

The Power of First-Person Storytelling

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A Research Report by Video Volunteers

Synopsis: In a world of constant media consumption, it is difficult to find the voices of marginalized communities. We see news reports of homelessness but when do we see the homeless sharing their own stories? First person storytelling, where the person experiencing the issues shares their story, is essential in helping us connect with and understand the experiences of those around us.

The nonprofit Video Volunteers engaged student researchers from two American universities to study Youtube and its first person storytelling content in 2022 and 2023. The initial research was done by Brianna Richards, a student at Brown University. Following that, a group of student researchers taking a course on social impact at the Ballard Center for Social Impact at Brigham Young University (Utah) collectively gave 20-25 hours a week to this project over two semesters, for a total of 30 weeks. Jessica Mayberry from Video Volunteers guided the research.

We searched through Youtube for content on three social issues - disability, incarceration and homelessness - using keywords and filters to find unique and unknown creators. We watched 100s and 100s of hours of videos on these three issues.

We found a lot of channels that raised awareness for these social issues, but realized that most of the spokespeople for these channels come from an indirect source, rather than from people who have lived the social issue firsthand. Because of this, our research aims to understand why there is a lack of awareness, consumption, and support for first-person storytellers in the United States. This report shares the findings of our studies. We are not experts, but want to increase the dialogue regarding this important topic and find new ways to bring visibility to first person social justice content creators.

TOWARD A DEMOCRATIZED MEDIA

The democratization of the media over the last 50-100 years can be viewed as a journey with a starting point where the media gives no direct voice, to an aspirational endpoint, not yet achieved, where it will truly give voice to all who wish to speak, and where everyone has equal chance to be seen and heard.

- **Stage zero:** the issues of the marginalized are ignored; their stories and

realities are not told at all because established corporate media choose not to cover their stories.

- **Stage 1:** a privileged person turns the camera on the underprivileged story teller
- **Stage 2:** allies of the underprivileged – people with access and education – tell the stories of the underprivileged.
- **Stage 3:** the underprivileged person tells the story of other underprivileged, oppressed and otherwise unheard people – including telling their own story.

- **Stage 4:** the oppressed, underprivileged and otherwise unheard turn the camera on the privileged. They seek to call out inequities and to tell the story of the dominant community, seeking to narrate the wider societal story rather than just tell the story of their own community.

In the USA, and in most media markets, we have largely moved beyond Stage Zero. Mainstream media outlets rarely ban the coverage of particular issues, and many viewers today call attention to perceived biases in the coverage of mainstream outlets. Stages 1 and 2 occur in a flourishing documentary and ‘impact media’ environment and content is often produced by or with nonprofits who are becoming better communicators. There are numerous and very strong examples of Stages 1 and 2 and the ability to easily upload content on social media platforms has lowered the bar for new creators.

Stages 3 and 4 occur when the underprivileged are able to shape the narrative themselves. This happens more often, but still less than it should, and it is the focus of our research. The world has witnessed in the last couple of decades profound examples of how stage 4 propels real and lasting change in society. Increasingly, social media and video are playing a major role in social and political movements and in propelling the democratization of the media. In Black Lives Matter, people have used video to expose police misconduct, resulting in rethinking the purpose and objective of policing and initiating reforms in departments across the country. In the #metoo movement, women using personal stories exposed male domination and misconduct resulting in new,

strengthened, zero tolerance sexual harassment policies. Video from the Arab Spring exposed the abuse and criminality of the Egyptian government, resulting in the overthrow of the regime. Participants of the farmers’ movement in India wielding their own cameras and creating content from their own first hand experience while rejecting (even chasing away) many reporters of established mainstream media exposes their distrust of the traditional voice gatekeepers and also a recognition of their own agency and power of self representation.

There are few examples of Stage 4. But Stage 3, in which the underprivileged or socially excluded person tells their own story, has, or so it would seem, received a huge boost due to the proliferation of cell phones.

One would think that with cell phones everywhere and with easily accessible platforms like YouTube and TikTok, anyone can make a video, upload it and have their story heard, achieving stage 3. The fact that YouTube hosts 28 million channels with more than 100 subscribers seems to indicate that the platform is creating a dramatic improvement in giving voice to the voiceless. But that large figure doesn't answer the question - how much of this content is from the socially excluded, telling their own stories? In short, how democratic is social media? Is it possible that these platforms serve those who already have a voice while not doing enough to empower those who don't? Is it possible that these platforms are giving people a space to upload, but that it is an empty promise, because there are no possibilities of actually being meaningfully heard by an audience?

INTENTIONAL LISTENING

The question above matters. If the conversation on diversity and inclusion is to be truly diverse and inclusive, we need to hear directly from those who experience in real time and live day to day with America's social problems - those who are homeless, incarcerated, LGBTQ, disabled, abused, undocumented, seeking citizenship. In short, the storyteller needs to be the person in the story - the "I".

With access to technology and media platforms, anyone - including those who are historically unheard - can share their personal thoughts, experiences and beliefs with the rest of the world. And when they do, they have some potential to change the power dynamics around news making, sourcing and reporting. There are, of course, many other factors that are needed to change power dynamics, such as greater investment in the media in rural areas or in minority-owned media houses, and the internal commitment to DEI. But this is one area of media transformation where a citizen can make a difference, and that is why it matters.

But has the digital age really changed the power dynamics around narrative and what gets covered? How much content is actually created by first person storytellers - that is, those with lived experience of America's social hardships? Which social issue has the greatest amount of content? Are there more people with lived experience on a particular social issue who are creating content on that issue? Why is that? How diverse are the content creators? To what extent are these storytellers influencing the narrative in the mainstream press? What structural changes are needed in the media industry and in our media education system so that diverse voices can shape the story?

To answer these questions and assess the current state, we focused our lens on YouTube, the largest and ostensibly most democratic body of video content in the world. Further, given that the editorial point of view informs the degree of media freedom, with YouTube editorial is best understood by looking at who is wielding the camera.

WHY WE CHOSE TO STUDY YOUTUBE

We chose YouTube because, having started in 2005, it is the oldest platform and therefore its archive should be immeasurably rich in terms of social justice content. YouTube's [mission statement](#) is inspiring to all content creators: "Our mission is to give everyone a voice and show them to the world. We believe that everyone deserves to have a voice, and that the world is a better place when we listen, share and build community through our stories."

However, the practical implementation of that mission is a worthy area of study. Is 'providing a platform to upload' to share content the same as 'giving a voice'? Have you given a voice to someone if you don't correspondingly help to make that voice heard?

We were also intrigued by Youtube's [stated commitments](#), which are:

- Managing harmful content
- Preventing bias
- Fighting misinformation
- Curbing extremist content
- Standing up to hate
- Supporting political integrity
- Fostering child safety
- Sharing revenue

- Responding to Covid 19

We wondered how it is possible to give ‘everyone’ a voice without, for instance, having a commitment to fostering a diversity of content creators, giving the huge barriers that so many communities face.

In short, we were interested in testing the actual application of this mission and these commitments.

SEARCHING FOR COMPELLING STORIES TOLD BY THOSE WHO LIVE THEM

We conducted initial research¹ on what we call ‘first person, lived experience social justice storytelling’. We have chosen to describe it thus to highlight a few aspects of the content we are looking for, that makes it more specific than just a general search for ‘diversity’. With the emphasis on ‘first person’ and ‘lived experience’ we aim to highlight personal storytelling and to juxtapose ‘lived experience’ knowledge with ‘expert knowledge.’ And why ‘social justice’? Because we were looking for the content where people choose to speak out on social change issues, as opposed to other kinds of content. This is not to judge social justice

¹ We dedicated 7 hours of research, on average, to each topic

² To avoid skewing data with any stored cookies and search histories, we opened an incognito search window to access YouTube’s search browser. Search histories were cleared before each new “keyword/scenario” search. We returned to the original search using the back arrow - not the search term. Within YouTube, we searched using key terms, scenarios and advanced search filters. We generated a list of keywords that could identify significant/relevant content creators based on our general knowledge of that topic and news stories, and then searched by scenarios compiled from popular topics from previous searches. We also searched events or places related to the issue areas, e.g. George Floyd protests, Del Rio refugee camp, Disability Pride Month. We also used key words related

content as more valuable than any other; it’s just what we were looking for.

We focused on three social issues: disability rights, homelessness and incarceration. This is a subset of a much longer list of social issues on which similar research is required. Though we used a similar methodology² to do research in each area, we treated each category as absolutely unique, letting the stories we heard and the content we found drive the conclusions we make. It is also important to note that we have not, as yet, spoken to content creators themselves. We wish to do that in the next phase of research.

WHAT WE FOUND

We made several observations regardless of category:

- Very few people living in challenging situations are creating content. Our researchers surfaced only a small number of them.
- It is difficult to find first person storytellers on YouTube, and they almost never appear in the top results.
- The search for ‘first person storytellers’ or even ‘citizen journalism’ doesn’t necessarily lead you to content created by first person storytellers³

to citizen journalism and first person storytelling. Conducting these searches while simultaneously testing the effectiveness of various YouTube advanced search filters, we were able to map out the creators and content being produced. We recorded key search results by general description, video format and length, number of subscribers and views. We noted how far down one has to scroll to access the content, whether it is a top search result or low in the ranking. We did not search on other platforms.

³ “1st page” and “people also watched” results feature content posted by third parties – news media coverage e.g. reports/documentaries, school and work-related projects, lectures, Ted/Tedx Talks, interviews, short films, ally

- The best way to find them is to look at a like-minded channel's collaborations, search on Google for allied nonprofits or read the comments. All of which suggests the algorithm doesn't support finding them (Stages 1-3)
- Many allied nonprofits began using YouTube during the pandemic. As conferences moved to a Zoom format, nonprofits began live streaming those to YouTube. (Stage 3)

Along with these cross category conclusions, we did find some examples of first person storytellers creating content on YouTube; they were not easy to find, but we did find a few.

ON DISABILITY

YouTube searches on disability yielded the most first person content. Why might this be? Disability lends itself well to visual storytelling - the disabled can share their lived experience by turning the camera onto themselves as they go about living with their disability. Another reason might be the popularity of their movement - #DisabilityPride. That hashtag led our researchers to find first person content yielding strong results. It could also be because we did not apply any other intersectional filter of class/race/gender and other contributing factors to voicelessness.

For example [Sarah Todd Hammer](#), is a 20 year old dancer, author, advocate who has experienced varying degrees of paralysis, due

to Acute Vlaccid Myelitis, since she was eight. This condition affects every aspect of her life and she chooses to embrace it. Sarah has filmed a number of videos showing her experiences with this condition and the consequences of lack of accessibility. In the video [ABLEISM STORYTIMES](#), she compares her life with accessibility and accommodations in college to life without it. She speaks to ableism and tells stories from her childhood and people who are able-ist - parties she wasn't invited to because they were at skating rinks or bowling alleys. "It wasn't for them to decide", she says. The viewer feels her courage and is educated to this disability as a result.

Another example is [Chrissy](#), a deaf YouTuber who creates videos about deaf awareness/the deaf community and the value of language accessibility. She focuses on her own personal experiences with deafness. [One video we decided to highlight](#) was a conversation she has with Rikki Poynter, another deaf YouTuber, that includes their commentary on what it's like to be deaf and "mainstreamed". Chrissy talks about her cochlear implants and how she thinks about them: *"The device doesn't mean that people will always compromise and accommodate me, I must always advocate for myself to have things like captions and interpreters and other accommodations. I hope people can walk away from this video recognizing the true value of ASL (American Sign Language) while realizing that the cochlear implant is just another tool."*

organizations that support the cause with the objectives of increasing awareness, generating interest, motivating contributions. Results that did reveal 1st person storytellers were typically posted or supported by an established news

network or verified platform e.g. CDC, The Atlantic, Creative Live, Tedx, OWN

And then there is [this one](#), *Things Not to Say to Deaf People*. It is sweet and funny and teaches the viewer a lot about the deaf experience.

[Stephanie Bethany](#) is an autistic YouTuber who advocates for autism awareness through her channel. She gives viewers research-based balanced information regarding autism-related topics, educates and facilitates conversations about autism, and shares her own personal experience with autism. [This video](#) explores why the way we view autism matters and the consequences that come with polarizing perspectives. Stephanie tells the viewer in her video [what is it like to have autism/be autistic](#): *“Many people have asked me what it’s like to be autistic. I haven’t really set aside a time to think on how to explain it until today making this video. I don’t have a simulation or a VR experience for you, and I can’t boil it down to a simplified, statement, but that’s just me. I can’t make you think like me or see through my eyes or into my world or make you process like I do. But I hope this gives you a little bit of an answer to the question, what is it like to be autistic.”*

[Annie Elaine](#) is a chronically ill, disabled, queer, autistic, Latinx, woman of color documenting her life experience and commenting on social problems she faces. In [I Got Surgery to Hear](#), she tells the viewer *“On this channel, I create videos on various topics that include my observations and experiences with body image, gender, race, LGBT+, disability, chronic illness, and mental health. This channel also contains my creative work; I share music performances, visual art, pieces of writing, as well as uplifting influences and favorites in the creative arts.”*

[In how much money i made on YouTube](#)” [Rikki Poynter](#) critiques how a niche like disability doesn’t generate earnings: *“Make up YouTubers, their ads just make more money than me talking about disability. Me talking about disability, it just isn’t popular with the ad people. It’s unfortunate. It is what it is, I don’t like it, but just letting you know.”* (Note: Rikki has 92,000 subscribers, 732,000 views and made about \$2000 in one recent year).

ON HOMELESSNESS

This category, because of lack of financial accessibility to cell phones, internet, and the likely more nomadic lifestyle of those who are homeless, did not yield as many first person justice storytellers as the disability category.

It did yield several prominent organizations doing advocacy work.

Invisible People

<https://www.youtube.com/c/InvisiblePeople/videos> featuring video profiles of homeless people.

Voiceless Media TV

<https://www.youtube.com/c/VoicelessMediaTV/featured> (*“A place for those who would otherwise be unheard to have a voice”*) and

Tales from the Streets

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCVXeqEdMnBHDrfkDqvutU1w>

give voice to the homeless and offer strong examples of media-first grassroots projects.

Though it is often not clear who is behind these channels, they are strong examples of YouTube at its best - staying true to its

purpose of “giving voice” to under-resourced content creators.

ON INCARCERATION

Most results fall under one of three categories:

- Business/allied organizations providing job opportunities and informational resources to formerly incarcerated; this group uses YouTube as a channel for advertising these opportunities and resources
- Nonprofit, empowerment or religious mission organizations that help with rehabilitation to prevent recidivism
- Organizations/channels pushing for greater awareness and activism for the criminal justice reform movement
- Some channels are a combination of two or three of these categories and are run by formerly incarcerated individuals, e.g. advocates/allies and incarcerated individuals working together to produce content

However, we did find some powerful first person storytellers in this category. For example, [Designed Conviction - YouTube](#), which features Cecilia, the “*wife of a lifer together with my husband Taylor ... [we] have created (this channel) as a social enterprise ... we're promoting the positive works of people that are incarcerated and formerly incarcerated with our motto - art changes lives.*”

[Voice of the Experienced - YouTube](#), is a local advocacy organization that embeds its philosophy in its name - that lived experience is the basis of expertise. The organization is founded and run by formerly incarcerated people (FIP), their families and allies. “*We*

are dedicated to restoring the full human and civil rights of those most impacted by the criminal (in)justice system. Together we have the experiences, expertise and power to improve public safety in New Orleans and beyond without relying on mass incarceration.” The channel sponsors an oral history project. In this [Sample video](#), a formerly incarcerated man, while on parole, helped to pass a constitutional amendment in Rhode Island.

In [Grand Risings UNI-Versity - YouTube](#) we meet a pastor who describes himself as follows on the about section of his YouTube channel: ‘I’m both formerly incarcerated & a former licensed attorney in NYC (Brooklyn). I’m diagnosed mentally ill & have used drugs while homeless living on the streets. My mission is to create amazing content that spreads our message to the least of these.’ He is clearly committed to using YouTube to tell his stories and does so using different types of videos indicating his interest in the medium itself. He’s engaging and articulate.

MOVING FORWARD, DRIVING CHANGE

Have first person storytellers changed the way in which social justice issues are presented today on social media? Have they created that arguably ‘ideal’ state, where those with the lived experience are amongst the most prominent and known voices on those topics? Our findings are mixed at best. Are these types of creators out there on YouTube? Yes. Are they easy to find? No.

Why might this be? It’s probably a mix of factors including the following:

- It may be that the content creators are making the content, but they are found not on YouTube but rather on Instagram or TikTok, some of the newest or youngest creators may bypass YouTube altogether. Further research is needed on this.
- As independent creators hampered by their experiences of marginalization, they have miniscule audiences. The news organizations that are the top content creators on these themes came to YouTube with a huge audience already, and it is nearly impossible to grow a channel from zero views to millions without a huge advertising budget and access to star power and connections.
- Many potential creators simply may not want to create social justice content. They may not be interested, or they may not believe that sharing their stories will change anything. Some undoubtedly think it will result in negative repercussions, stigmatizing them and exposing them to discrimination. Even amongst those who do produce content on social justice, it may be just a small part of their content; they also include lifestyle content like make-up and fashion tips.
- Those living in acute distress lack resources and confidence. There are many societal reasons that stop them from wanting to use their voice.
- It could also be that they don't have an audience because their content is simply badly made, boring and uninteresting. Across YouTube there is a vast majority of unwatchable content and this is no doubt true with this sub-category of lived experience

social justice content creators. But we think it is far more likely that their content isn't high quality in the mainstream sense due to a huge under-investment in diversity in the media.

In short, we did find many channels that empower creators and that do broadcast on social justice issues. We did find nonprofits and ally organizations whose YouTube channels provide a place of invaluable information and resources for those who seek them. But it is easy to get lost in the buzz of verified channels and traditional news headlines and overlook the smaller individual creators whose personal experiences are at the very forefront of their content creation. These content creators are buried under ever present 'breaking news', TedTalks and view-seeking sensationalism videos.

So what can be done to rectify this situation? How could we have more people living through hardship telling their stories about it? How could we have more first person creators?

First, people need to know that they have some likelihood, if they produce good content, of finding an audience. What can YouTube do to make it easier to find them? What can YouTube do to amplify channels that should be celebrated?

- **Alter the algorithm.** Instead of recommending the most viewed or subscribed channels, YouTube can highlight smaller channels, especially those who speak to today's most important social issues. As one of the most popular U.S. social media platforms, YouTube has the potential to uplift and revolutionize the transformative impact of individual

creators on how the average citizen receives their information today.

- **Alter the Misinformation Benchmark:** Only content creators with more than 100,000 followers can achieve verification (designated as so with a checkmark). First person content creators do not have large audience numbers and so the YouTube benchmark presents quite a hurdle.
- **Incentivize social justice content creation with advertising dollars:** YouTube allows top creators to earn so creators are incentivized to create content that earns more advertising dollars. As one disability activist points out in her video: “you earn less advertising dollars from disability than from fashion.” The advertising system on YouTube may be a disincentive to produce social justice content.
- **Add specific search features.** YouTube could add a specific filter for first person content creators or create a hashtag or other identifying feature that creators can use to identify and tag their channels or content, for instance, #firstperson or #livedexperience. This would greatly improve the average user’s ability to find this type of content. Such hashtags have to be popularized before they become known, so provide guidance on how to popularize them.
- **Start a conversation with their viewers regarding the ‘media**

bubbles’ we often live in. Help the audience understand the value of listening to different perspectives.

- When big news events happen, identify the first person storytellers and reach out to them. Support them to tell the stories.
- **Partner with the NGOs to support them in making these communities feel like their voices matter.** Provide training resources and bootcamps.
- **Identify ‘influencers’ from the community of lived experience storytellers.** Help them to become brand ambassadors for YouTube’s advertisers.

Finally, what can we do as individuals to uplift these hidden voices and stories? What can the community of changemakers do to support them?

As media consumers living in a democratic society, we have the freedom and opportunity to select from a vast number of content sources. It is our responsibility to seek and find those voices that are different from our own - the content creators we introduced in this article provide a great start to the journey - we encourage readers to listen to what they have to say.

There is more than can be done to amplify these voices. We look forward to sharing our work on that effort shortly.