

The YouTube Formula: Information Work and Community-Building in a Visual Era

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ABSTRACT

In our increasingly visually oriented world, people's information practices shift and adapt accordingly. In this panel, we bring together an international group of scholars to discuss their insights on information practices related to visual platforms such as YouTube. From the information and communication practices of beauty vloggers garnering international attention to YouTubers specializing in building bridges between cultures, the emergence of the K-pop fandom on YouTube, and the effects of participatory transmedia on viewers' everyday rituals, the panelists share theoretical, empirical, and methodological insights on emerging and evolving everyday information practices. The audience engagement and panelist presentations will coalesce in the formulation of a research agenda that pertains, broadly, to everyday visual engagement, trust and meaning-making, and community building at local and translocal levels.

KEYWORDS

YouTube, visual culture, everyday life information practices, intercultural literacy, community-building, cognitive authority

INTRODUCTION

The video-hosting site, YouTube, is the second most-visited website in the world (Alexa, January 2018). YouTube is estimated to have over one billion total users who stream more than 3.25 billion hours of video per month (Statista, 2015; YouTube Statistics, 2016). A survey of 13 to 18 year-olds by *Variety* magazine (Ault, 2014) found that YouTubers (YouTube video creators) are the most 'influential celebrities' for this demographic group. Given its worldwide prominence, an exploration of the YouTube platform, and the rituals and interactions that occur around it, is timely indeed. In an increasingly visually oriented world (Kaminsky, 2010), people's information behaviours, practices, and source preferences are necessarily shifting, and information science scholars are beginning to pay attention to YouTube as a context for research. Recent work has examined YouTube features with a focus on pedagogy, scholarship, and entertainment (e.g., Cho, 2013; Kousha et al., 2012; Sugimoto & Thelwall, 2013); however, several critical gaps remain in our understanding of some YouTube dynamics:

- Why do certain individuals create and share videos, and curate YouTube channels?
- What leads viewers/consumers to seek information on YouTube over other sources?
- What patterns of site-wide engagement can be discerned on YouTube?

This panel and associated audience engagement will coalesce in the formulation of a research agenda that pertains, broadly, to everyday visual engagement, trust and meaning-making, and community building at local and translocal levels.

THE EMERGENCE OF 'YOUTUBERS' AND AFFILIATIVE IDENTITIES

As of 2011, 47.3 million of YouTube users had uploaded at least one video to a personal channel on the site; by 2012, 'thousands' of them were grossing up to \$100,000 US dollars by creating and sharing content in this way, with earnings flowing largely from advertisement revenue and various sponsorships (Telegraph, 2012). While many of the individuals uploading to YouTube do so casually, simply dabbling in video-making, others undertake the practice with seriousness, and regularly upload self-produced videos to their channels; thus, claiming a niche for themselves; and addressing global audiences of unknown viewers whom they cultivate as dedicated sub-communities (Thomson, 2017). The "micro-celebrities" of modern social media (Jerslev, 2016) can inspire fandoms, and contribute to forging intercultural boundaries and fostering transnational connections (Kim et al., 2018).

YouTubers' videos run the gamut of imaginable topics, and sit under broad categories like Music, Comedy, Science & Education, Tech, Cooking & Health, and How-To & DIY. A majority of YouTubers working within categories centred around relaying first-hand wisdom and personal advice as opposed to entertainment (Cooking & Health rather than Comedy, for example)—whether casual or serious—are explicitly not topical experts. Instead, they make videos as ordinary citizens, speaking to hobby interests and issues of everyday concern. As relatable 'citizen experts,' uploading to a platform that is reminiscent of face-to-face talk and predicated on an 'ideology of authenticity' (Burgess & Green, 2009, p. 28), such YouTubers come to occupy increasingly important positions in the information source horizons of audiences. Many are cast by their viewers into—and, in turn, assume—roles as informal information providers, offering up their 'experiences, knowledge, resources, [... and] support' (Oh & Syn, 2015, p. 2046; cf. Burnett, 2000).

FORMAT AND SCOPE OF PANEL

The panel brings together a group of scholars with broad, international perspectives to discuss their diverse theoretical, empirical, and methodological work around everyday information practices and the YouTube platform. The panel's short presentations and interspersed audience interaction will coalesce in a concluding open discussion revolving around such issues as the following (these are meant as semi-structured question probes only, as spontaneous points raised by audience members are likely to also move the conversation in fruitful directions):

1. What framework and concepts best account for the everyday rituals involved in creating and viewing YouTube videos?
2. What cognitive, affective, and bridge-building work do YouTube videos do in an intercultural context?
3. What approaches are most suitable for exploring YouTube and similar visually based platforms?

The panel will begin with an overall introduction to visual information culture, new media information, and information practices, along with a brief introduction to YouTube as a platform (including examples of YouTube channels and videos representative of the cases featured in this panel session). Four short presentations (of no more than 10 minutes per panelist) will follow, introducing different findings from rich and diverse settings. Panel members will then lead the audience into a discussion/engagement portion. The panelists' various projects are outlined below (in alphabetical order by last name, with presentation titles illustrative only):

- ***The case of digital/visual consumption and creative practice among transmedia fans (Eric Forcier, Swinburne Univ. of Technology)***

Transmedia fandom represents the engagement practices of a given storyworld's fans, including everyday consumption, community interaction and inspired creative works. The panelist will focus on the influence of visual participatory platforms, such as YouTube and Twitch, in his study on the everyday information behaviours of transmedia fans. Audiences and official authors co-construct storyworlds that are extended across multiple narrative media (Stein & Busse, 2012). Based on in-depth interviews with self-identified fans and textual analysis of online fan communities, the panelist will present key examples that demonstrate how digital/visual media contribute to the everyday rituals of fans.

- ***The case of intercultural literacy mediated through YouTube encounters (Alice N. Kim, Nadia Caidi, and Niel Chah, Univ. of Toronto)***

In this study, the panelists examine YouTube channels dealing with their creators' experiences with another culture—for example, British or Canadians individuals who live (or lived) in Korea, and wish to share their experiences about Korean culture. These YouTubers create and upload videos on a range of topics, including food practices, beauty practices, and other everyday matters; draw comparisons with practices 'back home'; and stimulate vivid engagement around these videos. The panelists theorize about the resulting dynamics of such intercultural encounters, the role of YouTubers as bridges and facilitators, and the emerging modes of engagement.

- ***The case of serious beauty and lifestyle YouTubers (Leslie Thomson, Univ. of North Carolina)***

In this study, the panelist examines YouTube creators who operate personal YouTube channels focused upon such varied terrain as skincare, makeup, fashion, fitness, home décor, relationships, school, careers, and daily life. Among other topics, she considers these YouTubers' paradoxical positions as non-experts, "native speakers of the language of teen girls" (Jeffries, 2011, p. 64), and savvy businesspeople, manoeuvring through a competitive, commodity-intensive environment with strategic brand partnerships and video metadata, while trying to attain broad, international appeal. She theorizes about the cultural aspects of the serious leisure social world in which beauty and lifestyle YouTubers move, and the complex relationships that factor into their creating and sharing, including with global viewerships, brands, third-party 'infopreneurs,' and the YouTube platform itself.

- ***The case of transnational fan knowledge of K-pop on YouTube (Kyong Yoon, Univ. of British Columbia)***

Drawing on a textual analysis of Western fan vlogs of K-pop (Korean pop music), the panelist explores how YouTube is integrated into young people's transnational cultural consumption and understanding. Owing to its intensive and extensive

exploitation of YouTube, K-pop has rapidly emerged as a new transnational cultural phenomenon among subcultural youth, not only in Asia, but also in the West, over the past 10 years. The panelist's work examines how Western K-pop fans—who may encounter linguistic and cultural barriers with K-pop as a music genre produced in a non-Western context—engage with an interactive participatory culture on YouTube.

The open discussion with the audience that follows these short presentations will pave the way for future research at the intersection of visual engagement, trust and meaning-making, and local and translocal community building. This panel is expected to appeal to researchers and practitioners alike, particularly but not limited to those involved with SIG USE, SIG III, and SIG SM. It is likely to result in a research agenda that may be carried forward into a future ASIS&T or SIG workshop on the new media platforms and modes of engagement increasingly characteristic of our visual and networked environment.

SPEAKERS' BIOGRAPHIES

Leslie Thomson is a Ph.D. candidate in the School of Information and Library Science, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Her research interests include human information behaviour, everyday life and leisure, and social media.

Nadia Caidi is Associate Professor in the Information School, University of Toronto. She received her Ph.D. from UCLA, and her research interests include human information behaviour, global migration, and information policy.

Kyong Yoon is a media researcher specializing in Asian digital media, youth culture, and cultural studies. He received his Ph.D. in Cultural Studies from the University of Birmingham.

Eric Forcier is a Ph.D. candidate in Media and Communication at Swinburne University of Technology in Melbourne, Australia. His research interests include postdigital information behaviour in everyday life contexts and transmedia fan studies.

Alice Nahyeon Kim is a Researcher at the Korean Education Centre in Toronto. She received her M.I. from the Information School, University of Toronto, and her research interests include information practices of diaspora communities, ethnic media, and intercultural communication mediated through social media.

Niel Chah is a Ph.D. student in the Information School, University of Toronto. His research interests include social media, intercultural communication, and ethnic media.

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