In the early days, before thumbs-up buttons and YouTube TV, subscription channels, and monetization, YouTube was the primordial soup of content. Significance was determined by the individual viewer’s opinion, or by video artists such as Natalie Bookchin, whose multichannel supercuts of trends helped audiences notice similarities across types of posts, such as dancing or making confessions.1 For a time, YouTube arguably captured snippets of everyday life, or at least everyday media production, evoking home video in both style and content. YouTube was a repository of everyday performance, gesturing toward connection with others rather than toward a like and subscribe prerogative or the hope of monetization, corporate sponsorship, or fame. As other platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook grew, the content you were likely to find and be recommended on YouTube transformed into increasingly self-conscious productions that reflected professional production styles and cultural zeitgeists. The platform also became a popular source for information searching. The unpredicted election of Donald J. Trump drew increased attention to user-produced content spread,

particularly ideology and (mis)information. Average citizens grew increasingly aware of the role that algorithms play in what they see and do not see online. In the commodified internet space, uploaded media almost always has the market potential to become the next viral video or meme. Creators and influencers, who now number more than fifty million around the world, are proprietors of the “fastest-growing type of small business,” according to a report last year by SignalFire, a venture capital firm.

With hundreds of thousands of videos now uploaded every hour, not everything can go viral. What’s more, not everything gets watched. So many production tropes and genres have proliferated globally on YouTube, TikTok, and other video sharing platforms. However, there remains a tremendous amount of media content that neither circulates nor adheres to existing categories. A plethora of YouTube videos have only a handful of views, but they will likely stay on the site in perpetuity. This material is public and indexed by search engines, but it is cast aside by algorithms in response to the video’s initial viewership or metadata, which render the content invisible in search results or viewing suggestions. It is precisely their lack of spreadability that pushes these videos further below what freelance writer and artist Joe Viex refers to as the “epidermal layer of YouTube” where the “recommended for you” content resides. In 2016, Viex coined the term the lonely web to refer to media content that exists in “the murky space between the mainstream and the deep webs. This media is public and indexed by search engines, but broadcast to a tiny audience, algorithmically filtered out, and/or difficult to find using traditional search techniques.”

I call online user-produced audiovisual media that has been uploaded online but not viewed or circulated beyond the maker and their immediate, already-invested audience digital obscura. Far from a place of lack, one assumed to be always searching in vain for an audience, digital obscura can teach us about the internet and ourselves. What might such media teach us about the themes, identities, and production practices that escape reception and representation, and how do technical systems such as algorithms and other back-end functionalities structure meaning about digital media artifacts? What is revealed by the existence and obfuscation of digital obscura


6. Viex.

7. Elsewhere I have referred to this media as “unwatched digital media” but have chosen to revise the nomenclature.
under an algorithmic penumbra? I contend that studying unwatched digital media yields productive possibilities for media research, expanding our understanding of how people are using the internet. What’s more, searching for and viewing unwatched digital media requires us to embrace different viewing practices that shed light on how current platform functionalities structure our viewing habits, social media streams, and psyches.

The content on YouTube that exists but goes unwatched is diverse. Picture a video that simply shows an arc of urine hitting the drain of a urinal from the point of view of the person urinating; a couple dancing to the melody of their Samsung clothes dryer cycle completion tune; an overexposed video of a Canadian real estate tour, set to instrumental music; a group of young men chopping vegetables together; a motorcyclist looking down into the camera in their lap in a video titled “i tried chasing the Google car”; and a close-up of a Sesame Street puppet singing a song by the Crash Test Dummies.8 Some look like clips taken from longer videos that exist elsewhere; others seem to have been created with hopes for wide circulation, as they gesture to existing internet memes or address a perceived audience in their description or performance. There is also a whole universe of livestreamed media that goes unwatched on other platforms. As Patricia Hernandez notes, “when seemingly everyone wants to record footage or live stream, who ends up watching the content?”9

Unwatched video content sometimes conforms to generic formulas: videos that highlight happy family occasions such as a child blowing out their birthday candles or performing a monologue for an audition. But just as often, this context departs from generic conventions. Greg Wenner, who created a platform called the Lonely Web Project to foreground unwatched YouTube videos, claims that the channel is a “self-proclaimed member of the Lonely Web Club, a bit like the internet’s introvert, in a world of noise that yearns to be heard, one voice that doesn’t care if anyone’s listening.”10 And again, some people really do care who is listening and long to be heard. According to a 2018 article for The Verge online magazine, for streamers on Twitch who lack viewers, the notion of posting to no one exacerbated their already-existing sense of loneliness—it was “demoralizing” and “disheartening.”11


We also know that some creators may post videos to test what sticks, continually posting to see what gains traction. Most notable in 2023 is twenty-five-year-old Jimmy Donaldson, also known as “MrBeast,” who has made a lifestyle and livelihood of learning what circulates based on trial and error, finding “the perfect viral recipe with his videos.” As of this writing, he is the most subscribed YouTube creator in the United States, with over ninety-one million subscribers across his three accounts. His most successful formula for video circulation involves giving money away to strangers: for some, it’s so they can buy life-changing medical technologies, such as hearing technologies for people with hearing loss; for others, it is cash or prizes to participate in one of his challenges, such as quitting their jobs in exchange for a bag full of $100,000 or being the first person to help him change a flat tire on the side of the road for a surprise thank-you of keys to a new car.

As with all moving image media, we cannot assume that creators intend simply to have their videos be viewed, nor can we always infer a video’s provenance. Who took the video is not always the same as who uploaded it, and it is not typically clear why the poster chose to share a video from the title or description. Digital obscura bears similarities to other categories of nontheatrical media (found media, orphan films, home movies, etc.) that exhibit vernacular style and content, are produced for a very specific known audience, and may have unknown authorship. At the same time, there are several factors that make the category of digital obscura unique.

Digital obscura is difficult to find. It is present on YouTube but buried. Finding unwatched videos is a complicated endeavor, requiring patience and creative programming skills. There have been a number of concentrated efforts to search for and connect viewers with these lonely videos, including artist Yann van der Cruyssen’s PetitTube platform, Wenner’s the Lonely Web Project website, and a screening of unwatched YouTube videos that I curated with Adam Sekuler in 2013 for Northwest Film Forum in Seattle. Elsewhere I have written about the difficulty of finding videos with few to no views, and in interviews with van der Cruyssen, Wenner, and Viex, it became apparent that there is no foolproof method for unearthing them. Each of us attempted to circumnavigate the ever-changing YouTube algorithms—whether that meant searching for default video files with random numbers (Viex), prioritizing low-resolution Digital Visual Interface (DVI) camera footage (van der

12. Read, “MrBeast.”
13. Read.
15. PetitTube.com out of France has been in existence since 2011. It began as a platform van der Cruyssen created to watch unwatched videos with his friends and arts collaborators. He later began a community practice of remaking YouTube media, sometimes sending the remakes to the original creators. PetitTube has run a program that searches for videos using random sequences of letters and then refines the list to videos that have not been viewed, are very short, and have existed on the site for longer than six months. Google has revoked the platform’s ability to search for videos, claiming that their logo is too close to that of YouTube and that they have taken a clone of YouTube without adding additional features. Yann van der Cruyssen, interview by author, June 25, 2023.
Crussyen), using randomly selected search terms (Berliner and Sekuler), or creating an elaborate external video capture and extraction program (van der Crussyen and Wenner). As Viex describes it, searching for an obscure video you’ve seen before and want to re-watch can feel “as if the earth is constantly shifting below you.” What worked to find a video in the first instance often doesn’t work the next time around. For Wenner, who started the project in 2016, “the internet’s transformed drastically since the project’s inception. Everything’s grown—seen content, unseen content, trends, and platform diversity. Users now curate their content across numerous platforms, which is fantastic. Yet, we still lack a reliable way to unearth hidden content across platforms. There might be entire platforms full of such content, but how do we tap into them?”

Another unique characteristic of digital obscura is that it is at once ephemeral and lasting. While viewed by very few and imminently hard to find in a future search, they may also remain online and technically searchable forever. It is unclear how long video material is stored on YouTube, as Google completely black boxes that information, but the default seems to be in perpetuity. This content has passed through the gauntlet of platform content moderation, which as Tarleton Gillespie has elucidated, does much of the work of providing and distributing media, adding terms and conditions that affect what circulates, what goes on the so-called back shelf, and what gets culled in the name of risk aversion and profit.

Finally, online video’s unique relationship to the process of becoming data online can reveal details about existing site functionalities. What doesn’t circulate has escaped the datafication of popular taste or appropriation by popular media, for example, through clips from video sharing platforms rescreened on morning television shows. Digital obscura does not fit broader cultural narratives about what is happening in the world today. Popular taste is produced reciprocally, where broadcast yourself has evolved into a feedback loop that encourages yourself to conform to norms. There is something raw and pure about this elusive content. It exists on its own terms, without having been framed, lifted, and re-signified by other media users or commercial media outlets seeking to profit from its circulation or cross-marketing potential. Searching for and watching digital obscura requires us to slow down our

16. In his 2016 Fusion article, Viex explains his search process about the “lonely web” phenomenon. He writes, “one of my favorite techniques comes from /r/ imgxxxx and involves searching the default file formats for digital cameras plus four random numbers. This dredges up videos so unwanted that they were never named. In some cases, not even the person who filmed the videos seems to have watched them.” Viex, “Weird, Unfiltered Internet.” Greg Wenner described his process as “parsing YouTube links and extracting video stats, which I then stored in a modest three-table database. I even crafted an admin console to keep tabs on the videos that were captured and checked within the database, methods that only work some of the time.” Greg Wenner, interview by author, August 9, 2023. I describe my curatorial process with Adam Sekular in Lauren S. Berlinger, “Towards a Methodology of Unwatched Digital Media,” Feminist Media Histories 8, no. 2 (2022): 219–230, https://doi.org/10.1525/fmh.2022.8.2.219.


18. Wenner, interview.

pace of online media consumption and resist the pull of algorithmic recommendations. Viex refers to this practice as “resisting the digital routine.”

Taking digital obscura seriously requires that we acknowledge other ways of performing, filming, and editing outside of an attention economy that privileges media popularized by massive corporate players. It means grappling with content that may feel opaque or sitting with an image or experience that isn’t initially legible to us. Through digital obscura we can also become aware of niche audiences and a wide variety of experimental practices. And conversely, knowing what doesn’t get watched can help us reverse engineer algorithms to more clearly see trends in uploading and naming content and identify patterns in online media production and circulation.

In a moment in time when there is so much concern about deepfakes, AI-generated content, and other forms of digital augmentation, it behooves us to also consider the images that are already in our midst, however ethereal, and contend with how the feedback loop of algorithms and likes structures what we are seeing and not seeing. A universe of obscure content exists with lessons to teach us if we’re ready to search, watch, and listen.

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