Coverage of YouTube has Always Missed the Mark

By Aja Simpson

At this point almost everyone I know has heard and likely followed the controversy over short-time YouTuber Logan Paul, who uploaded a vlog of him and his friends finding a suicide victim hanging from a tree in Aokigahara forest in Japan. The video showed him acting shocked for the camera, him and his friends laughing about the sight and then, of course, a full unblurred view of the decomposing corpse. Besides the fact that he bragged about his video being the first of its kind ever uploaded to YouTube, the majority of his subscribers are children or young adults, and that alone alarmed a lot of people.

The headlines from media outlets were typical news headlines, explaining the premise of the event in a succinct title: “[Logan Paul Posts Footage of Apparent Suicide Victim on YouTube](https://nymag.com/selectall/2018/01/logan-paul-suicide-forest-video-youtube.html)” but once the incident garnered more attention, people unfamiliar with the website started asking how something like that could happen in the first place.

Parents of the kids who watched his videos were upset, companies who once allowed ads on his videos were embarrassed and other YouTubers who had built careers of off YouTube’s platform felt frustrated and betrayed by way he represented their work.

And this is when more developed headlines began surfacing like “[Why Logan Paul Should Really Worry Us](https://www.vanityfair.com/style/2018/01/logan-paul-youtube-apology)” and “[What will it take for YouTube to kick off Logan Paul?](https://www.usatoday.com/story/tech/talkingtech/2018/02/10/what-take-youtube-kick-off-logan-paul/325321002/)” which attacked the YouTube and internet video space in general for allowing the content to become so popular. These reporters insist that the problem lies not only on Logan Paul’s actions but also the already influential platform that he and others like him are given for such content. But I argue, as would any long-time YouTuber or subscriber, that this incident is not indicative of the site as a whole, and some media outlets seem to be missing the mark and lazily reporting on the issue without context. And this is just one example of a lingering problem.

I’ve been an avid YouTube watcher since big names like Shane Dawson, Jacksfilms and Jenna Marbles - all still full-time YouTubers - started posting videos for fun in 2007. Back then, YouTube was primarily a space to host videos. That was it. The business model was similar to that of Vimeo, in that its users could create a profile or “channel” in order to upload videos that could then be easily distributed to others through shareable links.

Around this time, the coverage of YouTube by major media outlets was pretty basic and straight-forward - here’s this new video-streaming website that is housing all kinds of content. In a 2006 [archived New York Times article](http://www.nytimes.com/2006/02/20/business/media/a-video-clip-goes-viral-and-a-tv-network-wants-to-control-it.html) from their technology section, a video clip went “viral” on YouTube and this is how they described it: “On one free video-sharing site, YouTube (www.youtube.com), it was watched five million times in a few days.” And this is how most news coverage went, because all YouTube did at that time was host random content.

About a year later when users of the platform began uploading more regularly, YouTube became more than a space for one-off videos, as communities formed between YouTubers and their constituents. At that time, YouTubers and their communities were forced to self-regulate and report on internal news themselves, and now. While YouTubers are still the main reliable reporters for their news - people like [Philip DeFranco](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C7xDzYnst34) and [H3H3 Productions](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pj8n78AuN3w) are perfect examples of this - news outlets have quickly caught wind of its popularity.

But with all the goings-on in the YouTube company and its content, the basic problem from some media outlets who reach large audiences that disregarded the platform in the past, is their reporting now is filled with misinformation and a basic misunderstanding of the communities within that created social impact.

In a 2016 article from Richard Lawson (the same Vanity Fair reporter who would later argue why Logan Paul should worry us) titled “[People Are Just Drinking Pee on YouTube Now](https://www.vanityfair.com/culture/2016/01/youtube-digest-january-8)”, he writes about BuzzFeed’s YouTube channel sinking to low levels to produce interesting content. He goes on to complain about a YouTuber, who he describes as “this screaming Irishman, Jacksepticeye,” who gained 8 million subscribers “for screaming things while playing video games.” He takes a similar approach in describing multiple other big YouTubers and completely sets aside the amount of work, time and patience these channels have put into their content and respective communities in order to acquire such milestones.

It’s clear, from my point of view, that Lawson did a minimal amount of research before writing his piece, which is somewhat pathetic, considering the research would have just been watching more videos. Of course, it was an opinion piece, much like this one. However the lack of context discredits half of what he writes and questions his ethical values as a journalist. But his work does not stand alone.

There is a New York Magazine article that makes fun of the YouTube content and its creators titled “[Who Did You Think Teenagers Were Watching on Their Phones?](http://nymag.com/news/media/internet-fame/intro-2014-4/)” which comes from an entire folder of articles called “The Weird Wide World of Internet Celebrity.” And although these titles could seem harmless, they are perpetuating the flawed idea that all content on YouTube is ridiculous and inconsequential.

It seems as if so many reporters that try to understand the complexities of YouTube just get wrapped up and fall for the few channels that make purposefully terrible videos for views because they hold a preconceived idea of what the website produces as a whole. But those ideas are based off of the fact that those terrible videos are the ones making headlines in the first place! (This cycle is not new to the news world, however, as most news is written by one person and then read and rewritten by another, until every outlet has an article reporting on it.)

But, I digress. The problem lies in those reporters for simply taking the lazy way out of a story they were likely unqualified to report on anyway.

YouTube has been around for only a little over a decade and in that short amount of time, the platform has accumulated over 1.3 billion users and now has an upload rate of about 300 hours of content per minute. YouTube is a huge influencer of people of all ages since the site is more accessible, portable and digestible than traditional T.V.

With the rise of its impact on American society - YouTube is cited by the [Pew Research Center](http://www.pewinternet.org/2018/03/01/social-media-use-in-2018/) as the most widely used social media site - the site has gained so much notoriety, with content improvements, faulty algorithms and, most notably, controversies that make it out into the mainstream sphere of entertainment.

For readers who want to learn about the possibilities within YouTube and the creators who keep it honest and afloat, turn to reporters who already understand it themselves, like Paul Lewis. [In this 2018 article](https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2018/feb/02/how-youtubes-algorithm-distorts-truth), he reveals himself to be a well-researched, truthful and well-rounded reporter with a beautifully detailed story about the problems with YouTube’s algorithm and how that implicated American politics. He gives his reader a fully comprehensive rundown of why YouTube is more than just a video-sharing platform and how it is affecting each and every one of us.

If mainstream media can’t accurately report on this phenomena in our culture, it’s up to us as readers to think about what the internal mechanisms of huge social media sites like YouTube mean for our society.