

GET ONE MILLION VIEWS OVERNIGHT!
HOW YOUTUBE INFLUENCES THE CREATION
AND RECEPTION OF DOCUMENTARY FILM

by

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ABSTRACT

Trends in media creation, distribution and consumption have led YouTube to become a platform where masses of creators and consumers come together to tell stories, entertain and share information. Documentary filmmakers have begun to utilize YouTube for the distribution of films and develop content specifically for the platform. YouTube culture has influenced creators to produce content with an aesthetic distinct to the platform. The indiscriminate nature of the platform allows for nearly any creator to produce content. A participatory culture is created where viewers can critique and share additional information in a comment section and influence future content creation. YouTube is assisting filmmakers in accomplishing their objectives by linking them with an audience that desires their content. My film, *Scumbag Hunters*, was influenced by what I call the YouTube niche. Creating this film designed for the YouTube niche and distributing on the platform may be a favorable avenue compared to traditional distribution methods in accomplishing the objectives of entertaining, inspiring and educating the audience.

INTRODUCTION

The ways in which media is produced and consumed is ever-changing, with genres of media morphing alongside popular trends to meet the demand of the consumers. In this discussion, the genre of documentary is explored to examine how it fits into the media distribution giant that is YouTube. Historically, documentary film has been less popular than other genres. Recently however, media consumption habits have shifted and there is evidence to suggest that YouTube is popularizing the documentary genre beyond where it has been previously (Muller 3; Earnshaw 2-5).

The platform, YouTube, will be the center of discussion for how media is delivered and consumed. This includes the revolution of YouTube and how it is arguably the most powerful media outlet in the world. The 'YouTube niche' has emerged from filmmakers adapting storytelling techniques to fit the demands of online viewers. Using YouTube as a distribution platform for documentaries will be discussed, as well as the effectiveness of using YouTube niche films in accomplishing the objectives of a documentary filmmaker. Filmmaking techniques of three different YouTube creators within the YouTube niche will be analyzed, including how effective their content is in accomplishing their goals. Steps to construct a film designed for the YouTube niche will be outlined, drawing from influences of various YouTube creators. Such techniques include the use of animation, human presenters and quick paced storytelling which assist documentary filmmakers in accomplishing their objectives.

DEFINING NEW MEDIA TERMS

YouTube is mainly a distribution platform, but much of the content presented on the platform has distinct characteristics that represent a new film genre. It is difficult to assess the significance of this effect, or what exactly this new genre is, but many YouTube videos share similarities that make them distinct from other existing video types. Notable characteristics include; quick paced storytelling, direct address of the audience, and the creation of a participatory environment between the creator and the viewer (Chau 67). The nomenclature of newer genres and crediting is not widely recognized. Crediting video producers within the realm of online media gets confusing, as often most of the work is done by one or two individuals.

As discussed in Rae Earnshaw's book, *State of the Art in Digital Media and Applications* (2007), the lines between publishers, broadcasters, consumers digital media become blurry. For the purposes of this discussion, I will refer online media producers as "creators" which is becoming the popular nomenclature used amongst peers whom produce media on YouTube. Media produced on YouTube can also be referred to by many different names, such as; video, film, vlog, short, etc., so for purposes of this discussion, YouTube videos will be simply referred to as "content."

YOUTUBE REVOLUTION

1.9 billion YouTube users watch 1 billion hours of video every day, making YouTube one of the most powerful and popular methods of delivering media content in our society today (YouTube for Press). The platform accepts media uploads from nearly anyone. A user can upload a video, and within seconds, it is searchable and available to be viewed by anyone with an internet connection. Policies are in place to prevent “inappropriate” content from being posted, but the system is user regulated, meaning a YouTube viewer needs to flag a video before it will be reviewed to see if the community guidelines were violated (YouTube Policies). This low barrier to entry system has allowed creators of any filmmaking skill level to share their content.

YouTube has only been around for fourteen years, making it a relatively new method of media distribution. It has been rapidly growing since its inception, with users producing original content, in addition to existing media producers adding it to their methods of delivery. Most major television networks have YouTube accounts to compliment their television broadcast distribution, as can be seen with networks such as BBC News, CNN and Fox News. Within any genre imaginable, sports, news, narrative, entertainment, education, etc, both new and existing media producers have been flocking to the platform. The genre of documentary is no exception, in fact numerous YouTube creators have begun producing documentary content.

YOUTUBE IS REDEFINING DOCUMENTARY

Documentary film is often defined as a creative treatment of actuality through motion pictures (Grierson 97). Using this definition, a large portion of original creators on YouTube are documentary filmmakers. Creators often present a creative treatment of actuality in their content. Their video may be about makeup, family, a prank, or an infinite number of other topics, but the video is based in reality and is discussing a factual topic. Creators do utilize narrative and fictional storytelling, but a surprising amount of YouTube content falls into Grierson's definition of documentary.

Historically, documentary film has been a less popular genre of media. Narrative films tend to perform better in most distribution avenues. On YouTube, however, documentary style videos are wildly popular. Content based in reality often outperforms fictional content. Understanding the true numbers associated with YouTube documentaries is nearly impossible. There is no section on YouTube that categorizes videos and tells us what is and is not documentary; however, individual creators who possess certain characteristics can be identified. Later in this paper three categories and three YouTube creators will be discussed that emulate attributes of documentary film.

SETTING AND MEETING GOALS

Every creator has motives and goals behind why they create their content. Some creator's goals might be to; educate, inspire, entertain, raise awareness, influence social change or simply make money (Aguayo 7). This is true whether you are a documentary filmmaker distributing content through traditional channels or one producing documentary content for YouTube.

In the digital age, it is almost impossible to ignore online distribution as one of the tools to assist filmmakers in reaching their goals. People's media consumption habits are increasingly focused on internet based platforms. Influence from these online platforms has also driven a change in the type of content viewers are selecting for. It would be wise for creators to consider these shifts in viewer preference when producing and distributing content (Earnshaw 75).

Traditional documentaries are often posted on YouTube after their initial premiere and distribution at festivals or public screening. Generally, this is considered the proper order of operations for distribution. Recently, films will have their initial premiere on YouTube. Beyond that, many creators are tailoring content to fit within the YouTube niche that is exclusively distributed on the platform.

Documentary filmmakers often feel the need to submit to festivals to gain approval from their peers. Usually this requires expensive submission fees, long wait periods and stringent submission guidelines. Review committees skim through numerous films, selecting only a few to be screened at a festival. If not selected, one may feel like a failure, that their film wasn't good enough, and no one would want to view it. On the

other hand, if selected, one gets the approval of their peers, recognition of important people and more credibility when viewers see laurels at the beginning of the film.

Appearance in film festivals can lead to collaborations and one could gain credibility in the film industry. Someone may also want to invest in, buy or distribute one's film. (*How Film Festivals Help Launch Careers | Sundance and More.*)

YouTube has no review committee; everyone is allowed in. Anyone with an internet connection can upload content, share it, and post comments. Peers can still view and comment, but no hierarchy is made to distinguish a one piece of content from the other hundreds of videos that are uploaded at the same time. As stated earlier, users self-regulate by reporting inappropriate content, but most of the content is publicly posted and uncontested.

YouTube is often perceived as “unprofessional” and people often associate the platform as hosting poor quality or “brainless” content (Juhasz 300). However, there is potential for a piece of content to be viewed by millions of people. If content is compelling, it can be shared and re-shared to reach masses unimaginable by many independent film festivals.

Christina Cooper, in an unpublished master's thesis, argues that using new media and digital technologies as tools to create social change may be more effective than traditional methods of delivering films. This adds the benefit of cost reduction in using social media for advocacy (Cooper 4). The same reasoning can be applied to using YouTube as platform to achieve the goal of one's film.

Every distribution method has pros and cons that vary with every film. For my film, *Scumbag Hunters*, which will be discussed later in this paper, YouTube seems to be

the best distribution option. My personal journey is still in the midst of experimentation, but many signs are pointing towards distribution focused on YouTube to meet my personal goals.

CRAFTING AND DISTRIBUTING FOR YOUTUBE

YouTube culture has influenced creators to craft content designed specifically for the platform. Creators are utilizing a mixture of contemporary production styles and new technology to accomplish this. Viewers and creators alike, use the platform for many of the same reasons which will be discussed below.

Ease of Use and Low Threshold of Entry

The low threshold for entry allows nearly anyone to distribute their content on YouTube. The service requires no monetary payment to use, and has liberal limits on the size and length of the video. Users can post videos tailored for a computer or a mobile device in both horizontal or vertical aspect ratios. Numerous video file formats are accepted, and resolutions up to 3840x2160 pixels are supported. This means that a user can upload a video file from nearly any camera or video editing software and it will be publicly available in minutes.

It's Where the People Are

The numbers speak for themselves that people consume media on YouTube like no other media delivery system in the world. 1.9 billion users consume and contribute to the media giant. 50 million of the users generate content for site. 5 billion videos are watched per day and 300 hours of video are uploaded every minute (Aslam 1).

Convenience

Sharing content is extremely easy, one can copy links, post them on various social media platforms and put them in front of a desired audience. Viewers can choose what they want to watch and when they want to watch it. They can set up notifications to be sent to their phone or email when desired content is released.

Search Based

A viewer can easily search for content they are interested in by typing specific terms in the search bar, or by browsing suggested videos that the YouTube suggests. YouTube's algorithm automatically suggests "related videos" to the user based on their aggregated practices of sequential viewing (Airoldi et. al. 1).

Participatory Culture

Anyone can comment and engage with the documentary content, you don't have to be an acclaimed film reviewer or a columnist at a prominent newspaper. Any individual who has access to the internet, is able to participate in the discussion (Desmet, 65; Colliander et. al 186). Immediately after a video is posted, viewers can post a comment. Creators often directly reference commenters, and adjust their content to appease the viewers. In Clement Chau's article, *YouTube as a Participatory Culture*, he notes how YouTube has created a culture in which users can comment and influence the direction of future content of their preferred creators. Chau hypothesizes that young

audiences will continue to be attracted to the platform for a source of information and communication (72-73).

Creator Analytics

YouTube creators have access to detailed viewer analytics that can help determine the success or failure of specific videos or even sections within videos. By seeing the number of views, user engagement, watch times and click-through rates, a metric can be used to compare and analyze how content is performing. This metric of performance is unavailable in most other forms of media delivery.

FITTING INTO THE NICHE

As stated previously, documentary as it is often defined as a treatment of actuality through motion pictures (Grierson 97). This definition encompasses a large array of content on YouTube. For the purposes of this discussion I have separated YouTube documentaries into three categories. These three categories encompass documentaries that are morphing into a unique style influenced by YouTube culture. This is by no means a comprehensive analysis of YouTube documentaries, just a glimpse into three categories that I have identified within the YouTube niche. For each category, an example of a creator will be discussed.

The Vlog

An extremely popular form of content present on YouTube is “Vlog” or “Video Log” style videos. The word Vlog is a variant of Blog, which was a colloquial shortening of web log. The term vlog can be summarized as a record of thoughts, opinions, or experiences that are filmed and published on the internet. Many YouTube creators self identify as vloggers and the style has become increasingly popular in the last ten years.

A decade ago, hearing the word “Vlog” would likely not conjure thoughts of meaningful content. Today, however, it is arguably one the most influential forms of media delivery available in the world. Several studies have analyzed and discussed how audiences often have confidence in product endorsements from popular vloggers. Both articles mention how viewers trust information presented by popular vloggers (Munnukka

231; Kauppinen 40). This suggests that, under the right circumstances, vlogs can be highly influential.

Vlogs have only recently become popular and very little literature exists on the topic. It is also difficult to distinguish what is and isn't a vlog, making it problematic to quantify meaningful data. It is possible, however, to identify creators that have distinctly vlog-like characteristics and discuss how they use the technique to accomplish their goals.

Vloggers produce content in a variety of ways. A large portion of vlogs contain a treatment of actuality within the video. For this discussion, I have identified a vlogger whose content contains many elements of documentary film.

Casey Niestat

Casey is one of the most popular vloggers in the United States. He has 11 million YouTube subscribers and his 1000 videos have been viewed over 2.5 billion times. Casey often films himself, addresses the camera directly speaking in a conversational tone. Most of his vlogs contain stories about himself and he frequently gives advice to viewers based on personal life lessons (Earnshaw, 59).

Nearly every piece of content he posts has multiple millions of views within days, tens of thousands of "likes" and thousands of comments of viewers engaging with the content. His vlogging technique is often replicated by other creators and Casey is frequently referenced in other YouTube content. As an example, Casey posted a YouTube vlog, *The Greatest Year of My ENTIRE LIFE*, in which he recaps his first year

of vlogging, in 2015. Numerous other vloggers followed suit, creating videos with similar titles, recapping the previous year of their life.

Casey uses quick-paced storytelling, never dwelling on a single topic or story for very long. He follows trends in popular media and new products, which likely help with the popularity of his content. His vlogs usually have a time-lapse at the beginning and an abrupt ending, but outside of that, have little predictability. Casey constantly integrates new techniques of storytelling, cinematography and editing to construct his vlogs.

One of the most prominent objectives in Casey's content is to inspire his audience. He talks to the camera as if he is having a conversation with an individual viewer. He poses questions to viewers, and challenges them to better themselves or think about the world in a different way. For example in the video, *It Finally Happened!!*, Casey documents his best friend realize his life dream of watching his favorite football team win the Super Bowl. Casey challenges the viewer to think of what their number one dream is and to "try to imagine where you would be emotionally if you were experiencing that dream." Casey follows with "and that, boys and girls, is what you are about to see." The following segment takes the viewer on an emotional rollercoaster ride of witnessing Casey's friends reaction to his team winning.

Viewers are also able to interact with Casey in the comment section. Comments number in the thousands on each of Casey's vlogs. Scrolling through them will reveal praise, critiques, and questions concerning his videos. Casey will talk about viewer's comments in his vlog and how they influence future videos. This is a prime example of the participatory culture created by YouTube. It establishes a connection between creator and viewer that is unavailable in other avenues of distribution.

YouTube University

YouTube has increasingly become a source for education. Tutorials and informational videos exist on almost any topic imaginable. Students at any level can find supplementary information on any subject. There are “how to” videos on everything from everyday tasks to complex building projects. If you have a question, chances are there is a YouTube video that breaks down an answer.

Many successful YouTube creators who focus on educational content employ similar strategies. Quick-paced storytelling, again, is prominent among YouTube educators. Another strategy is the use of animation. Cut-out static images and drawings are used to quickly associate information with a tangible visual. Infographics are utilized to make numbers and statistics more digestible. Putting data or knowledge into a graphic enables the viewer to recognize trends or interpret data clearly and quickly (Lankow et. al 187). These infographics and animations are often cut together with a human presenter, and b-roll footage. This mixture of visual media keeps viewers engaged and helps them learning the desired information.

Educational YouTube content frequently shares similar objectives of traditional documentary films, such as bringing forth information to the viewer. In Derek Muller’s doctoral thesis, he discusses methods in which multimedia can be used for education. While results varied greatly across his literature review, he did find evidence to support the use of methods that are currently employed by YouTube educators such as animation and static images to associate information. Interestingly, Muller also found that animations that are too complex can have negative effect on learning, as the human brain

cannot process the information fast enough. He concluded a better method for educating with multimedia is to create content that inspires interest, intriguing the viewer to want to learn more (Muller 64).

The library of educational content on YouTube continues to grow, and will likely become a valuable source of information across disciplines in the future. There are numerous YouTube educators, but for this discussion I have identified a creator whose primary focus is science education.

SciShow

SciShow is one of the top educational YouTube creators. They have over 5 million subscribers and their content has been viewed over 1 billion times. The content focuses on answering a question or explaining a science related fact in simplified terms.

There are a number of hosts and contributors who help tell stories on *SciShow*. Most videos focus on a single topic and follow a structure. The video title will typically be a question or intriguing statement, such as *Why We Haven't Cured Cancer*. The host starts with an introduction, giving background information on the subject and then lay out a question. The host continues to talk throughout the video, presenting information, often citing reputable scientists. After pertinent information is presented, the host will conclude by answering the question that was laid out in the introduction.

SciShow routinely uses infographics to help present information. As an example; the video *Why We Haven't Cured Cancer*, a graphic starts with the word "cancer" in a bubble. A quick animation shows the words; "thyroid, breast, lung, prostate, colon,

bladder, skin and blood” appearing from the bubble. This graphic quickly and effectively illustrates that there are many different types of cancer.

SciShow rarely use complex animations. Static images are used to show things such as geographic location or anatomy. Simple drawings are used illustrate things such as a DNA strand or chemical bond. Movement in animation is kept to a minimum. The animation may be as simple as just changing colors of images to make a point. For example in the video, *What You Need to Know About Ebola*, a graphic of human organs turns from pink to black to illustrate organ failure. Keeping the animations simple helps the viewer focus on the information rather than being overwhelmed by a complex visual.

Comedic Storytelling and Education

YouTube is often stereotyped as being platform for stupid and funny videos. While there won't be a shortage of funny cat videos anytime soon, creators have begun to make humorous content with substance. Creators use comedy to make educational videos and to tell stories based on reality. Researchers suggest that using comedy in online education increases engagement and can help with learning (Smith and Wortley 19; Dreon et. al. 4).

Oliver Dreon et. al. discuss how a middle school math teacher, creates short comedic videos as supplementary education tools in his classroom. Students reportedly sought out the videos when they struggled with certain math problems. It also helped students to engage more closely with their teacher (4). Smith and Wortley had a similar conclusion that when the instructor uses humor or shows comedic online educational videos “students are able to create more powerful connections with the material and the

instructor” (Smith and Wortley 19). This information suggests that when education is the objective, humor can be an extremely useful tool.

YouTube creators utilize comedic skits and constructed narratives, to tell stories with the goal of inspiring and educating their viewers. The use of fictional characters provides opportunities for creative storytelling. Interestingly, while some of these narrative skits don’t quite fit into the broad definition of documentary film, they tend to have similar objectives of educating or inspiring. A group of YouTube creators have taken a comedic approach to telling stories and dispelling common misconceptions.

Adam Ruins Everything

Adam Ruins Everything is a YouTube series and a portion of the parent channel, *College Humor*. Collectively the channel has 13 million subscribers, with many of the views being allocated to *Adam Ruins Everything*. All of the videos have an educational component within them and use humor as a tool in their storytelling.

Adam, the host, usually interacts with another character who has a misconception about a topic. A mixture of animation, creative narratives and integration of subject experts are utilized to help Adam “ruin” the character’s misconception. For example, in the video *Why Engagement Rings Are a Scam*, Adam interrupts a couple in the middle of a marriage proposal. He reveals that the cultural infatuation with diamond engagement rings was the result a marketing campaign from the De Beers corporation. Adam goes on to correct the couples misconception of the value of a diamond ring by quoting a De Beers Chairman who said “diamonds are intrinsically worthless.” By creating this

comedic skit, *Adam Ruins Everything* is able to educate the audience in a quick and entertaining fashion.

Adam Ruins Everything often uses characters that are relatable to the viewer. The character normally has a misconception that is widely believed. For example, in the video *Why Trophy Hunting Can Be Good for Animals*, Adam speaks to character that is an animal lover. This character views trophy hunting as a barbaric practice that should be banned. Many viewers undoubtedly share this view with the character. When the viewer is able to sympathize with the character, it makes the message more digestible.

Adam Ruins Everything is also unique in the way that it cites the sources of his information, on screen, backing up Adam's claims. For example, in the video *Electric Cars Aren't As Green As You Think*, when Adam makes a claim, a citation pops up in the upper-right corner of the video. The on-screen citations are very similar to in-text citations in a traditional academic paper. Adding these citations, gives the content a higher level of credibility, allowing the viewer to fact-check claims being made.

CREATION OF A FILM FOR THE YOUTUBE NICHE

My personal journey as a storyteller and filmmaker is just beginning. The creative choices and storytelling techniques I use are constantly fluctuating. I hope that I continue to evolve and adapt storytelling techniques into the future. As a Master of Fine Arts student in filmmaking and a Field Producer for *On Your Own Adventures LLC*, I have witnessed the creation and distribution of multiple documentaries, whether it be my own, one I am a crew member on, or a film created by a colleague. While observing the distribution of these films, I think about the goals of the film and to what level those goals were accomplished. Goals are often ambitious, and the results are often less than hoped for. When the objectives are to inspire and educate, it is nearly impossible to measure success with a quantitative approach. It is possible, however, to measure qualitatively from viewer feedback. The YouTube comment section is a tool to engage and receive feedback from the audience. I have crafted a film with these thoughts in mind.

My film, *Scumbag Hunters*, is designed to fit in the YouTube niche. It has an objective of educating the viewer about a topic they likely have a misconception about. The title, *Scumbag Hunters*, is a parody. The film tells the true story of hunters being conservationists. I function as the main storyteller and narrator. I created an animated character who interjects opinions that are contrary to the points I am making. The character asks questions and points out biases that viewers will likely have. This sets up the narrator, myself, to address the biases with a response.

The creation of *Scumbag Hunters* was inspired by my personal relationship to hunting. I grew up hunting and work full-time in the hunting industry, creating films, television episodes and YouTube content. There are many biases and misconceptions about hunting and *Scumbag Hunters* addresses some of the most common. It would be naive to state my own biases are not present in the film, but my hope is that the viewer may appreciate hunting a tiny bit more after hearing these stories.

Filmmaking techniques used in *Scumbag Hunters* were influenced by numerous filmmakers and, particularly, from content within the YouTube niche. As discussed previously, the use of static imagery, simple animations and infographics were used to clearly and quickly present information. An attempt was made to keep the tone light-hearted and insert subtle comedy within the story.

My animation strategy was informed by research presented by Salva Kalyuga and Derek Muller. Kalyuga discussed how some students perform better with static imagery while others perform well with some moving animation. He mentioned how subjects will become overwhelmed with too much continuous animation. Muller also discussed how students can experience a cognitive overload with continuous animation. Muller suggested using a mixture of static imagery, animation and a human presenter can increase the subjects ability to retain knowledge. This research helped to motivate the use a mixture of methods in the film *Scumbag Hunters*. The film utilizes a human presenter, animation and static imagery as storytelling tools (Kalyuga 853-860; Muller 23).

As stated earlier, content in the YouTube niche often employs quick paced storytelling. Casey Neistat, *SciShow* and *Adam Ruins Everything* all employ upbeat storytelling methods and likewise were all influential in the creation of *Scumbag*

Hunters. The use of a naive character, whose biases and thoughts are likely to align with the mind of the viewer was influenced by *Adam Ruins Everything*. The mixture of a human presenter, animation and static imagery are elements adopted from both *SciShow* and *Adam Ruins Everything*. Using simplistic cut-out images in animations can be seen in a substantial amount of YouTube content. This method is used throughout my film. For example, to quickly illustrate that people were moving to urban areas, cut out images of farmers, move from the country and disappear into the cities. This simple infographic illustrates the point quickly while keeping the viewer focused and entertained. Influence from Casey Neistat and vlog style content can be seen in the introduction of *Scumbag Hunters* and during the conclusion. I speak to the camera as if I am speaking to an individual. The film concludes with an inspirational message from myself, while looking directly into the camera. My hope is that message will leave a lasting impression.

CONCLUSION

YouTube is a powerful force in media creation and delivery. Crafting documentaries to fit the YouTube niche could be a solid avenue for many creators to reach their objectives. Traditional filmmaking techniques and distribution methods undoubtedly still serve a valuable purpose, but YouTube offers an intriguing option for many, especially emerging filmmakers. YouTube's easy-to-use interface and low barrier to entry allows a bigger pool of individuals to participate in media distribution on a more level playing field. The relatively new phenomenon of viewer participation allows the creator and the audience to interact and steer the direction of future content. YouTube offers creators a way to share their stories, to educate, inspire and accomplish their goals like never before.

The film *Scumbag Hunters*, is an experimental documentary designed for the YouTube niche. The objectives are to inspire, educate and entertain the viewer on a topic that they may have had a misconception about. Currently, the YouTube niche appears to be the best avenue for reaching those objectives. YouTube will continue to influence documentary film creation and distribution long into the future. The platform is hub for creators and viewers to communicate and share information. To remain relevant with audiences, documentary filmmakers should consider these points.

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