

Is the end of audience the beginning of creation?

With younger people drifting away from conventional media forms and intertextuality becoming the new normal, Laurence Russell asks if we are heading towards a singularity, in which we are all both audiences and creators.

Across the latest releases by the UK's Office for National Statistics, an undeniable pattern begins to emerge. Younger populations in Britain are watching less television, reading fewer magazines or newspapers in print, going to fewer pubs and restaurants, and watching fewer movies in cinemas. All these traditional pastimes are being steadily replaced with online entertainment and social media.

It's easy to assert that this cultural migration has merely become trendy, or popular with the entitled millennials and lazy generation Z-ers who'd rather reach for a smartphone than brave the outside world, but the reason for this increasingly striking divide in entertainment forms between young and old audiences relates to who is being catered to online, and the opportunities, or lack thereof, for young, diverse talent to influence traditional industry.

Whilst certain modes or niches of entertainment have difficulty surviving in traditional media industries, or perhaps aren't invested in to begin with, the free platform of the internet has offered more fertile ground for new voices in media, where it has intertextually evolved in ways traditional media cannot replicate or even understand. But first, some context.

Emerging from the spurious culture of video bloggers in the late 2000s, modern YouTube stars enjoy far more infamy than their contemporaries. There are many in Britain who would consider certain online celebrities to be household names with more relevance than traditional celebs. YouTubers like KSI, Olajideb, ThatcherJoe, or Jacksepticeye dish out content on a daily basis, keeping their fans' activity

Zoella, speaking at the 2014 VidCon in Anaheim, California



Image by Gage Skidmore



feeds saturated with streamlined, formulaic content.

Zoe Suggs and Alfie Deyes, otherwise known as Zoella and PointlessBlog, both of the millennial generation, are something like veterans in this field; they have outlasted most of the biggest names in the UK YouTube scene, having both started their channels in 2009 when the website was enjoying its initial meteoric rise in popularity. Whilst a decade-long media career isn't particularly remarkable for traditional celebrities, it certainly is online. In the information era, global internet personalities tend to spring up overnight, and disappear into obscurity just as fast, but Zoella has maintained the usually fickle attention of a sizeable online audience for an alarming span of time, steadily growing as social media has gained relevance.

YouTubers of a particular status often find themselves approached by traditional media groups, offering them magazine interviews, television appearances, film cameos, or book deals. ThatcherJoe's participation in 2018's *Strictly Come Dancing* line-up is a perfect example of the convergence between these two media platforms.

However digital media doesn't only empower younger audiences. *Desimag* and *Attitude* enjoy the status of existing at the forefront of two massive UK audience demographics, with *Desimag* describing itself as 'The UK's number 1 Asian online lifestyle magazine' and *Attitude* as 'The UK's best-selling gay magazine' (the online version of which is set product for A Level media). Both groups were created by and for social groups that haven't enjoyed an abundance of support from traditional UK industries, despite making up a significant portion of the market.

These sites generate stories, organise interviews, and follow events that traditional media just don't make space for, and provide minority demographics with a platform that caters to and supports their identity. Traditional media tends to not have time for coverage on this scale, and sometimes avoids it entirely.

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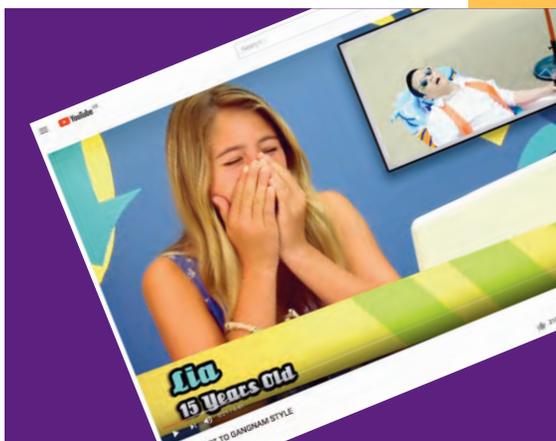


motivates the propagation of the cultures and voices that are so unique to those groups and the creation of yet more content.

While there are some exceptions, most internet celebrities or bloggers begin their lives as you might expect: as participatory figures, creating reactive content around existing texts for small circles of followers they know personally. Amongst younger generations, this 'participatory creatorship' is enjoyed almost universally. These 'internet celebrities' aren't superstars, and are capable of maintaining real friendship with their fans: a unique relationship that Hollywood superstars or magazine editors can never replicate.

These social media stars and blogs become popular by creating regular, compelling content and staying relevant. Their content is not managed by a team of editors or producers, but singlehandedly, at least when they start, and produced not only on a daily scale, but often an hourly one. Their upload schedule must keep up with the around the clock scheduling of the news and entertainment entities they're imitating, or else their content will be buried under that of their competitors.

This desperate struggle for content has given rise to a habitual reliance on reaction to secondary texts. 'Reaction videos' or 'let's plays' (videos of gamers giving real-time commentary on their gameplay) are fine examples of commercial secondary texts online. YouTubers make a living simply responding to primary texts like video games, news, or music videos in a relatively entertaining way. The Fine Brothers' wildly popular 'React' series is a good example of this phenomenon, featuring nothing but different age groups reacting to pop culture phenomena such as 'Teens react to Gangnam Style'. Regrettably, this practice may have led to some audiences feeling no need to pay for the primary text to begin with, with some producers complaining their content is being presented for consumption as both primary and secondary text. Other producers, specifically in the video games industry, have taken more active



approaches against YouTubers, filing copyright claims against 'let's players' so that their game is only available to those who purchase it.

Whatever the case, it is undeniable that digital media has established a tendency for intertextuality never before seen in media, and on an alarming scale. Many social media texts feature deep connections to other texts, some so inherent that they cannot exist without reliance on a given secondary text. A 'let's play' cannot exist without a game to draw commentary from. YouTubers have even created reaction videos in which they react to someone else's reaction video, or 'let's plays' in which a user-generated game modded inside of an existing game is played and commented on, as is the case with Nintendo's *Super Mario Maker*, a game centred around letting players make their own shareable levels, that was extremely popular with let's players. These baffling phenomena illustrate the radical extent of participation and convergence in online spaces which younger viewers have come to expect.

What all these digital producers have in common is an emphasis on encouraging audience response. In the most obvious case, the comments section of *Desimag* or *Attitude* or a YouTube video provide a forum where readers can leave their thoughts, and engage with both the content and brand, deepening their connection to it and creating buzz. 'Engagement' has become one of many buzzwords in digital marketing, and something all websites now strive for, both on their own website, but primarily across social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, where most new consumers can be attracted.

However, what's increasingly apparent is how modern media content is intentionally constructed not only to motivate clicks, but also to provoke a response. Sensationalist subjects in articles and videos use a variety of techniques to incite debate, such as capitalising on moral outrage, participating in viral 'challenges' which viewers are intended to replicate, or by employing enticing or leading titles.

But creators don't solely motivate engagement in clandestine ways; they're almost always transparent about it too, by asking for engagement directly with a 'call to action'. A call to action is another intimidating buzzword in the burgeoning arena of digital marketing, referring to a section in a YouTube video or article where the creator directly addresses the consumers to request engagement, asking for likes, reposts, subscribes or however the platform allows users to express approval or dialogue.

Consumers often become creators too through these secondary texts. For example, if a YouTuber asks fans to create content for them as part of a 'challenge'; they may then call attention to a handful of fans' work, giving each a brief surge of popularity,



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which can then provide the fans their own viewer base. As online texts encourage the creation of new texts, a domino effect occurs in which content begets content. This intense democratisation of creatorship is at the heart of Clay Shirkey's 'end of audience' theory. As audience participation and creatorship become intertwined, perhaps one day Shirkey's theory will become fully literal, and there really won't be a single audience member who is not themselves a creator of some kind.

As digital media continues to innovate, traditional media struggles to embrace a movement that's already passed them by, modernising too slowly to a new intertextuality that is the norm for younger audiences. How traditional media will adapt to remain relevant to changing audiences amid the dizzying cultural metamorphosis we are living through remains to be seen, but what is certain is that media has fundamentally changed, and continues to change with increasing speed.

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