



YouTube star Kat Lazo: "The internet was my *The Feminist Mystique*."

Everyone's a star

YouTube offers teenagers the chance to learn, perform, campaign or just show off, writes **Samantha Trenoweth**.



IT'S 2015, YOUTUBE HAS BEEN around for ten years, but already one wonders what a canny, creative teenager did on a slow suburban weekend before it came along. In the meantime, parents still panic about the Internet, fretting about stalkers and pornography and bullying, worried their kids will be brainwashed by fundamentalists —or, in our house, that their impressionable minds will be filled with fairy floss.

After what must have been a thousand hours of

viewing, my sixteen-year-old daughter can [apply liquid eyeliner](#) in one deft sweep, unearth new music more swiftly than the A&R department at EMI, whip up a wholesome [chia and granola pudding for breakfast](#) and bake [Christmas cake pops](#) in the shape of reindeers.

Her father reckons she is frittering away her teenage years on stuff and nonsense, but I'm not so sure.

For teenagers, YouTube is an extraordinary, democratic, libertarian medium. It's a community of

peers, much like the underground press was in the 1970s, but without an editor. It's a free platform on which artists, actors, activists, the makers of cake pops and the knitters of onesies can exhibit their work.

All aspiring vloggers (video bloggers) need is an iPhone or a digital camera with video capability, and a simple edit program like iMovie. Uploading a video to YouTube is as easy as attaching a document to an email. The results might be approbation, love, sponsorship or the warm glow that comes from making even a tiny contribution to a better world.

Take 5 Seconds of Summer, the stuff of YouTube legend. These four lads from Riverstone in Sydney's far northwest spent their weekends busking outside the local shopping centre and [uploading cover versions to the web](#), and became a hit when a bunch of teenage girls stumbled upon their channel.

Word spread. Towards the end of 2011, there was an all-ages show at the Annandale Hotel in inner Sydney. It was the first time any of the band had been to a gig, let alone played one.

The music industry caught on belatedly. By then the band's following had snowballed. They sold out their second show in five minutes flat. An EP and a support spot on One Direction's world tour followed. Since then the pop punk quartet has hit number one in Australia, New Zealand, Ireland and the UK (they made number two in the US) and headlined shows around the world, including their own [wacky festival in](#)



Hopeful astronaut Abigail Harrison, above, depressive Scarlett Curtis, below.

[Los Angeles](#). They've lived the dream that's cherished by many of the creators of the 300 hours of video that are uploaded to YouTube every minute of every day.

The BBC has a YouTube channel. So do Giorgio Armani, the British monarchy, Russell Brand and the CIA.

YouTube has more than a billion monthly active users; that's roughly one in seven people on earth. The same number of people watched the London Olympics Opening Ceremony across all platforms. People watch hundreds of millions of hours of this stuff every day in 75 countries and 61 languages.

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There's a whole lot of mainstream programming on there, and a whole lot of rubbish. But there are obscure, brilliant, quirky

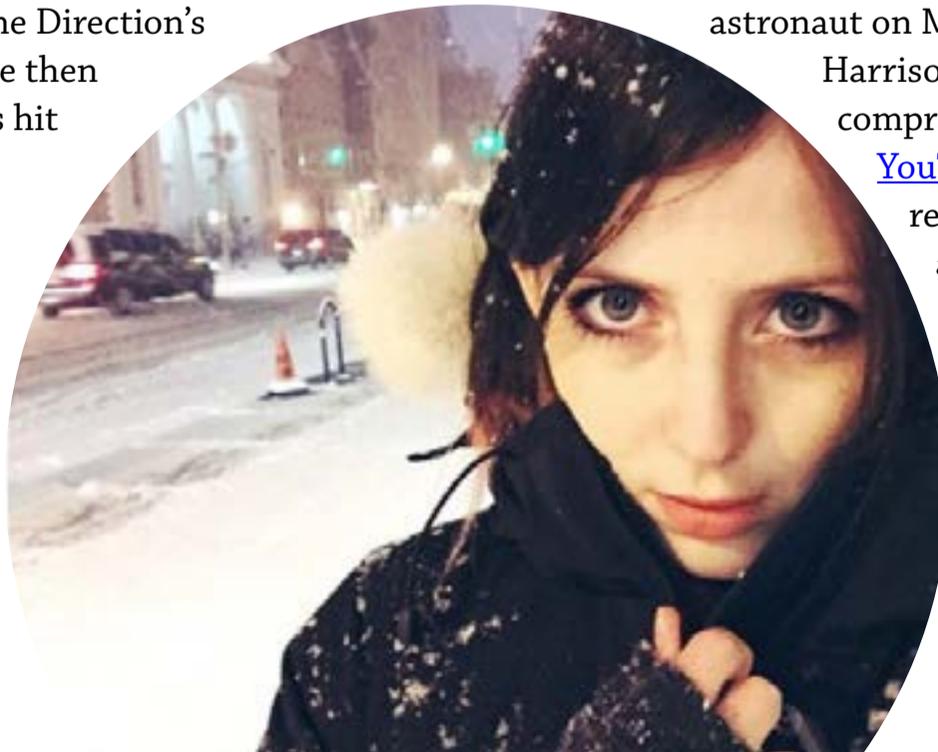
gems too, and finding them offers membership to those in-the-know clubs that teenagers (and even adults) get a kick out of.

Abigail Harrison (Astronaut Abby) doesn't want to shoot to stardom—[she wants to shoot into space](#).

"I was probably four or five years old when I first went outside at night, looked up at the stars and thought, 'I want to go there some day,'" says Abby, now seventeen, in her final year of high school in Minnesota and determined to be the first astronaut on Mars.

Harrison now has a comprehensive website and a [YouTube channel](#) where she reports—largely to other aspiring astronauts and space enthusiasts—on science and space-related issues.

"There's this incredible space



community on social media,” she explains to ASR, and the ability to talk directly to real astronauts and engineers “just makes the whole thing feel more real and achievable”.

Teenagers constantly refer to this notion of community when talking about YouTube. [Scarlett Curtis is a British blogger](#), writer, student, baker and knitter. She struggled throughout her teens with chronic pain from a spinal operation and consequent depression. She dropped out of school and lost touch with friends but she attributes her slow, sure recovery to the community of YouTubers who kept her company through long and sleepless nights.

Her favourites were [Louise Pentland \(Sprinkle of Glitter\)](#) and [Tanya Burr](#).

“These women talked to me,” Curtis wrote last December in the *Guardian*. “They talked in a way that most people had become too scared to, and for the first time in years I began to feel like a teenage girl again. When they laughed I felt happy, when they cried I felt sad, when they talked about their boyfriends, parents or new favourite lipgloss, I felt like I had a friend again.”

Pentland and Burr are two of Britain’s star vloggers. They post intimate chats, bringing their cameras (and thus their viewers) along on reassuringly ordinary days as well as special occasions, sharing tips on make-up, boyfriends, cooking, self-esteem.

THE SKILL, EFFORT AND intelligence that goes into making a person feel as if they are not alone,” says Curtis, “as if they are hanging out with a friend, as if they are safe, is immense.”

Which is perhaps why YouTube has become such a valuable resource in the LGBTIQ community. Australian musician and vlogger [Troye Sivan’s coming out video](#) has been viewed more than five million times and it is honest, hopeful, moving and

reassuring. [American vlogger Tyler Oakley](#) also has a coming out video and is a vocal advocate and celebrity fundraiser for the Trevor Project, a US crisis intervention and suicide prevention service for LGBTIQ youth. [Ashley Mardell is young, kooky, outspoken and bisexual](#), and her YouTube channel features advice on everything from proposing to your girlfriend to debunking LGBTIQ stereotypes and surviving the habanero chilli challenge.

The entertainment magazine *Variety* reports

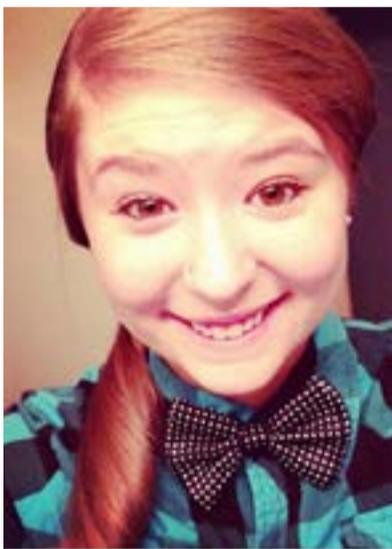
the most popular vloggers now have [substantially bigger teenage fan bases than mainstream celebrities](#). Many young vloggers are using their YouTube fame to rally support for causes and charities. After reading John Green’s bestselling novel *The Fault in Our Stars*, [Troye Sivan wrote a song about young people living with cancer](#) and donated the proceeds to the Princess Margaret Hospital in Western Australia.

British lads living the dream, [Jack’s Gap](#), were also moved to fundraise for teens with cancer. They rode across India in a tuk-tuk for the Teenage Cancer Trust and they’ve recently become [advocates for greater understanding about mental health](#), a huge trend right across social media. British YouTube star, [Zoella](#) (whose channel has almost eight million subscribers), has shared her own [struggle with anxiety and shared coping strategies](#).

Sprinkle of Glitter isn’t all fairy lights and cupcakes either. [She’s posted an informative big-sister chat about self-harm](#). And [Sarah Hawkinson](#) is a

Goth fashion and beauty vlogger who also studies psychology, speaks out against stigma and posts considered discussions of mental health.

There have been trolliNG and death threats and every shade of anti-woman activity on social media but third-wave feminism has also been an immense force, particularly on YouTube. [Laci Green, a sex education activist](#) (who now has her own MTV



Friends with attitude:
Ashley Mardell,
Troye Sivan



Budding filmmaker Didda, above, and insanely popular PewDiePie, below.

[Sydney-based media and arts production student](#) who posts short horror films and “Lovecraftian LEGO” animations.

For [sixteen-year-old Didda](#),

show), provides the most comprehensive, upbeat guides for teenagers to topics such as consent (“it’s not only hot, it’s mandatory”), and “freaky labia” (“Hey, guess what? Labias come in all different shapes and sizes”). There is no better five-minute introduction to feminism than her [“Why I’m a Feminist ... *gasp*”](#).

Younger women have followed. British geek-girl [Tyrannosauruslexxx](#) mashes a Harry Potter obsession with a fondness for bath products and some serious feminist and human rights concerns. Her [£100 Billion](#) is funny to boot.

Kat Lazo is a New Yorker who grew up in a Columbian/Peruvian family and looked to the internet for answers to her questions about “machismo”. She stumbled upon sites like Feministing, Rookie, F Bomb, The Crunk Feminist Collective and began watching Laci Green.

“The internet,” she says, “was my *The Feminist Mystique* ... and I realised that I could be the change I wanted to see in the world.”

Lazo’s [Thee Kat’s Meoww](#) addresses gender, race and sexuality. She posts prolifically on [truth in advertising and body image](#) and last year posted a clip of herself [walking naked](#) along a New York street to prove it was possible to feel comfortable in one’s own skin. She believes that “online feminism is the future of feminism”.

Many young YouTubers see the platform more as a medium for self-expression than advocacy. It has been a boon for young artists like [Andre Brimo, a nineteen-year-old](#)

YouTube is all about creative expression. Her whimsical, beautiful, funny films mix the hyper-reality of Icelandic (and sometimes Norwegian) landscapes with quirky DIY animation and special effects. Her world is a little like a hipster Narnia (without the preachiness).

“I mostly make my videos to entertain people and make them laugh,” she tells *ASR*, and she attributes her sense of humour to watching too

many Donald Duck cartoons growing up.

Didda is convinced that YouTube means the end of mainstream television, and to some extent she’s probably

right, at least for the teenage demographic.

[YouTube’s most popular star, the Swedish gamer, PewDiePie](#), has more than 30 million subscribers and his most popular video has clocked up around [60 million views](#).

By comparison, 7.99 million “legitimate viewers” watched the record-breaking fifth season premiere of *Game of Thrones* and roughly 1.5 million tuned into the 2015 MTV Movie Awards. Traditional TV stations, managed by lumbering hierarchies, simply can’t compete with YouTube’s immediacy and intimacy.

“I often feel isolated, living in Iceland,” says Didda, “and YouTube is more personal than television. It helps me connect with the world’.” ❖

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