We’ll See You Guys Back on the Internet: Live Performance On and Off-Line

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We’ll See You Guys Back on the Internet: How Digital Communities Complicate Live Performance Both On and Off-Line

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The final copy of this thesis has been examined by the signatories, and we find that both the content and the form meet acceptable presentation standards of scholarly work in the above mentioned discipline.
This thesis illuminates the world of YouTube culture by analyzing how both fans and content creators use liveness as a way to connect to each other and create a holistic community experience. YouTube, and YouTube fan culture, complicates liveness by creating several different live experiences (both digital and IRL), often at the same time. YouTube content creators are skilled at utilizing both new technology and older forms of live performance to engage their audiences and provide an unexpected live experience. In this thesis I will explore how liveness entwines both creator and audience in a variety of platforms, including purely digital live experiences through live streams, online video conventions like VidCon that facilitate both a digital and physical live experience, and the recent trend of YouTube live shows that draw on traditional theatrical forms to create a physical live experience.
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CHAPTER ONE: Introduction

On an average day, my phone alarm wakes me up and gives me short upstates on what happened in the world while I was asleep. Real friends with insomnia like my photos on Facebook from the previous day, internet friends that live in other countries (and whom I will never meet face to face) continue a conversation we were having in a queer chat room for fans of a particular podcast, and Hannah Hart—an online personality and YouTube content creator I am a big fan of—tells me to have a good morning and try not to think about the Presidential election tomorrow. By the time I’ve gotten dressed I have watched videos of Hannah and a few other YouTubers and friends eating breakfast on Snapchat, knowing that the video I am watching will not exist tomorrow but will likely be replaced with tomorrow’s breakfast.

While walking my dog I listen to a podcast hosted by John and Hank Green—two YouTubers I have been fans of for over six years; I stop dead in my tracks and start laughing uncontrollably as they read an email I sent them months ago on air asking for advice on how to get over something embarrassing that happened to me three years ago. This particular podcast episode was recorded live at a convention held for fans of the Green Brothers, so the brothers’ jokes about my email are peppered with the laughter of a live studio audience. The episode was recorded over two weeks ago, but I am only hearing now, the day the episode was uploaded onto iTunes. I received a text from an old college friend that also listens to the podcast and is delighted she now knows an “internet celebrity” and encourages me to use this moment as a way to boost my social media following. When I get home from my walk, I log on to the private fan group for this podcast (that I pay to be a part of) and chat with other fans about the episode and my experience. I read messages from these fans where they discuss how much they loved my email while I watch a livestream of Dan Howell—yet another YouTuber—sitting in his bedroom.
responding to questions and comments fans send him live on the air. Dan talks about what is going on with him today, gets interrupted a few times by his roommate and the doorbell and texts from his own friends, and reminds me to watch the YouTube video he posted yesterday. I spend the rest of the day attempting to work on this very thesis while staying up to date with all of my social media timelines, responding to texts from friends in town and far away, and sending my own Snapchats into the world (which will be destroyed in twenty four hours). I attend a meeting in another town over video chat while still sitting on my couch. I end my day watching reruns of an old TV show someone is livestreaming on Twitch and laughing at the comments other users are posting in real time as we all watch TV together from the comfort of our own homes. In this twenty-four hours I do not physically interact with another living being (aside from my sweet dog), yet feel so thoroughly connected to the world around me—virtually I’ve been around the world while sitting in my apartment alone. In this one sample slice of my life, I witness more live performances than I will ever hope to attend in a traditional theatre.

The points of connection between audience and performer (as well as audience and audience) are accelerated by the internet, which allows for a level of connection that places the performer in the audience’s everyday life. Just as I can drive across the country to see a friend, I can pull out my phone and talk to them face-to-face using a video chat application. This thesis analyzes the current trends in digital liveness, both on and off line, and investigates how these points of liveness facilitate community building and online relationships.

YouTube (and YouTube fan culture) complicates digital liveness by creating several different live experiences (both digital and physical), often at the same time. YouTube content creators are skilled at utilizing both new technology and older forms of live performance to engage their audiences and provide an unexpected live experience. My typical day where I speak
to no one physically but connect to hundreds throughout my day is an intentional disruption of how I can experience liveness.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND DEFINITION OF TERMS

First, I would like to parse out the definitions of a few specific internet terms that will feature heavily in this thesis—namely the difference between YouTubers, content creator, user, subscriber, and fandom. The use of these terms is by no means standardized as the nature of internet jargon makes definitions hard to pin down, especially since the relationship between audience and performer in online spaces is complex and always changing.

A YouTuber is a person who has an account on the website youtube.com and contributes to the website in some way: be it as a content creator, a user that engages in the discussion that happens in the comments of each video, or someone who is an active viewer of YouTube videos and adds to the number of views a video receives. Google itself defines YouTuber as a “frequent user” of the site, an expansive definition which is very broad. Their definition creates a scenario where a person with a popular and highly viewed YouTube channel who stops producing content on the site can suddenly become a “former YouTuber,” while a four year old child that watches cartoons on the site every day is an active YouTuber. It is important to note that YouTuber does not exclusively refer to someone that is “famous” or has millions of subscribers and fans, as those that make videos for small or even non-existent audiences may also refer to themselves as YouTubers. This is further complicated by the fact that when performers that make a living creating content on YouTube are discussed by outside media outlets, they are inevitably labeled a YouTuber, altering the meaning of that word to people outside of the culture. Increasingly, internet content creators who started their careers on YouTube also produce work for other sites
and other mediums, diversifying the work they do and making the term YouTuber inadequate to
describe the scope of their career.

Many popular YouTubers refer to themselves as content creators, which refers to a
person that makes content—videos, art work, podcasts—that is created for and distributed to an
online audience. While content creator can refer to someone that does not produce media for
YouTube specifically, the title works well for contemporary YouTube “stars” whose individual
brands go far beyond the website itself. I am hesitant to use words like “star” or “celebrity” when
talking about content creators with a large fanbase on YouTube, as YouTube culture is still a
subculture with only a handful of YouTubers finding fame outside of the core YouTube viewing
demographic. It is also possible for someone to be a dedicated fan of content created by one
specific YouTuber but have no interest or knowledge of the most subscribed content creators on
the site. It would be like being a fan of a local rock band in Austin, Texas, but having no idea
who the Beatles are. I also prefer the term content creator when talking about the YouTubers
discussed in this thesis because it is a verb. I am talking about people that are actively creating
content both on and off of YouTube as opposed to former YouTubers whose works live purely in
the archives.

Another term that gets tangled in this web is user, which refers to a person that accesses
and uses a website with some level of interactivity. In the context of YouTube, user and
YouTuber can be used interchangeably but I will stick to the word user as I will also be talking
about people that connect with content creators on sites other than YouTube. “Viewer” will be
used when referring to people that consumes content created online, including those that do not
interact with the content online or those that consume online content without necessarily being a
fan of that content. The term fan is reserved for users that have a dedicated and positive relationship to a content creator, typically communicating with other fans in online spaces.

The term subscribers is much more clear cut, as it refers to someone with a YouTube account who has made the choice to click another YouTuber’s subscribe button which sends new videos by that YouTuber to the subscriber's feed (or list of videos to be watched). Subscribers are important in YouTube culture because they are used as a metric for the popularity and viewership for any given content creator on YouTube.

I want to be clear about what I mean when I talk about liveness and live experiences, particularly when talking about live experiences both online and in the physical world. This thesis argues that the definition of liveness is complicated by the work of contemporary online content creators, but I will start with a baseline definition. The Oxford Dictionary defines liveness as “of a performance, heard or watched at the time of its occurrence, as distinguished from one recorded on film, tape, etc” (qtd. in Auslander 56). From this definition we hit our first complication, as live experiences accessed over the internet are frequently recorded as they happen so future viewers can access the live performance once the performance stops being live. On the whole, the Oxford definition still works as this particular definition only demands a temporal liveness, meaning the performer and viewer are connected at the same time. For my purposes, liveness is the act of receiving a performance, either digitally or physically, at the time it is performed.

Since our definition of liveness encompass experiences that happen without a physical connection, I will be borrowing an internet term to refer to experiences that do happen in the physical world. IRL stands for “in real life,” meaning experiences that take do not take place online. For example, if I make a friend by going to the same high school as them, they are my
IRL friend, whereas if I make a friend in an online chat room they are not necessarily my IRL friend. Now, the phrasing “in real life” to refer exclusively to physical experiences is problematic as it implies that online experiences are somehow less “real” than physical ones. Digital experiences are still real in that they can have real world consequences, create real bonds between people, and can contribute to a person’s identity and life experiences. One’s experience of the world can include one’s experiences online, so the line between what is real or not is complicated. Because the term IRL is defined as the line between digital and physical experiences, I will continue to use this term to that end despite the argument over what constitutes as “real” in the digital age.

The last few definitions I will cover are related to YouTube itself, particularly jargon about the kinds of videos that can exist on the platform. The most used term for my purposes here is vlog, short for video blog. A vlog is typically an online video meant to feature personal or slice of life footage of a content creator. Vlogs are important when it comes to the digital experience of liveness as vlogs tend to rely on the personality and charisma of the vlog creator to build interest, which helps vlog creators build a personal relationship with their audiences that translates well to various live performance venues. Each of the YouTube content creators covered in this thesis create vlogs for their channels, even if vlogs are not the primary type of video a YouTube channel focus on.

Speaking of which, a YouTube channel is a YouTube account owned by a user where online video content is uploaded as part of a collection. One user can own multiple YouTube channels, and one YouTube channel can be owned by multiple people. For instance, the vlogbrothers channel is hosted by two different people who share the account and create content both together and separately, but each contributor to vlogbrothers owns multiple other channels.
If a YouTuber has a popular YouTube channel, sometimes they will create a separate YouTube channel for bonus content referred to as a “side channel.”

Contemporary YouTube content creators sometimes refer to themselves (even jokingly) as a brand. While many YouTube content creators resent being thought of or referred to as a brand, the label has interesting implications. Contemporary YouTube content creators are expected to branch out from simply making videos on the YouTube platform if they hope to find success on the platform, which translates to using their popularity to sell merchandise on outside websites, writing and selling physical books, and working on other media platforms like television, movies, and live theatre. The term brand, when applied to a YouTuber in this context, refers both to the personal empire of merchandising and media output by an individual and the expectation for how that individual behaves. If a YouTube content creator is known for having a cynical and dark personality then one day makes a video wearing bright colors and spouting positivity, that change could be considered “off-brand” and may put off core viewers that come to expect a specific kind of behaviour from a creator. Some content creators may intentionally go off brand for comedic effect or to make a serious point, but the concept of YouTube personalities as a brand significantly informs the live interactions these creators have with their audiences. If a YouTube personality is known for being loud extroverted on camera, then is shy and introverted in a live performance, their audience may feel that they are off-brand and could question the authenticity of their previous videos.

This thesis will depend heavily on YouTube videos and online discussions as opposed to typical print media resources, as the most relevant and up-to-date discussion about YouTube is
on the site itself. Traditionally published resources also have the burden of taking longer to publish, where a YouTube video on a topic can be produced and distributed in a day.

The theoretical backbone of this thesis comes from Philip Auslander’s *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture*, which was originally written in 1999—six years before the creation of YouTube. Auslander’s primary focus is on how television in particular calls into question the ontology of liveness and of live performance in particular. In the 2008 second edition, Auslander makes a few perfunctory comments on how the internet further complicates our idea of liveness (and that the internet may do to television what television did to live performance) yet does not talk about online video content creation directly (43). My hope for this thesis is that I may continue this conversation from my vantage point in 2017 as the internet has had almost two decades of evolution and a growing amount of cultural capital with each coming year.

In the final chapter of *Liveness*, Auslander writes

> But my view of cultural economy holds that at any given historical moment, there are dominant forms that enjoy much greater cultural presence, prestige, and power than other forms. Nondominant forms will tend to become more like the dominant ones but not the other way around. (187)

Now that the internet is becoming the dominant form (particularly among younger generations), I can assess and argue against Auslander’s argument that dominant forms of performance do not become like older forms of performance by discussing how YouTube has become more like television over time, and how the popularity of YouTube live shows complicates this matter further.
To this end I will be focusing on seven YouTube content creators who I have put into three different groups based on their channels and who they are known to collaborate with. It is difficult to talk about just one channel or YouTube personality as the nature of YouTube is collaborative and an individual YouTube content creator’s “brand” is often inexorably tied to another YouTuber. To further complicate things, a single YouTuber may own multiple channels, including channels co-owned with other YouTubers.

A perfect example of this complicated web of connections is the relationship between Dan Howell and Phil Lester, major figures in this thesis. Lester created his first YouTube channel amazingphil on February 7, 2006, while he was still in college. Lester inspired the younger Howell to create YouTube videos, as Howell was a fan of Lester before he became a content creator himself on his channel danisnotonfire. The two became friends online and soon began doing collabs (or collaborative videos) together before finally moving into the same Manchester, England, apartment after Howell dropped out of college. While the two men continued to make videos on their own respective channels, their brands became intertwined as they made frequent appearances on each other’s channels. They have a similar video style of vlogs mixed with retellings of live events, usually dramatized with low-production props and costumes. On May 2, 2014, Howell and Lester started a joint YouTube channel called DanAndPhilGAMES, where they now post Let’s Plays of themselves playing popular (and a few vintage) video games together in their new shared London apartment. Howell and Lester also share a parody channel, DanAndPhilCRAFTS, where the upload one video a year on April Fools Day.

On top of these personal and shared channels, both Howell and Lester have popular side channels (YouTube channels meant to be periphery to a YouTuber’s main channel, which
usually contain bonus material from main channel videos) and will occasionally “guest star” on other YouTuber’s channels for collabs. Both Howell and Lester host their own weekly live shows, hosted on YouNow.com, and subsequently uploaded onto their respective side channels. Aside from their work online, Dan and Phil have written two books together, host a BBC radio show, and have gone on an international tour with their live, show *This Amazing Tour is Not On Fire* (c. 2016).

Much like Lester and Howell, Mamrie Hart, Hannah Hart, and Grace Helbig are YouTube content creators with their own channels that have formed a substantial fanbase by pooling their fans and working together to further their brands. They are known collectively as The Holy Trinity by their fans, which is a name they initially were uncomfortable with but have since adopted.

Helbig started her YouTube career in 2010 as an affiliate of the online media corporation My Damn Channel, until severing her connection with them in 2014, forcing her to start from scratch and make her own YouTube channel under her full name. My Damn Channel turned Grace’s old channel into an archive of her videos under the name DailyYou (2,004,071 current subscribers), while Grace’s current channel currently YouTube has over three million subscribers. Grace’s main channel is a mix of vlogs, comedy bits, bizarre cooking videos, make-up and beauty guru-esq videos, tag challenges, collabs with Mamrie, Hannah, and other YouTubers, and videos where she talks about her favorite products of the month.

Hannah Hart found fame with her YouTube series *My Drunk Kitchen*, which started in 2011 after she got drunk and decided to make a faux cooking video to cheer up a friend. Hannah has continued to make her flagship *My Drunk Kitchen* videos, now interspersed with personal vlogs, scripted bits about issues in her personal life, collabs, and videos about her *Have a Hart*
Day project. Have a Hart Day is Hannah’s volunteer organization where she mobilizes her fans in different cities to meet up and do a volunteer project together. Past projects include working for Habitat for Humanity and Meals on Wheels. Hannah has published a cookbook that also sheds some light on her mentality and YouTube channel, as well as a more serious memoir where she talks about her childhood trauma, mental illness, and coming out as lesbian. Hannah is also a queer activist and has worked with the Obama Administration on how to use YouTube as a platform for activism ("YouTube Stars Talk Health Care at the White House").

Mamrie Hart (no relation to Hannah Hart) was comedy partners with Grace Helbig in New York and performed both sketch shows and improv through the New York Upright Citizens Brigade before starting her YouTube channel in 2011. Mamrie’s main YouTube series is You Deserve a Drink, where she makes unique cocktails inspired by current events while crafting a comedy routine around the creation of said cocktail. Hart’s channel also features collabs with other YouTubers (frequently as guests on You Deserve a Drink), challenge videos where she plays games with other content creators, vlogs, and Q&As. She wrote the screenplay for two movies, Camp Takota (c. 2014) and Dirty 30 (c. 2016), which she co-starred along with Grace Helbig and Hannah Hart.

Together, Helbig, Hart, and Hart go on tour with their comedy sketch live show #nofilter, which has toured both in the United States and abroad. The trio also frequently appears together at live events and various online video conventions, as discussed in Chapter Three.

Which brings us to our most conventional YouTube duo, Hank and John Green, brothers and co-owners of their YouTube channel vlogbrothers. Started on New Year’s Day 2007, John and Hank originally made YouTube videos for each other as a way to stay in contact, giving up textual contact and communicating solely through daily YouTube videos. This project, known as
Brotherhood 2.0, was part of a larger movement of daily YouTube vlogs and videos that the Greens were inspired to make as fans of ZeFrank, a YouTube content creator popular in the early days of YouTube.

Since Brotherhood 2.0 ended in 2010, John and Hank Green have gone on to create several spin-off channels inspired by popular videos on their main channel. As part of the trend of YouTubers making videos of themselves playing video games (or Let’s Plays), Hank Green created his side channel hankgames, which his brother John Green has since taken over with his series of videos playing a soccer video game while responding to viewer questions. Hank created his own side channel in 2010 where he posts gaming videos and well as other miscellaneous videos that are longer than the four-minute video length of videos on the vlogbrothers channel.

Both Hank and John host and produce several popular educational YouTube series, many of which are more popular and boast more subscribers than their flagship channel. Crash Course and SciShow are YouTube channels hosted by the brothers and created for grade-school-aged children and young adults, with each video focusing on a different educational topic. Hank Green also produced a YouTube mini-series called The Lizzie Bennet Diaries, a modern retelling of the classic Jane Austin novel. John Green is a popular young adult novelist while Hank Green is the CEO of VidCon and now hosts several other internet fandom conventions with his team based in Missoula, Montana.
METHODOLOGY

This research has a special place in my heart because it allows me to apply my knowledge of performance to a medium that I consume daily for both my news and entertainment. It is strange to consider that I have spent so much time studying theatre and performance, yet have only had the opportunity to see a handful of live performances for financial and physical reasons. Meanwhile, I have watched at least an hour of content on YouTube a day since I was fourteen, yet never have the chance to discuss this interest in an academic setting.

I come at this research as a participant observer as I am both a long-time fan of many YouTube content creators mentioned in this thesis and a creator of YouTube videos myself. In many ways, it is hard not to be a participant observer when writing about YouTube, as in some ways to consume media on YouTube is to participate. In a system where individual views of a video are tallied and can turn into money for the video’s creator thanks to ad revenue, the act of observation makes an impact on the medium itself. Even if a viewer does not have a YouTube account, their individual views of a YouTube video are recorded, and that data is used to calculate the paychecks of individual YouTube content creators. Because YouTube is owned by Google and shares metadata between sites, watching a YouTube video also changes the internet life of the viewer, as watching a video of puppies playing can lead to a plague of targeted internet ads across several websites.

Part of my motivation for doing this research comes from my subject position as a millennial, particularly as a millennial privileged enough to grow up with the internet and on the internet. I have lived in a house with an internet connection since I was at least six years old and started going online unsupervised around the same time. I say I grew up online because from an
early age I developed lifelong friends and connections from various website and learned a great deal about the world around me through the lense of my Macintosh Computer.

When I say that I am a YouTuber myself, I mean that I have been making my own YouTube videos since I started my first YouTube channel in 2006 with my most widely viewed video coming in at a little over 1,500 views as of this writing. I am by no means a YouTube phenomenon, but my experience creating content for the site has given me some insight into the process that goes into being a successful YouTube content creator.

I decided to focus on these three distinct sets of YouTube content creators to show how YouTube live culture has changed over time and provide a spectrum of ways content creators can connect to their audience. I focused on the Vlogbrothers because they are one of the earliest YouTube content creators to craft a live YouTube show, and they have continued to produce online content for the last decade. Focusing on Hannah Hart, Grace Helbig, and Mamrie Hart allows me to showcase a female trio that is involved in a number of projects outside of YouTube, and have a unique approach to their live shows. Dan Howell and Phil Lester, the final YouTubers I highlight in this thesis, have more subscribers than the other groups of YouTubers I discuss—bringing a larger budget to their live audience experiences. I initially created a list of YouTube content creators I could possibly use as case studies, but settled on these three for the reasons listed above, and because I am fans of their work and have followed their careers for at least five years.

I value my position as a participant observer as it has allowed me to navigate the world of internet content creation already speaking the language, so to speak. YouTube culture has created an ever-growing list of jargon that changes constantly, and I fully expect some of the terms I have defined in this chapter to evolve over time. Because I am also a member of several
fandoms surrounding various YouTubers discussed in this thesis, I also have a working knowledge of (and access to) sites where fans discuss YouTube away from the YouTube site itself.

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

This thesis will investigate different pockets of liveness and provide a timeline of how some internet content creators have developed their relationships with their audiences, and define these relationships. In each chapter I will detail how different YouTubers use liveness to cultivate their audience in the hopes of creating broader ideas of what contemporary content creators can do on the YouTube platform.

Chapter Two focuses on liveness directly with a discussion about internet livestreams. The primary focus of this chapter is how live streams allow fans to connect live with both the content creators they enjoy and other fans from the comfort of their own homes. What does the physical divide between performer and audience give each the freedom to do, and what is lost in this interaction? How does livestreaming open up accessibility to fans who would normally be left out of a live fan experience? I also discuss the subculture that has formed around livestreams, particularly on the Twitch platform.

Chapter Three contains a brief history of VidCon and the meet-ups that pre-date the convention. As VidCon is the epicenter of the live YouTube experience, I discuss how the convention came to be and why it continues to be a success. VidCon turns six years old in 2017. I also have an opportunity to look at how the convention has changed over the years and what those changes signal about YouTube culture as a whole. Particular attention is paid to how
VidCon has regulated the relationship between fans and content creators, and how the split between the two groups is a fairly recent phenomenon.

Chapter Four explores the world of YouTube live shows, the IRL live performances YouTubers take on tour “Broadway Across America” style. This chapter covers both the physical event and how the live event is turned into a mediatized experience. Since these YouTube live shows are frequently performed in spaces usually reserved for traditional theatrical performances, I dedicate part of this chapter to analyzing these performances in the context of contemporary theatre.

This thesis concludes with an analysis of the overall effect these various modes of liveness have on the relationship between internet content creators and their fan bases, with a brief discussion of what the traditional theatre can learn from this performance model.

**SIGNIFICANCE**

My hope for this thesis is that I can capture this moment in online content creation by analyzing the way these content creators communicate with and relate to their audiences.

YouTube content creators are on the cutting edge of performance as their careers necessitate that they adopt both social media and performance trends early and often, or risk falling out of date with their fans. Since YouTubers and the audiences that surround them tend to skew young, we are seeing a generation of people that grew up online and see the world from that perspective. Whatever these young audiences experience on YouTube in terms of live and/or recorded performance will influence both digital and physical performance in the future.
The modes of live performance detailed in this thesis will be outdated by the end of the decade, but their significance will have ramifications long after YouTube shuts down and content creators have created the next big performance trend.
CHAPTER TWO: Live Streams

In 2008, the popular video hosting website youtube.com, fresh from their acquisition by Google inc., developed an ambitious live performance as a way to showcase the new live streaming technology they developed for the site. The Google produced show, dubbed “YouTube Live,” was broadcast exclusively on YouTube, and according to Joshua Green and Jean Burgess, the event was advertised as an “a variety concert-cum-awards-night,” that showcased “a combination of homegrown YouTube ‘stars’ and what the company referred to as ‘real world personalities’—performers and celebrities whose basis of fame lay in the traditional media or music industries, but who were also highly popular within YouTube itself” (The Entrepreneurial Vlogger 99). For the event, Google hired traditional media (a phrase used to describe most non-digital media forms such as print media and television) organizers from MTV and recruited pop-stars like Katy Perry to headline, host, and perform in the show. By all accounts, YouTube Live failed to impress both traditional media outlets and the existing YouTube community. Large media corporations saw the performance as proof that YouTube was a fad and a form that could not compete with existing media platforms, and the budgerning YouTube community felt that YouTube and Google as corporations did not understand the strengths and weaknesses of their own platform. In the end, “this was also ultimately the first, last, and only YouTube Live. By April of 2011, nearly the entire event had been taken off the site” (Grossman, “YouTube Live”).

YouTube Live also seemed to prove itself as an oxymoron, as liveness did not appear to be compatible with this new YouTube space, both off and on line. Liveness was still seen as the domain of television and theatre performances, where the audience at large can simultaneously experience media together from home or in communal theatre spaces respectively. As Uricchi articulates in his 2009 essay on YouTube culture, “YouTube, like film, misses the capacity for
televisional liveness. This is not to say that it doesn’t at times seek to simulate it” (32). But to divorce YouTube (and other digital platforms) from liveness on the basis of one failed attempt by the corporation to create a television-esq experience is to misunderstand YouTube and digital culture.

Live streams are becoming more and more prevalent in culture today, particularly when it comes to simulcasts where a performance with a physical audience is transmitted through a camera and live streaming software to either another physical location or to the internet as the performance takes place. It is not uncommon in 2017 for universities to simulcast live graduations and play the live stream of the event in an overflow room or make the stream available online so friends and family that could not attend the physical event can still see the moment someone graduates the moment they cross the stage. Although live streams create a physical separation between the IRL event and the audience watching the event remotely, in exchange live streams can reach a larger audience and allow those who cannot physically attend the event the ability to attend temporally.

While this compromise between the physical and the digital is easy to navigate when it comes to life moments like graduations, things can get tricky when it comes to more obviously produced and performed works like theatre, dance, and live music concerts that are intended to be experienced IRL. Live streams of these more traditional performance mediums are possible and could allow the performance to be accessed by a wider audience. Consider the evolution of organized sports which began as an event that had to be experienced physically to the current day sports TV empire that allows millions of viewers all over the world to watch a sporting event live without having to physically be at the performance site. Granted, the professional sports industry
employs a mass of individuals that work to broadcast hundreds of games a day, a work force that a typical theatre production lacks, however, with the advent of user friendly live streaming platforms like those offered by YouTube, an independent artist with limited funds and staff has access to live broadcasting. Today, webcams are relatively cheap, most smartphones have the live streaming capabilities built in, and live streaming sites like YouTube, YouNow, and Periscope are designed for use by non-experts, requiring only a crew of one to maintain the stream online. If live streaming a live production is cheap and relatively easy to set up, why do traditional performing arts not take advantage of the service to reach a greater audience?

First off, live streaming as a technology available to the casual user is still only about a decade old and may be overlooked by many artists because of innate technophobia (the fear of using or embracing new technologies due to a perceived inability to use them correctly), or because they may not know how accessible live streaming technologies are. Until the stigma that new technology is only for young or experimental artists, it will be difficult to make live streaming traditional performance arts commonplace.

Copyright restrictions (as they exist in 2017) also make live streaming produced IRL performing arts difficult. For a typical theatre production, everything from the script used to the various design elements that make up the performance are copyrighted by the various artists that created the production, which can make an online live stream impossible to set up if everyone involved does not agree to have their work transmitted outside of the performance space. Online content creators generally do not have this concern as they are largely the sole owners of their performances and likenesses—allowing them greater legal freedom to distribute their works as they wish. When it comes to new media and the digital space, copyright law is still vague and developing as of this writing, so it will be interesting to see how regulation of this creator-
focused model changes as time goes on. One issue creators must think about when live streaming a performance to the internet is how easy it is for online viewers to record, download, and redistribute live streams without the knowledge or permission of the original creators. The more viewers a live stream has, the greater the chance someone in the audience will take the time to save the performance—which could be an issue if the performance was meant to be an ethereal experience with distribution controlled by the creator. If the creator of the live stream does not make a recording of the stream available online for subsequent viewers, another user can take advantage by uploading their own personal recording to their own personal channel without the permission of the original creator.

Within the world of YouTube, live streams can be used to allow a digital audience to experience the same show or moment as an IRL audience. By streaming a live show, a YouTube content creator can expand the number of people with access to the performance, instantly archive the performance the moment the live stream is over if they wish, and promote future performances all in one fell swoop. In 2013, John and Hank Green hosted “An Evening of Awesome” at Carnegie Hall, a performance in front of a physical audience that was simultaneously live streamed to their shared vlogbrothers YouTube channel. The Carnegie Hall performance, sponsored by John Green’s publisher Penguin, was part promotion for John Green’s best selling young adult novel The Fault in Our Stars and part a celebration of the brother’s vlogbrothers channel. The performance consisted of a reading from The Fault in Our Stars on the one year anniversary of the novel’s publication, musical performances by Hank Green and The Mountain Goats, and appearances by Grace Helbig and Hannah Hart fairly early in their YouTube careers. I remember watching this performance while sitting in my undergrad dorm room in South Texas, wishing I had the time or money to be in the audience at Carnegie
Hall but thankful I could see the performance at all. The live stream started a little over half an hour before the performance started and I remember chatting with other fans in the live chat room connected to the live stream proper. I was surprised to discover that my sister also happened to be in this same chat room, sitting at her computer back at our parent’s house. My sister and I, along with thousands of other vlogbrothers fans, watched the Carnegie Hall performance live from across the country. I remember how important the whole event felt—YouTube felt like this niche interest for so long and yet here were two of my YouTube idols performing at one of the most prestigious performance halls in America. This event brought me closer to my sister that I missed dearly since moving out to go to college, even though we were still physically separated and talking to each other in a crowded chat room. Because of our strict upbringing and location in the U.S., my sister and I were not able to attend many live performances or concerts that interested us growing up; we spent most of our childhood alone at home (both of my parents work in medicine and often worked shifts overnight, leaving me to care for my sister). My sister and I adapted to our situation by learning to explore the world and find friends over the internet. Both of us made lifelong friends through various chat rooms and forums, and started getting in the habit of consuming online media without our parent’s knowledge. We may have been trapped in a suburb in South Texas without transportation and without the means to see a show at a theatre or concert hall, but though live streams and live fan communities my sister and I explored the world.

A more cynical view of the “Evening of Awesome” performance could point out that the event was essentially a three hour promotion for events and products for sale by the Green Brothers. As this performance was sponsored by Penguin publishers, there is a fair amount of promotion of John Green’s novel and Hank Green sings songs from his albums, which he sells
on his website dftba.com. It is not uncommon for YouTubers to use live streams to promote other performances or merchandising that generate revenue, but where is the line between a community building live experience and an infomercial?

John Green was able to combine the fanbase he generated by being a young adult novelist and his online fan base as a YouTube content creator into a giant young adult fan base that can now advertise for each other. Green himself said that he could feel a noticeable change in his popularity after the vlogbrothers channel took off. Before he found success online, Green talks about how going on book tour was hard because he would show up to a book store signing event and no one was familiar with who he was or what his books were about. Green realized things had changed for him after he hosted a book signing at a bookstore and fans walked up wearing homemade shirts with references to his books (“Being Sure”). The growing popularity of the vlogbrothers YouTube channel helped book sales of John Green’s books, and in 2006 John Green started including the url for the vlogbrothers YouTube channel at the end of his books so readers could find the online vlogbrothers community. John Green’s early live streams helped his reader base enter the vlogbrothers YouTube community by streaming live readings of his upcoming books and hosting Q&As where viewers of the live stream could ask questions in the live stream chat for John to answer. As a way to build momentum for the release of The Fault in Our Stars, John Green autographed every copy of the entire first printing of the novel and released videos along the way with progress updates and a homemade tracker showing how close he was to finishing. He would, on occasion, live stream himself signing books at home and chat with his audience about the book and his life. When he would make a mistake and produce a bad signature, Green would leave a special note on the page making that signature unique. His brother Hank began drawing anglerfishes (dubbed “hanklerfishes” by fans) on some signing
pages and John Green’s wife also started drawing yeti’s dancing as part of an inside joke with the vlogbrother’s audience. The yeti and anglerfish drawings have nothing to do with the actual novel and everything to do with the vlogbrothers community, so in order to understand what was happening on the signing page readers also had to be familiar with John Green’s online work. By signing books on camera and hiding these special messages in a small percentage of copies, fans were incentivized to pre-order the book and created a game out of hunting for copies of the book with the special messages. Fans that bought the special signed books posted pictures on social media, which gave the book free advertising. By live streaming the physical act of signing, fans could see the Green Brothers promote and physically interact with a physical object that could be purchased. Fans could watch John or Hank Green write a special note on a live stream, then hope that they ended up receiving that exact copy. Anyone viewing the live stream could watch John as he made something for his fans, even something as small as a scribble on a page of a book, then go to a local bookstore months later and feel connected to the community and to the Green Brothers themselves. It was like watching the 1969 moon landing, then being able to buy a genuine moon rock a few months later.

The vlogbrothers are not the only ones that use live streams as a way to promote other productions or goods available for sale. Dan Howell and Phil Lester each have a weekly live stream hosted on the YouNow live streaming platform. Both Howell and Lester use their live streams to have a casual conversation with their digital audiences where they discuss pop culture, current events, and what new projects they are working on or produced that week. These weekly live streams are like a recap show for their own YouTube channels—they make sure the audience is up to date on their video content while getting the word out about future projects and polling their audience about how their respective channels are doing. Howell and Lester also use
live streams to promote bigger projects such as their multi-country live show tour (discussed further in Chapter Four), their two published books, and new merchandising in their shared online store. Live stream viewers have the opportunity to hear about projects and Dan & Phil branded merchandise before viewers of their regular edited videos as fewer people know about their live streams than know about their main channels. Live stream viewers also have the opportunity to ask questions about these projects and merchandise thanks to the paid messaging service that allows users of the YouNow platform to pay money in order to have a message read (I discuss this relationship between viewer and streamer later in the chapter). Aside from updates about their commercial and video content output, Howell and Lester pepper their live streams with personal stories about funny or embarrassing things that happened to them that week and allow themselves to go on tangents about any topic that springs to mind. By allowing the audience insight into their personal lives and giving them an avenue to send direct messages, Howell and Lester are able to keep their live streams from being pure advertisement and thus turn the streams into a community event. YouTube content creators generally do not pay to advertise their channels, so it is up to the creators themselves to promote their own channel and call upon their audience to do the same. By giving out exclusive information to viewers that watch their hour-long live streams on top of their other content, Howell and Lester turn their viewer base into a promotion force that can spread the news of new content to fans on other online spaces such as Tumblr or Twitter.

Grace Helbig, Hannah Hart, and Mamrie Hart also use live streams to promote outside projects, but instead of giving their viewer base weekly updates like Howell and Lester, the “Holy Trinity” (as they are called by their fans) live stream very rarely and only in order to promote a specific project or product. Helbig, Hart, and Hart do not live together and have
separate channels and production schedules, so live streams are a rare treat and become something like must-see-TV for their shared fanbase.

Four months before the release of their first film *Camp Takota*, the Holy Trinity hosted a live stream on an outside set promoting the upcoming movie. The trio was joined by Chester See—another YouTube content creator and fellow co-star in *Camp Takota*—and other members of the production team to talk about the upcoming film, dress up in Halloween costumes (the live stream aired around Halloween), drink cocktails made by Mamrie Hart, and play games live on camera ("CAMP TAKOTA #HALLOWSTREAM"). Throughout the live stream, the hosts encouraged their viewers to use the hashtag #hallostream so they could respond to social media messages and have their viewers promote the movie across several different social media platforms. The Holy Trinity also hosted live streams in the past for their individual book releases, upcoming live shows they have performed together, and even as part of a sponsored promotion for another company. Hannah Hart hosts live streams (referred to as “Winestreams”) where she drinks wine on camera while promoting a wine subscription service to her viewers. Hart responds to users in the live chat and other social media platforms by asking her fans to use a specific hashtag to reach her during the stream. Hart includes a link to a custom URL where viewers can receive a discount on the wine delivery service and the wine company can track how successful Hart is at promoting the service—which translates to more promotion money for Hart. During the March 1, 2014, Winestream (named #winestorm due to the unexpected Los Angeles rainstorm during the live stream), Hart also promotes her book *My Drunk Kitchen: A Guide to Eating, Drinking, and Going with Your Gut* before the official release of the book later that year. Hart reminds viewers they can get a discount on the book by pre-ordering it online and asks the viewers in the chat how many of them already made the leap and pre-ordered the book. Although
the impetus for the Winestreams is to promote the wine service sponsoring Hart, the stream itself is loose and casual. Hart invites Grace Helbig over to her apartment during the live stream and they both answer viewer questions while drinking alcohol and setting up drinking games with the live stream audience. Hart and Helbig talk about past live streams they have done together, the Oscars, and topics provided by the viewers using the #winestorm hashtag. When Hart does talk about the wine service, she does so without a script and in her own words. Hart is transparent about the fact she is being paid as a promoter, but the vibe of the live stream feels like the viewer is hanging out and drinking with friends instead of feeling like a scripted infomercial. Hart comes across as someone simply providing her viewers with a discount instead of trying to take advantage of her viewer base, even if that is what she is being asked to do by the company sponsoring her.

YouTubers also use live streams for more altruistic purposes, as evidenced by the popularity of charity live streams. A charity live stream is when a content creator hosts a live stream as a way to raise money and/or awareness for a cause by capitalizing on the existing viewer base of the content creator and organizing an activity to go along with the live stream. Many charity live streams follow a marathon format where the live stream continues to air as long as people continue to donate to the cause. The “Mario Marathon,” founded in 2008, follows the marathon format to great success, raising $58,297 in 2016 and $112,808 in 2012, their most successful year. Hosted by a group of friends in Indiana, the “Mario Marathon” is an annual charity live stream where the hosts play Super Mario games and raise money for Child’s Play, a charity that provides games and entertainment for children stuck in hospitals for an extended period of time. Every level (or “star”) of every Super Mario game is assigned a dollar amount that must be raised before the players attempt that level—when the players catch up to the
number of levels unlocked, the stream ends. Donations for the “Mario Marathon” open at least a few days before the live stream begins in order to build a buffer, and the early levels are cheaper than the later ones so the stream will last at least a day. The “Mario Marathon” continues non-stop through the night until the players catch up to the donations, with the longest marathon lasting over four consecutive days (111 hours and 22 minutes). The marathon set-up for charity live streams is a lot like old TV phone-a-thons where live performances are intercut with hosts calling for donations and telling viewers about prizes they can win for donating. Instead of totebags, the “Mario Marathon” giveaways include Mario-themed merchandise including shirts, memorabilia, and gaming consoles worth hundreds of dollars. Viewers are entered to win these prizes by donating to the charity during the live stream and by using social media to promote the marathon online. By incentivising social media promotion, the “Mario Marathon” saves money and the time it takes to promote the event themselves, and allows the audience to be part of the mechanism that makes the live stream successful at raising money for charity.

Aside from prizes, viewers of the “Mario Marathon” benefit from the live stream by having hours of entertainment to watch at all hours of the day, a chance to give to a charitable cause, and a chance to be part of the online community of Mario fans via the live stream chat and social media outreach. Viewers of the “Mario Marathon” are able to interact with the hosts of the live stream by not only dictating how long it lasts by deciding to donate money, but by building the culture that surrounds the “Mario Marathon.” Viewers of the first “Mario Marathon” did not know the names of the hosts of the live stream, so they collectively gave them nicknames like “couch guy” and “orange shirt guy,” which has now become part of the host’s identities in all future live streams. The “Mario Marathon’s” viewers also make fan art every year of the hosts, characters from the Mario games themselves, and funny moments from the live stream that the
hosts then post on the official website. The “Mario Marathon” and streams like it can feel like going to summer camp—people come together for a short period of time and make friends, participate in activities together, and make inside jokes that only make sense to those in attendance. The hosts of the “Mario Marathon” upload the entire stream once the marathon is over, but watching an 111 hour video is difficult for even the most committed viewer, and the recording does not include a log of the live chat from the original live performance. Because live streams are typically uploaded without edits, the recorded live stream can include long periods of down time as streamers attempt to fix technical difficulties, move between activities or thoughts, or simply taking a break and not speaking for a long period of time. These long spans of down time can make for a boring video, but these moments can seem much more compelling during the live performance thanks to the digital presence of other viewers on the live chat. Even if the live stream shows nothing more than a black screen, viewers can occupy themselves by talking to each other in the live chat about things that happened earlier in the live stream and what they hope will happen later on. It is the difference between seeing photos of someone else’s camping trip and going camping yourself—even if in the case of live streams both can happen from the comfort of home.

One of the first and largest YouTube charity live streams is the annual “Project for Awesome,” created and hosted by the vlogbrothers in 2007. The “Project for Awesome” (also known online as the P4A) streams for three day straight, much like the “Mario Marathon,” but the dates, time, and length of the stream is decided weeks in advance allowing John and Hank Green to schedule guest hosts and special events well in advance of the live event. The Green Brothers developed a unique donation structure that allows viewers to have a say in what charities are featured and funded during the charity drive. Instead of focusing their collective
attention on one charity, the P4A encourages the community to create their own YouTube videos advocating for a charity the video maker cares about and allowing the P4A viewers to vote on which charities will receive a portion of the collected donations. P4A participants can make videos about local, national, or international charities to be played during the live stream as the hosts of the P4A direct their viewers to each video in turn. Even though only twelve videos can be picked to receive charitable donations from the large pot of donations, this structure allows for video advocacy—even if a charity does not win the money, someone in the viewing audience may hear about a cause that they can donate time or money to independent of the P4A. The Green Brothers themselves each pick a charity that a portion of the collected funds will go to, but still take time to make videos on their vlogbrothers channel advocating for why the charities they selected need the funds (“The Difference A Decade Makes: The 10th Annual Project for Awesome Is Here!”). By structuring the donation system in this way, the Green Brothers are able to promote a large number of causes while raising a significant amount of money for the few that win the community vote. This structure also gives power to the audience as they are called upon to make the final financial decisions for the live stream, insuring that the P4A sponsors causes that are important to the vlogbrothers’ audience and not just the vlogbrothers themselves.

The P4A draws viewers from beyond the core vlogbrothers viewer base by having other prominent internet content creators on as hosts throughout the live stream. This is possible because the YouTube streaming service allows the Green Brothers to call people from across the world using Google Hangouts so John and Hank Green can both host the event while living in different states and include guests that may not even live in the same country. Past guest hosts include YouTube content creators like Hannah Hart, Grace Helbig, and Philip DeFranco, hosts of popular podcasts like Travis McElroy, and more traditional celebrities like Wil Wheton and
Patrick Rothfuss. Guest hosts are announced in advance of the live stream so fans of the different content creators can plan to tune into the live stream at the right time. Guest hosts of the P4A typically chat with either John or Hank Green about their work and occasionally answer fan questions asked on the live stream chat. The guest hosts also watch the charity videos that air during the stream, and sometimes promote charitable causes of their own.

On top of drawing in a larger audience by bringing in guest hosts, the P4A is able to boost donation numbers by offering perks related to the work the Green Brothers do as well as perks offered by their guests. The cheaper end of the P4A perks tend to be digital offerings such as exclusive podcast recordings and digital copies of short stories, or portions of upcoming published works. Physical objects are also offered as perks for more generous donations, including a baking dish used by Hannah Hart on her YouTube channel and exclusive Polaroid pictures of Dan Howell and Phil Lester taken in their shared London apartment. The P4A is able to sell off such cheap items for such a high price because what they are really offering is a physical connection between fans and content creators. The ability for the P4A to connect viewer and creator is exactly why the live stream is so successful at generating donations—for three days viewers can watch a live stream where they have a chance to connect with content creators via social media or live chat, build a community with each other, and donate money to a charity that a popular content creator supports while having a chance to receive exclusive content in exchange.

Live streaming technology has advanced enough in the past decade that most smartphones are able to live stream with apps like Periscope, Google Hangouts, Instagram, and YouTube itself. Facebook in particular encourages users to live stream moments from their lives to their friends and family, normalizing the act of live streaming itself. I believe live streams are
so popular because they allow for an interaction, be it between two people talking over video chat or a host reading live viewer comments, with a level of convenience and distance. Dan & Phil do not need to rent out a large theatre space to have a chat with their fans, they can simply log into a website, connect a webcam, and instantly book a live audience with little notice. Fans from around the world, fans that for a variety of reasons cannot leave their homes or travel, fans with limited funds, are able to connect in a moment and experience the content they enjoy together. For viewers, live streams can feel like a distinct moment in time—like a performance of a lifetime—all while never properly putting on pants from the comfort of home.
CHAPTER THREE: Conventions

According to a 2017 interview with YouTube founder Steve Chen at South By Southwest, YouTube was originally conceived as a way for people to meet and date each other via online video: “we always thought there was something with video there, but what could be the actual practical application? We thought dating would be the obvious choice” (“YouTube Started as an Online Dating Site”). Although the YouTube founders soon ditched the dating site idea and opened the website up for all online videos, they could see from its conception that YouTube had the power to connect people.

In the mid-2000s, considered the early days of the YouTube community, the line between fan and friend was not well defined. John and Hank Green started the vlogbrothers channel early in the website’s existence, and John Green can recall knowing all of the channel’s earliest subscribers by name. At the time there were very few YouTube content creators regularly putting out new work, and without contemporary YouTube payment structures like contemporary ad integration that allows YouTubers to earn money through ads spliced into their videos, early YouTube content creators could not make a living producing content on YouTube. Even in these early days before millionaire YouTubers and the idea of YouTube content creators as brands, early adopters of YouTube as a creative space had a desire to meet each other.

In 2009, hundreds of YouTube enthusiasts (both creators and YouTube community members) met in Central Park for the 7/8/9 Gathering—an informal meetup where members of this emerging YouTube culture could meet one another face to face, share best practices for video making, and put a face to the community connections they were making online. This gathering was not engineered by Google Inc. or sponsored by them in any official capacity, rather it came about due to a desire for live connections born from digital experiences.
On December 9, 2009, Hank Green made an announcement on the vlogbrothers channel about the creation of VidCon, the first large scale YouTube convention, while talking to a sock puppet version of himself (“Announcing! VidCon: Online Video IRL”). According to Green in a later video answering questions about the conference, VidCon is “half conference, half celebration. We wanted to get as much of the online video community together in one place in the real world for a weekend this summer. It’s a celebration of the community with performances and concerts and parties, but it’s also a discussion of the explosion in community based online video” (“VidCon Questions Answered”). The first VidCon took place in the summer 2010 in Los Angeles, California, before Los Angeles became the city YouTube content creators had to live in if they wanted to make it big in the community. Green was a fan of the early small-scale meetups before VidCon, but wanted to offer a more organized experience: “I’ve done dozens of those real world free gatherings and they are fantastic. They’re also generally short focused on one person specifically or completely unfocused” (“VidCon Questions Answered”). By “short focused,” Green means that most YouTube gatherings are for fans to meet one specific YouTube content creator. Early meetups were not heavily structured and were frequently organized by content creators themselves as a way to meet their own subscribers, such as the 2011 meetup tour YouTube content creators Rhett & Link embarked on during their move from North Carolina to Los Angeles. Rhett & Link gave their viewers a map of the rest stops they would be stopping at along the way and a 48 hour window of time for when they expected to make it to each rest stop (“MYTHICAL ROAD TRIP! MEET US!”). The Rhett & Link community was small enough at the time that they could comfortably meet their viewers in a public place with little organization, but with 4.3 million subscribers on their main channel alone a tour like this would be difficult to organize today. While intimate meetups with creators and other community members benefited
from being loosely organized as it allowed for the line between creator and audience to stay fairly blurred, Hank Green envisioned VidCon to be a gathering of the online video community on a larger scale than had been seen at the time, while allowing some content creators to take center stage (quite literally) and perform in front of a large physical audience.

The creation of VidCon was a milestone in the timeline of online video as a distinct creative platform as it showed that online video had a large and dedicated user base willing to come together as an actual, physical community. At the time of the first VidCon, YouTube was still seen by many in the general culture as a place to watch viral videos and funny cat videos. Hank Green’s hope for the first VidCon was to change that perception by highlighting YouTube content creators and “getting together people that know what’s going on” (“VidCon Schedule Spectacular”).

In his video “VidCon Schedule Spectacular,” Green advocates for online video as a distinct and culturally important medium, explaining “most of what I started to call social video, even when it’s Miley Cyrus vlogging, it’s still a personal interaction. It’s not the same kind of entertainment these people are used to. It’s not reality television, it’s what we call reality.” Hank goes on to explain that even when YouTubers are playing characters they are closer to reality and their viewer base and television because they do not have a production team behind them—YouTube content creators are expected to plan, edit, and manage their videos by themselves. YouTube culture at the time of the first VidCon saw a new, intimate relationship between creators and their audience that VidCon took full advantage of and actively promoted. Before some YouTube content creators became household names with billboards promoting their channels in Los Angeles, VidCon existed as a celebration that the medium of online video existed at all.
Hank Green, perhaps inspired by the relative equality of early YouTube gatherings, envisioned VidCon as a place where hierarchies within the community did not exist—where someone with a million subscribers and someone with zero subscribers could mingle together as equals. Hank Green, as he explains in his video “Vidcon Questions Answered,” structured the first VidCon “so that there could be conversations between the big names in online video and the up-and-coming content creators.” Here Green assumes that those that are not currently “big names in online video” aspire to be someday; that most people in the online video community are creators themselves. The original VidCon was designed to be a place where people could network—where those that had found some level of success could share their best practices with other content creators. The “big names” did have the ability to draw people to the event, but at least to Green they were not celebrities but members of the community: “Oh, they’re not big famous people. We’re friends, we talk a lot in the online video community and one day I had this idea and I started asking people and they were like ‘Yeah, sure!’” (“VidCon Questions Answered”).

For Green, having online video content creators that were popular on the YouTube platform was less like booking a star and more like calling up a friend to see if they were free. At the time it was unheard of for a YouTube content creator to have an agent (unless they were also doing work outside of YouTube), which is much more common today. According to John Green, who helped host the event, the first VidCon succeeded in blending people of all levels of online success into one community: “Everyone was incredibly nice. Everyone hung out, famous people didn’t act like they were famous, and the whole vibe of the event was so wonderfully supportive and collaborative” (“Top 10 VidCon Moments”). There are several videos still on YouTube filmed by attendees of the first VidCon that include footage of them meeting YouTube content
creators that were big at the time, panels and casual conversations with several different content creators, and personal footage of what they did at the convention with friends. YouTube user JohnRimer uploaded a video of his experience shortly after the 2010 convention, then updated the video description of the video a number of years later to reflect on that experience and how VidCon has changed:

VidCon 2010 was the first conference about online video with YouTubers (mainly a YouTube Convention) where many big names on YouTube come to meet their fans while learning about the future of online video. Back then you could just hang out in the lobby with people like Shay Carl, Michael Buckley, Mystery Guitar Man, Olga Kay, and so many others who were the big starts [sic] of the time on this platform! It took place in LA and I was there! Had so much fun and met so many cool people. Thanks to all the YouTube celebs who gave me shoutouts...VidCon has really changed since then... there are now over 30,000 people who attend! It was really special to be there when there were less than a 10th of that and everyone just hung out together like it was no big deal! ("The first VidCon - VidCon 2010")

As JohnRimer eludes to, VidCon is no longer the casual networking opportunity it once was. Although VidCon may no longer be able to attend to its attendees as one communal mass, there is digital proof from those who could attend that the first VidCon that it truly was a space where community could flourish and enjoy a weekend celebrating online video while experiencing a new kind of liveness between community members of all levels.

The first VidCon offered two different kinds of attendance badges: insider and community. The original VidCon website explaining the difference between the tracks has since been deleted, but based on how Hank talks about the two tracks in his videos about the
convention it seems like the insider ticket cost more money and granted ticket holders access to more technical panels about the online video industry while the community tickets were cheaper and did not grant access to those panels (but did grant access to more general panels with prominent YouTube content creators). In his video “VidCon Questions Answered,” Hank Green explains “the community track has all the awesome cool things that VidCon will have, it just won’t have talks like Intellectual Property in Emerging Digital Media.” While the insider track seems to be intended for VidCon attendees with a fan following and high subscriber numbers, anyone with any number of subscribers (or people with no YouTube channel at all) were able to buy tickets for this track in order to learn how to optimize their videos and channel. Today, the VidCon ticket tracks are much more defined and the divide between people with millions of subscribers and those with none is far more pronounced.

The 2018 VidCon registration website lists three different kinds of registration with different permissions and different cost. The standard cost for the Community track is $150, the Creator track is $200, and the new Industry track is $750 (“VIDCON 2018 TICKETS NOW ON SALE!”). The community registration still exists from the original VidCon, but is now more directly geared for fans of popular YouTube content creators. The community track grants attendees access to the expo hall, concerts performed by prominent YouTubers, Q&A panels hosted by prominent YouTubers, movie nights, the VidCon prom, and meet-and-greets with prominent YouTubers. In 2014, meet-and-greets were organized on a first come first serve basis, but the organizers discovered fans were willing to forgo all of the other events VidCon had to offer in order to stand in line for hours for the chance to meet a YouTuber they follow (and the YouTube content creators being meeted and greeted exhausting themselves by trying to get through as many people as possible and not turn anyone away). Starting in 2015, VidCon
organizers implemented a lottery system where community registration ticket holders rank the available YouTubers offering meet-and-greets and are assigned a meet-and-greet slot based on interest and availability ("Announcing Vidcon 2016"). While this was not an entirely popular decision—many attendees go to VidCon exclusively for the chance to meet their favorite YouTube content creator—the hope was that community ticket holders would be able to see at least one content creator they enjoyed and could spend more time meeting other fans and participating in VidCon events. The fact that the lottery system needed to be implemented at all shows how much VidCon has changed since the inaugural convention in 2010. Instead of hosting casual meet ups in hotel lobbies or giving content creators the freedom and space to mingle with their fans as they see fit, interactions between fans and creators must be tightly regulated by the convention itself in order for VidCon to run smoothly and for content creators to also enjoy their time at the convention. With hundreds or thousands of fans that see prominent YouTube content creators as celebrities instead of as fellow community members, VidCon started employing security personnel to handle crowds and insure that content creators with hoards of fans looking for them could move around the convention center without being swarmed and possibly injured. Attendees with creator or industry registrations even have access to floors inaccessible to those with community registrations, creating a physical barrier between creators and their community.

In seven years, the way the YouTube community negotiates liveness (particularly physical liveness) has changed drastically as evidenced by the way VidCon itself has changed. At the first VidCon, the mode of interacting with content creators of all levels of renown was that of friends and colleagues having a reunion for a weekend. These interactions were live and real in the same way high school reunions are real—everyone may be trying to present their best selves, but the interactions are not so structured that real connections become impossible.
Current and future VidCon attendees may know before registering that the convention is now structured in such a way that casual conversation between fans and creators is nearly impossible, but still fans and creators devote time and money into coming together for a weekend to have some kind of live experience. The first VidCon was available via live stream as were all following VidCons, so attendees are not paying for the content of VidCon as that content is available for free live on the internet (“VidCon by the Numbers”). In this instance, VidCon attendees are not paying for liveness since viewers can communicate and participate in VidCon live during the live streams or commune with fellow fans in live social media interactions—so what are they paying for? Both YouTube content creators and fans continue to invest their time and money into VidCon for that moment of live physical interaction that can happen at a meet-and-greet and the live experience of attending an event together in the same space at the same time. YouTube content creators rarely have physical interactions with their fans and viewers unless they organize those interactions themselves, so VidCon is a way for them to put a face and body to the subscriber ticker under their YouTube usernames and physically see the impact their work has on the community. Creating videos on YouTube can be isolating work—especially for YouTube content creators that handle every aspect of their videos themselves—and events like VidCon help cut through that isolation by putting humans in front of humans. While current day VidCon organization may heavily regulate these live, physical interactions to keep the line moving, the experience of the physical interaction between creator and viewer is still impactful for both parties involved. Fan that have a chance to meet their favorite YouTube content creator and take pictures with them can also gain social currency in online fan groups, as Auslander eludes to: “merely being able to say you were there, live, translates into symbolic capital in the appropriate cultural contexts” (67). In an online community where the self is represented
through text and images, being able to produce digital photographic evidence of a physical moment with a content creator can boost one’s online social currency.

Along with the social currency that comes from having physical interactions with content creators, fans that attend online video conventions have the opportunity to meet other friends and establish a relationship outside of the shared relationship with the content creator that brought them together. What is unique about the kinds of friendships that can form in this environment is that frequently these friendships started in the digital space of a chatroom or social media platform with the convention bringing these established friends together to meet for the first time. It would be difficult to sell a convention with such a high ticket price for such a small amount of time creators and fans can interact with each other, so the ability for fans to interact with each other is important enough to make the experience worthwhile for many attendees.

As discussed in Chapter Two, physical closeness is not required for liveness to occur and be meaningful in the YouTube community as evidenced by the popularity of YouTube live streams—and yet fans and creators still seek out live physical interactions with one another. Physical liveness may not be required for viewers to feel close and connected to content creators, but the live physical connection between audience and performer is still a commodity that both sides of the interaction are willing to put time and money into creating. Watching a basketball game live on television may be an adequate viewing experience, but what fan would pass up the chance to sit courtside for a championship game? What dedicated fan would pass up the chance to meet the object of their affection while being physically surrounded by a community of fellow fans? Conventions like VidCon commodify the chance for physical liveness between creator and audience across several creators and several audiences, but as I will discuss in the next chapter, YouTube live shows complicate the idea of liveness even further.
CHAPTER FOUR: Live Shows

While live conventions like VidCon may be a great way for content creators to perform for a live physical audience, for some content creators performing once or twice a year isn’t enough. For many early content creators, VidCon was their first and largest performance in front of a live audience. YouTube content creators can feel removed from their audience, especially in the early years of a content creator’s career. When a traditional TV or movie star gets their big break—they can go quickly from being someone no one knows to being booked on late night shows and run through a media tour so people will know who they are and people can physically see their face. A YouTube content creator can make videos and cultivate an audience for years before ever seeing one of their fans in the flesh, particularly if they do not live in a large city or cannot easily travel. Creating content for YouTube can be an isolating experience, even with meaningful digital feedback from fans. It can be hard to feel like a success, or even understand what it means to have thousands of subscribers, when sitting alone on a computer. Even during live streams, the audience’s response is limited to text on a website—potentially reducing a creator’s perception of their audience to numbers and letters. What is the difference between performing for a numerical viewcount and text comments, and performing for a physical audience?

For some online content creators like Griffin McElroy—co-host and creator of popular podcasts *My Brother, My Brother, and Me* and *The Adventure Zone*—the physical separation between creator and audience allows him to deal with his social anxiety and continue to create content comfortably. Griffin McElroy and his fellow co-hosts frequently underestimate how many people want to see them perform live—selling out venues in minutes with little advertisement. McElroy performs live shows of both of his podcasts (usually live recordings of
those podcasts with added live performance moments like taking live audience questions) despite his anxiety about performing live. In 2017, the McElroy Brothers performed at least ten shows in cities around the United States. If performing to a digital audience over a live stream is sufficient to fulfill some desire of liveness, why bother with live performances at all? Why are content creators, even those that struggle with social anxiety, driven to create live physical experiences for themselves and their fans? In this chapter I try to unpack this drive towards IRL performances while discussing the distinct ways YouTube content creators create these live, physical performances for their digital audiences.

Hank and John Green, by virtue of being one of the first YouTube content creators to build a sizable and passionate viewer base, were some of the first YouTube content creators to go on tour. In the world of online content creation, “going on tour” typically means bringing an IRL performance—be it a musical concert, a book signing, or some new performance creation—to performance spaces in at least a few different cities. The vlogbrothers were able to go on tour when it was unheard of for YouTubers to do so thanks to John Green’s success as a young adult novelist.

Since 2008, Hank and John have gone on tour numerous times, primarily as a means to promote their books and CDs (“Life on Tour”). These tours started as book tours for John Green’s various young adult fiction novels, where Hank would tag along as a way to draw in fans of their YouTube channel (who are frequently also fans of John’s books). What developed was the “Tour de Nerdfighting,” which mixed book readings from John, music from Hank, and various games played on stage with each other and the audience. As John Green, in a video capturing some of the magic of these early performances, describes, “Then you [Hank] sing some more songs and people dance and it feels magical and otherworldly to be in a room full of
people that feel unembarrassed by their enthusiasm and intellect” (“Thoughts from Places: The Tour”). Their 2013 tour came to a climax with their sold-out performance at Carnegie Hall, as described in Chapter Two when discussing the live stream of this event.

Both Hank and John Green made multiple YouTube videos trying to capture the experience of going on tour. In one such video, appropriately titled “How it Felt” (c. 2012), John explains: “So the Tour de Nerdfighting is coming to an end after three weeks and last night as we were signing in Seattle it occurred to me that the last three weeks have really been like the internet became IRL.” Up until they started touring, the newfound fame the brothers were generating online was limited to their online interactions with their fans. By going on tour, Hank and John Green were able to see their audience physically and share a new kind of intimacy that comes from being physically present in a community. The Tour de Nerdfighting felt like the internet came to life because their live show was a celebration of what was happening for them online. The moment they came out onstage, the brothers already had a past with the audience including inside jokes and a shared canon of what cultural references are important to their community. The tour was not about trying to make new fans out of casual participants, but about celebrating the community that already existed.

I use the word celebrate because that’s what the live show recordings feel like. The vlogbrothers are not singing songs or putting on puppet shows because they are master musicians or puppeteers—they are doing these things because they audience enjoys seeing them in person and participating in an activity together, even if that activity is singing “500 Miles” (by The Pretenders) badly. The audience is invited to participate beyond singing along to songs. The brothers created a game out of answering audience questions by agreeing to endure an electrical shock onstage if they are the last person to speak before an onstage timer runs out—fairly
reminiscent of a neo-futurist performance. In at least once instance John Green handed his video camera to someone in the audience and asked them to record some footage of the group singing together to be used in a future *vlogbrothers* performance. In the video, the person recording tries their best to fulfill their duty, then is left with the camera as the brothers exit the stage. She quips, “I guess I’ll keep this, then,” although the fact that the footage was later uploaded to the *vlogbrothers* channel implies one of the brothers managed to get the camera back. That fan became a pivotal part of the physical experience during the live show by freeing up John Green to dance and sing with his brother, and was able to contribute to the online experience of the *vlogbrothers* once the footage was uploaded. The “Tour de Nerdfighting” felt like the internet came to life because the internet was still alive and present during the IRL shows. The actions of people in the audience and on stage had consequences online as the live fed the recorded experience and vice versa.

Unlike the Green Brothers, Mamrie Hart and Grace Helbig began their YouTube careers already having live performance experience. The pair met through the Upright Citizens Brigade in New York City and soon began performing live comedy shows as a duo. Both Hart and Helbig also had some experience with traditional media and booked spots on TV shows and commercials. In contrast, Hannah Hart started her YouTube career with no real live performance experience, which made her uncomfortable when approached by Helbig and Mamrie Hart about putting together a live show as a trio (Hart 111). Hannah Hart overcame her fears and the trio performed their first “#NoFilter” live show on February 2nd, 2013.

Much like the vlogbrother’s live show, the “#NoFilter show” is a comedy performance that mixes skits, games, and audience interactions. Because their live show is relatively easy to put together and can be written with fairly short notice, Hart, Hart, and Helbig have taken the
show on tour numerous times—generally in short bursts as part of a promotion for their various books, movies, and other projects. Most recently, the trio took their live show to Australia ahead of their film *Dirty 30* (c. 2016). This iteration of their live show includes a live version of Mamrie Hart’s “You Deserve a Drink” segment from her YouTube channel where she has an audience member assist her as she prepares Australia-themed cocktails, Hannah Hart inviting an audience member to sing along with a song Hannah wrote for her YouTube channel, and the trio reenacting fanfiction written about them online (“Full #NoFilterShow Adelaide 17.12.15”).

Mamrie describes the show as having “a bit of vaudeville-ness or old school. Some of the visual gags we pull in the “#NoFilter” show are a bit like Carol Burnett” (qtd. in Chamberlain). Grace, Hannah, and Mamrie are independent YouTubers with their own individual channels, each with over a million subscribers. The three have capitalized on what Grace refers to as “one of the core concepts of growing a channel,” namely, “collaborating” (“The Holy Trinity Q&A Vidcon 2014”). They are friends in real life and frequently pop-up in each other’s videos, but still have the freedom to form their own voices and pursue their own projects. Keeping in line with this unique relationship, the “#NoFilter” shows alternate between group skits, games, and performances and short solo acts that give each woman a moment to shine independently. The show is described by Grace as “80 percent scripted, 50 percent unscripted,” and features short skits, monologue retellings of embarrassing life events, musical improv games, gameshow-esq interactions with the audience, and pre-recorded videos from other YouTubers. Each show on the tour is very loosely put together, with many segments being written in a hotel room the night before.

The loose structure also keeps the show fresh as they stop in different cities on the tour, which is particularly important because each tour stop is dutifully recorded by fans in the
audience and uploaded before they can get to their next stop. Instead of trying to shut down video recording and cell phone interaction—like many traditional theatre performance try to do—the trio actively encourage the audience to tweet, instagram, photograph, and record every performance. Before each show, Hannah Hart tells the audience they “hope that you guys use your fingers later tonight to take pictures and record video and to really document this entire show and put it up on social media using the hashtag No Filter Show so later on we can watch it” (“#NOFILTERSHOW SF B Hannah Hart, Mamrie Hart&Grace Helbig! June 13, 2015.”). By embracing today’s social media and cellphone culture, these three YouTubers employ the audience as willing videographers, marketing agents, and hypemen. While they may not make money directly from someone uploading their whole show to a channel they do not control, they reap the benefits of growing interest in both their stage show and their individual channels. Viewers and fans, many of them minors without the means or funds to attend a show on the other side of the country, can still feel included in the community without leaving their rooms. By asking this invisible audience to contribute to the show by tweeting suggestions and questions that are read on stage, these community members are active participants in the stage shows and can feel like they made a difference in the community.

Both the vlogbrothers and the trio of Hart, Hart, and Helbig created live shows that do not require a large budget or crew and can re-staged with little notice. Daniel Howell and Phil Lester (known collectively online as Dan & Phil) changed the YouTube live show medium with the creation of their large scale live show “This Amazing Tour is Not on Fire.” On March 27, 2015, Dan & Phil announced the publication of This Amazing Book is Not on Fire (or TABINOF) through a cinematic trailer uploaded onto their channels. The book, written by both Howell and Lester, was created as a way for Dan & Phil fans to have a physical object to hold
and remember their time spent watching both Dan & Phil on their various channels. In a behind the scenes interview, Dan & Phil discuss what inspired them to write the book and create the live show:

DAN: “Then all of a sudden, we realized, hey we’ve got this huge audience. This is a real thing. What happens if we just get hit by a meteor? We need to do something before it’s too late”

PHIL: “What is the legacy?...what can we do that involves our audience that is completely new and something we’ve never done before and that will leave behind some kind of feeling of yes, that was Dan and Phil”

DAN: “And I said, let’s do a book and a stage show so then people have something to hold and people can see us in real life.” (00:03:23 - 00:03:47)

In 2017, online content creators know that the internet is ephemeral. Websites come and go quickly, and the content and audience for those sites are lost to time. Recently, the website Vine.com was shut down abruptly leaving both users and Viners (the name for content creators on Vine) without access to a much loved online video platform. Dan & Phil know this as people that grew up online, and seem to know that all of the success they’ve built up over the last six years could disappear without warning. In the 2015 book trailer for TABINOF, an older woman living in a futuristic world finds the book and is taken back to the years she spent as a Dan & Phil fan and the memories associated with the Dan & Phil community. TABINOF reads like a scrapbook mixed with a fan zine—there are pages and pages of professional photographs of the pair along with blueprints for each apartment they lived in together, personal stories they have not told on their channels, and references to inside jokes only diehard fans would understand (“This Amazing Tour is Not on Fire”). TABINOF is Dan & Phil’s attempt to bring their digital
channel into the physical realm, and the related live show “This Amazing Tour is Not On Fire” (or TATINOF) is their attempt to bring both physical and temporal liveness to their audience across the globe.

The UK leg of the TATINOF tour began in 2015 at the Glasgow Royal Concert Hall (with a capacity of 2,475) to a sold out show and ended at the London Palladium after fifteen shows, with four added due to popularity. After the UK tour, Howell and Lester began the North American leg of the tour in Orlando, FL after Playlist Live 2016 (an online video convention much like VidCon). After 40 shows in 24 states and two stops in Canada, the tour ended in a sold out show at the Kodak Theatre in Hollywood, California, the theatre the Oscars are held in every year, on June 23, 2016. The final leg of the TATINOF tour ended in Australia in August 2016, with no firm plans for another tour of this particular show. Dan Howell, in a live stream after the end of the tour, voiced regrets for not being able to tour to more countries around the world as intended, but considering that TATINOF was Dan & Phil’s first live show, the tour was quite ambitious enough (“I'M BACK FROM HIBERNATION”).

The central idea for the TATINOF live show was to bring Dan & Phil’s YouTube channel into the real world, which is represented quite literally at the start of the show where Phil accidentally “breaks the internet” by microwaving his laptop and bringing the world of Dan & Phil into the real world and onto the stage. All parts of the set, which is quite large and intricate (requiring its own trailer and crew), are references to things Dan and Phil talk about on their YouTube channels or inside jokes only their viewers would understand. The TATINOF live show is made exclusively for their fans, with some jokes thrown into the script about how “there’s one confused dad up there,” or that the parents in the audience should not even try to guess what’s going on (“This Amazing Tour is Not on Fire”). The live show is hard to take in as
an outsider, particularly when thousands of young fans cheer or laugh after everything Dan and Phil say. Dan admits in the behind the scenes documentary companion video for the live show (c. 2016) that the show was not intended for outside objective viewers: “The entire show is an in-joke...we didn’t want to make a show that was objectively good, we wanted to do it for us and our audience that had been with us for half a decade” (“Dan and Phil’s Story of TATINOF”).

Although the TATINOF live show toured to many traditional theatres and opera houses, the show’s creators make no claims about producing great works of art. Like the early vlogbrothers live shows, the TATINOF tour is first and foremost a celebration of the pre-existing community Howell and Lester cultivated online over the past six years.

Dan Howell and Phil Lester’s first live show has several distinct differences from the YouTube live shows discussed earlier in this chapter. First and foremost, attendees of the TATINOF live show were prohibited from using their phones during the show to record the show (other than the VIP meet-and-greet), which Howell and Lester explained in a joint YouTube video was to keep people that did not have a chance to see it yet from being “spoiled.” The idea that an audience member could have this live experience spoiled is interesting, as the real selling point of the live show experience is the opportunity to be physically present with the content creators behind the show. While there are a few surprises during the show, such as a video game character from Howell and Lester’s joint YouTube gaming channel coming to life and emerging from the audience, or the musical number that ends the show, these surprises are not narratively important to this show that is light on real narrative and could be discussed or “spoiled” without the need for recording devices. It seems the real reason fans could not record the show was due to a deal Howell and Lester made with YouTube itself—the final performance of TATINOF at the Kodak Theater was professionally filmed, directed, and produced as a movie.
that could only be accessed by YouTube Red subscribers. YouTube Red is the subscription service Google rolled out in early 2016 that allows users to access premium content by popular content creators, as well as a smaller quality-of-life features like ad-free viewing and optimised mobile videos, for around $10 a month. The official recording of TATINOF, as well as the behind the scenes documentary about the tour, is only accessible to YouTube Red subscribers and only as long as they continue to pay for the service. Dan Howell and Phil Lester receive a cut of the YouTube Red subscription money, although how the money is distributed to individual content creators is not certain. In this context, it makes sense that Howell and Lester would not want their audience to record the show themselves—they found a way to monetize their live show beyond the actual live performances by restricting access to the recording of the show to those willing to pay for a premium service. With this structure, Howell and Lester are able to collect money from fans that could attend the live show and those that could not.

The TATINOF live show is also much more scripted than the live shows of the Green Brothers or Hart, Hart, and Helbig. While both live shows discussed earlier in this chapter are by no means free form experiences, they both allow for a great deal of randomness and mistakes that make the performers seems surprisingly human. In comparison, TATINOF is very scripted with a few unscripted moments to make each show unique. The production team behind TATINOF goes to the IRL audience in the hours before the show starts to scout for childhood stories for a segment Lester does and questions from the audience for Howell to answer. These regimented interactions give Dan & Phil something new to react to each night, but these unexpected moments are the exception, not the rule. In many ways, Dan & Phil seem less like themselves and more like they are performing their online personas, particularly when compared against their entirely unscripted weekly live streams. While TATINOF is able to bring a physical
experience of liveness to those able to attend the live show, the Dan & Phil experienced in the show is decidedly less live. In many ways, the TATINOF live show is a lot more like a traditional theatre production where an aesthetic distance between performer and character is expected and audience members are required to suspend their disbelief.

So what does the audience have to gain by attending a live performance of TATINOF, or any YouTube live show for that matter, when a recording is usually available online for less money than a performance ticket and live, perhaps more genuine, live experiences happening regularly online? First off, viewers and fans of Dan and Phil’s online content have the opportunity to treat their live shows as gatherings—a place to meet and connection with other members of the Dan and Phil community. In their behind the scenes documentary, Howell cites this fan experience as one of the selling points for the live shows: “All the people that watch our videos are a big community that all share one common interest. So a lot of people would come that were like ‘hey I don’t know anybody here’ and then they’d leave having met a whole bunch of friends” (“Dan and Phil’s Story of TATINOF”). The average age of Dan and Phil viewers skews young and seems to appeal to a subset of teenagers that grew up making friends online and may not be used to socializing IRL, so the experience of sitting in a crowded theatre full of fellow fans that ostensibly live in the same town could lead to genuine, lifelong friendships through this shared experience.

The content creators behind the live shows also get to access the community in a way that’s not possible online. Howell comments on the difference between performing for an online audience and performing for a live on in the behind-the-scenes documentary, explaining

It’s really weird having an audience to react to because that’s the one thing that we don’t get from YouTube, you know? It’s all like, “I think this is going to be funny and that
people will like it” but then you just see the response in the comments whereas this was our first experience ever coming out onto a stage an going “ha ha joke,” and then having someone go [claps]. (“Dan and Phil’s Story of TATINOF”) Creating content online can also be an isolating experience, so live shows allow YouTube content creators to physically see and contact with fans that are usually represented by letters and numbers on a screen. These physical interactions can be particularly impactful when fans have the opportunity to talk directly with content creators in a meet-and-greet before the main stage show. Howell and Lester discuss the impact of meeting fans one-on-one, saying

DAN “Our audience is this big anonymous mass on the internet so meeting each individual person and then hearing their story and actually being able to connect with the people that have given us everything I think is really important.”

PHIL “I don’t think we realized how much of an impact we’ve had on certain people until we’ve met them.” (“Dan and Phil’s Story of TATINOF”) Live shows, and meet-and-greets specifically are are humanizing experience for content creators as they are finally able to put a face to the community they took so long to build online. Live shows are the prestige moments of an online content creator’s career—they spend so much time building up this invisible audience online only to have the fruit of their efforts revealed when they are able to finally meet their audience face to face.

The very idea of the YouTube live show goes against Auslander’s idea of mediatized performance, where dominant media forms with more cultural capital having little to gain from older media forms, while those same older media forms having to adopt the technology and form of newer medias in order to stay relevant. YouTube content creators do not need to take their online success and translate it into a live theatre experience in order to stay relevant, maintain
popularity online, or even have a live experience with their audiences, and yet YouTube content creators continue to be drawn to live performance as a media form. The live shows might not be necessary, but they are still desired by both viewers and creators alike. The internet may make emotional connections between people separated by distance possible, but at the end of the day a physical connection is still desired.
CHAPTER FIVE: Conclusion

There is a running joke in the YouTube community that YouTube could disappear at any moment like many websites come and go, so all popularity one can gain from YouTube is temporary. It’s strange to hear the core community talk about the platform they make their living off of as so fleeting; it’s as if in the first years of television everyone was looking for other jobs, just waiting for the bubble to pop. This fear that YouTube could cease to exist is not without precedent—in 2017 the popular website Vine closed down for good with little warning. Vine, much like YouTube, had its own successful content creators that specialized in making six-second videos that could be looped endlessly. When the site closed with little notice, all of those content creators had to scramble to find a new place to create content (and learn how to change their content to fit new mediums) or give up on online video content altogether.

This is all to say, the world of online content creation changes rapidly and is more ephemeral than it appears. YouTube is an archive, to be sure, but it’s an archive that is one bankruptcy or buyout away from no longer existing. If the website collapsed tomorrow, or even in the next few years, the work online content creators have dedicated years of their lives to and the careers build around that work could be lost in an instant. YouTubers would have to adapt to whatever the new trend, the next YouTube, or risk falling behind and no longer being relevant.

This end-of-days mentality that comes from working in a medium that is not expected to stand the test of time could be why in recent years many YouTube content creators have branched out from making content only on the core YouTube site and have started to diversity their online presence and focus on live experiences. By creating side content on social media sites like Snapchat and Instagram, YouTubers can continue to be a part of the daily life of fans and viewers even if YouTube stops existing. Some YouTubers that create video game content
have branched onto live video game streaming sites like Twitch to reach a wider audience and diversify their online presence. Online video creators also have to stay up to date on current and future trends in case society moves on to a new site or a new way to consume content. Early YouTubers may not have an interest on hosting live streams, but when live streams became popular, online creators had to start hosting them to stay relevant. If the future of online content creation is virtual reality, or a new form of media not yet invented, or simply does not exist anymore, creators have to adapt or cease to be relevant.

Dan Howell, in the video trailer for the book he co-wrote with Phil Lester, cites this fear that YouTube will no longer exist in the near future as part of the inspiration for creating the book in the first place. Howell and Lester wanted to create a physical object that would exist even if their YouTube channels no longer did so fans could have a physical memory of their time spent as fans of both them individually and online video in general. Their first book, This Amazing Book is Not on Fire (c. 2015) reads a lot like a scrapbook, as does their book Dan and Phil Go Outside (c. 2016) which was created as a memory book for their live tour.

Live shows themselves are a way to capitalize on a content creator’s current fame and create IRL memories that may last longer than an individual YouTube video. YouTube content creators do not expect to have the long touring life of someone like a musician, so they may take advantage of their current popularity to go on tour for the first and maybe last time.

The pursuit of a live experience between creator and audience is born out of a desire to connect with others, even if that connection is mediatized and without physical closeness. Liveness is an experience that can bring the audience closer emotionally to a creator and develop that relationship in interesting ways, and can also be used as a tool to help fund the creator financially.
I have discussed live streams, which can be used to promote outside content like Helbig, Hart, and Hart’s movies or John Green’s books, or charities that allow both content creators and viewers to make a real and positive impact on the world. Live streams can also open up the lines of communication between creator and audience by allowing users to send messages to a creator without having to physically be present. Creators can connect with a global audience with little planning or investment by simply turning on a camera and connecting to a streaming site. Digital liveness is prized enough for people to pay for the experience, as seen when discussing marathon charity events where users pay to keep the live content on the air. Live streams may be the only way an individual that lacks the monetary and physical means to see a live YouTube event can interact with a beloved YouTube content creator, so these live moments are precious and potentially the only live experience they are able to have.

The conversation about live streams moved into an analysis of online video conventions that blur the line between digital and physical live experiences. Conventions like VidCon allow content creators and audiences to physically meet and have IRL experience like concerts or meet-and-greets, while participating in performances and panels that are streamed live to a digital audience that could not be physically present at the convention. VidCon continues to sell out every year, with the price of physical admission rising to the hundreds while live digital access continues to be free to YouTube users. The fact that people are willing to pay high admission prices on top of travel expenses to spend moderated physical time with online creators means that contemporary online audiences still value live physical experiences and continue to seek those experiences out.

This desire for physical liveness adds to our discussion of the more contemporary trend of YouTube live shows. The live stage performances may differ wildly between YouTube
content creators when it comes to style, content, and quality, but every stage production by an online creator has a desire for physical liveness motivating its creation. Live stage shows can put a human face to the digital audiences YouTube content creators work hard to build and cultivate, and can serve as the prestige to several years of online work as creators can hear the live reactions and applause for their work, perhaps for the first time in the creator’s career. As discussed in the previous chapter, online content creation can be an isolating experience for both the creators and the audience. Live shows help relieve some of that isolation and can build lasting friendships between audience members, and a stronger emotional connection between the performer and the audience.

The current trend among major news outlets and “traditional media” creators is to cast Millennials (the generation born between the late 80s and the early 2000s) as a generation so attached to social media and digital experiences that they miss out on living in the moment. This view of the generation is part of why Millennials are blamed for the drop of theatre ticket sales, both off and on Broadway. But perhaps Millennials, who are largely the target demographic of online content found on YouTube, are finding new and cheaper ways to have a live experience as student debt and a lack of high-paying jobs for college educated people lock many Millennials out of the disposable income needed to fly to New York and watch a Broadway show. Even regional and community theatre prices cannot compete with online streaming services that can provide live experiences for free. The stereotypical image of a Millennial buried in their phone is supposed to depict and isolating experience, but Millennials are using their phones to connect to others through text, social media, and other online experiences. Millennials are not opposed to live experiences, but are interested in having those experiences on their terms. YouTube content creators know this, and are on the front lines when it comes to providing easy-to-access live
experiences—especially since online content creators live or die on their ability to draw an audience. If a theatre company is struggling to fill seats while a kid with a webcam pulls millions of audience members a week creating content online, perhaps it is time for the old to learn from the new. At the same time, online content creators are already using live performance venues and methods (old) to grow their brands beyond the digital world (new) through live shows and other live experiences.

Because the internet—particularly when it comes to how online content is created, performed, and produced, moves at such an accelerated timeline—this thesis may be obsolete in only a couple of years. My hope is to frame my research here not as a manifesto of what online video is and will always be, but as a snapshot of the work contemporary online video creators have done in the past decade and are currently doing. As an academic and avid fan of online content, I wonder what will be next as creators keep pushing the envelope for how they can connect to their audiences. Perhaps the future is in virtual reality (VR) as companies continue to market VR headsets and software to everyday consumers. In 2017, VR users can talk to both strangers and friends and explore vast digital worlds in games like Minecraft while sitting at home connected to a headset that covers the eyes and ears in order to blur the lines between reality and digital reality. If VR technology becomes cheaper and more commonplace, perhaps future online content creators can find new ways to bridge the divide between themselves and their audiences.

There are questions that lie outside of the scope of this thesis, including what dangers can come from live experiences born from online interactions. What harm can come to creators as an audience feels more and more familiar? What boundaries can be crossed due to the increased access the audience has to the creator thanks to the ease of online liveness? As online video
continues to grow, the issues that surround it will surely come to light and hopefully those equipped to analyze these issues will step forward.
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