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# Our world on autoplay:

## 20 years of YouTube

It started out as a dating website but couldn't get women to post on it. Its four co-founders then pivoted, and opened up the platform to videos of any kind. Its early success caught the attention of Google, which snapped it up and turned it into a content-creating juggernaut. What's next for the world's biggest streaming platform? What surprises lurk in the vast depths beneath its viral content?

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**A**ll stories begin somewhere. Finding out where isn't always easy, and this is especially true of YouTube.

The facts are straightforward. The video-sharing platform, now believed to be the second-most-visited site in the world (after Google), was incorporated in 2005, by Steve Chen, Chad Hurley and Jawed Karim. One could say the story began three years earlier, when eBay took over PayPal, causing a culture clash that led 38 of the original 50 PayPal employees to quit. Among these were PayPal co-founders Elon Musk and Peter Thiel; future venture capitalists David O Sacks and Roelof Botha; and the three future founders of YouTube.

One could also go further back, to 1995 and the launch of Match.com, one of the earliest dating platforms on the internet. The use of computers in matchmaking is older than the internet, going all the way back to a 1959 Stanford project that used an IBM 650 to connect 49 men with an equal number of women. But for Gary Kremen, the founder of Match, it wasn't as easy. He wanted to use data to help people connect. He wanted to be able to feed in hobbies, professions, height, weight; anything that could influence affinity.

But there was a problem. In 1995, the internet was overwhelmingly male. Without significant female participation, Kremen knew Match was doomed to failure.

The story of Match.com may seem tangential to the story of YouTube, but when Chen, Hurley and Karim started their company, they visualised it as an online dating platform where men and women would post videos about themselves that prospective partners could watch. They even had a slogan: Tune In, Hook Up.

But 10 years after the launch of Match, the internet was still male-dominated, and online dating was viewed with suspicion. Chen, Karim and Hurley even posted on Craigslist, offering women \$20 to post videos of themselves on the platform. There were no takers.

So they performed arguably the most effective pivot in internet history, and opened up the platform to any sort of video.

The pivot was informed by one of the most significant sports events of the Aughts: the 2004 Super Bowl halftime show, featuring Kid Rock, P Diddy, Nelly and, most famously, Janet Jackson and Justin Timberlake. Towards the end of the performance, Timberlake ripped off a portion of Jackson's top, exposing her breast.

The resulting scandal nearly destroyed Jackson's career. Despite being broadcast live on TV, clips of the incident were next to impossible to find online a year later, giving Chen and the others the idea of a broad-based video-hosting platform.

Karim was the first to post on YouTube, that now-tiresomely-famous video of him at the San Diego Zoo. It now has over 360 million views — a significant number, but one that pales, for instance, in comparison to Baby Shark (2016), which has over 15 billion. By the end of 2005, YouTube was a genuine phenomenon. TV channels advertised on it. Charlie bit his brother's finger.

There were other videos: brutal clips from the war raging in Iraq, videos of war crimes committed by American soldiers at Guantanamo Bay in Cuba.

Disturbingly, for the corporate world, movies, music videos and TV show episodes began to show up in their entirety. Corporate lawyers rubbed their hands in glee and, by the end of 2006, the platform was facing a deluge of copyright-violation suits.

Meanwhile, also in 2005, Google launched its video platform, Google

Video. It was, in many ways, the opposite of YouTube. Videos were manually verified before being made available. This approval process sometimes took weeks. YouTube soon left Google Video in the dust.

In November 2006, Google executive Jeff Huber emailed Peter Chan, product manager for Google Video, saying YouTube was "cranking interesting features a lot faster than we are, but don't likely have a backend that will scale or plan to make money". Chan responded that Google Video had plans to catch up. The thread went on, until Google co-founder Larry Page stepped in with a single sentence: "I think we should look into acquiring them."

A year later, the acquisition was complete. YouTube had been looking for a buyer. There had been informal conversations with companies such as Microsoft, Yahoo and Rupert Murdoch's News Corp. Google moved faster.

Their biggest concern were the copyright-violation suits, but they were confident they could work this out. The price they paid was a jaw-dropping \$1.65 billion in stock — an unheard-of sum for a company with no revenue model yet.

Pundits muttered about risk, but two decades on, the YouTube acquisition has paid off many times over. And when it came to the legal hassles, they did figure it out.

2007 saw the launch of Content ID, an automated system that checks posts for copyright violations. It also saw the launch of the YouTube Partner Program, in which content creators could monetise their videos by allowing the insertion of ads.

Today, this programme has helped make YouTube one of the most successful monetisation systems on the internet.

Just four years after they bought it, in 2010, Google announced that YouTube had registered a profit.

It was doing a lot more than that. It had started to spawn its own superstars: PewDiePie (the Swede Felix Kjellberg, who started out making gaming videos and has since built a side hustle in online feuds), Pomplamoose (the husband-wife musical duo of Nataly Dawn and Jack Conte), Jenna Marbles (a comedian and the first woman to hit a billion views).

In 2012, Korean popstar Psy's Gangnam Style became the first video to hit a billion views. The video was so popular that it broke YouTube's view counter, which at the time maxed out at 2.147 billion views.

When Covid-19 struck, it had a major impact, driving massive surges in viewership, content creation and revenue. Amid rolling lockdowns around the world, people turned to the platform for entertainment, education, recipe videos. Ad revenue nearly doubled, rising from over \$15 billion in 2019 to \$28.8 billion in 2021.

There are competitors, of course. TikTok and Instagram Reels focus on short videos and encourage scrolling more directly. Twitch targets gamers effectively. Streaming platforms such as Netflix and Amazon Prime are competing for the viewer's time.

It hasn't all been smooth sailing for YouTube either. There was Elagate, in which brutal cartoon videos gamed the YouTube Kids algorithm to garner millions of views, at least some of them from children on devices set to autoplay.

The platform has also been accused of being a hotbed of political misinformation and disinformation.

As for the future, like so much else, it seems likely that AI will be involved. (Maybe the next product will generate videos based on text prompts.)

There is also the anti-trust litigation facing Google, and a divestiture of YouTube is a possibility here.

Google Search and Google Ads could be split up, which could disrupt the creator economy at the heart of the video platform.

At the moment, it remains the platform that binds the world. Whether it's a security guard on the night shift watching a movie, a traveller on a train watching a talk show, a pensioner watching a devotional song, a child watching a cartoon or a student at a virtual lecture, this is where most of the world hits play.

(K Narayanan writes on films, videogames, books and occasionally technology)

**SPOT the first-ever video, the ice-bucket challenge, Justin Bieber, Moo Deng, MrBeast, Dhanush and Kolaveri Di, Pomplamoose, Logan Paul, Charlie and his brother, SNL's early viral Lazy Sunday sketch, Hanumankind, Baby Shark, PewDiePie, Jamie Oliver, Psy, and Tay Zonday singing Chocolate Rain.**

{ NET ZERO } VIDEOS WITH NO VIEWS, LIKES, SHARES

## Deep in the shadowlands: YouTube's best-kept secrets

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**M**ost of YouTube looks nothing like the YouTube we know.

Dive below the surface layer of gaming clips, music covers, challenges and dares, product placement and stunt philanthropy, and one finds... Indian construction workers talking about how much they miss home, moving tributes to lost pets, children showcasing amateur but delightful rap skills through songs about the many moons of Neptune.

There are also intimate home-video-style vignettes of birthday parties, travel velfies, heartfelt messages to friends and raw footage from dashcams.

"YouTube is the default video arm of the internet, in large parts of the world," says Ryan McGrady, senior researcher at the Initiative for Digital Public Infrastructure (IDPI) of the University of Massachusetts Amherst. "Some of it looks familiar, some of it is strange, some of it is personal, and a lot of it is really just banal pieces of people's lives."

McGrady stumbled into this landscape that most of us never encounter, in early 2022. He was setting out to study instances of hate speech on the platform, and thought he'd start by finding out how many videos YouTube actually hosted.

It turned out there was no official answer (YouTube has since released one estimate, this April, of "more than 20 billion uploads").

"My co-author, (IDPI director) Ethan Zuckerman, calls these 'denominator problems,'" McGrady says, "in the sense that we have easy access to numerators — for instance, 10,000 videos that are popular — but denominators are hard to find."

How does one go about gathering an estimate for a platform that sees about 20 million videos uploaded a day (according to more YouTube data from April)?

At IDPI, the attempt involved creating a software program that estimated the number

of videos by randomly generating and testing tens of thousands of YouTube IDs. This is how they realised that most of YouTube — a world McGrady refers to as Deep YouTube — is made up of videos that have never been lifted by an algorithm.

As of April, the scraper had found 19.4 billion videos hosted on the platform.

About 4% of these have no views at all, 74% have no comments, and 32% have no likes, the researchers found.



Videos with 10,000 or more views drive 94% of the site's traffic but make up less than 4% of total uploads.

While this clearly works as a business model — ad spend on the platform has risen sharply and consistently, and YouTube is the world's second-most-visited website after Google — it also creates a sense of sameness that does not reflect the true nature of the content on the platform, McGrady says.

**More than meets the AI**

What is the true nature of the content on YouTube?

In a paper published in *Journal of Quantitative Description: Digital Media* in 2023, McGrady and his team traced a rich diversity in usage across the platform.

People who speak different languages, for instance, use the platform differently. A larger portion of videos in Hindi are intended for relatives and friends of the content creator (rather than a broader audience), their ongoing research shows. Many were photo slideshows set to popular music, IDPI found.

Videos uploaded in Korean and Russian, meanwhile, were found to contain more news-driven content. In Russia, the platform had emerged as the go-to resource for unfiltered news from around the world. "Lately, YouTube has been throttled and is harder to access there, but it persisted for an amazingly long time. Perhaps it was too popular to ban outright," McGrady says.

Meanwhile, worldwide, a fifth of all YouTube videos are videogame clips.

**Fringer feeds**

How strange are the strangest videos? Some clips are just 10 seconds of part of someone's face as they try to figure out a new phone camera. There are snatches of inaudible martial-arts instruction. Two hours of choir practice.

The spookiest thing to him, McGrady says, are the videos with no views at all.

"You'd think at least the uploader would watch their own post, right?" he says. An explanation for this could be the third-party apps on phones and videogame consoles, which make it easy for people to create clips and upload them directly to YouTube in bulk.

Yet it is in these videos, the ones with few views or none at all, that real life is being archived, he adds.

A group of friends celebrating a birthday shouldn't have more than 20 views, as he puts it. It is only meant for, say, friends who couldn't make it. But it is such videos, more than the viral content, that serve as time capsules: of how we lived, what we wore, how we celebrated, the languages we spoke and people we loved.

Who were really there, in other words, when almost no one was watching.



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