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**Author**

Ozier, Dalila

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**The Spider or the Fly?**

**New Media, Power, and Competing Discussions of Sexual  
Violence in the YouTube Community**

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the  
requirements for the degree Master of Arts in  
Anthropology

by

Dalila Isoke Ozier

2015



## ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

### The Spider or the Fly?

New Media, Power, and Competing Discussions  
of Sexual Violence in the YouTube Community

By

Dalila Isoke Ozier

Master of Arts in Anthropology

University of California, Los Angeles, 2015

Professor Sherry B. Ortner, Chair

In recent years, the advent of new media has enabled public figures to amass devoted followings outside of the context of the traditional media industry. Much of the success of these “new media celebrities” relies on the perceived lack of artificiality in the celebrity’s public presentation of self. Though the relationship between online content-creators and content-consumers is just as hierarchical as the relationship between traditional celebrities and their fans, the illusion of egalitarianism in digital fandom is maintained by the new media celebrity’s performance of the ordinary, projecting the image that they are “just like” the fans who idolize them and thereby encouraging a heightened sense of intimacy between fan and creator. Unfortunately, the trust fans have in their idols is regularly abused by some new media celebrities, who use their newfound influence to sexually exploit their predominately adolescent female audience. This research specifically focuses on recent reports of sexual abuse committed by content-creators in the YouTube community, examining how the pseudo-transparent construction of a digital celebrity’s online identity obfuscates the imbalanced celebrity-fan power dynamic and creates an environment that

facilitates the celebrity's abuse of authority. Ultimately, the goal of this project is to illuminate negative aspects of the digitized celebrity-fan relationship and destabilize the myth of egalitarianism in the digital space.

The thesis of Dalila Isoke Ozier is approved.

Marjorie Goodwin

Christopher Kelty

Sherry B. Ortner, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2015

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## Introduction

During a recent walk to school, I noticed a fairly large group of protestors marching in concentric circles outside of an (otherwise nondescript) apartment complex in West Los Angeles. The protestors—predominately young, predominately white, predominately female—were concerned with the nationwide issue of sexual assault in higher education, I discovered after stopping to talk to a few of the protestors. Universities, they argued, were notoriously ineffective when it came to responding to reports of sexual violence<sup>1</sup>, creating a cultural climate on college campuses that permitted these acts of aggression to go relatively unpunished.

The gathering was certainly very eye-catching—the protestors were dressed in matching, brightly-colored T-shirts and were brandishing signs that had been emblazoned with pithy slogans: A SHORT DRESS DOES NOT MEAN YES, for instance, or WE ALL HAVE THE RIGHT TO BE SAFE AT NIGHT, or the very succinct F—K YOU, RAPISTS. What caught and held my attention, however, was not their purposely conspicuous appearance. “Stop blaming the victim!” the protestors were shouting, their unified voices easily heard over the din of Los Angeles traffic. They punctuated each word by pumping their upraised fists ever-higher into the air. “Stop blaming the victim!”

The phrase “blaming the victim” was originally coined by sociologist William Ryan (1976) in order to address hegemonic ideologies that identified the cause of social injustice and racism against black people in the United States as the behaviors of the oppressed rather than institutional mechanisms of oppression (Essed 1991:33). Particularly, Ryan was protesting the work of senator and sociologist Daniel Patrick Moynihan, who argued

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<sup>1</sup> In this paper, I use the phrases “sexual violence” and (less frequently) “sexual aggression” as ‘catch-all’ terms that are able to encompass a broad variety of sexually violent acts, including sexual harassment, sexual abuse, sexual assault, and rape. Understand the use of the phrases these catch-all phrases as referring to the general phenomenon of sexually violent acts, while the use of more specific phrases (e.g. sexual assault) refer to more particular circumstances and behaviors.



that the African-American family structure—namely, the fact that black households exhibited relatively higher rates of unwed births and single mother households than non-black households—was what caused the African-American population to experience lower rates of employment and educational achievement compared to their white counterparts (Moynihan et al. 1967). Black families, Moynihan implied, were therefore the fundamental arbiters of their own oppression. This denial of the structural causes and effects of institutionalized racism delegitimizes the experiences of marginalized groups, permits the circulation of racist discourse, and disguises the continued impact of racial inequalities (van Dijk 1992, Nelson 2013). In this way, the act of “blaming the victim” is situated within a larger pattern of individuals in positions of privilege or power (e.g. members of dominant social groups) ignoring (and thereby permitting) mechanisms of structural violence.

This tendency to shift blame away from the perpetrator and onto the victim<sup>2</sup> has been similarly observed in mainstream discourse about sexual violence. Sexual assault victims are often attributed as being ultimately responsible for their own victimization (Grubb and Turner 2012:445), with factors like the victim’s style of dress or consumption of alcohol being seen as evidence of his or her own culpability. Indeed, a meta-analytic review of thirty-seven academic investigations of this phenomenon very clearly demonstrates that “rape myths”—culturally-constructed ideologies about sexual assault victims that “allow men to justify rape and [allow female non-victims] to minimize personal vulnerability”—significantly contribute to the general public’s “understanding of rape and its consequences

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<sup>2</sup> For the purpose of this paper, I have consciously chosen to use the term “victim”(e.g. “sexual assault victim”) to refer to individuals who have experienced acts of sexual violence, as opposed to using the term “survivor” (e.g. “sexual assault survivor”) that is more commonly used in sexual violence support groups and other therapeutic settings. While the word “victim” is loaded with a fair share of troublesome connotations—conjuring ideas of helplessness and of an inability to heal—it also inherently indicates the power imbalance between the perpetrator of abuse and the individual harmed by it. As such, I have chosen to use the word “victim” in order to more clearly indicate my ideas about the relationship between sexual violence and power.

to its victims” (Suarez 2010:2013). These popular ideas about what constitutes a “real” victim in sexual assault cases are culturally enforced and systemically reified (M.J. Anderson 2005, I. Anderson 2007), with dominant ideologies about sexual violence shaping public perceptions of victims of sexual violence. Indeed, victims of sexual violence often internalize the victim-as-criminal ideology and exhibit signs of heightened shame and self-blame (Miller and Porter 1983; Ullman 1996; Sheikh and McNamara 2014).

This hegemonically enforced idea of victim-as-criminal can have a dramatic impact on the treatment of sexual assault cases both within and outside of legal-judicial contexts. Consider, for instance, the instance where an eleven-year-old girl in Cleveland, Texas was gang raped repeatedly by twenty-one different assailants in 2010. Only after cell phone footage of the abuse was brought to the attention of an elementary school teacher by one of the victim’s classmates were the men responsible for the assaults arrested, tried, and ultimately convicted. “How could [these] young men have been drawn into such an act?” a *New York Times* article on the subject lamented—*drawn into*, as though the true culprit was some mysterious external force that had lured the men into perpetrating the crime. During the course of the article, the reporter deftly suggests that the victim’s own “licentious” behaviors—i.e. her propensity for “wearing makeup and fashions more appropriate to a woman in her twenties” and “hang[ing] out with teenage boys at a playground”—were the real causes of the abuse (McKinley 2011). According to this view, the assailants had been enticed by the victim herself into committing these acts of violence. In this way, the dominant ideology of victim-as-criminal influences popular discussions of innocence vs. guilt in sexual violence cases, with a sexual assault victim’s own behaviors being seen as evidence of his or her culpability.

“Stop blaming the victim!” the protestors screamed, fists in the air, as I passed them on my way to school, and it was the blatant subversiveness of their slogan that caught and

held my attention. While mainstream discussion of sexual violence (such as the victim-as-criminal discourse surrounding the aforementioned Cleveland sexual assault case) are quick to cast judgment upon rape victims, contemporary anti-rape advocates are able to actively challenge this dominant ideology: through subversive discourse, these protestors are able to lay the blame squarely at the feet of sexual assailants while also criticizing the role of systemic processes that enable acts of sexual aggression.

There has been a demonstrable shift in the public space that has increased the visibility and perceived legitimacy of this subversive discourse. The work of anti-sexual violence activists over the course of the past several decades has helped to increase the level of public awareness of the issue of sexual aggression and to provide more services for survivors of sexual violence; however, despite these efforts, certain misconceptions about sexual violence remain firmly embedded in dominant ideologies about the topic (McMahon 2011). As such, there exists a clear gap between the perspectives of 1) those who are actively involved in the field of sexual violence (i.e. advocates, activists, researchers) and 2) the general public. The manner in which the general public perceives the causes of sexual violence, what constitutes an act of sexual violence, and the victims and perpetrators of sexual violence lags behind the ideas of advocates and experts in the field (McMahon 2011, O’Neil and Morgan 2010).

In effect, there are two competing discourses<sup>3</sup> about sexual violence. On one hand, you have the hegemonically enforced dominant discourse that depicts sexual assault

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<sup>3</sup> It’s important to consider the role the adversarial nature of the American legal system has in constructing this competitive dialogue. Under this system, the notion of “truth” is orchestrated through the open opposition between the prosecution and the defense, creating a dualistic vision of the events discussed in the case. When it comes to sexual violence cases, this method of constructing truth means that there are only two possible versions of events that are understood to be true: either 1) the defendant is found guilty; or 2) the defendant is found not guilty, and the accuser is, by default, considered guilty in the court of popular opinion (e.g. guilty of lying, guilty of being too promiscuous, etc.)

victims as being more culpable for acts of sexual violence than the perpetrators of the assault, a discourse that is articulated and re-articulated by the general public. On the other, you have the counter-hegemonic subversive discourse that defends the “victim-ness” of sexual assault victims just as it condemns socio-political systems that exonerate perpetrators of sexual aggression, the view held by individuals active engaged in the field of sexual violence. Since these discourses are contradictory and mutually exclusive, they are constantly at war, with discussion of a particular act of sexual violence being alternately understood by members of each camp. The conflict between these two contrasting ideologies about sexual aggression is well illustrated in this exchange between former Cleveland Police Department Sergeant Chad Langdon, who had served as the lead investigator on the aforementioned Cleveland case, and defense attorney Steve Taylor, who was representing defendant Jared Len Cruse<sup>4</sup> (who, it should be noted, was later convicted and sentenced to life in prison without parole) (Horswell 2012):

J. Taylor:	Like the spider and the fly. Wasn't she saying, "Come into my parlor, said the spider to the fly?"
C. Langdon:	I wouldn't call her a spider. I'd say she was just an eleven-year-old girl.

Taylor, of course, is referencing the classic children's poem by Mary Howitt, which depicts a duplicitous spider that manages to ensnare a gullible fly by using flattery and

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<sup>4</sup> It would be misleading for me to highlight the problematic aspects of the defense attorney's speech while glossing over similarly problematic remarks made by the prosecution. During this trial, the defendant Cruse was referred to by the prosecution as one of a “pack of dogs.” The use of this phrase to refer to a group of African-American males is politically-charged: it is situated with a history of racist discourse that systemically “Otherizes” and dehumanizes minority groups.

In fact, it's important to consider the role the race of the Cleveland rape suspects may have had in the interpretation of the act as a “real” rape case. As will be discussed for thoroughly in Part One, the classic rape model (i.e. the narrative that most closely aligns with dominant ideologies about what constitutes “real rape”) often feeds into a stereotypical assessment of male members of racial minority groups (especially African-American men) as being inherently more sexually violent. Would the case have inspired the same degree of moral panic if it did not reify a systemic narrative of the dark, dangerous Other? I would argue that racialized discourses of violence and victimization impact how assessors judge a case of sexual violence to be “real” or not.

charm. In Taylor's estimation, the sexual assault victim inhabits the role of the spider, luring unsuspecting men into committing unspeakable criminal acts, a view that quite perfectly fits the dominant discursive model of victims-as-criminals. Langdon, on the other hand, does not agree with this characterization of the sexual assault survivor as a spider, instead choosing to facilitate an understanding of the girl as a victim—or, to borrow Taylor's metaphor, a fly. One goal of this project is to further explore the conflict between these two alternate (and fundamentally adversarial) modes of discussing sexual violence; in this paper, I will examine discursive strategies utilized by 1) articulators of the dominant discourse, which characterizes the victim as a spider and the perpetrator as a fly; and 2) articulators of the subversive discourse, which argues the reverse.

There is certainly more progress to be made in terms of destabilizing certain long-held and deep-rooted misconceptions about sexual violence that direct public discourse on the topic (Gavey 2013, Raphael 2013). However, in recent years, there has been a slight but obvious change in public discussions of sexual violence that has made said discussions more critical of the dominant discourse (where the victim of sexual violence is seen as being ultimately responsible for his or her own victimization) and more amenable to the subversive discourse (which rejects this victim-as-criminal ideology) (McMahon 2011). It's certainly no coincidence that this shift has occurred following the introduction of the Internet as a new medium for social interaction. New media provides a platform for destabilizing figures—victims of sexual violence; anti-rape activists and advocates; academics and researchers who study sexual violence; and health and social service professionals alike—to publicize subversive beliefs about sexual violence and victimization.

This project centers on self-identified victims of sexual violence who have published their narratives on the blogging website Tumblr. The individuals discussed in this study have reported a pattern of sexual abuse within a community of active users of the popular

video-sharing website YouTube, accusing certain high-profile YouTube content-creators of leveraging their significant cultural clout within the YouTube community in order to pursue sexually abusive relationships with their predominantly young, teenaged fans. After learning of these allegations, I became interested in studying how structures of hierarchical power were constructed within the digital space, as well as how the popular idea of the Internet as a wholly egalitarian medium disguises these imbalanced power dynamics. Additionally, I was interested in the role digital interaction plays in publicizing subversive narratives about sexual violence, enabling 1) victims to connect with other victims and thereby establish a support system that they would otherwise not have access to; and 2) non-victims to learn about these patterns of abuse and, as a result, come to recognize the popular idea of the egalitarianism of YouTube as a myth. Underscoring the project design was a desire to understand the nature of social interaction on the Internet: what is the relationship between YouTube content-creators and content consumers, and how is this relationship articulated and maintained? How are patterns of Internet-mediated sexual abuse in the YouTube community similar and dissimilar to abusive behaviors that occur outside the realm of new media celebrity? What role does community and communality in the digital space play in establishing the legitimacy of sexual abuse allegations?

As such, this project is firmly situated within digital anthropology, concerned with how (and where) “individuals and groups deploy and communicate with digital media,” and how “a range of cultural representations, experiences, and identities” are articulated and remade in the virtual space (Coleman 2010:488). While the vastness and diversity of the digital realm makes ethnographic research somewhat difficult, these spaces have the capacity to reveal valuable information about contemporary interaction. Digital anthropology is a methodological approach founded in participant observation, designed for

“investigating the virtual and its relationship to the actual” (Boellstorf 2013:40) and blurring the analytical divide between the two realms.

The core of this project is designed around participant observation concentrated in the virtual space. Participant observation “provides ethnographers insight into practices and meanings as they unfold” and “allows for obtaining nonelicited data” e.g. spontaneous conversations as they occur (Boellstorf 2013:55). By examining how members of the YouTube fan community use Tumblr to interact, publicize sexual abuse narratives, and renegotiate their participation in the group, this project can reveal underlying patterns of hierarchical social structures within the YouTube community. Because of this, analyzing published sexual abuse allegations in addition to the broader Tumblr-based discourse surrounding these narratives forms the foundation of the project. Ultimately, the goal of this project is to gain a cohesive understanding of social structures and power dynamics embedded in the YouTube community.

## Part One: Literature Review

### Introduction

Beginning March 11th, 2014, a teenaged girl named Megan<sup>5</sup> published a series of short blog posts on the website Tumblr discussing her romantic relationship with British YouTuber Tom Milsom, whom she first met at VidCon (an annual YouTube convention) when she was fourteen years old and he was twenty-two. In the posts, she discusses being psychologically manipulated by Milsom into performing sexual acts with him, both on and off camera, despite her young age and her obvious discomfort. “the first time it wasn’t even in a bed...” read one post. “...and it fucking hurt and was really horrible and unpleasant ugh like we’d go to the mall or something and come home and he’d start making out with me and slipping his hand down my pants oh my god this is making my heart beat so fast I feel horrible.” She continued: “ i’d say it was really painful and i ended up really sore and bruised for like days like literally everything hurt so bad and i told him that and it didn’t really matter i didn’t stop anything” (see Figure 1.)

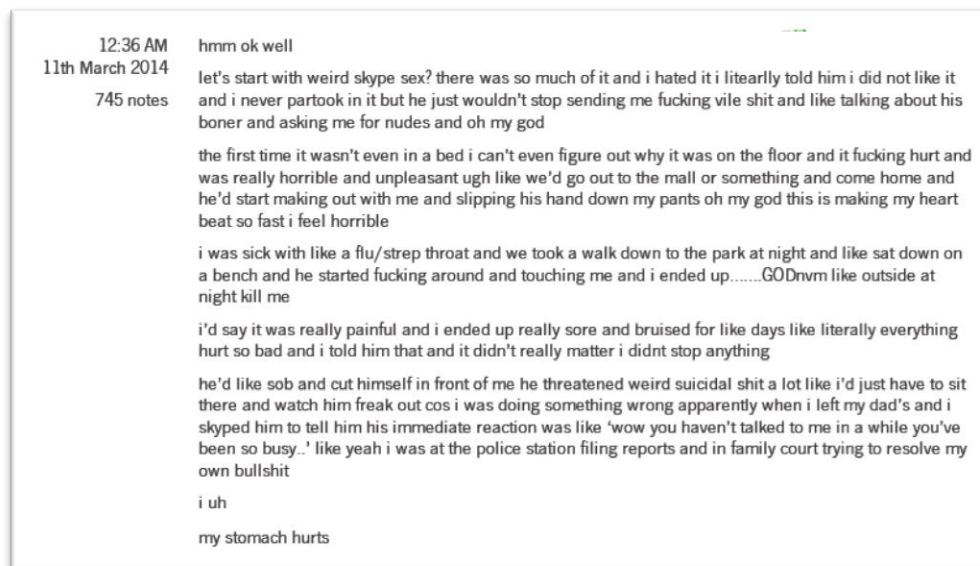


Figure 1: Screenshot from Megan's blog, taken April 5, 2014.

<sup>5</sup> Name changed.



While her posts were met with a fair share of criticism and skepticism by Milsom's supporters—many of whom highlighted the lyrical stream-of-consciousness style of the narrative and Megan's decision to discuss the abuse on the Internet rather than in an official legal-judicial context as evidence of her mendacity—her blog posts incited a deluge of similar accusations levied against other male content-producers in the YouTube community, thereby encouraging a broader discussion about the unequal power dynamic between content-producers and content-consumers. (This broader discourse about the sexual abuse allegations in the YouTube community will be examined more thoroughly in Part Two.)

Traditional media like film and television is typically seen as possessing systemic mechanisms of maintaining and reifying an established hegemonic social structure, confirming the core ideological principle that “happiness, or liberty, or equality, or fraternity can be affirmed through the existing private commodity forms, under the benign, protective eye of the national security state” (Gitlin 1979:265). In contrast, new or digital media like YouTube is often characterized as a participatory culture, representative of a shift away from hegemony of traditional media and toward a cultural “isonomy” (Stiegler 2009), a social system where all participants are equally valued and privileged. It's certainly true that the advent of new media landscapes and digital technologies has introduced a dramatic shift in how information is distributed and consumed in present-day society (Kumar 2011:33). However, are digital communities like YouTube truly egalitarian social structures, as they are often understood in popular discourse, or are they just as hierarchical and institutionally-constructed as the traditional media structures they have nominally replaced? The publication of these sexual violence narratives problematizes the idea of YouTube as an isonomic utopia, showcasing the unequal power dynamics embedded in the YouTube community.

In this section, I will provide a cultural history of the YouTube community, describing the development of institutional inequalities in the digital space as a way of theorizing structural causes for the acts of sexual abuse described by members of the YouTube community. I will unpack the popular idea of YouTube as a participatory and democratic space that stands in opposition against the hegemonic structures of traditional media.

### **“Broadcast Yourself”: YouTube as a Participatory Culture**

#### *Defining “participatory culture”*

Fame is not a modern invention. Long before a young John Lennon casually announced in a magazine interview that The Beatles were “more popular than Jesus” (Gould 2008:308-309), long before Renaissance-era composer Franz Liszt was being swarmed in the streets of Berlin by fans desperate to snag snips of his hair (Walker 1987:372), exceptional men and women have consistently been uplifted above their peers, becoming deific spectacles for an eagerly consuming audience. “Heroes” like Napoleon or Shakespeare or Plato were glorified by the masses because of their apparent exceptionality, with a particular emphasis being placed on their possession of some “individual spirit” that somehow distinguished them from commonfolk (Marshall 1997:8).

Beginning in the 20th century, the production of these celebrity figures became centralized within mass media enterprises—for instance, the Hollywood film industry—that held a monopoly on cultural production. Though the development of these monopolistic enterprises had some arguably beneficial impacts—such as the democratization of a consumer’s access to artistic work that would have been historically limited to the bourgeoisie—they also had a significantly negative effect on the diversity of popular culture in contemporary society. As Frankfurt School neo-Marxists Max Horkheimer and Theodor

Adorno (1972) famously argued, these “culture industries” mass-manufacture popular culture in much the same way factories produce material goods, allowing no room for subversive forms of creative expression to be distributed. In traditional media, only an elite few are able to control the means and modes of cultural production, resulting in a clear demarcation between “producers”—those who are able to generate, own, and distribute creative content—and “consumers,” who are barred from participating in the production process (Jenkins and Deuze 2008:5). As a result, traditional media is a homogenized domain, structured in a way that reinforces the hierarchical relationship between producer and consumer just as it regurgitates the beliefs and perspectives of Western culture’s dominant ideological system.

However, as argued by Henry Jenkins, “We are living at a moment of profound and prolonged media transition: the old scripts by which media industries operated or consumers absorbed media content are being rewritten” (Jenkins and Deuze 2008:5). With the introduction of new media technologies, there has been a dramatic “shift in the power relations between media industries and their consumers” (Burgess and Green 2009b:10). By using digital platforms like YouTube, Tumblr, and Twitter, individuals who would have historically been relegated to the sidelines, unable to break free from the category of “consumer,” are now able to “actively participate in the creation and circulation of new content” (Jenkins 2006b:290). In this way, production processes that had once been controlled by a handful of hierarchical institutions have been “usurped by independent publishers, video-sharing sites, collaboratively sustained knowledge banks, and fan-generated entertainment” (Delwiche and Henderson 2013:4). As such, these mediums are often characterized in academic literature as “participatory cultures,” representative of a shift away from the bureaucratic tyranny of the traditional culture industries and toward a

more egalitarian field where all participating members have an equal ability to produce creative content.

In addition to their comparatively low barriers to “artistic expression and civic engagement” (Jenkins 2006a:7), participatory cultures are defined by a strong sense of kinship and collective identity. Individuals within these cultures are often profoundly supportive of one another, valuing the creative works of others within the community and offering informal mentorship to novices. As such, the community “provides strong incentives for creative expression and active participation” that encourages personal investment in the social group (Jenkins and Bertozzi 2008:174). The end result is a virtual space that provides an open platform that allows users to not only generate and distribute their own creative content, but also have said creative content be enthusiastically consumed and celebrated (and, in some cases, collaboratively expanded upon) by other users.

Of course, this isn't to say that these web-based participatory cultures are perfectly egalitarian utopias where all interested participants have the ability to produce creative content and where all creative content is equally valued. For one thing, access to these participatory digital communities is limited by structural inequalities in the “real world.” For instance, individuals in certain industrialized societies with advanced economies (e.g. Iceland, Japan, the Netherlands) have consistent access to the Internet (and, resultantly, consistent access to web-based participatory cultures), whereas Internet access in certain areas of sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, the Middle East, and Southeast Asia is much more limited (Norris 2001:5; Internet World Stats<sup>6</sup>).

Even within nations with high Internet penetration rates, there exists a “digital divide” between a) high-income citizens who have reliable Internet access and b) low-

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<sup>6</sup> Internet World Stats. URL: <http://www.internetworldstats.com/> Date accessed: March 6, 2015

income citizens whose access is much more limited (Henderson 2013:273). As argued by James et al. (2010), who were specifically examining youth engagement in digital culture: “Access is increasingly available in spaces such as public libraries, but some young people don’t have consistent access to new media or to support structures that guide their use or participation” (p. 265). This lack of continuous connectivity results in a “participation gap” between those from low-income backgrounds and those from middle- to upper-class backgrounds (Jenkins 2006a:12-13), with individuals from low-income backgrounds being limited in their ability to actively take part in web-based participatory cultures.

In addition to these economic inequalities, participatory cultures are also characterized by noticeable inequities in social prestige within the virtual space. The perceived value of an individual’s contribution to a participatory culture “is not self-situated; rather, it arises from interactions with others in the group” (Henderson 2013: 277). Content-creators with a quantifiably higher degree of influence (for example, the possession of a relatively large amount of subscribers on YouTube or followers on Tumblr or micro-blogging social media site Twitter) are able to distribute their content to a wider audience than content-creators who have more limited followings. While participatory cultures are “often considered to be places of collective decision making and, by extension, collective rule making” (p. 274), rules of participation are not always constructed through a collaborative process. In many cases, “norms for interactivity and engagement” are “developed, administered, and reinforced by those with the loudest voices and longest tenures” (p. 275). In other words, those who are perceived to have the most experience or cultural clout (e.g. “big-name fans,” “big-name bloggers,” YouTube stars) often play the most important role in determining “how and what should get done” (p. 275). While the structural inequalities embedded in participatory cultures are arguably less dramatic than those embedded in traditional culture industries, it’s important to recognize “the capacity of

new media to mediate people's lives in ways that recreate social and economic inequality" (Mansell 2004:99). As a whole, however, participatory cultures are characterized not by said structural inequalities, but these cultures' capacity to blur the divide between "producers" and "consumers" within a collective, collaborative environment.

### *The "participatory-ness" of YouTube*

In its earliest days, the YouTube community quite perfectly embodied this model of the participatory culture. YouTube launched in 2005 with little pomp and circumstance, competing with several other similar web-based services that were all designed to aid in the distribution of online video. YouTube rapidly (and, by some counts, bafflingly) achieved mainstream success, with tech giant Google, Inc. ultimately acquiring YouTube for a whopping \$1.65 billion in October 2006. Unlike in traditional media enterprises like the film industry, where studios must bear the costs of discovering talent and producing creative content, YouTube's role as a handy repository for user-generated content absolves the company of such costly and laborious tasks. Rather, the business of YouTube is "the provision of a convenient and usable platform for online video sharing" (Burgess and Green 2009b:4), with an emphasis placed on the participatory distribution of amateur videos. "Broadcast Yourself," the website's infamous slogan proudly states, branding the website as a space "where the discourses of participatory culture and the emergence of the creative, empowered consumer" (Burgess and Green 2009a) are perfectly realized.

In many ways, YouTube as a media platform continues to embody the characteristics of the quintessential participatory culture, acting as "a site of collective expression, collaboration, discussion, and learning for the amateur and semi-professional users who create, share, watch, and comment on videos hosted by the website" (Mueller 2014:10). These virtual spaces act as "portals" to digital communities where users are able to freely "bond with peers, engage in public discourse, explore identity, and acquire new

skills” (Chau 2010:65). As such, YouTube offers everyday users the opportunity to subvert traditional modes of media distribution, with all interested users having equal access to the production process—at least in theory. In everyday discourse, YouTube is often “characterized as a significant challenger to the dominance of traditional broadcasting and television services” (Burgess and Green 2009a:89). Indeed, though YouTube has begun to seek premium content distribution deals with professional (rather than amateur) content producers, the website has continued to discursively “orient its services toward content sharing, including the sharing of mundane and amateur content, rather than the provision of high-quality video” (Burgess and Green 2009b:5).

However, YouTube is, ultimately, a business. Its reliance on an advertising-based revenue model means that the company is beholden not just to investors and stockholders but to potential advertisers who have particular ideas about what creative content is appropriate enough to represent their commercial products. Due to pressure to preserve positive relationships with potential advertisers, YouTube’s business plan has evolved to emphasize the recruitment of professional industry talent and the production and distribution of “high-quality” creative content (McDonald 2009) whilst simultaneously cultivating institutionalized methods of standardizing creative content that is uploaded to the website (Burgess 2012). As such, “YouTube represents a seemingly uneasy compromise between the democratic and empowering values of participatory culture, and the economic interests of incumbent media institutions” (Mueller 2014:11). Because of this, the popular rhetoric that characterizes YouTube as a wholly democratized space is inaccurate and unproductive at best, and dangerously misleading at worst. As argued by Alice Marwick:

...we should question rhetorics of “democracy” that posit YouTube as an alternative to the limits of traditional political participation. These rhetorics ignore the limited avenues of participation available to users and the authority of the site’s corporate ownership, particularly with regard to profit-driven

decision-making. Furthermore, claims of “egalitarianism” do not take into account the power relations within communities that privilege certain subject positions over others...While it is easy to posit new technologies as utopian and revolutionary, it is ultimately unfruitful (2007b:24-25).

Despite these caveats, the myth of YouTube as a completely egalitarian space continues to grip the public’s imagination. Indeed, popular discourse about participatory cultures tends to understand these virtual spaces as perfectly isonomic democracies that exist in “resistive opposition to ‘Big Media’” without understanding imbalanced power relations within these communities (Marwick 2007b:7). Additionally, these popular characterizations of participatory cultures tend to be static, with the myth of democratization persisting even as YouTube has evolved into a virtual space that more closely mimics the traditional media structures it ostensibly replaces. In the following section, I will explore the role cultural and economic capital plays in constructing structural hierarchies in the YouTube community, problematizing the popular public conception of YouTube as a wholly democratized space.

### **The Development of Structural Inequalities in the YouTube Community**

#### *A (YouTube) Star is Born!—YouTube and cultural capital*

Much of the optimism and valorization that surrounds new media enterprises like YouTube stems from a rejection of the hegemonic power of traditional media structures. As briefly discussed in the previous section, the modes and means of cultural production has historically been owned and controlled by a select group of media powerhouses (Horkheimer and Adorno 1972). As such, these traditional media industries were able to maintain a monopoly on the production of cultural capital, gaining the cultural power associated with the vast accumulation of said cultural capital (Bourdieu 1986). As such, academic literature about cultural production theorizes “systems of power [that are] embedded in the processes



of cultural production and consumption” (Harrington and Bielby 2000:4), with producers of popular culture both reflecting and shaping broader social forces (p. 6). Of course, consumers of these cultural products have a certain degree of power in acting as “active participants in the creation of meaning” (p. 4), maintaining the ability to “develop their own readings of, and uses for, cultural products—in fun, in resistance, or to articulate their own identity” (During 1993:7). However, as a whole, producers of cultural products have more cultural power than their consuming counterparts, and are therefore privileged above consumers in popular discourse about creative content.

The advent of digital media allowed individuals would have historically been excluded from the production process to instead be active participants (Couldry 2012:12), enabling members of digital communities to amass large and devoted followings outside of the context of the traditional media industry. These YouTube celebrities are typically viewed “as a triumph for American individualism, in which a talented individual could bypass the star system and achieve success” through hard work and dedication (Marwick 2007b:12).

For example, PewDiePie—who, as of this writing, is the owner of the most subscribed user-operated<sup>7</sup> channel on YouTube, with upwards of 34 million subscribers—receives an average of about 3.5 million views per video<sup>8</sup>. The second most subscribed user-operated channel, HolaSoyGerman., possesses upwards of 21 million subscribers with an

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<sup>7</sup> Here, the designation “user-operated” refers to channels that are controlled by individual content-creators (i.e. “YouTubers”) rather than being curated by mass enterprises like Vevo, Sony Music, or YouTube itself. In order, the top 10 most subscribed channels (as of this writing) are: #Music (controlled by YouTube), #Gaming (controlled by YouTube) #Sports (controlled by YouTube), PewDiePie (user-operated), News (controlled by YouTube), #PopularOnYouTube (controlled by YouTube), YouTube Spotlight (controlled by YouTube), HolaSoyGerman (user-operated), Smosh (user-operated), and Movies (controlled by YouTube). Of these YouTube-controlled channels, only YouTube Spotlight produces original content. The others only curate content that has been previously uploaded by other (sometimes user-operated) channels. Of the top 50 most subscribed channels, roughly half are user-operated.

<sup>8</sup> VidStatsX. <http://vidstatsx.com/PewDiePie/youtube-channel>. Date accessed: March 6, 2015.

average of over 14.4 million views per video<sup>9</sup>. Of course, these views are still a fraction of what the traditional media juggernaut is able to achieve: for instance, NBC Sunday Night Football, currently the most popular television program in the United States, received an average of over 31 million views per episode in the year 2013<sup>10</sup>, a large number that doesn't even include international and non-same-day domestic views. As such, these new media enterprises don't quite have the same sphere of influence as traditional media enterprises, at least not as of yet, meaning that celebrities produced in the traditional star system generally have more brand recognition and prestige. While traditional celebrities have the ability to achieve international mainstream recognition, a YouTuber's influence is generally (though not always) confined to the insular digital community, though this is likely to change in the upcoming years.

However, traditional and new media celebrities have similar positionalities as loci of "parasocial" interaction (Horton 1956:215-16); in these cases, the relationship between performer and spectator is fundamentally one-sided. Though all YouTube users have the ability to distribute video on the website, many members of the YouTube community elect not to join in this production process, instead preferring to participate as consumers, such as by viewing videos and reading comments (Chau 2010:67). In this way, there exists a functional distinction between producers and consumers of creative content in digital communities, a distinction that closely mimics the producer-consumer dichotomy that exists in the traditional media industry. It must be recognized that there is power embedded in cultural production—the power to accumulate cultural capital, the power to shape the cultural landscape of the community. And though new media celebrities may not currently be in the position to acquire quite as much prestige as traditional celebrities can,

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<sup>9</sup> VidStatsX. <http://vidstatsx.com/holasoygerman/youtube-channel>. Date accessed: March 6, 2015.

<sup>10</sup> Nielsen Foundation. <http://www.nielsen.com/us/en/insights/news/2013/tops-of-2013-tv-and-social-media.html>. Date accessed: March 6, 2015.

these new media celebrities have a great deal of clout within the digital community itself, power than can occasionally (if not frequently) be extended outside of the digital community into the “real world.”

### *The introduction of economic capital*

During YouTube’s earliest days, this cultural capital was the only form of capital that prominent content-creators could hope to acquire through their participation in the digital community. This, in and of itself, should not have prevented these early YouTubers from accessing economic capital through their participation in the YouTube community. As argued by Pierre Bourdieu (1986), cultural capital is (under certain conditions) convertible into economic capital. However, the early infrastructure of YouTube limited users’ ability to monetize their content, preventing the user-generated cultural capital to be translated into economic capital (Marwick 2007b:18). This lack of access to economic capital was specific to the users of the website, with the website’s owners controlling the ability to convert the cultural capital of the user-generated content into economic capital.

YouTube’s acquisition by Google marked a major milestone for the company, establishing it as an archetypical example of the “Web 2.0” business ethic: by “incorporating the logic and rhetoric of social engagement and democratic empowerment into the technology of web-based consumer products and services” (Mueller 2014:7), Web. 2.0 companies are able to monetize and commercialize participatory cultures. These companies emphasize the development of easily accessible self-publication tools that are able to attract a large audience of devoted amateur users, framing Web 2.0 as “an enabler of participatory culture and its utopian ideals” (p. 7) that subverts the hierarchical nature of traditional media enterprises. In the case of YouTube, the Web 2.0 business model was successful in

both generating a significant amount of economic capital via advertising revenue, and, resultantly, confirming YouTube's status as a major player in the global marketplace.

Despite the YouTube community's ethos of collaboration and egalitarianism that had supposedly erased traditional divisions between producer and consumer, the economic system of YouTube was still conspicuously hierarchical, with the website's proprietors effectively controlling the modes and means of economic production in this virtual space. As such, YouTube's purchase by Google served as a visible manifestation of this perceived gap between the website's users and its owners. As talent agent Jason Nadler reported in an interview with *The New York Times*:

[YouTube celebrities] see YouTube being bought for \$1.6 billion. They say, "Wait a sec, I haven't seen a penny of this. Meanwhile, my stuff has been downloaded two million times." They feel like they might not be getting as a good a deal as they should (Halbfinger 2006, C1).

Possibly in response to this criticism from the YouTube community, YouTube launched the Partner Program in 2007, which allows popular users to monetize their original creative content by receiving a portion of the website's advertising revenues. At launch, the Partner Program was limited only to a select group of YouTube users who had a large enough subscriber base to qualify, meaning that the vast majority of YouTube users were still explicitly barred from access (Marwick 2007b:18). However, currently all YouTube users in eligible countries (e.g. the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom) whose account is in good standing and who upload "original, quality content that is advertiser friendly"<sup>11</sup> have the ability to monetize their videos. According to YouTube, more than a million channels are currently enrolled in the YouTube Partner Program<sup>12</sup>, up from

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<sup>11</sup> YouTube. "Criteria for YouTube partnership." <https://support.google.com/youtube/answer/82839>. Date accessed: March 6, 2015.

<sup>12</sup> YouTube. "Statistics." <http://www.youtube.com/yt/press/statistics.html>. Date accessed: March 6, 2015.

30,000 in 2011 (Marshall 2013). It should be noted, however, that according to the same official report from YouTube, the website currently has over 1 billion users, meaning that only a fraction of a percent of all users are enrolled in the YouTube Partner Program and are able to monetize their content through the website. This dramatic difference in access to the website's established mechanisms of generating economic capital results in obvious structural inequalities that 1) reinforce the already existing distinction between producers and consumers, with producers being privileged above their consuming counterparts; and 2) create a divide between producers who can generate economic capital and producers who cannot.

Another important side effect of the increased monetization of the YouTube community is the homogenization and standardization of content distributed on the website. Because the YouTube business model relies on advertising revenue, the company needs to be able to attract advertisers, the website requires harmless, non-copyright-infringing creative content. Indeed, the YouTube Partner Program “functions as a strategy for legitimizing YouTube as a safe site for advertising” (McDonald 2009:392), guaranteeing potential advertisers that their products will be showcased in an environment that said advertisers wouldn't be embarrassed to associate with their brand. Compared to the archetypical aesthetic of user-generated content produced in the pre-Google era (which boasted low production values, poor lighting, amateurish editing, etc.), modern YouTube Partners construct a significantly more polished image. This is a shift that is actively encouraged by the company. For instance, the company has established production facilities (“YouTube Spaces”) in Los Angeles, London, Tokyo, New York, and São Paulo where content-creators are able to take classes on professional video production<sup>13</sup> and—if they

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<sup>13</sup> Sample class titles: “Self Shooter: Video Production for One”; “Camera Framing and Lighting Workshop”; “Build Your Channel: Beyond Vlogging”

have a high enough subscriber count—utilize professional quality filmmaking equipment <sup>14</sup>. While the YouTube community as a whole continues to valorize the “bottom-up,” grassroots entrepreneurship of the archetypical YouTube “amateur” (Morreale 2014:116-117), the brand of user-generated content that is most successful in the website’s current mediascape affects the refined, carefully mediated look of the professional.

The push for monetization has also led to the introduction of commercialized, branded content. “If the pre-Google era of YouTube is characterized by amateur-produced videos in an ad-free environment,” argues Jin Kim (2012), “the post-Google purchase stage is characterized by professionally generated videos in an ad-friendly environment.” While in its earliest days, YouTube was often characterized as a rival for traditional media companies, YouTube’s acquisition by Google led to “Big Media” networks to view the website not as a threat but as a partner. Beginning in 2008, “Big Media” networks began to use YouTube as a “new channel to re-transmit their programs” (p.57), posting clips of existing “old media” on the new media platform as a promotional tool. Over time YouTube has “morphed from being a more social media platform with links to friends and commentary, to emphasize more commercial fare and individualized consumption of...professional media” (Lange 2014:9). In this way, YouTube as a community “reflects a hegemonic tension between an amateur-led, individually driven mediascape and a professionally led, institutionally driven professional media landscape” (p. 54), and creative content in the latter category is increasingly controlling the social and cultural economy of the website (Morreale 2014:116). Even though YouTube is popularly characterized as a site of participatory culture where “bottom-up” user-generated production is able to thrive, “top-down” professionally-generated production dominates the YouTube space.

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<sup>14</sup> YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/yt/space/>. Date accessed: March 6, 2015.

All of these factors have contributed to the construction and maintenance of structural hierarchies within the YouTube community. Even though the valorization of the amateur forms a core aspect of the YouTube community's ideological narrative, both the website itself and its users privilege the professional. As argued by Nick Salvato: "...the users whom YouTube invites to 'broadcast [themselves]' regularly and consistently affirm the professional, [which is] produced and defined in tandem with and at the ultimate expense of the amateur" (2009:69). Indeed, the myth of democratization within the YouTube community serves as a method of both disguising and legitimizing commercialism on the website. Content-creators appeal to "the cachet of the 'homegrown' and the 'grassroots'" (p. 69) in order to preserve a sense of authenticity. In contrast to this popular rhetoric of egalitarianism, YouTube is in the process of transforming (or, perhaps, has already transformed) into a space where the hierarchical relationship between producers and consumers is persistently reified. Indeed, the fact that these structural hierarchies are hidden behind this myth of democratization can potentially disguise patterns of abuse, a phenomenon that will be explored more thoroughly in the next section.

### **Structural Inequalities and Sexual Abuse**

Firmly embedded in academic and feminist discussions of rape is that it is not an act of sex but, rather, an act of violence. As prominent French philosopher Michel Foucault (1988) argued: "there is no difference, in principle, between sticking one's fist into someone's face or one's penis into their *sexe* [genitalia]..." (p. 200). As such, rape is, at its core, an abuse of power, "a wrongdoer's culpable exploitation of dominance, influence, and control over a person in a subordinate position" (Buchhandler-Raphael 2011:53-54). Rape, then, is not founded upon sexual desire but about the desire to claim (or reclaim) power by sublimating the will of another. This idea of sexual violence—as an act of violence rather

than as an act of romantic or sexual desire—has permeated popular discourse on the subject of rape.

However, these popular ideas about the relationship between sexual violence and power tend to be limited to fictionalized and hegemonically enforced constructs of what “real” rape is, at least when it comes to public discourse about sexual violence. As argued by legal theorist Michelle J. Anderson, the “classic rape narrative” that is conjured in the American mind when defining an act of sexual violence tends to look something like this:

A fair young woman is walking home alone at night. Gray street lamps cast shadows from the figure she cuts through an urban landscape. She hurries along, unsure of her safety. Suddenly, perhaps from behind a dumpster, a strange, dark man lunges out at her, knife at her throat, and drags her into a dark alley...The young woman puts up a valiant fight to protect her sexual virtue but the assailant overcomes her will...(2005:625-626)

These ideas about what rape “should” look like are infused with an air of drama that is “woven from racist and sexist mythology specific to our country and its history” (Anderson 2005:626), with the “ideal” victim inhabiting the role of a helpless, white damsel-in-distress and the “ideal” rapist embodying the “sinister blackness” (p. 626) of minority racial and ethnic groups<sup>15</sup>. In this view, the act of rape is the violent act of a stranger, a mysterious and gruesome act that takes place in the cover of night. In reality, this type of rape is a statistical outlier, “so different from the norm as to be exceptional rather than typical” (p. 626). Most acts of rape are committed not by a mysterious stranger but by a personal acquaintance of the victim. There is also usually no extrinsic, visible manifestations of violence, at least not in the way violence is usually perceived in the

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<sup>15</sup> Recall the discussion of Jared Len Cruse in the Cleveland rape case (previously mentioned in this paper’s introduction), who was referred to by the prosecution as one of a “pack of dogs.” As African-American males, he and the other convicted rapists in this case fit this model of “sinister blackness.”



classic rape narrative—usually, there is “no knife, no dragging into an alley, no threat of death, no beating” (p. 626).

However, despite the fact that the “stranger rape” of the classic rape narrative is far more uncommon than the more typical “acquaintance rape,” this popular perception of stranger rape as real prevents cases of “acquaintance rape” from being taken seriously in popular discourse, with these culturally-constructed ideologies about sexual assault victims creating an ecological structure that “allow[s] men to justify rape and [female non-victims] to minimize personal vulnerability (Suarez and Gadalla 2010:2013). As such, victims of acquaintance rape often opt not to report their experiences for fear of rejection or reprisal, causing these acts of violence to remain hidden in the shadowy private realm.

In this way, the most common forms of rape are grounded not in the physical power of the classic rape narrative but in structural power, with the perpetrator able to exert hierarchical and psychological control of the victim. In many cases, the unbalanced power dynamics between victim and perpetrator in acts of acquaintance rape are even more starkly apparent: an employee who is sexually harassed at work by a supervisor, for instance, is further disadvantaged by their lower social position. In fact, sexual harassment in this context is most accurately understood as a political tactic “designed to enhance the harasser’s power position,” with the act of harassment itself “a symbolic maneuver designed to enhance one’s image of power and dominance” (Thacker and Ferris 1991:3). In this way, the capacity for sexual violence can often be strengthened by a perpetrator’s ability to build on existing inequalities and political power and a particular socio-political space. As argued by prominent feminist thinker Susan Brownmiller:

All rape is an exercise in power, but some rapists have an edge that is more than physical. They operate within an institutionalized setting that works to their advantage and in which a victim has little chance to redress her grievance (1975:200).

As such, it's possible to understand the phenomenon of sexual abuse as being founded upon one of two sources of power: individual power, which is derived not from structural forces from an "individual's personality, expertise, knowledge, opportunity to access and manipulate important, critical information" (Thacker and Ferris 1991:27), and organizational power, where the abuser's authority is derived from their privileged position within a structural hierarchy that manifested in a particular socio-political sphere (p. 26). These methods of power can be mapped to prominent social theorist Max Weber's ideas of charismatic authority (a method of domination that is grounded by an individual's innate extraordinariness [1978:241-242]) and legal (or bureaucratic) authority (a method of domination that is grounded in formal rule systems [1978:1111]). As such, acts of acquaintance rape that are founded on organizational power tend to manifest themselves within institutions. Indeed, this form of sexual violence is particularly troublesome in institutionalized settings, where the acts of abuse can become normalized within a system that consistently exonerates perpetrators and vilifies victims.

It's important, here, to recognize this power differential as a fundamental reason why the "just say no" school of sexual violence prevention—the goal of which is to teach women to *just say no*, clearly and unapologetically, thereby enabling them to avoid victimization via acquaintance rape—is not an effective model for avoiding unwanted sex. Firstly (and perhaps most importantly), it should not be expected that the burden of sexual violence prevention lies with the victimized rather than the victimizer. Additionally, even if a victim of sexual assault does not explicitly use the word "no," said victim usually engages in clear refusal interactions that unambiguously demonstrate their unwillingness and discomfort. In these situations, victims (particularly young women) are inclined to utilize indirect refusals that follow organized, normative discursive patterns; in any other context,

these refusals would be seen as adequately representative of their negation. In other words, “refusals do not have to be—and generally are not—emphatic, direct, and immediate ‘no’s” (Kitzinger 1999:309). As such, men who claim to not have understood an indirect refusal are proclaiming that they “are ignorant of ways of expressing refusal which they themselves routinely use in other areas of their lives” (Kitzinger 1999:310). Indeed, I would argue that in an institutional structure where the victim of sexual violence has less power than the perpetrator (such as in employer-employee interactions or the interactions between a celebrity and a fan), the victim’s utterance of the word “no” has no meaning, since the ability to refuse is confined by an individual’s authority (or lack thereof). As such, spaces with embedded mechanisms of imbalanced structural power act as perfect gestation fields for cyclical patterns of sexual abuse.

Consider the case of Megan and Tom Milsom, previously discussed in the introduction of this section of the paper. Their relationship was very obviously inequalitarian, due to 1) the dramatic disparity in Megan and Milsom’s ages as well as 2) Milsom’s positionality as an Internet celebrity and Megan’s positionality as a fan. As such, unequal distributions of power can help to contribute to patterns of structural inequality and abuse.

## **Conclusions**

In the case of the YouTube community, the existing structural inequalities 1) between producers and consumers of creative content, 2) between producers with access to economic capital and producers without access, and 3) between producers who have accumulated vast amounts of cultural capital (e.g. the aforementioned PewDiePie, with his upwards of 30 million subscribers) and less well-known producers has created a digital environment where instances of sexual violence can be institutionalized and normalized.

Indeed, the myth of the YouTube community as a wholly democratized space helps to obscure abuses of power within the community. In this way, popular depictions of YouTube as wholly democratized is not only misleading, but also potentially dangerous, allowing acts of abuse to go unchecked behind a constructed image of egalitarianism.

To be clear, I am not arguing that the YouTube community as a whole is rife with sexual abuse, thereby building on years of skepticism and moral grandstanding that has surrounded digital communities since the birth of the Internet; indeed, the Internet is the latest in a long line of new technologies that has inspired a moral panic amongst concerned adults. Tales of Internet-mediated sexual abuse haunt the public imagination, with adults viewing the digital world as a unsafe space teeming with sexual predators. While it's certainly true that the Internet has provided a forum for sexual predators to solicit underage victims (Mitchell et al. 2011), the prevalence of sexual violence on the Internet is often overstated and overemphasized (Cassell and Cramer 2008). In fact, most underage Internet users will not be targeted or victimized by sexual predators, and the view of the Internet as a "wild, wild West" of sexual impropriety largely stems from fears of the newness and unfamiliarity of the digital world. Without having more data on the subject of sexual abuse within the YouTube community, it's difficult to speak definitively about the prevalence of sexual violence in this space. However, if the proportion of acts of abuse is statistically similar to acts of Internet-mediated sexual abuse outside of the YouTube community, YouTube as a whole is, more than likely, a relatively safe space for the vast majority of its users.

Still, though it might not be accurate to argue that YouTube as a whole is an unsafe space (in much the same way that uninformed naysayers describe the Internet as a whole as a den of danger and immorality), the recent reports of sexual abuse in the YouTube community has made it extremely necessary to understand what institutional

characteristics of the YouTube community might be allowing these acts of violence to persist. In the following section, we will review the specifics of these allegations of sexual violence in greater depth.

## Part Two: Analysis of Data

### Introduction: The Case of Alex Day

Alex Day first became active in the YouTube community in 2006, shortly before the Google buyout, and rapidly became well known within the YouTube community: as of this writing, his YouTube channel possesses upwards of 900 thousand subscribers with an average of over 300 thousand views per video. Alex is perhaps most appropriately characterized as a vlogger (or “video blogger”), a type of YouTuber who specializes in shooting video in a distinct *cinema vérité* style. These vloggers are able to document abbreviated versions of their everyday lives, either 1) by scripting a video that’s filmed in a confessional style, framed as a conversation between the filmmaker and the camera (and, by proxy, the spectator), or 2) by filming themselves “out in the field” in a short-form documentary format.

These “videos of affinity” (Lange 2009) are deliberately mundane, shrewdly highlighting and magnifying the normal and the ordinary; however, rather than merely recording reality, these vloggers are carefully constructing it, editing their videos in ways that minimize negative aspects of their personalities and heighten the videos’ entertainment value. While it wouldn’t be accurate to claim that these videos are false, exactly, it also cannot be claimed that they are unadulterated reflections of reality. As such, these videos masterfully blur the line between fiction and fact, and the end result manifests what Bourdieu termed the “reality effect”: the YouTubers’ artificial construction of themselves is consumed by an audience who mistakes the construction for unmediated reality (1998:21).

Of course, the inability of an audience member to recognize the object of their adoration as an artificial construction is not something unique to the relationship between content-producers and content-consumers in the new media landscape; as discussed in the

previous section, this self-same adoration for constructed images is just as inherent to the relationship between traditional celebrities and their fans, and these fans can certainly misinterpret these images as unadulterated truth. However, I would argue that the heightened intimacy of Internet-based creative content plays a significant role in obscuring the simulated nature of the medium and, additionally, functions to create a strong bond between performer and spectator that is absent from many other brands of mass media. In framing their videos as conversations, the vlogger invites their viewers to understand their consumption of these videos as dialogue rather than passive observation. Indeed, the YouTubers can divulge private (if edited and carefully selected) details of their lives with such a genuine air that their fans can come to feel that they know the YouTuber in the same familiar way they know their friends and family. However, though the YouTuber may be understood by the audience as a comrade or confidante, this bond of intimacy is fundamentally founded upon the content-producer's artificial construction of self (Horton 1956:216-17). The fans don't know the "real" YouTuber; they know the version of the YouTuber that is edited and distributed for public consumption.

Now, let me perfectly clear: I do not see this form of parasocial interaction between fans and celebrities as being inherently pathological or problematic. Nor am I attempting to imply that the affection that fans feel for beloved celebrities is somehow wrong or invalid. However, it is important to recognize the illusion of intimacy and authenticity in Internet-based content distribution and understand how this illusion can help to obscure problematic or dangerous behaviors a content-producer is able to disguise behind his or her mediated persona.

After Megan (previously discussed in Part One) published a series of blog posts about her abusive relationship with YouTuber Tom Milsom, other members of the YouTube community were inspired to publicly discuss their own experiences of abuse at the hands of

prominent YouTube personalities<sup>16</sup>. In the following sections, I will discuss allegations of abuse (both sexual and psychological) levied against Alex Day, who was the most prominent YouTube celebrity to be accused of sexual impropriety. I will examine discursive strategies utilized by Day's accusers to support the characterization of Day as a "spider," just as I will look at discursive strategies utilized by Day to resist this characterization and recast himself as a vulnerable "fly." By looking at these posts as a collective, I can demonstrate how narratives are constructed, supported, countered, and legitimized in the digital space.

### **Alex Day: Spider or Fly?**

The assessment of authenticity is an important social process in everyday interaction, with individual social actors valuing interconnected ideals of truthfulness, reality, and consistency, and actively disliking what they perceive to be "pseudo-authentic," such as perceptibly artificial tourist venues and individuals who act "above" their station (Coupland 2003:417). As such, authentic language acts as a mechanism of constructing a more "genuine" experience through the use of particular discursive strategies (Coupland 2003:417). When it comes to how these sexual abuse narratives about YouTubers are responded to online, the assessment of authenticity is especially important in establishing the legitimacy of the complainant's claims, with narratives judged as authentic gaining the actionable power to publicly indict the perpetrator of the abuse. Because of this, it's important to identify the linguistic processes through which a victim is established as an "authentic" speaker (Ehrlich 2001:20).

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<sup>16</sup> It is perhaps important to note, here, that the vast majority of the self-identified victims who have published these YouTube-centric abuse narratives on Tumblr are female, with only two participants identifying as male. This could be because the "vlogging" fanbase on YouTube is predominately female, coupled with the fact that, statistically-speaking, sexual violence is a largely gendered crime. However, it's definitely possible that there have potentially been more male YouTube fans who have been abused in this way and are reluctant to come forward for a variety of reasons, such as the well-documented disdain and skepticism the general public has for male victims of sexual violence.



The subversiveness of these published narratives about sexual violence in the YouTube community presents a fair share of obstacles to the speakers who wish to have their narratives be judged as authentic. The perceived authenticity of sexual violence narratives depends upon the use of discursive strategies that are bound by “culturally specific paradigms of ‘knowledge’ about reality,” with storytellers utilizing cohesive schemas as a “linguistic means of ritualizing the representation of experience” and thereby legitimizing the text (Bennett 1997:99-100). The storyteller’s inability to ascribe to these established rules of speaking authentically limits the narrative’s success; therefore, the hearer’s familiarity with the narrative’s structure greatly influences the assessment of the narrative as being authentic or inauthentic (p. 100). A skilled storyteller, then, must carefully negotiate the construction of their narrative based on existing structural schematics in order to be authenticated.

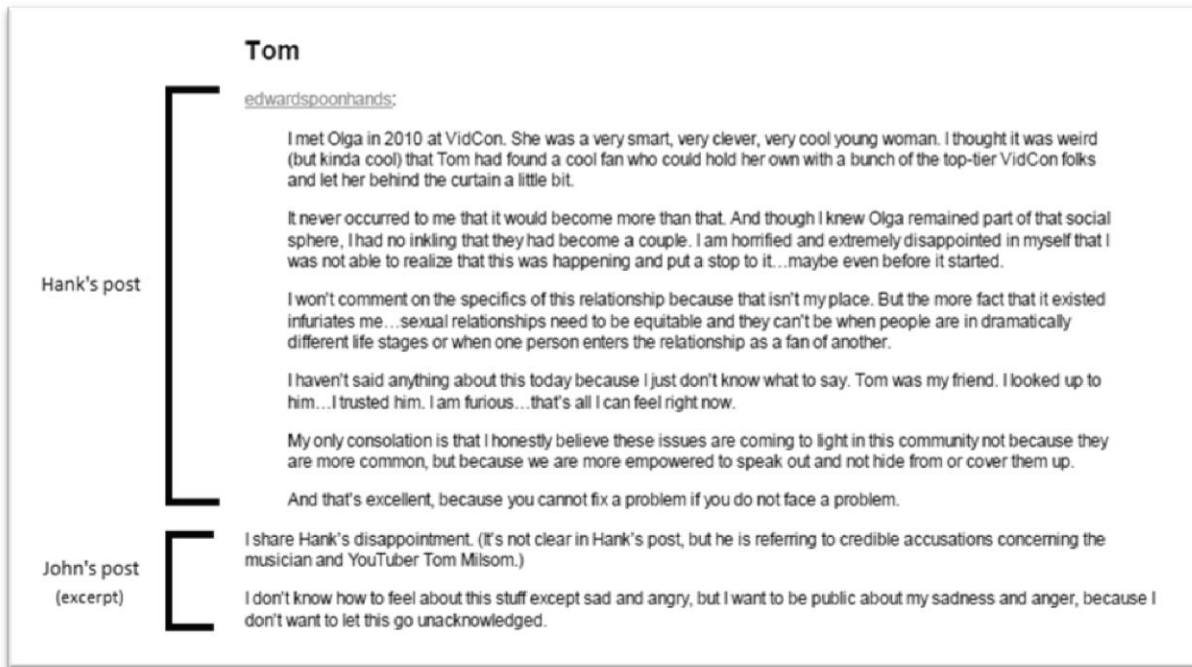
By publishing their YouTube sexual violence narratives online, the speakers sidestep the legitimized context of the legal-judicial system, thereby exposing their narratives to criticism from audiences who are skeptical of the non-legitimized nature of the digital space. Indeed, the omnipresence of the aforementioned rape myth—an established narrative paradigm regarding what constitutes “real” rape and “real” rape victims—has constructed an image of how an authentic author of a sexual abuse narrative should present oneself. As such, complainants who do not conform to this conception of the “typical” victim of sexual violence are dismissed as inauthentic speakers. A woman (or man) who is willing to publicly and graphically discuss their experiences in gruesome detail in Internet-based blog posts does not fit the established model of victimhood. Additionally, sexual abuse victims attempting to discuss their experiences of abuse at the hands of prominent YouTubers have the added burden of attempting to authenticate a sexual abuse narrative that directly contradicts the constructed image of the YouTuber that has already

been accepted as established truth. Because these new sexual abuse narratives have not yet been normalized in the same way the established “brand” of the YouTuber has been, these narratives can be judged as inauthentic because of their perceived deviance and abnormality.

As such, it’s helpful to understand the discursive strategies the authors of these sexual abuse narratives use in order to resist delegitimization. For instance, authenticity often depends on some process of authorization that is arbitrated by an “infrastructure of expert authenticators in positions of power” (Coupland 2003:419). As such, sexual abuse narratives that are legitimized by external social actors in positions of authority are judged as being more authentic than narratives that lack this corroboration. Consider the aforementioned case of Megan and Tom Milsom—at the time of publishing the narrative, Megan did not have a very well-known online presence, a fact that 1) limited her ability to distribute her narrative and have it be consumed (and judged as authentic) by others and 2) denied her narrative the legitimizing power of an authority figure. When considered in isolation, her narrative could be dismissed by skeptical readers as the dishonest ramblings of some anonymous girl on the Internet.

However, her story was able to gain traction in the YouTube community by being “reblogged” and cosigned by the Vlogbrothers, two prominent YouTubers with a great deal of authority in the community: Hank Green (musician and founder of DFTBA Records, the music label through which Milsom distributed his music) and his brother John Green (a bestselling young adult novelist with a large and avid teenaged fanbase) (see Figure 2). By cosigning Megan’s narrative, the Vlogbrothers assumed the role of expert authenticators, arbitrating the legitimization of Megan’s speech by labeling it as truth. Indeed, after receiving this authenticating signal boost, Megan’s blog posts were able to gain enough attention within the YouTube community to encourage others to publish similar narratives

about their own experience of abuse at the hands of prominent members of the YouTube community. As such, this method of utilizing expert authenticators to legitimize the text was able to encourage candid discussion of the unbalanced power dynamic between content-producers and content-consumers in the YouTube community.



**Figure 2: Hank's and John's responses to Olga's allegations (March 2014). Screenshot taken April, 5 2014.**

In the case of the abuse allegations against Alex Day, speakers did not utilize expert authenticators in order to legitimize their narratives about their experiences of abuse and sexual violence. Instead, these speakers tended to legitimize their narratives by situating said stories within a cohesive intertextual narrative, fundamentally interwoven with similar narratives published by other self-identified victims. In effect, each individual narrative about Alex Day was legitimized and authenticated via its connection with other narratives about Alex Day.

An anonymous Tumblr user, who operated under the username “pepperysalts,” penned the first of these allegations against Alex Day. This initial post is excerpted below<sup>17</sup>:

- (1) It seems like a lot of stuff is coming to light about the male YouTube population. I’m not glad that it’s happening, but I’m glad people are talking about it, because it needs to stop. I hope this post will contribute to that.
- (3) I met [Alex Day] when I was 17 and a fan of his videos, and after talking online for less than a month he invited me to stay over at his place. I was initially adamant that nothing would happen between us and he initially agreed, but continually expressed a disregard for that further into our interactions.
- (4) Once we were sleeping in the same room (as what I thought of as “just friends”) and he woke me up by kissing me and touching me sexually
- (5) ...I know for a fact I’m not the only girl he’s done this with.
- (7) When sitting next to him, he would tell me I wouldn’t be able to turn my head towards him without him trying to kiss me. I’d sit in the same position until my neck hurt and then he’d try to kiss me anyway.
- (8) Once, he complained to me “Can we skip the part where you say no for an hour before anything happens? It’s tiring.”
- (13) I don’t want to take this further. I just wanted my word out there in the hopes that other people who have been abused emotionally, sexually or physically by these people who have a great deal of influence over a large number of teenage girls won’t be as afraid to come forward. It’s time to stop letting things like this happen.

In paragraph 1, pepperysalts prefaces her narrative by grounding it in the context of the multiple sexual abuse allegations that had been made against other YouTubers around the same time of her writing and publishing her own account (“a lot of stuff is coming to light about the male YouTube population”; “I hope this post will contribute to that”). In this

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<sup>17</sup> Numbers in parentheses correspond with paragraph number of original blog post.

way, her story becomes part of an intertextual network of thematically similar narratives, with her own narrative being effectively co-authored by other survivors of sexual abuse. Because of this, a shift in footing (Goffman 1981)—in this instance, a loss of the intertextual bracketing of pepperysalts’s story by other sexual abuse narratives—would change or possibly even diminish the meaning of the post. This communal and intertextual aspect of the narrative is reinforced in different ways throughout the text, such as in paragraph 5 (“I know for a fact I’m not the only girl he’s done this with.”), resulting in a text that seems both multivocal and deeply personal.

Subsequent posts by other accusers consciously built on this multivocality, comparing their experiences with those of other accusers and highlighting similarities in their narratives. Some, like pepperysalts, discussed situations in which Day demonstrated a disregard for their lack of consent. Others, like anonymous users “ohnoitsallcomingout” and “infinitelovewithoutfulfilment,” provided more graphic discussions of being pressured into sexual relationships with Day when the accusers were as young as fourteen. Still others, like anonymous user “anothonymous” and prominent YouTuber Tikken, discussed past instances of Alex Day’s infidelity, discussing these previous indiscretions as a way of further dismantling Day’s more positive construction of self. In this way, each individual speaker’s narrative was able to be authenticated based on its connection to other narratives, resulting in an intertextual narrative that depicts Alex Day as manipulative, unrepentant “spider.”

In response to these allegations, Alex Day published a blog post on March 12, 2014 entitled “On Mistakes,” which has been excerpted below:

- (1) I don’t consider myself a particularly good person, although I am trying to be better. There are definitely things that I’ve done in the past that were not good things to have done...I’m telling you about it because it’s

in my past, because people are flawed, some much more than others, and because I believe the mark of a good person lies in that person's capacity to apologise for what they've done, take responsibility for their actions and make sure they learn from the pain they've caused in order to make sure they never do anything like it again.

- (2) At no point in my life have I ever had a sexual relationship with someone under the age of consent...At no point in my life have I ever undertaken any romantic activity, sexual or otherwise, without being sure the other person wanted it.
- (4) I feel incredibly ashamed to have mistreated people in the past, and for the unhealthy relationships I have previously instigated or allowed to carry on when I should have been more responsible. I've been honest about that in the past and will continue to be honest about my past failures, as well as my attempts to make amends for them. ... But I also can't help acknowledging that this discussion is good. People should always be encouraged to speak up in cases where they feel uncomfortable or mistreated, and the signal boosting of such cases are necessary to help other people that have been mistreated to a) speak up themselves to make people more aware of how their actions are interpreted and b) feel more empowered to voice their concerns next time before things go too far.
- (5) Ultimately, the decision to believe me, or continue to support my work, is yours alone.

In response to Day's "On Mistakes" post, pepperysalts responded: "I'm so angry. This is absolute bullshit, and people are going to believe you. You've just enabled every sexual abuser in a position of power to get away with this....I hope you realise how many people are going to be taken advantage of, abused, or raped because of this post." Similarly critical was prominent YouTuber Lex, who published a blog post detailing her own experience with Alex Day in an effort to help delegitimize Day's claims:

- (1) In late 2008 I became friends with Alex Day. For quite a while we were close, and I often called him one of my best friends...In 2010, I went to Alex's flat to stay for

the week as we were still close friends. Alex kissed me, and I stopped him and told him I didn't want to as I was recently getting over a break-up and wasn't ready. I told him I just needed him to be my friend. Alex ignored this, and continued to try to kiss me despite what I'd said. He later asked me to sleep in his bed and was very frustrated with me when I refused. I slept on the sofa and then went home. A while later, once I'd eventually realised that what Alex and I had wasn't a genuine friendship and that his behaviour towards me generally had been unacceptable, I cut ties with him.

- (2) I confronted Alex about this today because I felt that what he did to me, although it wasn't any kind of serious assault by any means, was in direct contradiction to the statement he posted earlier today in which he said 'At no point in my life have I ever undertaken any romantic activity, sexual or otherwise, without being sure the other person wanted it.' [*paragraph 2 of Day's "On Mistakes"*] He has apologised to me for his past behaviour and clarified that actually it wasn't a contradiction, because despite the fact that I made it clear I wasn't consenting to a kiss, in his mind he was still sure I wanted it because he thought my reasons for saying no were something he could 'make me feel better about' or that I 'did want it, but just needed help getting that issue out of the way'...
- (3) So basically despite the fact that I said I didn't want to kiss him, and said I wasn't ready, and was very clearly not giving him consent, Alex was still sure I 'wanted it'.
- (4) I am by no means the victim of this situation. I am only posting this to make it clear that Alex's statement does not *necessarily* mean that he has actually always been given consent – in my case it meant that he believed that he had consent, even when he was directly told that he did not.

Another post by Tumblr user Rebecca<sup>18</sup> built on both pepperysalts's and Lex's posts:

- (1) Maaan I really didn't want to get involved with this, but I feel like Alex's post is super damaging to anyone who wants to speak out this kind of thing in the future and I can't really just let it slide.

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<sup>18</sup> Name changed.

- (2) [pepperysalts's and Lex's posts] sound like I could have written them, aside from a few specific details...He used the 'Can we skip the part where you say no for an hour before anything happens?' line on me too [*paragraph 8 of pepperysalts's original post*]
- (5) ...I'm adding my voice [to the sexual abuse allegations] to hopefully claim back a little more credibility now Alex has unleashed a new wave of victim-blamers and naysayers onto the poor souls who were brave enough to speak out.

In this way, each individual speaker's narrative gains legitimacy because of his or her connection to other speakers and narratives, with the overall intertextual narrative construction becoming increasingly authentic because of its cohesiveness. The formation and maintenance of an intertextual narrative of similar narratives is one effective method of legitimizing subversive discourse and delegitimizing dominant discourse about sexual violence. In effect, subversive speakers utilize the participatory frameworks offered by the digital space to construct and publicize new ideas about violence and authenticity.

## Conclusions

In this project, I hope to have problematized the academic conception of YouTube as an egalitarian participatory culture by exposing ways YouTubers in positions of authority use their power over their fans in coercive ways, and how this coercive power is at least partially obscured by the "myth of egalitarianism" in the YouTube community. Though the YouTube community is often stylized as a wholly egalitarian space, there are fundamental structural inequalities embedded in the community's social system. Prestige and economic capital are inequitably distributed in the digital space, leading to the construction of unbalanced power dynamics between YouTube celebrities and their fans. The myth of egalitarianism in the YouTube community—which emphasizes (and valorizes) amateurism



and “bottom-up” content creation whilst subliminally privileging advertiser-friendly professional content—disguises these inequalities.

Reported patterns of sexual violence in the YouTube community help to destabilize this understanding of YouTube as an egalitarian space. Narratives published on Tumblr depict a pattern of abuse that is mapped onto unbalanced systems of power. These narratives indicate that unscrupulous YouTube celebrities are able to leverage their prestige within the YouTube community in order to perpetuate acts of abuse. This reported violence is situated within a system of structural power, with individual acts of abuse building on existing inequalities in the digital space.

The narratives about sexual abuse potentially expose these systemic inequalities in the YouTube community by highlighting acts of coercion perpetrated by YouTube celebrities in positions of power. Though it is unlikely that these patterns of sexual abuse is overwhelmingly common (as previously discussed in Part One), it is important to consider what institutional factors are potentially contributing to the reported perpetration of sexual violence. Demystifying systems of hierarchical power in the YouTube community is the first step to illuminating patterns of abuse and theorizing methods of making the digital space safer for potential victims.

However, discussing these patterns of coercion and abuse requires speakers to overcome dominant ideologies about sexual violence, which tends to classify reported victims of abuse as “spiders” who are worthy of skepticism and distrust. As such, authors of these YouTube-centric sexual violence narratives have to work to authenticate their stories in order to resist delegitimization. Establishing these narratives as part of an intertextual network helps to increase the perceived authenticity of the stories. In this way, the collaborative work of reported victims of abuse help to publicize incidents of violence in the YouTube community and publicly indict the accused perpetrators of the abuse.

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