtag “#StopBuzzThieves” in response to the company allegedly copying one of her sketch videos (see: episodes two and three of my project) as well as the work of some other Internet creators. She posted a video about it on her channel (which I include in my project), and started a petition calling for advertisers to drop BuzzFeed: “By continuing to support BuzzFeed video, you are complicit in the repeated, egregious theft of hundreds of millennials’ intellectual property.”<sup>35</sup> As of April 2017, the petition has 7.5 thousand signatures.

To me, determining whether BuzzFeed has legitimately plagiarizes is a not the most interesting and pressing aspect of this argument. I’m far more concerned with the underlying question: why is BuzzFeed making similar content to YouTubers in the first

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<sup>34</sup> YouTube Advertisers, “YouTube Brandcast.”

<sup>35</sup> Akilah Hughes, “Dear Advertisers: It’s Time to Stop Supporting BuzzFeedVideo,” *The Startup*, published 20 Jun 2016, <https://medium.com/swlh/dear-advertisers-its-time-to-stop-supporting-buzzfeed-video-10f1f423a645>.

place (the production company has the capability to make “higher quality” [read: more in line with the Hollywood style] videos), and how does the nature of this content change when its produced by a company versus an independent YouTuber? In my project, I highlight how BuzzFeedVideo has learned from older media to craft their strategy. I also ruminate on the danger of a company willing to mix its unsponsored content with sponsored content, particularly given the flow-like experience of watching YouTube.

In episode 2 of my project, I feature a number of clips from “Puppyhood” as an example of BuzzFeed’s sponsored content. The video depicts a touching tale of a man (Max Baumgarten, one of the lesser-known members of the BuzzFeed Video team) bonding with his new puppy. Only at the end of the 3 minute and 34 second long video does the audience realize that the video is sponsored by Purina Puppy Chow, when well-integrated product placement gives way to on-screen text encouraging the viewer to “Visit Puppyhood.com,” Purina’s website. “Branded content” like this has popped up all over the Internet, and increasingly on social media sites like YouTube or Facebook, where the slippage between friends and brands can make messages more powerful. One of the more overt examples of consumerism on YouTube and on BuzzFeed in particular, this Purina ad illustrates McChesney’s claim that media industries have become dependent on advertising rather than the reverse, making creators more likely to adapt their product to suit advertisers. BuzzFeed’s “authentic” façade thus falls apart when one considers their partnerships with advertisers. I discuss this further in episodes 2 and 3.

I focus my discussion of Buzzfeed around the following two-part question: what strategies has Buzzfeed used to establish its prominent YouTube presence, and what are the ideological implications of that presence? I’m looking at Buzzfeed as a sort of

auteur—or in Professor Jerome Christensen’s terms, a corporate author<sup>36</sup>—by considering the company’s developing oeuvre in terms of patterns in style and ideology. A comparison of videos produced independently by former or current BuzzFeedVideo employees with videos created by the same producers under the guise of the company investigates the extent to which BuzzFeed’s content fits a consistent structure.

### *The Episodes*

This project consists of three video essays, the first about seven minutes, and the other two just under a half hour each. These episodes function similarly to traditional chapters, and are separated by theme and scope.

The first episode briefly explains Habermas’s theory of the public sphere, its complications, and its broad applications to media. I summarize cyber-utopian rhetoric, highlighting YouTube as a potential public sphere, where anyone with a camera (or a keyboard) can come to share their experiences and discuss ideas. This episode introduces the overall argument of the project: that companies, including YouTube itself, are attempting to transform the site (and, effectively, online video in general) by reshaping it in the image of other corporately controlled media. The end goal, it seems, is to control Internet video as closely as possible—to solidify a one way system, placing a select few at the transmitting end and the “masses” at the receiving end, which will thereby limit the medium’s potential to serve as an open, accessible, and democratic public sphere.

The second episode outlines BuzzFeed’s varied tactics to maximize their YouTube viewership, which I see as recycled strategies proven successful in other media

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<sup>36</sup> Jerome Christensen, *America’s Corporate Art: The Studio Authorship of Hollywood Motion Pictures* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012).

industries. In this episode, I also display examples of the company co-opting vlogger aesthetics: I show a number of vlog-like camera set-ups and “authentic” moments in otherwise highly polished BuzzFeed videos—moments that would not appear on comparable television shows.

The final episode of my project goes into further detail about BuzzFeed’s co-option of YouTube aesthetics by comparing their videos to that of an independent creator. I chose to study the work of former BuzzFeedVideo employee Gaby Dunn for a number of reasons: her overt, consistent politics; her large independent body of video work; her status as a popular vlogger; her participation in multiple YouTube channels. Gaby’s vlogs and her co-created comedy videos differ from her BuzzFeed videos in style, tone, production value, and message.

### *The Medium*

Perhaps the most challenging aspect of this project was fine-tuning the style of the videos, in terms of the visuals, script, and delivery. I originally planned to emulate my favorite video essayist, the NerdWriter, whose somewhat silly name doesn’t do justice to the professionalism and depth of his weekly video essays. Evan Puschak, who creates the video essays on The Nerdwriter YouTube channel (NerdWriter1) has a clean, digestible, simple style—he constructs leisurely montages of film, television, or YouTube clips juxtaposed with a calm, linear aural argumentative voiceover. Admittedly, I’m a sucker for Nerdwriter videos because they are almost always media-centric, discussing film, music, television, language, social media, video games, painting. He even has a video discussing Internet video as a medium called “YouTube: The Medium is the Message.”

With polished editing and clear, steadily-paced voiceover, Puschak is able to distill complex theoretical concepts from a broad range of disciplines (sociology, psychology, philosophy, literary theory, film studies) and apply those concepts to specific pieces of media, illuminating new perspectives and layers of meaning. Due to Puschak's multidisciplinary approach and success at finding an audience, I initially sought to mimic his style in the creation of my project.

In attempting to channel Puschak's polish, I quickly ran into issues. Firstly, I lack the skills to create at Puschak's polished level. Though we used the same program (Final Cut Pro), Puschak has experience producing and editing professionally, and I couldn't come close to matching his execution. Some of this difference simply personality: Puschak takes himself seriously, choosing to address intellectual subjects straight on; I can't help but injecting a high dosage of self-deprecation into my delivery.<sup>37</sup>

So it was no surprise that I found myself increasingly shifting into the mode of a more personal, confessional vlogger. Once I noticed the tendency, I decided to give up attempting to copy a creator I admired. I leaned into the vlogger aesthetic, and found that my project functioned all the better because of it. In the videos, I discuss low-tech, confessional, homemade style, and conduct my discussion in the very same style. I explain the type of authenticity valued on YouTube while engaging with the "authenticity aesthetics" that vloggers use. I use awkward takes, I keep mistakes that could've been easily salvaged (see: the absence of Kelsey Darragh from the initial list of BuzzFeed partner producers, the use of a Coke ad despite the mention of a Bounty ad in the

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<sup>37</sup> One trait we do share is a noticeable enthusiasm for our subjects. Puschak's fascination with the topics of his videos plays no small part in capturing and keeping the viewer's attention, and I hope the same can be said for my work. (Unfortunately, during the recording of the third episode I was feeling very fatigued, and I think the drive of the video's narrative suffers for it.)

voiceover). I resisted my urge to record the voiceover with professional audio equipment. I shot the videos in my room, using only the sun from my window and my lamp as lighting. I also consciously adhered to the style of editing that vloggers tend to use, which incorporates many, many jumpcuts, as well as quick textual jokes: flashing text that pops up on the screen for mere milliseconds can serve as rewarding, humorous commentary for vigilant viewers (see: “good save, Jamie” in episode 2), or as footnotes that provide elaboration on the content discussed in the videos (see: the explanation of Hank Green in episode 3). Sometimes it was difficult to rein in my own perfectionism: I was constantly aware that the videos don’t look, sound, or feel like “professional” works. However, I think the product aligns with the values of the site of interest, which will also be its publishing platform. I practice what I interrogate.

Despite my shift away from professional aesthetics, I still attempted to incorporate what I find most striking about Nerdwriter videos: their ability to communicate parallel lines of argument through the voiceover and the images. Both of these elements could be traced into individual arguments, but together, they reinforce each other as well as play off of each other, elevating the material by provoking questions or complicating the meaning. These video essays epitomize the form at its best, as Puschak doesn’t simply translate written essays into video essays by overlaying words with corresponding images. Here, the video element is inextricable from the argument; simply reading a Nerdwriter script would not facilitate the same experience or result in the same understanding of his point.

In attempting to craft arguments through visuals and audio that were simultaneous, complementary, and inextricable from each other, I found that I continually

discovered differences between the crafting of traditional written academic essays and video essays. This came as a slight surprise, since my project comes about as close to a written academic essay as is possible in the video form: the argument is overt, with little left up for interpretation, and is bookended by an introduction and conclusion. Like most vlogs, my project is not particularly writerly; that is, I tried to eliminate ambiguity and do most of the analytic work for the viewer. That said, I did notice that I ended up doing more—and more thorough—analysis work than I might in essays. In the essay form, if a reader has trouble with a particular concept, they can read slowly, or reread. A YouTube viewer also has the option to go back to certain points in the video, but this is not the ideal viewing experience. As such, in the videos, I repeat and reiterate my points more than I would have if I'd been writing an essay.<sup>38</sup> Although at times I felt redundant in the early stages, but I think the final product—particularly because the pacing is quick (which is partially informed by taste, but again, influenced by fast-talking, fast-editing YouTubers)—is more accessible as a result.

And then, there was the inverse of the analysis issue: the examples. In my videos, the majority of the examples that illustrate my points come from images or YouTube clips. In the scripts, I constantly had to hold myself back from listing numerous examples to back up each point, as I normally would while writing academic essays. My analysis thus felt weak and unfounded on the page, but on screen, visuals and the occasional audiovisual clips filled those perceived gaps.

The research process was essentially the same; however, the crafting of the scripts surprisingly came much more naturally than academic essays. I wrote the full script for

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<sup>38</sup> I tended to do this more in episodes 1 and 3, since I wrote episode 2 first and noticed after the initial edit that some concepts could be clearer.

episode 2 in essentially one day, and it underwent very few edits. I felt as though I could finally use my own words, untethered by the expectation of formality. Since taking Process, Prose, and Pedagogy with Dr. Matt Schultz my freshman year, I've been an adamant supporter of accessible writing; I preach it as a consultant in the Writing Center, and I've tried to practice it while writing. However, I don't think I fully understood how much I censored my personality while writing academic essays until the formality floodgates opened at the advent of this project. Not only does this project feel like a fitting culmination of my four-year-long crusade to encourage students to tear down the ivory tower, it's also consciously encouraged me to rethink my own academic writing, and experiment with tone and structure.<sup>39</sup>

Perhaps the most glaring difference: in video essays with voiceover, the person doing the arguing is visible, audible, or both. This human presence inherently entails that the creator displays personality. No matter the tone, the delivery will inevitably inform the reception and interpretation of the argument. I felt almost forced to reveal my personality, so I decided to play that up, injecting much more humor and personal thoughts than I originally intended. (Yet another reason why leaning into the YouTube aesthetic served me well.)

When I post the videos on YouTube, I plan to reference BuzzFeed's "clickbait" strategies in the titles of my videos. BuzzFeed video titles are provocative and enticing. BuzzFeed stretches these formulas to fit so many of their videos to an absurd degree. The titles tend to play into a previously established formula (*[type of person] try [food/activity/trend] for the first time*; e.g. "Couples Try Aphrodisiacs for the First Time"), and sometimes barely correspond to the content of the video (e.g. narrative

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<sup>39</sup> I'm actually doing that right now, in this very statement. Could you tell?

videos with listicle-esque titles, such as “Ways to Talk to Your Crush,” which is a narrative sketch video). Other title formats include *when [insert relatable situation]* (“When You’re in Love with Your Roommate”) and *[adjectival metric] [noun] vs. [vastly different adjectival metric] [same noun]* (“\$5 Hot Dog vs. \$500 Hot Dog”). BuzzFeed attempts to pigeonhole their videos into these formulas, presumably to maintain consistent branding and/or increased viewership. Using these title formulas in my project will playfully hint that not all videos can be easily condensed into a formulaic title—the episodes will have unwieldy, overly complex titles that both stick to the formula and encapsulate the content.

Overall, I’ve attempted to pose this project as an addition to an already ongoing conversation. To not do so would be a disservice to the history of the YouTube community, for these issues are being discussed on the site; perhaps not with as obviously theoretical of a basis, but since the community first formed, vloggers have been involved in conversations about YouTube as a sociopolitical democratic sphere, who is seen and heard within that sphere, and the increasing influence of commercialization on the site. Strangelove notes that meta-conversations about the state of the site were present years ago. Take popular vlogger Nathan Zed’s channel for instance: in the past few years, he’s posted videos entitled “YouTube is Boring” (in which he bemoans the encroaching sensationalism in vlogs), “Stop Worshipping YouTubers (Re: YouTube Culture)” (criticizing what he sees as an unnecessary and dangerous divide between YouTube “celebrities” and their “fans”) and “YouTubers and Sexual Abuse” (addressing what he saw as a lacking community-wide response to a number of assault accusations against well-known vloggers). A whole flurry of videos—including many

from the most popular channels—popped up in response to famous YouTuber Casey Neistat’s claim during the 2016 election that those with large audiences have a responsibility to speak out about politics. Neistat’s video reinvigorated conversation about the potential public sphere on the site, and sparked debate about YouTuber’s social and political responsibility to their audience. (I feature a number of these videos in succession in episode 2.) Additionally, a whole subsphere of responses to BuzzFeed thrives on YouTube—serious, vlog-style critiques from former employees, rants about BuzzFeed’s politics from random vloggers, accusations of plagiarism from other creators, parodies, etc. Given this rich history of discussion, I created my project as an addition to the ongoing dialogue about the state of YouTube and the corporations that seek to colonize it.

Full disclosure: I had dreams of this project becoming huge—garnering tons of views and shares, going viral. Retrospectively, I see that this (absurd) possibility put me in the mindset of a YouTuber, considering the ways to make my content more appealing to viewers. I wasn’t just thinking about my advisors’ opinions<sup>40</sup>—I created these videos with a much larger audience in mind. Operating within the YouTuber mode, with the intention of posting the product on the site (and, obviously, quickly becoming famous [or even employed!] as a result), I drew from what I knew worked on YouTube—humor, personal anecdotes, quick visual jokes—when writing, shooting, and editing the videos. I quite honestly don’t care about how many views I get at this point. But looking back, I’m incredibly pleased that I drew from my vast experience with YouTube in creating the episodes. As a result of that instinct, this project was collectively created by the YouTube community. And with the help of my colleagues TheThirdPew, vlogbrothers, tadelesmith,

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<sup>40</sup> Although I value those opinions deeply—greetings, Bill and Alex!

DailyGrace, charlieissocoollike, and countless others, I hope I've been able to capture the spirit of the site.

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