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YouTube, Take 2

By Mark Costlow

In our last issue we talked about YouTube's beginning and turbocharged growth. Now we'll look at what is there, and some ways to use it more effectively.

A YouTube Sampler

Here is a taste of what's available. These topics were chosen to demonstrate the wide variety of content. The examples are very specific, to reveal the true breadth of what is there. You can drill down to the same level of specificity on any topic.

Woodworking - You'll find videos at every level, from beginning advice to tips from master craftspeople. Some are **pushing the envelope** of what is possible. The feedback loops created by give and take between these artists leads to **things you might never imagine**, like **gluing hundreds of colored pencils** in a bundle and turning the multi-colored block on a lathe to create a beautiful lamp. Other unusual "wood" turning materials include: old glass bottles, resin scraps, colored aluminum foil.

Music - Music has always been a big part of YouTube. There is some of whatever you're into, from current pop hits to obscure recordings of decades past. For those learning an instrument, there are myriad tutorials from musicians of all styles.

The **Drumeo** channel makes reaction videos in which a professional drummer listens to a song for the first time, often outside their usual genre. **The pro dissects the piece**, sharing their thoughts with us in real time, then attempts to play it after just one listen. Or, the pro **hears a song with the drum track removed**, then plays along, creating their own version of the drum part. The audience gets a master class in how a pro approaches their craft, what elements are important, and how they might recreate or embellish someone else's work.

A fun exercise is to search for, "cover of X" where X is any song you like. You'll find many takes on the song, from faithful renditions to

unexpected genres. Fun songs to try: "Bridge Over Troubled Water", "Kashmir", "Lola", "Single Ladies", "Radioactive", "Ring of Fire", "Hey Jude", "Sinnerman". If you dig deep you'll find things that could not have existed a few years ago, like the **48-person trombone cover of a Daft Punk song** with none of the musicians in the same room together.

How To X - Some people love to DIY and aren't afraid to dive in to home improvement projects. But for many of us, it's hard to know where to start or what pitfalls to watch for. YouTube tutorials help immensely. Seeing someone else do the thing gives you confidence. Video is a much richer medium than words and diagrams. Seeing the contortion needed to remove a Mazda headlamp gives you the nerve to reach in and grab it. Being told it requires more force than expected helps you move past the point you might have given up.

Here's a brief sample How To videos. HOW TO: use a multi-meter to test a wall socket, restring a guitar, run faster, repair drywall, replace a faucet, grow garlic, replace a 2016 Honda Accord headlight, install a motion sensing light switch, refine silver, replace a car battery, coil a cord, sew a button, grill (anything), connect a Samsung TV to WiFi, remove acrylic nails, install a wig, diagnose a car AC problem, sing harmony, make fried rice, wrap a gift, wrap a burrito, store ratchet straps, level a washing machine, eat a pomegranate.

Science and Education - these channels dispense knowledge on every topic under the sun. They explore science, math, history, and engineering in straight forward ways that make them appealing even to novices, children, or anyone with healthy curiosity about the world.

The short videos and engaging personalities make them great for intellectual snacking, like educational popcorn. They also reveal the importance of one YouTube's two-way info flow. Creators interact with each other and viewers through the comments. Sometimes ideas will rage through a group of creators like a virus, as when several tried to explain a controversial physical phenomenon, the **ball chain fountain** effect. Channels devised and filmed experiments to support different theories to explain the effect, building on each other's work. It was a reminder of how much we humans still don't know, even about things that seem like they must have been solved already.

Here are some science edutainment channels to explore: Steve Mould (physics), Stuff-MadeHere (fabrication/engineering), Veritasium (math/history/philosophy), Astrum (space), Tom Scott (exploring the natural and built world), PhysicsGirl (physical sciences), SmarterEvery-

Day (engineering), Undecided with Matt Ferrell (current/future technology), PracticalEngineering (civil infrastructure), Mark Rober (engineering, education), Cleo Abram (current/future technology), LockPickingLawyer (security and physical locks).

The Algorithm

Given the extraordinary depth and breadth of content available, how does one decide what to watch? The search feature which works fairly well, but **most people are highly influenced by what YouTube itself suggests** to watch next. At the end of every video, the screen fills with suggestions for your next watch. How does YouTube decide what to suggest?

That is a complicated and controversial question. The first thing to know is, **we do not know**. "The Algorithm" is the set of rules and conditions that YouTube uses to make suggestions. The exact composition of The Algorithm is a trade secret and YouTube does not divulge details. It considers all it knows about you and your viewing history. But it also considers all videos available, how much money each might earn for the company, in both the short and long term. It may also model your psychological make-up and ponder which videos are most likely to keep you engaged and watching.

That last is a sore point for social media sites. We believe The Algorithm tries to **maximize each user's watching time**. Studies show **recommending upsetting or negative content increases "engagement"** on social media sites. People are twice as likely to share posts with negative content about the "other" political party than posts with positive content about their own side. Given that **The Algorithm is responsible for 70% of the videos viewed** it is sensible to be concerned about its motives. Even with no malicious intent, a stubborn focus on one metric ("engagement") can deluge us with unhealthy content as a side effect.

From personal experience: I believe The Algorithm is paying very little attention to my expressed preferences. Some suggestions are drawn from my subscribed channels, but most are not. My recourse is to periodically visit the "Subscriptions" page to see the recent content from channels I've subscribed to. I understand that there is a flood of content and it's hard to pick the right bits of it to show me, but it's clear the choices are made to optimize YouTube's goals, not mine. That is an important point to remember with any free Internet service: If the service is free for you, then you are not the customer, you are the **product**. That doesn't mean we don't get value out of it, but we should be aware of what we trade for it since it is not openly acknowledged.

Usage Tips

Here are some keyboard shortcuts to make YouTube in a browser on a desktop or laptop more satisfying:

- Press the right/left arrow keys to skip ahead/back 5 seconds
- The up/down-arrow keys increase or decrease the volume
- The '>' and '<' keys speed up or slow down the video. 1.5x or faster playback is useful for how-to and recipe videos.
- When paused, the period and comma keys advance the video a single frame.
- 'c' turns close-captions on and off.
- 'f' turns full-screen mode on or off.

And a tip for watching YouTube on a TV. Most smart TVs and streaming devices have YouTube apps, but the interfaces are clunky. A better option is to use the YouTube app on your phone, tablet, or computer to find the video, then "cast" it to your TV. The particulars depend on your specific device, but of course YouTube has a **video with setup advice**.

And Finally

As with any population allowed to evolve in isolation with internal feedback loops, some mutations take root and spawn new variations perfectly suited to the environment. A sample:

- **Slow TV** - Extremely long videos of slow processes, such as a **10 hour train ride to the arctic circle**, 16 hour walking tours of cities, 10 hours of waves on a beach.
- **Game playthroughs** - Watch other people play games. Learn how to progress in a game, get past that final boss, or just admire the skill of a dedicated gamer.
- **ASMR** - Millions of so-called "**autonomous sensory meridian response**" videos of people slowly eating snack chips or pickles, scratching wood, fondling plastic wrap, and more.
- **Unboxing** - Watch people unpack new toys and electronics or detail their latest shopping trip.

Hopefully this YouTube peek has piqued your curiosity. We will dive into other mainstays of Internet life in the future.

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