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“Real Vlogs: The Rules and Meanings of Online Video”

ABSTRACT: This paper seeks to delineate what the “rules” of vlogging are: the various visual and social practices needed to create an online video that is read as “real” by viewers. Using an analysis of a small, random set of vlogs on YouTube, and a discussion of the Internet controversy over “Lonelygirl15,” the web show, this paper argues that online self-expression is not without its limits, implicit or explicit.

The year 2006 exposed the rules of online self-expression. “Lonelygirl15,”¹ now a fictional television show on YouTube, during its first two months worth of videos had led thousands of YouTubers to believe the girl behind the camera was Bree, a 16-year old girl living alone with her religious, home-schooling parents. Lonelygirl15 turned out to be then-19-year old actress Jessica Lee Rose living in Los Angeles, an actress who has since had cameos in web shows such as “Quarterlife” and the cable drama series “Greek.” Hundreds, and likely thousands, of viewers were fooled into believing Bree was a real person, and yet the most pressing question is not how many viewers were fooled, but how and why. In that moment, YouTube had distinguished itself from other, related forms of online self-presentation – most notably webcams, which were harder to fake. YouTube instead became much more like television, with its rules and codes, and much less like an idyllic venue for the distribution of real selves.

This paper focuses on vlogs – video web logs, video blogs or video logs – a specific kind of video on YouTube. A vlog is many things, and different things to different people, but most broadly it is an expression of a self. Yet this expression is not unbridled. There are rules and codes in vlogging; whether or not a video follows a set of standards distinguishes it as either “real” and “sincere” versus “fake,” insincere and professional – self- and community-centered as

opposed to audience- or market-centered, to frame it another way. Lonelygirl15 succeeded at first on its presumed sincere, personal and community focus and nearly fell apart upon revealing its professional, market-centered intent (it lived on successfully as an online television show).

These distinctions are critical. Online videos created by individuals are expected to be reflections of real people or at least aspects of real personalities and often described as a revolutionary development in media production. (Jenkins 2006, 17) Yet not all videos are created equal and knowing the rules helps expose the arbitrariness of some online personalities being perceived as more honest than others. The rules of vlogging, much different from the rules in television or film, will influence how online video progresses as a style in the future, so an account of the debates surrounding its meaning and style is crucial.

METHOD

This paper involves close analysis of the visual and audio content of over 70 individual videos posted on YouTube. YouTube was the ideal venue from what to gather these videos because it is undoubtedly the most popular video site on the web, with tens of millions of viewers and billions of video views each month. (De Avila 2008, D1) It is, to date, the most representative site for web video; while there are other sites, none match YouTube's archive of vlogs.

The videos analyzed in this paper are organized around themes and key incidents on the site. First, I examined "first vlogs," videos posted by people who are new to the site, to get a sense of what vlogs are in their "purest" form. Several times on the site, vlogs are mentioned as what users do at the start of their time on YouTube, and it is often discussed as a sincere and innocent time. First vlogs are also the videos during which people are most concerned with self-

expression – as opposed to gathering an audience, maintaining subscriptions and achieving publicity, although those motivations are sometimes there as well. I found these “first vlogs,” by randomly sampling responses to a very popular “how to make a vlog” video on the site,² which has received about 400,000 views and provided more reassurance the videos were in fact first vlogs (looking at individual channels is more flawed: users often delete their first videos).

The next sections are arranged thematically, looking at different ways to address the anatomy of a vlog. I searched the site for videos that answer three separate questions: how to make a vlog, what is a real vlog and what is a vlog in general. From there I noted and categorized the most popular arguments.

The last two sections focus on three controversies around the reality or authenticity of vlogs. The first involves a debate that erupted when one of the most popular users on the site, LisaNova, a comedian, decided to start posting vlogs on her channel – she is known for sketch comedy, not talking about herself. I analyzed her vlogs and the video responses to them from users. The second is an analysis of the debates around Lonelygirl15, including what arguments her critics and fans used to discredit or support whether or not her vlogs were real. Folded into my discussion of Lonelygirl15 is a brief consideration of Dax Flame, who has exploited the rules of vlogging to insinuate his character is real, but whose over-the-top acting belies those very insinuations.

LITERATURE

This paper incorporates literature from a variety of disciplines. In general, it seeks to marry arguments made by cultural studies about the constructed and contingent nature of authenticity and reality with the literature on visual strategies in film. The debate over the role of

film and its relationship to reality is a lengthy one. Theorists have suggested editing either distracts from or enhances the reality of film, with Bazin distrusting “editing,” in favor of making films “...without disturbing the unity natural to them,” (Bazin 1967, 38) while others advocating using film’s techniques to reach deeper truths. (Eisenstein 1957, 10, 37-40) That debate persists on YouTube, with some users advocating for a realistic no-editing approach and others advocating for editing because it is entertaining and linked to popularity. The latter is winning the debate – in practice, it is more popular to edit – and there reasons for this: editing is quite natural and viewers understand it so long as it makes sense visually (“locally comprehensible”) and within the structure of the film. (Hochberg and Brooks 1996, 380-381). Bordwell theorizes that editing conventions are not arbitrary and help viewers understand. (Bordwell 1996, 87) In addition, editing can make a film seem faster and stronger, though not necessarily better. (Penn 1971) Aside from editing, the most pervasive stylistic convention on YouTube is the close-up/direct address, a well-theorized convention – its use in creating empathy (Rizzolatti, et al. 2008, 132-137) and persuading people. (Galan 1986)

The cultural meaning of “reality” – specifically with new media – is another issue and has been much debated. This paper discusses what viewers consider real on an intellectual or emotional level, yet underlying these debates are deeper concerns about what is real in a digital world. Early theory on this topic focused on how new media challenges notions of reality and embodiment and highlights how much digital technology warped perceptions of what is real. In her essay, “Will the Real Body Please Stand Up?” Allucquere Rosanne Stone suggested a new kind of “body” would arise out of digital technology. (Stone 1991, 505, 517) N. Katherine Hayles, reacting to the idea that physical bodies can be represented in text and code, furthered this argument, calling for an “embodied virtuality,” a recognition that new media forces a

realization that mind, body, material and information are all constructions, none are a given. (Hayles 1999, xiv, 2-3, 27) Anne Balsamo summarizes the thought fairly succinctly: “As the virtual body is deployed as a medium of information and of encryption, the structural integrity of the material body as a bounded physical object is technologically deconstructed.” (Balsamo 497) This paper will add to these debates by showing how online – even when physical bodies are present and animate – “real” and “fake” are extremes and the truth is up for debate, somewhere in the middle, as Hayles suggests (with more sophistication).

Many viewers on YouTube are concerned with what is real and authentic online. Individuals who go online are, to be sure, often skeptical about what they see, but online, especially with private and personal distribution sites like blogs, webcams or liveblogs, and vlogs, there is an expectation of truth, a hope for something “real.” Even those who produce the content often presume an almost revolutionary kind of “honesty.” (Serfaty 2004, 91) The desire for truth is perhaps an attempt to work through the screen – to reconcile the camera with the aliveness of what is behind it. As Michele White notes in her study of women and webcams, viewing a webcam is an “intimate” activity, “...the spectator becomes wrapped up in the image rather than being able to grasp the whole representation.” (White 2006, 78) New media technologies, in other words, offer individuals the chance to broadcast their private lives, promising a human and real experience while disguising the constructed nature of the experience and the constructed nature of all experience.

The construction of everyday life has been well theorized. In social situations, as Goffman noted, people adapt their behavior to their environment, adopting “predictive behavior.” “...the more the individual is concerned with the reality that is not available to perception, the more must he concentrate his attention on appearances.” (Goffman, 1959, p. 249)

This adaptation of appearance is always happening, even online. Online spaces are analogous to physical world ones in various ways,³ yet in any situation, there is an audience and a performer regulating his or her own appearance. In her work MySpace, for instance, danah boyd notes how individual pages allow individuals to construct an acceptable self and receive immediate feedback from an audience (friends). (boyd 2007)

The practice of realism on YouTube arise out of several conventions, some of which arose from the webcam movement – regular close-ups of the actor, looking into the camera – but some of which also arose from film and television. Kristin Thompson notes that realism has historically been a reaction to the conventions of mass media – Hollywood and television. (Thompson 1988, 201) Some of YouTube’s other antecedents are recent, like the Dogme 95 movement that privileged cheap production (Vinterberg and Von Trier, Dogme 95) and earlier expositions of cinema. Despite the fact there is nothing “natural” about film, the presumption has plagued film ever since. This tradition runs into the mockumentary tradition, with such notables as *The Blair Witch Project* and *This is Spinal Tap*, both of which, despite traditional marketing efforts, managed to convince some of their veracity. (Telotte 2001, 32) In all, while visual mediums have often strived for reality, these styles have always been, and will continue to be, constructed.

FIRST VLOGS

First vlogs are the closest examples of YouTube’s slogan “broadcast yourself,” which in most cases translates to “express yourself” (as opposed to posting a video ripped off from television or cell phone footage of a local Barack Obama election night party). Because of this focus on the self and relating that self to a community, first vlogs are what many would consider

the purest example of vlogging on the site. I would argue it is important to have a grounded, basic understanding of what a vlog looks like in order to understand the more complex debates around it.

Despite the diversity of videos on YouTube, first vlogs have a lot in common in style and content. Analyzing 26 first vlogs, nearly all, save two, had the vlogger looking at the camera. This may seem perfunctory, even ordinary, yet it is not necessarily the most natural step in the video-making process. As will be shown later, some viewers look at the computer screen when making a video – at their own image – and not at the camera. Still many other users employ third-person perspective. The only two videos I watched in which the vlogger did not look at the screen was one where the person made a photo slideshow set to music and another who used a stuffed animal instead of a person to narrate the video.

The head-on close-up shot is overwhelmingly the most popular common visual perspective in first vlogs; only one person used a full-body shot, all the rest shot from the torso-up. This appears to be common because it is the easiest thing to do. Many webcams are attached to computers, and, if a vlogger is using YouTube's "direct cam upload" option, they can simply turn on the camera, say something, and have it on the web within minutes. One of the shortest videos I saw, made by CrazyKid000888000, had little more than this to say: "I just got a camera and I just want to see how this turns out."⁴ This met the minimum qualifications of a vlog.

Beyond these two aspects, only two other qualifications seem to apply: all but five gave some information about themselves and all but nine used editing (at least two cuts, by my definition). The use of editing is very interesting; as will be discussed later, some hold the perception on YouTube that vlogs should not have too much editing, yet it appears most vloggers, even those first-timers presumably without much experience, use editing. In addition,

the notion of self-revelation is key to vlogging: real vlogs include some kind of personal information, it seems, a name being the lowest common denominator. A person's interests are the next most popular subject – including opinions, likes/dislikes, hobbies, and – rarely – politics (first vlogs are largely apolitical). There is less consensus on what information beyond that is necessary: topics such as profession, age, family, relationship or health status (one person talked about her ADD) occur less frequently.

Less common but still popular are onscreen text (half the sample), using effects (manipulating the image or sounds in any way), the use of music, discussing future plans for a channel, and being self-reflexive about vlogging – the latter four occurred in about one-third of vlogs. I would categorize these as conscientious aspects of vlogging: indicating the vlogger has more actively conceived what their channel or videos should be or look like. These aspects of vlogging, though somewhat common, skirt the line between “real” and calculated: things aimed at getting an audience. Onscreen text often involves conventions used in TV and movies: intros, credits and plugs (one person referred viewers to his MySpace page). In the “plans” category, a few promised to post regularly, like television. One of those vloggers, MissusCracker, also became reflexive during her video, complaining about the number of takes and previous attempts at angles and sound – i.e., exposing the constructed nature of vlogging.

As important as what vloggers do is what they do not do. These include: moving the camera, filming outdoors, filming with another person, and using still photos. These were done by only a few individuals.

HOW TO VLOG

The divide between vlogs of self-expression (real vlogs, following the rules above) and vlogs intended to get attention, a market or an audience, is somewhat wide. YouTubers who give advice on “how to make a vlog” are more experienced and have been vlogging a bit longer – a couple of the 15 users whose “how to” videos I examined have hundreds of thousands subscribers. So their advice stands in almost direct contrast to what first vlogs, or “real” vlogs, look like. These YouTubers are most concerned with making vlogs entertaining and following pretty defined editing rules – the goal is popularity, along with but never predicated on self-expression. In this way, they reveal how there are real vlogs and good vlogs. To make a good vlog, these users emphasized similar techniques and suggested a good vlog isn’t real at all, but entirely constructed. As sxephil, one of YouTube’s all-time most subscribed users, said: “There’s no such thing as reality on the internet. There’s only people’s perception of what’s real.”⁵ His videos are heavily edited.

Suggestions on how to make a vlog ranged from rudimentary to sophisticated. Nearly every vlogger who discussed style mentioned the need for adequate lighting and sound. Brookers – once referred to as the first YouTube star (Hardy 2006) – satirized the need for good lighting by talking to the camera with a black screen over her face. Her other advice also included staring at the camera and not at one’s image on the screen – a suggestion echoed by others – and the need to keep videos short in duration. Other than lighting and sound – the two most popular suggestions – a couple mentioned making lots of cuts and switching your position and angle on the screen between these edits. Blade376, from who’s “how to” I gathered my sample of first vlogs, called the YouTube editing style as “witty editing:” cutting out “um’s” and “uh’s” to make the video seem faster and funnier (a point also echoed by several others). Sxephil suggested using music and image effects to get attention.

Aside from editing and style, most other advice focused on how to entertain. By far the most common suggestion was to have a plan for the video: refrain from rambling, have notes or a script, test jokes on friends, have an idea for the channel, don't be self-reflexive and pick a topic. Vividedge06 gave a list of ideas: complain about another YouTuber, discuss pop culture, current events and music. Wheresthebrain carried that idea to its necessary conclusion: don't talk about whom you are and the details of your life. Taking it further, dumands1 suggested users "act" or "be someone else."⁶ In fact, the least common advice given was "be who you are." Looking at YouTube's most popular channels, it becomes clear why this is the case: the top vloggers are very explicitly acting or doing comedy, and they are unabashedly aimed at getting an audience.

REAL VLOGS

This section discusses ten vlogs self-classified as "real" or professing to explain what a real vlog is.

Like the first vlogs, each vlog comprised a head-on close-up shot and the vlogger looking at the camera. Vloggers discussed the details about their life, in contrast to suggestions from more skilled vloggers not to do that: Yesitsconor discussed his recent haircut, his "pimped out calculator," and how he attended a "rave" in an Apple store. Some videos were avowedly unplanned – two referred explicitly to this – and one user, Lizziethecreepy, said she didn't know what she was doing.⁷ Several vloggers told narratives, but most were short, about recent happenings in their lives; though one user, Shrinkinglaura, discussed her journey to Mexico for stomach surgery and compared US and Mexican healthcare.⁸

The concept of the "real vlog" is widely held enough for satire. User DanteCWB took a sarcastic approach to the real vlog, playing moody music while talking about the "drama" in his

life, or lack thereof: “like seriously I’m pouring my soul out!”⁹ In order for the satire to work, however, he had to “look into the camera” and frame his face in close-up (for exaggeration, he jut his head fairly close).

Another video posted by an anthropology undergraduate showed clips of various reactions to the Lonelygirl15 saga (to be discussed) and put quotes around the “real” people assume on YouTube.¹⁰ One clip dramatized the primacy of the real/fake debate on the site, when Renetto, a very influential vlogger, said: ““YouTube is just not for fake stuff! It’s for real stuff!” To further question the “reality” of vlogs, the video highlights YouTubers discussing their setting up the camera and use of makeup.

In general, the focus on self-expression and interacting (truthfully) with a community was supported by style.

WHAT IS A VLOG

When addressing the question “what is a vlog,” however, YouTubers focused more on its meaning as a mode of communication than on its visual or stylistic attributes. Vlogs are, the consensus is, a way to connect with other people and a way to express oneself: “Everybody all over the world, and on the other side of the world, gets to look at what you have to say,” user atomsound said in a video.¹¹

Of the eleven videos I found defining a vlog, about half referred to style. Even among those, there was no agreement on length: some said shorter was better, one set a minimum at one sentence in length, one left it open-ended. On editing, andymooseman had a particularly relevant argument against it:

You should be seeing the real person...When it's edited...you never know what you're missing and so maybe it isn't the truth...Really it just be whatever comes out...You can have planning blogs, you can have unplanned vlogs....We're making it up as we go along. We're creating the standard....Some of the best vlogs are unedited.¹²

This is perceived conventional wisdom on editing and vlogs, though it often does translate in practice. In this statement andymooseman connects the style of real vlogging – lack of editing – with self and community expression, implying editing is anti-community, disingenuous, or, as will be shown, even market-oriented. One popular user, Xelanderthomas, in response to the backlash against YouTube celebrity LisaNova when starting to post vlogs, posted a lengthy rant on this prescription: that editing kills a vlog's authenticity.¹³

LISANOVA AND THE VLOG DEBATE

Xelanderthomas' main argument was that a vlog can be whatever a user wants it to be: that there are not restrictions on what it can be. LisaNova – a top YouTuber with over 100,000 subscribers – had just started to post personal videos – as opposed to her more heavily produced sketch comedy – and some of her fans were charging her with insincerity. In his response, Xelander – whose real name is Alexander – laid out the perceived rules of vlogging: be “real” and spontaneous, don't edit, act, plan or plot, use titles, effects or change outfits, all stylistic conventions assumed to assert a real self. “Who came up with this ancient book of rules?” he asked. At the time, LisaNova, seeking to calm her fan base, was going on camera to explain that she wasn't being insincere or fake by vlogging, which Xelander found ridiculous: “I have to sit here and explain to you whether I'm being real and who I am and what I'm not: fuck you!”

The controversy around LisaNova's vlogging revolved around her being "bad" at vlogging, or rather, not very interesting as a person. Oddly, because she was an actress and entertainer before being a vlogger, following the rules of vlogging – no editing, looking at the camera, talking about her life, not planning what to say, being mundane – led to charges of insincerity, because it was not the original point of her channel and it appeared, like Lonelygirl15, she was merely following the rules to look authentic and build her subscriber base (solidify her market):

Some others...are suggesting that this vlogging or me vlogging is insincere or it's a conspiracy or I'm doing it as a joke, and I just wanted to say that's not true, I am being honest, um, and this is just me vlogging, and I know it sounds weird that I'd be bad at it...It reminded me of when I first started on YouTube two years ago, and I didn't know what to do the first time.¹⁴

LisaNova came across as shy, an unexpected revelation for her fans, who only knew her more boisterous comedic personality. Indeed, perhaps her shyness, fine for most vloggers, was perceived as acting.

Most responses to her vlogs were less passionate than Alexander's (there were no negative video responses; it's likely LisaNova deleted videos of critics). Users focused primarily on the issue of being real and sincere, all agreeing that LisaNova was in fact being real. Yet there were nearly as many comments about the notion of vlogging being "hard," with some agreeing vlogging is hard and other saying it wasn't because there is no such thing as a bad vlog. The discussion highlights some of the paradoxes in vlogging: users tacitly acknowledged there were rules to vlogging (it is hard because there are rules to follow) and yet as a mode of self-expression it is beyond criticism: "I don't think you're doing a bad job, and I don't think you're

bad at being you,” YouTuber zbrack said.¹⁵ At the same time, the rules are pretty clear, according to Leopopeo:

To sit there in front of the camera and still be interesting and still maintain and still know what to say without having to necessarily write it all out on a script is a really great quality. And I think that you’ve got it!¹⁶

Here, he refers to qualities of real vlogs (being spontaneous, focus on the camera) and of more planned, audience-oriented vlogs; of course, if the “real you” is broadcasting, you should be free to write a script or not. Similarly, InfoDissemination, who agreed vlogging was hard because it is not scripted and a person can “mess up,” described his vlogs as “pure, boring, monotone, unedited, or mostly unedited vlogging. Not a lot of time and effort is put into the videos over here. This is basically just fun.”¹⁷ Real vlogs are not interesting, edited or scripted – exactly what LisaNova’s and other first vlogs were. These are supposedly “pure” expressions of self, like first vlogs, but rules imply constriction, which is supposedly the domain of impersonal, market-focused vlogs.

THE STORY OF LONELYGIRL15 and DAX FLAME

This final section examines how the issues discussed so far operate in practice. The Lonelygirl15 story is almost unquestionably the most significant incident involving authenticity and reality on YouTube – perhaps in all of web 2.0. The genius of Lonelygirl’s creators – now the company EQAL – was their ability to mask a “fake vlog” – aimed at getting an audience and market – with a “real” one – focused on self-expression and sincerity, all reinforced using traditional visual styles. An account of the major debates and players in the incident brings to light more rules for real vlogs, including a lack of professionalism (film quality, editing) and

acting, irregularity of posting, unattractiveness of the vlogger, removal of corporate interests (today a few popular channels, including Fred and WhatTheBuck, have product placements), and the absence of mystery and narrative flow.¹⁸ (Stelter 2008, A1; Albrecht 2008)

The first installment of the Lonelygirl series was somewhat simple – no props – featuring only her face as she spoke about her identity. The simplicity of the video seems, in retrospect, to be a concerted effort to construct normalcy: “This is the story about an ordinary girl, a girl you could find anywhere. Her name is Bree. She’s 16 years old. She’s cute, but a little nerdy...Pure innocent, imaginative, little bit of a bookworm,” the series later described as the intent of the first “episodes” of the series.¹⁹ (Lonelygirl15, “lonelygirl15 Season 1 Recap”) What the first videos of the series demonstrate is how it is possible to create in a very deliberate way the conditions of a “real” video blog. Even while differentiating the series from television, Miles Beckett, one of the creators, attests that the reality produced online has its own rules: “The blogging works, as do talking to camera and characters filming video - that's all crucial. On television, you don't care where the camera is, but for stories like this – because the idea is that the character is real – you have to explain how they can upload video and so on.”(Armstrong 10) Beckett clearly states here that “talking to the camera,” as the character Bree does consistently in the first videos, and “having the characters film the episodes themselves,” was “crucial” to creating something real. Under these conditions, close-ups become a method for reality production, similar to the “first vlogs” discussed earlier. That Bree also talks about her interests, a little bit – but not too much – about her background, as done in other first vlogs, reinforces the “realness” of the post.

While Beckett and the others creators successfully convinced thousands, if not millions, of viewers that the Lonelygirl vlog was “real,” many saw through its use of convention. Brian Fleming, an independent film director and early fan of the show, is largely credited with

providing the most detailed analysis of the YouTube phenomenon before the show was finally exposed (though he was not the first to suggest it was fake.) In his analysis of how to properly construct a mockumentary, after suggesting Lonelygirl was fake, Fleming said “avoid all hints of professionalism.”²⁰ “Professionalism,” here is marked as unreal. Fleming says Lonelygirl became unreal when viewers started to realize the lighting was too well-executed and the video and sound quality too sharp. “Real webcam videos have flaws,” he wrote.²¹ He also gave prescriptions specific to YouTube. Real vloggers, he noted, post inconsistently: “...they don't put out a steady stream of similar-looking videos on a regular schedule,” which, of course, is the format of television.²²

Viewers too noticed this tension between professionalism and independent vlogging, but early on few suspected the vlog might have producers. They saw it as unprofessional, and unprofessional vlogging was real and true. As one Lonelygirl fan wrote on the *New York Times*’ “Medium” blog: “... part of the appeal is the ‘do it yourself’ type of entertainment that they provide. We know that it’s coming from them and not from a corporate production team...” (Heffernan 2006) This statement reiterates the claim that Lonelygirl’s appeal was its lack of deliberate construction. Many commenters echoed this sentiment. In late July, when the *Times* first hinted at the controversy, few people endorsed the argument alleging foul play. The overwhelming majority of viewers were not cynical – even in the fairly cynical enterprise of commenting on videos and blogs. The audience was not completely in the dark about the lack of “flaws” in the early videos, but this did not always translate to suspicion about its reality. As one early commentator said, cheerleading the editing: “great personality, btw. and pretty good editing skills as well! did you learn that in home school, too? :)”²³ Others noted the same, and one even asked for the program she used to edit the videos.²⁴ Clearly, the creators had mimicked the style

of YouTube to a fairly accurate degree. The first few hundred comments on Lonelygirl's first video were all quite celebratory, not one suggesting any suspicion about its authenticity.

Yet even before Brian Fleming's lengthy analysis, some early critics of the blog noted the high quality of the videos: "This is obviously fake, it seems very professionally edited and the non-professional aspects of it seem very phony and calculated," one person noted on the first blog.²⁵ Most notable was the criticism of gohepcat, a YouTuber often cited as giving the first video tirade against the soon-to-be-exposed vlog. Stephen Hill, known online as gohepcat, criticized the series' "sharp lighting and seamless dialogue:" "I've never seen anything go on for weeks without people being able to pull it apart." (Fine 2006) Since Lonelygirl started posting not long after YouTube's beginning, viewers were likely accustomed to sloppy editing and even sloppier people.²⁶

Interestingly another visual feature that disturbed some questioning viewers was Bree's attractiveness. From the beginning, Bree, often described in the press as "doe-eyed" and "cute," had become the fantasy of thousands on the site. In most cases, this helped the vlog, as it continues to do, making it popular and likely blunting early criticism. Yet not all were smitten. On her second blog, one commentator, clearly in the minority, said: "she's child-actress cute and not random-chick kind of cute..."²⁷ This idea that Bree was not "random"—"chance" being an important convention in realism (Thompson 1988, 204) – would be a factor in her undoing. References to Bree's looks as proof of insincerity escalated until the project was officially uncovered. In his deconstruction of the series, Fleming noted how Bree's attractiveness was a hint of a corporate marketing – with corporate interest seen automatically as anti-real: "She's supercute. She's also supersmart....she's fairly innocent and doesn't meet a lot of guys....In other words, she's *exactly the kind of girl that the young male YouTube demographic would fantasize*

about.” (emphasis in original) (Fleming 2006) Even before Fleming, bloggers suspected her attractiveness was fishy: “All you need to know is that this chick is ridiculously cute! Therefore she is an actress and getting paid.” (Evil Genius 2006) Logically, there should be no correlation between looks and authenticity, but this association, bred by perceptions of television and film, appeared logical a number of people.

On YouTube vloggers are not supposed to act or play characters, be mysterious or remind the viewers of the presence of the camera if they want to be seen as real. All of these remind the viewer of a narrative, which furthers implies a construction.

The clearest example of this is in Brian Fleming’s takeout of one Lonelygirl video, which while written over two weeks before an admission of the creators, turned out to be completely correct. In the video titled “I Probably Shouldn’t Post This…” Bree and her friend Daniel, an awkward looking teen who in the show edits her videos and has a crush on Bree, have a fight. For Fleming, this video demonstrated a break with the narrative – which highlights the fact that there is one – and inconsistency of character – which highlights the fact that these are characters. (Fleming 2006) First, Fleming says, the argument would not have been recorded in the first place. Daniel says in the video they should shut off the camera, while Bree says it does not matter. This then calls into question why the video was posted in the first place, since Daniel edits all of Bree’s vlogs: “they just had a fight, and it’s not plausible that Daniel would then happily edit Bree’s video for her,” especially after expressing opposition.²⁸ Both of these flaws highlight characteristics authentic vlogs are not *supposed* to have: character, narrative, and editing: “The Bree character actually wouldn’t post this. But the producers need to get across a story point, so they have their character do something she wouldn’t really do. Heartbreaking.”

(Fleming 2006) Characters read from scripts, and, rather than acknowledge the scripted nature of life (Goffman), viewers inevitably read characters as not real.

Dax Flame is an even better example of the power of acting to raise questions about reality. Dax's videos have since the beginning been "odd." Unlike Lonelygirl, he has largely stuck to the traditional "me in front of the camera" genre and only rarely edited narrative-style videos, so questions of style are less relevant than those of character and content. It is difficult to describe his performance, except to say it resembles the behavior of someone with a mental or learning disability.²⁹ His peculiar demeanor raised eyebrows almost immediately, prompting the fourth commenter on his first video post to announce skepticism: "And so the new genre of LonelyGirlesque video blogs begin. At least these are funny."³⁰ Putting Dax in the lineage of Lonelygirl was an attempt to mark him as unreal. Almost all the criticism of Dax Flame has centered along this narrative, with many questioning the extent to which he is "acting." While style is less crucial when analyzing Dax Flame, these criticisms of "acting" did become more pointed in another early video, in which Dax first tried to make a "movie," a short remix of *Superman*.³¹ After this, one commenter said, "I really had my doubts about this being a real blog. I thought you were just an actor. Then I saw this and laughed my ass off... Now I'm sure you're an actor," and another commenter called him "Lonelyboy15."³² The introduction, then, of a narrative clip – this time labeled by the vlogger himself as a "motion picture" – brought attention to acting, which raised suspicions.

What brought the "Dax is not real" suspicions to a head were revelations – perhaps nothing is confirmed – of Dax's "real name." In his first video, Dax stated his name was Bernice Jauch III, a point he underscored by having a friend of his visit his home and almost inaudibly call him "Bernice."³³ Soon however, some enterprising bloggers found photos of him on a

baseball team's website, going by the name, "Madison Patrello."³⁴ While this revelation proved nothing, it merely suggested he uses a pseudonym. This point was not lost on some commenters: "It never actually proves hes fake, just that hes using a fake name....He could be called Madison Patrello and still act as ***** up in real life as he does in his videos."³⁵ Yet the use of another name, for many, underscored the idea of Dax as a "character." As blogger Steve Higgins noted:

OK, so Dax lied about his name, he is in fact Madison not Bernice, this makes me pretty sure that he is acting. The couple of things which really seal the deal for me is that in Dax's "motion picture" videos such as "Marriage of the Kidnap!" and "Kisses are Forever" and in LisaNova's video "LisaNova Does YouTube" which Dax appears in, he is required to act and when he is acting his character is identical to Dax's character.³⁶

His referencing the "motion picture" videos – more stylized and narrative than the others – underscores this preoccupation with acting; even though during those videos his inability to get into character could be a sign he is *not* acting in all his other videos, Higgins interpreted it the other way.

For Lonelygirl, character was not the only sign of faking it; one other anomaly sparked speculation the show was not real: a mystery. It soon became clear to YouTubers that the "religion" Bree consistently referred to as the reason why she could not leave her room was not going to be revealed. This led to speculation about what the religion was – showing up rather early in the video's comments – and then to speculation that this mysterious religion was, in fact, the producer of the videos. One of the earliest criticisms of Lonelygirl, posted just one hour after the *New York Times*' mild suggestion of a hoax, cited the mysterious religion as cause for fakery: "Lonelygirl15 is a front for the Mormon church," the blogger said plainly.³⁷ The mystery continued when viewers noticed a photo of what appeared to be Aleister Crowley in the

background. That the camera peered over the photo set off some alarms, but it was the reference to the occultist that ended the debate for some fans. (This instinct turned out to be accurate. Since the mystery around Bree concluded, the Lonelygirl series and its British spin-off Kate Modern have both focused on secret cults and religious conspiracies.) Nonetheless, the presence of a “mystery” in a forum for authenticity and candor (YouTube) alarmed some viewers.

The fallout from the Lonelygirl imbroglio prompted some serious questioning on YouTube, and a general disillusionment with authenticity among its users. Several of the site’s most popular and influential vloggers – most prominently Renetto and HappySlip – felt compelled to verify their authenticity.³⁸ If the situation resulted in anything, it was to awaken users to the realities of online video: vlogs are not “real” in any pure sense; behind the camera, motivations always extend beyond mere self-expression.

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¹ <http://www.youtube.com/lonelygirl15>

² Blade376. "How to make your 1st Vlog! START TODAY!" March 24, 2007. <http://www.youtube.com/Blade376>

³ We can think of it as either a conversation between equals or even a lecture (when one person has authority over another, which is often the case with blogs and on YouTube, since the vlogger can delete comments, preclude discussion, etc.) (Goffman, 1981, 194-195.)

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- ¹⁸ Both Fred (<http://www.youtube.com/Fred>) and Michael Buckley (<http://www.youtube.com/WhattheBuck>) are so over-the-top that their authenticity isn't in question.
- ¹⁹ It is a bit of misnomer to call the videos episodes, since few ran longer than three minutes and they were deliberately constructed to be almost the opposite of television – fewer edits, consistent lighting, etc.
- ²⁰ Fleming, Lonelygirl15 jumps the shark. www.brianflemming.org/archives/002277.html.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*
- ²² *Ibid.*
- ²³ Lonelygirl15. First Blog / Dorkiness Prevails. <http://www.youtube.com/lonelygirl15>
- ²⁴ The creators managed to explain away the good editing but having Bree's friend, Daniel, "edit" the videos.
- ²⁵ Lonelygirl15. "First Blog / Dorkiness Prevails."
- ²⁶ In the end, despite constant remarks from critics that the production quality was too good, the *New York Times* reported the camera used to post the videos was consumer-friendly and the creators used natural light. Heffernan, "Applause for lonelygirl15, and DVD Extras."
- ²⁷ Lonelygirl15, Purple Monkey. <http://www.youtube.com/lonelygirl15>
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*
- ²⁹ This has led several bloggers and commentators to ask if he has autism or Aspergers syndrome.
- ³⁰ DaxFlame. My First Video Diary Entry. January 2 2007. <http://www.youtube.com/DaxFlame>.
- ³¹ DaxFlame, First Motion Picture. January 14 2007. <http://www.youtube.com/DaxFlame>.
- ³² *Ibid.* Lonelyboy15 ironically is somewhat accurate, since his videos rarely have other "characters," and he is about 15 years old.
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