

# YOUTUBE TAKES THE STAGE

WORDS: EMMA HUDSON



YouTube changed how we make and consume digital video. Now, can it conquer the events world? Access presses play on this new global trend

About 18 months ago, I noticed that my husband was spending an unusual amount of time watching a very American man on YouTube. When I say American, I don't mean Southern, or portly, or inclined to voting against his own interests, but just — loudly optimistic.

The man turned out to be Casey Neistat, the wildly successful NYC-based 'vlogger' who has reached the dizzying digital heights of six million-plus subscribers, over one billion views and a platform so influential that CNN bought him and his team in late 2016 for an estimated US\$25m (approx. £20m).

(I should note here that my husband insists he was not a bandwagon viewer. "I was there at 250k subscribers," he tells me. "It's my claim to fame.")

The funny thing about watching Neistat's videos is that, while his constant and consistent optimism did often grate, his daily videos became strangely addictive, watching them just as much a part of my daily routine as brushing my teeth or drinking three cups of coffee every morning.

This is the phenomenon of vlogging. While it's certainly not a new medium, the level of celebrity that the top echelon of YouTubers has catapulted to definitely is.

Think PewDiePie (52.3m subscribers), Zoella (11.5m), Tanya Burr (3.6m), Jenna Marbles (16.7m), AmazingPhil (3.9m), Danisnotonfire (6.2m) and Neistat (6.2m).

Not only are these self-described 'creators' raking in six-figure salaries from their vlogs (video blogs), but they have tapped into and engaged with a frankly mind-boggling audience that ranges from eight-year-old girls to middle-aged men.

This is the gold star of audience demographics. These people don't just watch Zoella and Tanya Burr show them how to create the perfect smoky eye — they note the products used and actually go out and buy them. AmazingPhil and Danisnotonfire parlayed their subscriber numbers into a prime spot on BBC Radio 1, because what they say matters to their audience.

And that level of influence, of audience engagement, has predictably caught the attention of the events industry. 📺

## The comic con for the YouTube generation

Many of the most popular creators on YouTube establish a connection with their audience by talking directly to the camera, chatting away as if they were speaking to a close friend — not hundreds, thousands or even millions of viewers.

From plus-size body confidence vloggers to gaming enthusiasts, these everyday individuals simply need a camera to become an overnight sensation or icon that the masses look up to — and more importantly, relate to.

It was perhaps inevitable, then, that event organisers saw an opportunity to manifest this virtual community in the physical world.

“The intimacy between creator and community is authentic,” says Michael Gardner, COO of VidCon, an event for YouTubers and fans that has steadily been growing in numbers and influence over the past few years.

“Audiences and communities are suddenly finding that where once they thought they were weird and alone for liking something niche, there are actually millions of people that feel the same way,” he tells *Access*. “It’s the, ‘Holy cow, me too’ phenomenon. Online video creators are leaders of a community; they let their audience into their actual lives, and that shared experience is unscripted and not controlled by executives or any other creative origin.”

“It’s a direct communication that then spawns new connections between communities.”

VidCon began in 2010, founded in the USA by brothers Hank and John Green of YouTube channel The Vlogbrothers. In its inaugural year, the event brought around 1,400 creators and industry folk to what was essentially a B2B conference for the online video community.

Prepare yourselves for a record scratch. This event, which, again, started six years ago with just over 1,400 attendees, grew more than 20 times in size between its inaugural event and its most recent last summer.

2016 brought an attendee count of more than

30,000. No longer a B2B event, VidCon expanded to accommodate the celebrity nature of YouTube creators, scheduling meet-and-greets, gigs, awards ceremonies, high profile TED Talk-style sessions and panel discussions and numerous spin-off events and parties over the course of the three-day main event.

Such is the continued growth in popularity of VidCon that 2017 will be known to those in the online video community as the year VidCon went international, with the first VidCon Europe taking place in April.

“We’ve been fielding requests from the community to host VidCon in other regions and markets for years, but we felt like the online video ecosystem hadn’t quite matured enough to the point that there was a critical mass of audience, industry and creators to put resources into developing a new event,” says Gardner.

To push the community on, Gardner tells *Access*, VidCon organisers began creating educational

**“THE INTIMACY BETWEEN  
CREATOR AND COMMUNITY  
IS AUTHENTIC”  
– MICHAEL GARDNER**


**Loudly optimistic,**  
*Casey Neistat (below)*  
is a regular presenter at  
VidCon (above)

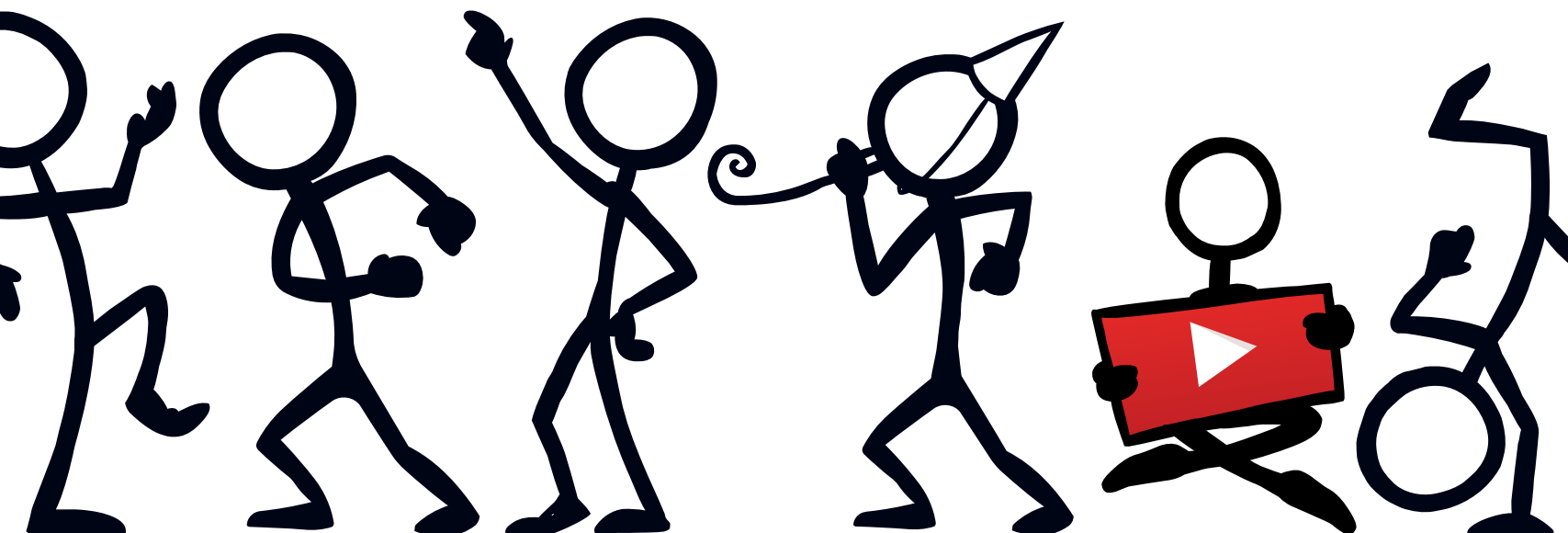


PHOTO: VIDCON



content that would accelerate its audience’s maturity.

“In 2015, we enhanced the VidCon USA event by adding our Creator Track,” he says. “It’s an educational and inspirational track dedicated to aspirational creators. We realised that there was an unmet appetite for an event outside of the USA that satisfies our core tenets of connecting creators to their communities, empowering creators, exposing industry professionals to each other and the audiences they serve, and 



overall, celebrating and accelerating this emergent new media.”

This years-long evolution from being industry-based to focusing more on the audience aspiring to join the industry is something that Tom Burns knows well. Burns co-founded Summer in the City with his friend Dave Bullas — both themselves YouTubers — and has grown it from a meet-up of creators in London’s parks to a

**“BEFORE 2012, BEING A YOUTUBER, BEING A MANAGER OF A YOUTUBER... THOSE JOBS DIDN'T REALLY EXIST IN THE SAME MANNER THAT THEY DO NOW.”**  
— TOM BURNS

## TOP TIPS FOR EVENTPROFS FROM THE YOUTUBE GENERATION

**Gardner:** “Authenticity is key. Be like the YouTube creators, who are cautious and committed to being real for their audiences.”

**Burns:** “The biggest thing is social media. No matter what, being more vocal on social media can never hurt. Some events I’ve attended, you check their Twitter and the last post was 10 days ago about buying tickets. That’s the biggest thing the events industry can learn from YouTube: use technology and social media to help you move forward.”



10,000-strong ticketed event at ExCeL London.

Burns likens his event’s attendees to the most passionate of gig and festival-goers.

“You hear YouTube being spoken about a lot, but there are the fans, the super-fans and then the type of fans who are like the biggest festival and gig fans, who go to 150 gigs a year,” Burns tells *Access*. “It’s still a niche market at this point, but it’s an audience that has a massive passion for it.”

“It’s funny,” he continues, “because when we first started, you didn’t really see fans. Fans weren’t really that prominent. Then, in 2012, they seemed to twig that they could come along and meet some of their favourite YouTubers. The event blew up and attendance tripled from there.”

“Summer in the City sort of grew up with YouTube; attendance went up around the same time that a lot of the current big YouTubers started to boom and appear on the platform. So we adapted by adding official meet-and-greets, more panels, more stage performances constantly throughout the day — just to ensure there was content.”

### Making the virtual physical

One thing that is surprising about the popularity of events like VidCon and Summer in the City is how well it translates from the online world to the physical one.

YouTube may have started out as a platform to watch funny animal videos with your coworkers, but as it grew, a new generation of filmmakers started to recognise the power of the site. As more and more of these filmmakers joined YouTube, their videos adapted and matured. Suddenly, watching regular vloggers’ videos was a uniquely intimate experience.

Millions and billions of viewers tuned in each week, or every day, to watch someone monologue about their day for 10 minutes at a time.

The experience has continued to

evolve: while daily vloggers like Neistat let audiences join them on their daily routine, other vloggers create episodes, complete with narrative structure and carefully crafted camera shots. The more creators experiment with the medium of YouTube, the more people watch and subscribe from the comfort of their sofas and beds.

So the trick in creating an event that exploits those audience numbers is to get that very intimate, solitary experience working in a crowded venue or park. How do VidCon and Summer in the City achieve that?

“By creating authentic opportunities for all the spokes in the online video hub to connect,” VidCon’s Gardner says. “Creator to creator, fan to fan, creator to community, professional to creator, professional to fan. Equalising access and nurturing real dialogue about the issues, rather than just showcasing the world’s most popular creators, is critical.”

“VidCon gives audiences the opportunity to manifest their virtual emotional connections via shared experiences, and that’s validating and cathartic.”

For Burns, the intimacy of YouTube enflames a passion in fans that translates into big audience numbers at his event.

“Things like Summer in the City and VidCon work a lot better when there’s passion behind them, when they’re driven on genuine communities,” he says. “It was interesting to see this massive shift in 2012. Before that, being a YouTuber, being a manager of a YouTuber, those jobs didn’t really exist in the same manner they do now. Because of the connection between the creators and their audience, all these platforms have blown up.”

Undoubtedly one of the most popular aspects of these events is the meet-and-greet. And while more traditional celebrities like Taylor Swift and Justin Bieber have begun slowly phasing out their physical engagement with fans, YouTubers are more than happy to participate in meet-and-greets.

It poses a tricky organisational problem, Burns admits. 

The largest & most reliable event equipment rental company in the Middle East.

**PROTEC**  
PRODUCTION TECHNOLOGY

Dubai & Abu Dhabi  
eventrental@productiontec.com  
[productiontec.com](http://productiontec.com)



EVENT EQUIPMENT RENTAL | TECHNICAL EXPERTISE | DESIGN SUPPORT  
AUDIO | VIDEO | LIGHTING | STAGING & SETS | RIGGING | AUTOMATION & SFX | BACKLINE | CONFERENCING SOLUTIONS | DESIGN | SPECIAL PROJECTS



"We had a problem with our meet-and-greets a few years ago," he says. "They were getting too crowded and people were turning up to queue at 3AM, so I introduced a ballot system where people in advance applied for their top eight people they wanted to see."

"If they picked eight of the most popular YouTubers, they could end up seeing no one, but if they did it as the website advised, they could end up meeting at least one creator, and sometimes even two or three."

As you would expect from events borne out of the YouTube generation, both Summer in the City and VidCon place a premium on good, reliable technology; as Burns says, "It's really about embracing technology to solve the problem".

But it's equally as important to remember that, even though the draw to these events for audiences began with an online video, they are still physical events.

"Human connections are everything," Gardner adds. "We're all tethered to our phones and social media, but nothing can replace directly connecting to peers and role models."

"What we learned from six years of doing VidCon USA, and what we will apply to VidCon Europe, is that the most important thing to the development of the industry is the breaking down of barriers and empowering those that want to cultivate their own communities. That online video is more than just entertainment; it's inherently social and fills emotional gaps in an increasingly disconnected, yet hyper-connected, global community."

It's a poetic idea that Gardner describes — creating something intended for solitary viewing in someone's bedroom, translated back into the real world and forging a true human connection.

And it seems fitting that, in this age of headlines screaming at us to unchain ourselves from technology, at least two events have figured out how to make the online realm of YouTube work in the physical world. **AAA**

*VidCon Europe's inaugural event takes place at Amsterdam RAI on 7-9 April. Summer in the City 2017 takes place at ExCeL London on 4-6 August.*

## VIDCON EUROPE: THE LINE-UP

VidCon offers three attendee tracks — Community, Creator, and Industry — with the latter being geared towards online video professionals.

"These are just a few of the more than 50 in-depth panels, keynotes, master classes, and more coming to VidCon Europe's Industry Track in April," says editorial director Jim Louderback.

- VidCon co-founder **Hank Green** will kick off the programming slate with a keynote address, followed by remarks from the CEOs of three of Europe's biggest digital networks: **Ashley McKenzie** of Brave Bison, **Paola Marinone** of BuzzMyVideos and **Matthew Heiman** of Diagonal View.
- **Nikolas Schriefer**, co-founder of live events crowdsourcing platform Stagelink will discuss how to cash in on new media through non-traditional projects and the creators **HelloRasmus** of Denmark and Canadian travel vlogger **Cailin O'Neil** will discuss how brands can best make use of Snapchat.
- VidCon Europe will also host panels tackling the growth of Facebook video, as well as the emergence of virtual reality.
- The Lad Bible founder and CEO **Solly Solomou** and MetDaan co-founder and CEO **Illirian Krasniq** will discuss how they built two of the world's biggest Facebook video channels, while **Andrew Hawken** of Mesmerise and **Jan-Phillip Mohr** of Hashplay will share how to tell great stories in VR.
- **Nick Hayward**, CEO of digital studio The Narrative, will lead a conversation about how digital and traditional media can work together in the future, featuring Condé Nast Britain head **Will Harris** and Studio71 managing director **Ronald Horstman**.

"VIDCON GIVES AUDIENCES THE OPPORTUNITY TO MANIFEST THEIR VIRTUAL CONNECTIONS VIA EXPERIENCES, AND THAT'S VALIDATING"  
— MICHAEL GARDNER

Virtual engagement,

Left: Visitors take selfies at Summer in the City

Right: Crowds at VidCon 2016

