The Dynamics of Transgression on YouTube:  
A research analysis of action, excess and limits of UGC

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In this essay, I will be discussing how transgressive spaces operate in Web 2.0 communications (social media), specifically, the video-streaming platform YouTube (YT). First, I will define and describe the concept of transgression by illustrating the historical and narrative literature that discuss transgressive social attitudes and identity. By drawing on the course texts “Cultures of Darkness: Night travels in the history of transgression” by Bryan D. Palmer and “The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde” by Robert Louis Stevenson, I argue that there are 3 major dynamics that produce transgressive acts; these dynamics include extreme acts of performativity, excess and limitations, as well as the consequences of these activities. Then I will address how these transgressive dynamics exist on certain YT channels; this social network makes it possible for users to broadcast whatever they want through acts of performance, instances of excess, and due to recent events, user-generated content (UGC) has been censored on the public platform due to videos that contain contentious content. An example of this ongoing phenomena will be explored in the case-study of popular YT channel PewDiePie, operated by Felix Kjellberg. A controversial spotlight has been put on Kjellberg’s YT channel due in part by a Wall Street Journal’s expose that portrays him as a racist and an anti-semitic. This channel and others like it have motivated corporate advertisers to pull marketing from YT to protect their brands. Following these events, new rules and regulations have been strengthened to try and control the platform by demonetizing videos that are not considered ‘family friendly.’ Because of this, any videos that transgress these new rules will not receive any monetary benefits and may be censored. Therefore, many content creators have had to alter their content to keep their YT careers, by altering UGC to appease corporate power. Due the excess of controversial content and boundaries made possible
by YT and corporate advertisers, the productions of UGC is being controlled and censored. Content creators are no longer able to transgress the rules, but this also endangers progressive channels from continuing to grow due to the new limitations being forced on YouTubers.

Historical and literary illustrations of transgression

Transgressive spaces have always existed throughout history, most often hidden from society. Non-conforming social practices that deviate from dominant social rules and expectations can be considered inappropriate or improper. For instance, in the 18th and 19th century, homosexual acts were hidden from public eye. Heteronormativity was predominant and homosexuality was punishable by law; an unacceptable act of social indecency. These boundaries that drew lines between right and wrong demonized homosexuality as a transgression by forcing these individuals into the shadows of society. The following excerpt from Palmer’s chapter “Nights of Leather and Lace,” states how these boundaries and limitations shaped homosexual transgressive acts:

“...before the medical and psychoanalysis “invention” of heterosexuality and homosexuality in the late nineteenth century, pre-modern sexual transgression transcended any particular essentializing homosexual orientation. This view lays stress not on homosexuality but on a plurality of desires, practices, and in some cases, obscure cultural enclaves of possibility, needs, acts and places which – however much they broke with conventionally or reconstructed boundaries of erotic life – lacked the conscious self-articulation of a or the homosexual role before the late nineteenth or the early twentieth century … the ways in which sexualities are socially constructed in oppositional categories related to power’s rigid need to designate ‘deviant’ and ‘normal’

In this view, before the inception of the homosexual as a socially constructed label, LGBTQ identities were targeted when evidence of transgressive acts arose – otherwise they remain invisible and concealed identities of heteronormativity. Here Palmer states that the words

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homosexuality and heterosexuality were later invented to classify what is normal or abnormal sexual behaviour. Through this we can understand that when transgressors are caught in devious acts, the social mechanisms of what is considered good or bad is judged based on and endorsed by the public perception and accompanying social laws.²

Although tracking homosexuality is difficult for historians due to its hidden existence, queer identities developed slowly in western society through liminal social spaces, which eventually lead to growing public recognition and acceptance in the later 20th century.³ In this case, although there are dominant beliefs and social rules that place boundaries in public society, people will still stray from these social expectations. Palmer’s work highlights how breaches of what society deems as devious can still exist within the margins of these social boundaries.

Another example of transgressive individuals is depicted through the novel “The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde.” Set in the Victorian era, this text tells readers of a tale of excess, limits and the consequences of devious actions. To put it simply, this is a story about a man of science, Dr. Jekyll, who invents a potion to allow him to become someone else. By creating a living alter ego named Mr. Hyde, Jekyll can go back and forth between the two identities due to his scientific discovery. This allowed the scientist to leave the banalities of civilized society, to seek out other more unconventional pass-times through the identity of Hyde.⁴ Although this story is based in fiction, Stevenson’s work allows us to unpack the excessive nature of transgressive behaviour and the limitations that can be met when certain boundaries have been exceeded.

In this way, Jekyll experiences life as a primitive, youthful human being, without fear of the judgement of others. He becomes bitter and evil, trampling or beating anyone in his way as he

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ventures to the docks and other ‘enclaves of possibility’ as Palmer noted in the above quote. Jekyll wants to be two types of men: one that allows him to bypass dominant social conventions and the other that allows him to have the everyday comforts of common life. In his explanation of his experiment, Jekyll states that “… I had now two appearances, one was wholly evil, and the other was still old Henry Jekyll, that incongruous compound of whose reformation and improvement I had already learned to despair.”5 Nonetheless his devious acts as Hyde result in dire consequences. After a period of transgressing social boundaries, Jekyll loses control of his alter ego and becomes trapped inside the body of Hyde. Some can read this story and see it as an educational narrative that demonstrates the fallout of being malicious or evil. This may be true, however there is a larger, more complex part of this narrative that shows how the expectations of society can be outweighed by one’s own innate desires – and what happens when one reaches excess and the results of the actions.

Firstly, Jekyll committed what most would only fantasize about, but would never do. In his statement to Anderson he addresses how he has always been both identities and had longed to let his darker side show: “… I saw that, of the two natures that contended in the Weld of my consciousness, even if I could rightly be said to be either, it was only because I was radically both … I had learned to dwell with pleasure, as a beloved daydream.”6 His desires led him to the creation of his shape shifting potion, becoming Hyde and acting out his desired primitive impulses. Although once he lost control, he tries to distance himself from the alter-identity he created.

In the letter to his friend Mr. Anderson, Jekyll blames his alter ego for his monstrosity - even though he previously states that both identities have always been a part of him. He pleads with Anderson in his statement by claiming “[he] stood at times aghast before the acts of Edward

Hyde; but the situation was apart from ordinary laws, and insidiously relaxed the grasps of consciousness.” What is interesting to note about Jekyll’s statement here, is that he distinguishes that ‘ordinary law,’ whether the law of science or the justice system, could not help him in his situation. This shows how the excess of transforming back and forth put him so far outside the realm of societal order that he could not be helped by any conventional means. Jekyll’s selfish decisions and devilish actions illustrate how transgressive acts have limits of excess. These limits of constraint are because of the lack of public resources to help him in his unconventional situation, due to the horror of his transgressive actions as Hyde, he is trapped on the outside of society.

By reviewing the texts from the course, both Palmer and Stevenson’s work highlight how social transgression existed in history and can be described through literature. Palmer explains how boundaries can repress unconventional behaviour through social norms and expectations, but also how people will indulge in transgressive acts, secluded to the margins of society. The Jekyll and Hyde narrative also exemplifies limits, but in a different way that showcases how devious behaviour and actions can lead to consequences of excess outside the order of society. These scholarly sources illustrate the three competing dynamics of transgression through action and performativity, excess and the limits of living an unconventional life as outlined at the beginning of this paper.

Web 2.0 communications and transgression

In the late 20th and early 21st century, access to the internet became a publicly accessible form of communication and necessity for everyday life. The internet is also a portal for people to enter virtual communities, away from public consciousness, where digital media can be spread

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through participatory culture. Media scholar Henry Jenkin’s describes this concept as a “… culture with relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing one’s creations …[members] believe that their contributions matter, and members [feel] some degree of social connection with one another.”

The invention of the internet has made it possible for users to spread UGC through various websites, forums and social media platforms, enabling virtual communities to cultivate and exist in these digital spaces.

Further study of online participatory culture was published by David Gunkel and Ted Gournelos in their book “Transgression 2.0: Media, Culture, and the Politics of a Digital Age.” They focus on the transgressive nature that exists on the internet, where users can network and access media that are not available through traditional forms of media. Transgression can exist online in varying forms. For instance, access to pornography or illegally downloaded media transgresses some social norms or law, however the distribution of child-pornography and human trafficking available on the internet breaks moral codes and laws of the justice system.

As transgressive spaces exist online, they demonstrate how Web 2.0 communications have strengthened our abilities to connect with people and ideas, expanding outward rather than inward as was noted in Palmer’s literature. The spread of digital culture is embedded in our social engagement that affects how we interact offline to some extent, but can still be hidden if no one knows your search history. Social norms that have been taught to users might make them self-regulate when navigating the world wide web, but to others the internet is seen as a door to possibility and pleasure that can lead to excess due to the endless amount of web resources and 24/7 availability.

Gunkel and Gournelos note that these “developments in social norms, whether

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8 Henry Jenkins, Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education in the 21st Century (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2009), p. 5-6
they act to break the structure of news, change our conception of ‘intellectual property,’ rethink pornography’s relationship to our everyday lives, or reformulate how digital media is developing and constraining the possibility of protest, cannot be fully understood without grappling with their limits, boundaries, and their transgressions.”

Thus, transgressions exist online and influence people’s individual perceptions, while still being constrained by limits of excess and social or digital boundaries that exist simultaneously. How can there be limits to online participatory culture? There is no dominant social order that readily exists – there is no list of rules – so what are the boundaries that dictate the flow of UGC? To answer this simply before unpacking these questions further, Gunkel and Gournelos note that “[online transgression] also describes a new era of surveillance, of censorship, of monopolistic consolidation, and of the foreclosure of discourse.” The things we post online are forever on the internet – even if deleted – somewhere on your computer or possibly stored or cached somewhere on the net. The content we watch online can be monitored through data mining and other surveillance tactics, but users – the audience of this content – are also watching, giving both positive and negative feedback. But do internet users care? The freedoms that exist online are felt when we use social media in our daily lives, but the restrictions to this form of engagement and activities have limits of excess and consequences to our online activities.

As a digital native, someone who grew up using internet computer technologies, I have become familiar with virtual communities and subcultures that exist online. Groups of geeks that play Steam games, a popular video-game service, or trolls that post on 4Chan; there are countless opportunities of belonging to a group that represents your interests somewhere on the internet. In

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10 Ted Gournelos and David J. Gunkel, *Transgression 2.0: Media, Culture and the Politics of a Digital Age*, 3.
addition to this, transgressive internet users may not care or want to be publicly recognized, whereas others might try to hide their identity.

I have learnt that YT has grown into a global virtual community, where users of different interests and backgrounds can create an account, upload videos to their respective channel, and use social networking to attract an audience. There are different genres of YT channels: comedy, pranks, news and pop-culture commentary videos, and more. The audience is a key part to the spread of UGC, where users can leave comments on videos or give feedback via commonly used social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter or Instagram.12

From internet memes to live current events, users are simultaneously both producers and consumers (prosumers) of UGC. Anyone can become a YouTuber if they have the means to do so, by simply creating an account and uploading their own edited videos. This also means that users, as an active audience, can “like,” share or comment on a video, giving videos the increased likelihood for their content to spread through social media.13 YT does have a trending tab on their home page, although only popular channels that are either sponsored or attract millions of viewers (otherwise known as viral media) can trend on this page. Otherwise, the popularity of YT channels is left up to audiences that play a key role in a YouTuber’s success.

Over the years YT has played host to alternative content not readily available on traditional forms of media like television, film or radio. This is because there are existing rules and modes of censorship in place that dictate what can be shown through the mainstream services and products. YT has become an outlet for adversary forms of visual content because these limits and regulations

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are much more relaxed through this site; for example, one controversial trend that many YouTubers partook in recently was the “Smash or Pass Challenge,” where people would film themselves playing this game where they would say smash or pass (have sex or not) to pictures of female or male YouTubers. Although it was met with criticism through various social media networks, the challenge went viral between February and March of this year. Some YouTubers uploaded videos of themselves reacting to Smash or Pass content that they were featured in. These videos seemed primarily entertaining and humorous, though some video were offensive and rude when discussing their desires or rejections of fellow YouTubers. These videos may not be breaking any laws or social norms, but the fact that someone can possibly make money from such content exhibits the power and autonomy YT has through trending UGC.

Some more of the controversial content that is on YouTube are fake/staged pranks that are depicted as real, a YT channel called “Baby Syringe” (Exactly like it sounds) and some channels contain fetish and soft-core porn videos that cannot be flagged as inappropriate per the Terms and Use of YouTube.\textsuperscript{14} Due to the high volume of uploads a day, some content creators have figured out how to cut corners and get away with uploading content like this, by using fake props or claiming to be comedy and other discretionary tactics to avoid censorship. This is how transgression has existed on YT, although due to recent events, this cultural hub of memes is now trying to control the limits of what types of videos people can upload. YT attempts this not solely because they care about their content, but more so to retain the corporate sponsorship and marketing partners that provide mass revenue for the site.

Transgression, PewDiePie & YT

I began watching YouTube channels last summer when my partner bought a Chrome-Cast, a device that streams media from a mobile device to our TV screen. Out of convenience I began watching YT, but quickly began to routinely enjoy amateur comedy and skits from different channels. Due to my large interest in gaming, I streamed different gaming channels and came across PewDiePie, a YouTube channel run by a 27 year old Swedish gamer named Felix Kjellberg. Known for his ear-shattering screams and absurd, yet humorous form of commentary in his gaming videos, he branches and produces other videos about internet pop-culture such as various challenges, trends and other YT content that he reviews on his channel. For months at a time, I would tune in for his daily videos and watch him play weird indie-games, discuss memes and even rants that he included about his personal life. I enjoy PewDiePie and still tune in regularly, but I have learned a lot about the YT virtual community due to the controversies that have followed this channel.

Since he started in 2011, Kjellberg has gained 50 million subscribers– the first YouTuber to ever achieve this. It’s impressive to know that someone in this YT genre has made 4 million dollars in revenue in 2014, and has continued to grow his media empire by recording video game commentary. Interviews of Kjellberg have been posted online where he explains how he got his start on YouTube by dropping out of university, working as a bouncer for night clubs and even at one point selling hotdogs on the street to make ends meet.15 His popularity and rise to fame through his channel have given him opportunities that are well beyond his initial expectations. Kjellberg also produced a YouTube Red (a subscription based streaming service, separate from YT) show called “Scared PewDiePie” and has been nicknamed one of YouTube’s prized ponies, being the

most subscribed to YouTuber and for 5 straight years was featured in the annual “YouTube rewind” video that highlights the best UGC of the year.

Until December 2016, I would just watch PewDiePie for the laughs and not think very critically about the channel, until one day I saw a video where he made a joke using the word “Jews.” I almost missed it, until I played the video back and heard Kjellberg’s comedic reference that someone is “worse than the Jewish holocaust” (this video has since been removed from his channel). Afterwards, I was talking to my friends about the video and mentioned his joke: “I wish he wouldn’t use that type of humor in his videos” I commented, but they did not seem concerned. In other videos this dark sense of humor came out more and more on his channel. For example, he made his own “Smash or Pass” video, but instead of smash or pass he would say “save” or “sell them to slavery,” a human trafficking joke. “He’s better than that!” I would scream at my computer. I thought PewDiePie was hilarious for his gaming, his weird sense of humor and his commentary towards pop-culture, but when he started to show this darker side I was not the only one critical of Kjellberg’s videos.

In February 2017, The Wall Street Journal published an article titled “Disney Severs Ties with YouTube Star PewDiePie After Anti-Semitic Posts.” Before I had even learned about the article I followed the news of the event through my Twitter feed, reading tweets defending Kjellberg and criticizing mainstream media. I finally read the Wall Street Journal’s article and was even more offended by the content of their supposed expose than anything I have ever seen on PewDiePie. The authors researching this article made examples of Kjellberg videos depicting him as a supporter of Hitler and an anti-Semite by editing and splicing different clips, including a Hitler speech and clips of him making gestures that resembles the Nazi salute, taking the YouTubers videos out of context, distorting his image and reputation in the process. He was dropped by YouTube Red (his Disney
sponsorship) and had to censor several his “controversial” videos, even though he never made an intentional, racist or anti-semetic remarks.\textsuperscript{16}

This event prompted coverage on both traditional media and Web 2.0 platforms. Several prominent YouTubers such as Markiplier (gamer), Jenna Marbles (entertainer/comedian) and Scarce (YT news host), pledged their support to PewDiePie stating in their respective videos that Kjellberg is a respected trailblazer on the site and a victim of the Wall Street Journal. However, not everyone supported Kjellberg and his prestigious YT reputation. Celebrities and spectators alike believed the Wall Street Journal’s story. One of the more high-profile social media accounts that posted about this PewDiePie controversy was J.K. Rowling. She berated Kjellberg’s content and reputation stating that he used fascism as an “edgy accessory.” Both Kjellberg and his supporters replied to Rowling’s post, however she only replied after someone photo shopped her in a Nazi uniform; “… you’ve simply reopened a subject you thought you were shutting down – Bravo!”\textsuperscript{17}

Kjellberg uploaded a video entitled “My response” two days later, calling out the authors of the Wall Street Journal article, stating that he was not a racist or anti-semetic, and through the course of his video, demonstrated and busted the angle the authors used to depict him as a racist troll and supporter of the alt-right. He ended his video by brandishing his middle finger, addressing the Wall Street journal personally, saying “try again mother fuckers.”\textsuperscript{18} Unfortunately for Kjellberg and other YouTubers, YT ended up censoring more videos due to unconventional forms of UGC.


YT’s reaction to Kjellberg’s content was not completely due to audience feedback. In reaction to all of this, YT tightened their grip on UGC due to the fallout from corporate sponsorships. AT&T, Coca Cola, Verizon and many other brand name companies have boycotted YouTube, withholding millions of dollars of ad spending made to advertise on popular YT channels. Due to this event, many of these advertisers withdrew from Google Display Ads entirely, which include video ads on YT, as well as any video/graphic ads displayed on other sites in the Google Display Network. Their explanation is that use of the service “found their ads appearing next to extremist content on YouTube.”19 Although PewDiePie was not publicly stated as the soul excuse for the boycott, I speculate that The Wall Street Journal’s expose on Kjellberg enlightened corporate sponsors to backpedal considering this and other controversial material being streamed on YouTube, under the Terms of Service radar. Since this happened YouTubers have had some of their videos demonetized due to what YT deems as “inappropriate content” that is not “family friendly” – a vague statement released by YT after YouTubers publicly reacted to this change they received without warning. This has motivated YouTubers of all backgrounds to adjust or alter the content on their channels as they want advertisers to come back to the public platform. Through capitalist mechanisms of control, YT and corporate brands have created these boundaries for YT content that could potentially alter the video-streaming site forever.

Transgressive actions, excess and limits on YouTube

The transgressive acts displayed by PewDiePie, whether wrongly displayed by the Wall Street Journal or not, the content, the audience – the excess of UGC that was being bred from channels like this – finally reached a breaking point. Kjellberg’s YT career was like a big balloon

blowing up. Slowly but surely over the past 6 years, he has demonstrated that he understands his following of geeks, gamers and average people alike that enjoy his absurd characteristics. He delivers the content he wants to, to viewers who want to see it. Nonetheless, when a balloon fills up with too much air, they burst; this accurately illustrates the PewDiePie controversy, insofar as that the excess of his content, the extreme humor and subjective jokes he would make, finally reached a limit. Along with other channels, YT and corporations are now regulating this type of content due to recent revelations, to ensure that any sponsored YT content be “family friendly.” So far, YT has not finished making the new terms of use policies for the site, but have vaguely stated they need sponsored channels to create content that reflects traditional values for several audiences.20

Another repercussion of these “family friendly” rules affects alternative forms of UGC concerning citizen journalism or political commentary. These types of videos are also being demonetized because political topics are also seen as sensitive content. The monetary support was greatly needed for many progressive YT channels. The sudden absence of ad-revenue from YT streaming has shattered the ability for many alternative media channels to continue growing. David Pakman, host of YT channel “The David Pakman Show” reports on political news and current events. His channel has fallen victim to the corporate boycott and states that this is a major challenge for his channel and others if YT does not loosen their grip on UGC. Having never uploaded any videos that violated YT terms and use policy, he criticizes YT publicly through other channels and in a recent article on the Huffington Post entitled, “Progressive Shows on YouTube Are in Big Trouble.” Pakman’s main concern, other than the loss of revenue he paid to produce

20 David Pakman, "Progressive Shows On YouTube Are In Big Trouble," The Huffington Post, April 5, 2017: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/progressive-shows-on-youtube-are-in-big-trouble_us_58e4fc27e4b02ef7e0e6e284.
his show, is that the new rules for sponsored UGC have changed to better capital, rather than creative content. By using his own experience, and elaborating on other YT channels, Pakman states that “the overwhelming majority of videos on YouTube with a much larger audience, some in the millions, do not feature racist content or titles. Yet these channels are being hit hard by demonetization, meaning the content creators cannot make any money off of the video from ads.”

PewDiePie and other alternative content creators like Pakman are being restricted based on demonstrated instances of unconformity and sensitive subject matter that received ad-revenue from viewership. This example of transgressive UGC was in a successful online bubble where Kjellberg made content to grow his audience and be paid for his creative content. Once he went over the line so to speak, based on social media feedback and YT new rules for monetized videos, limits and boundaries were placed to manipulate the site’s content.

As described in the literature review of Palmer and Stevenson’s writing on transgression, excess of transgressive actions has consequences, whether they are through conventional or unconventional forms of control. The Wall Street Journal wrongfully reported Kjellberg and YT is protecting the site by banning freedom of speech on their platform, making YouTubers self-regulate their channels. If something does not belong, or becomes too costly while wearing against the values and conventions of society, then those transgressors will be met with restrictions, rules and regulations for their actions.

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21 David Pakman, "Progressive Shows On YouTube Are In Big Trouble," The Huffington Post.
Bibliography


