# YouTube marks 20 years of transforming online video and culture



Twenty years ago, YouTube co-founder Jawed Karim uploaded the website's very first video titled "Me at the Zoo." In the video, Karim stood in front of elephants at the zoo, casually pointing out their long trunks, marking the modest beginnings of what would become one of the most influential platforms on the internet.

At the time, YouTube was a novel concept, as noted by Charles Osgood in 2006 on "Sunday Morning," describing it as "a website that lets just about anyone post videos for the whole world to see." Since then, YouTube has grown enormously, becoming the world's second most-visited website after Google, who acquired it for $1.65 billion in 2006.

In the past two decades, over 20 billion videos have been uploaded to YouTube. Viewership has soared with more than a billion hours of content watched daily, ranging from humorous clips, how-to guides, to the ever-popular cat videos. The most viewed video to date is "Baby Shark Dance," which has amassed approximately 16 billion views.

David Craig, a media and culture professor at the University of Southern California's Annenberg School, highlighted the evolution of the platform, especially the moment YouTube began sharing advertising revenue with its creators. "YouTube came along and said, 'Why don't we give you some advertising revenue in exchange for the fact that you're helping us grow our service?'" he explained. Presently, YouTube and content creators roughly split advertising revenue, with adjustments made for high-profile creators to keep them engaged.

Among these top creators are Rhett McLaughlin and Link Neal, hosts of the daily show "Good Mythical Morning," which has attracted 34 million subscribers and 14 billion views. McLaughlin described their show's charm: "Two old friends hanging out, where you can be the third person in that friendship. We kind of stumbled upon this secret formula for having people come back every single day."

Neal emphasised the interactive nature of YouTube compared to traditional TV, saying with a laugh, "I'd like to say our talent." McLaughlin added, "A big part of it is responding to the audience. You've got comments, right? So, there's ways that you can connect with people online."

Professor Craig categorised YouTube creators as "for-profit community organizers," using the platform to cultivate communities and develop diverse business models beyond ad revenue. For McLaughlin and Neal, this has included tours, books, merchandise such as sweatshirts and pins, and even expanding into hair products.

Jimmy Donaldson, better known as MrBeast, exemplifies the financial success possible on YouTube. His videos featuring large-scale giveaways and physical challenges have earned him the title of the most-followed YouTuber with 380 million fans. In 2023, Amazon Prime invested $100 million in a MrBeast game show, underscoring the scale of his influence.

When asked whether becoming a YouTube star has surpassed traditional television stardom as a career goal, David Craig noted, "I hate to tell you this, David, but that's been the case now for over 10 years." He pointed out that surveys reveal young people aspiring more to be creators or influencers than celebrities or journalists.

Despite its substantial cultural footprint, YouTube's advertising revenue still trails behind its reach, particularly among younger demographics compared to traditional TV shows. Neal remarked, "If you look at the 18-to-34 age group, we outperform all of the other late-night shows combined, but if you look at revenue that's being spent on those shows versus our show, it's not quite there yet." McLaughlin expressed interest in mainstream recognition, noting their pursuit of an Emmy, adding, "We're a part of the cultural conversation, as much as many shows that have won Emmys."

YouTube's two-decade history is not without controversy. Issues have arisen concerning data privacy, particularly involving children, and debates over the platform's impact on mental health. Additionally, YouTube's recommendation algorithm, designed to promote engaging content, has been criticised for potentially steering viewers towards extreme viewpoints.

YouTube CEO Neal Mohan addressed such concerns, stating, "We have this enormous diversity of opinions on our platform. We don't allow adult content. We obviously don't allow spam and fraud. And we have policies to protect young people and kids on the platform. But it's fundamentally a platform for freedom of speech."

Looking ahead, Mohan expressed excitement about integrating artificial intelligence into YouTube’s content creation. He envisioned scenarios where creators could easily enhance videos with AI-generated backgrounds and effects, saying, "That magical technology exists today."

Discussing the enduring appeal of online video, Mohan linked it to human nature, "We connect with other people. We are storytellers. That is what happens billions of times a day on YouTube. And it's back to our mission: give everyone a voice and show them the world."

From a simple video of elephants at a zoo to a global platform transforming how people create and consume media, YouTube’s 20th anniversary marks two decades of significant cultural, social, and technological impact.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

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