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ISAtv

YouTube and the Branding of Asian America

Lori Kido Lopez

Although it is still hotly debated whether or not YouTube should be considered “television,” one framework that draws together the online video repository and conventional television is that both are structured through the logic of the channel. Since its inception, YouTube has organized its offerings through discrete collections tied to a single source, whether that source is an individual, a corporation, or a collective. Although many YouTube channels blatantly rip and repurpose videos from a variety of sources, there is still a sense of “ownership” over the content distributed via individual channels, and it is channels that compete with one another for subscribers. Within the realm of television, networks benefit from what Catherine Johnson calls tele-branding, as “the branding of television networks enables them to compete effectively in an increasingly crowded marketplace by creating strong, distinctive and loyal relationships with viewers” (Johnson 2007, 7). The same is true for the channels on YouTube, which similarly must distinguish themselves among their competitors in order to remain marketable and relevant. This is particularly the case because the acquisition of loyal viewers or “subscribers” to YouTube channels is among one of the most valued metrics, as this data is used to determine the rate at which the channel’s owner can earn ad revenue. Yet in contrast to the professional industry of marketers who shape branding efforts within the television industry, many YouTube channels become popular and distinctive simply due to the unique appeal of the individuals who are featured within them.

This has certainly been the case for many Asian American YouTubers who have risen to popularity within YouTube’s ranks, including Ryan Higa of NigaHiga, Kevin Wu of Kevjumba, Michelle Phan, and Phil Wang from Wong Fu Productions. Each of these stars has worked to independently develop their own self-brand, broadcast through individual channels. With channels devoted to comic skits, makeup lessons, musical performances, and dramatic storytelling, they have earned millions of views and subscribers. The success of these YouTubers stands in contrast to the stark invisibility of

Asian Americans within the mainstream media landscape, where there are few opportunities for young Asian Americans to become stars. Alongside these wildly popular individual YouTube channels, we can additionally note the existence of an Asian American group channel that aggregates the works of these individuals and create a collective space for disseminating Asian American content—ISAtv. Although all YouTube channels are similar to television channels in some ways, this group channel more closely mimics the format of television and can help to reveal how YouTube channels function as part of the history of visibility for Asian Americans on TV.

Since 2012, ISAtv has served as a platform for over a dozen Asian American YouTubers to come together and create new programming. Through this case study, we can see how YouTube channels such as this one are utilizing the structure and frameworks of television channels in new ways, as well as what it means to remediate television into this online platform. At the same time, the case of ISAtv also helps point to the ways in which the grassroots, guerilla media style that is common among YouTubers significantly departs from traditional notions of the channel—in particular, revealing innovations that can more effectively support the minority communities that are often rendered invisible within corporate media. For Asian Americans, YouTube channels have provided a way to create mutually beneficial relationships among producers who might otherwise operate in isolation, all in an effort to collectively raise the profile of Asian American media stars in a new media environment. I argue that such efforts reveal the ways in which Asian American YouTube channels like ISAtv must be understood as moving beyond telebranding to engage in branding Asian America—an undertaking that inherently critiques the absence of Asian Americans within mainstream television and film production.

THE RISE OF DIGITAL TELEVISION

In an increasingly digital media landscape, we must continue to ask what has changed and what remains the same as the distribution of televisual content moves from terrestrial broadcasts and cable delivery to digital platforms such as YouTube. We can first note that entertainment entrepreneurs have been creating serialized narrative content for online distribution since the early days of the Internet, modeling many of their business practices and genres after television (Christian 2012). Yet William Uricchio (2009) argues that we must consider the way that YouTube differs from television in lacking the qualities of liveness, flow, and the aggregation of publics. Rather than viewing a steady and curated stream of content accessed via their television sets, users of YouTube pick and choose content from a database archive of endlessly accumulating options. Moreover, in the early days of YouTube, the site was primarily used to distribute what we might call “clips”—short videos shot on cell phones or webcams, or snippets stolen from mainstream movies, television, and websites. Such content does not seem to reflect the sensibilities of television in any way, reminding us that not all examples of audiovisual content available to mass audiences should be considered “television.”

But we started to see a shift in 2012, when Google and YouTube partnered to create the YouTube Original Channel Initiative—a \$100 million program designed to encourage the production of more television-like original content created exclusively for YouTube (Bond and Szalai 2011). This initiative was somewhat seen as a failure when they later dropped 60% of their original channels for failing to recoup their initial investments, even after Google spent an additional \$200 million in marketing (Blagdon 2012). YouTube has nevertheless continued to pursue original programming, and in 2016 they introduced yet another new initiative focused on original programming called YouTube Red. This subscription service charges subscribers \$10/month to gain access to movies and television shows created by some of their most popular personalities (Spangler 2016). Together, these initiatives clearly mark an effort to shift the programming on YouTube toward the familiar formats of television—encouraging the creation of recurring shows (whether fictional/narrative or nonfiction/reality-themed) composed of episodes that are released regularly and organized into a coherent season. Such initiatives seem designed to directly compete with television offerings that reach audiences both through traditional broadcasts and alternative distribution methods such as Hulu, Roku, HBO Go, Amazon Prime, or Netflix.

This resilience in outlasting upheavals in technology and format is consistent with the long history of television. The object that we call television has survived the transition from broadcast to cable and satellite, the rise of time-shifting devices such as the VCR and the DVR, and now the delivery of massive amounts of content via digital or online sources to a multiplicity of screens (Green 2008). Yet these conversations about how the content on YouTube is funded reminds us that there are ways in which the industrial structure of YouTube remains distinct from any of the online distribution venues for television content mentioned here—in particular, that the vast majority of channels are *not* being funded by YouTube or Google, but are simply created and maintained by everyday users. It is perhaps unfair to call these channels “amateur,” as this implies that their creators are not experienced, trained, or paid. The reality is that these distinctions are rarely clear-cut, given the wide variety of participants within the YouTube arena; as Burgess and Green state, “YouTube’s popular videos are contributed by a range of professional, semiprofessional, amateur and pro-amateur participants, some of whom produce content that is an uncomfortable fit with the available categories” (2009, 92). In examining the specific case of an Asian American YouTube channel that creates serialized and episodic televisual content yet remains independent from corporations and major media conglomerates, we can consider how the commercial imperatives of self-branding in the digital arena offer new political opportunities for minority media producers.

ORGANIZING ISATV AS A CHANNEL

Founded by the videographers from Wong Fu Productions and the musicians of Far East Movement, the International Secret Agents (ISA) started as an Asian American concert tour in 2008. At the time, YouTube was just starting to gain them followers,

so their focus remained on live shows that were selling out in cities like Los Angeles, San Francisco, and New York. Following their last concert in 2011, they decided to turn their energies fully to the digital sphere. With the motto “Asian Pacific American Culture + Entertainment Elevated,” ISAtv’s YouTube channel is organized much like a traditional television channel in that it is populated with serial programs hosted by well-known Asian American personalities (see Figure 24.1).

The shows are not released on a dependable schedule, but new content is made available one episode at a time over the period of a few months. Over time they began to organize their content into seasons, with series such as *ISA! Variety Game Show*, *ISA Weekly Rewind*, and *Angry Asian America* being “renewed” for second seasons.

The mimicking of the language and format of a television channel is clearly helpful in serving to organize the various offerings of the ISAtv channel. This style of organization contrasts with the channels of individual users, whose lifetime archives of videos are frequently organized by simple chronology with no thematic similarity. Yet one of the significant differences between the way that television channels and YouTube channels operate is through their branding efforts, or the work of distinguishing their own content from that of their competitors. Television channels often differentiate themselves by connecting their identity to that of a celebrity or popular host who then becomes synonymous with their brand. For instance, when we want to see the Kardashians, we turn to E!; Anderson Cooper and Wolf Blitzer can only be found on CNN; Andy Cohen and all of the women from *The Real Housewives* franchise have become the calling card for Bravo TV. The branding of a television network is then strengthened through audiences association of the network with both specific shows and the celebrities who are connected to them (Lis and Post 2013).

Yet what we see on ISAtv is that individual celebrities such as Linda Dong, Gina Darling, and Joanna Sotomura make little effort to distinguish their participation in ISAtv

Series Title	Description
2 Girls, 1 Lab	Linda Dong and Gina Darling test out some of the weirdest Asian trends.
Asian-ish*	DANakaDAN experiences the “Asian” things he missed out on when he was growing up in an adopted household.
Kawaii for Men	Rekstizzy, a New York based rapper, explores NYC to find the true meaning of “kawaii.”
Angry Asian Man	A talk show discussing current events in the Asian American community with Phil Yu and Jenny Yang.
It’s...Complicated	Joanna Sotomura is joined by special guests to discuss relationships and dating.
Step by Step	Philip Wang relives his dance crew glory days and gets taught a routine by a special celebrity guest choreographer.

FIGURE 24.1 A sampling of the series on ISAtv, each helmed by well-known Asian American host.

from the branding of their own personal channels. Within YouTube, where individual YouTube users are each owners of their own channels, ISAtv is directly in competition with the individual channels of each of its performers. This is certainly not the case for individual celebrities or talent on television, who may star in competing programming but do not in themselves represent channels. As Sarah Banet-Weiser (2012) has theorized, YouTube epitomizes the prevalent discourse on “self-branding,” where individuals structure the narratives of their own lives in ways that align with cultural and economic values in order to accrue positive feedback. Yet as we have seen here, this positive feedback can also become monetized if a user’s channel becomes popular enough; at a certain threshold of views and subscribers, individuals can turn their self-brands into financial profit through the YouTube Partner Program. This logic is a distinctive feature of the way that YouTube channels are organized, but in looking at the way that ISAtv structures its offerings, we can start to see the way that YouTubers are responding to these differences by sharing the wealth rather than competing with one another.

While television networks like NBC, CBS, and ABC seek to outperform one another in the ratings on a daily basis, this form of “competition” between channels does not seem to surface within ISAtv or its participants. In the parlance of television, we might say that there is no attempt to stop viewers from changing the channel—on the contrary, when individual stars are featured on ISAtv’s programs, viewers are encouraged to check out and support their channels. For instance, the show *2 Girls 1 Lab* (see Figure 24.2) on ISAtv features the talent of Dong and Darling, who “test out weird Asian trends.” On the descriptions of each individual episode, there are links to the Internet addresses for each performer with clear directives such as “SUPPORT LINDA DONG,” followed by links to Dong’s personal YouTube, Twitter, and Instagram handles. Moreover, the home page for the ISAtv YouTube channel features a right-hand sidebar titled,



FIGURE 24.2 On the ISAtv show “2 Girls 1 Lab,” co-hosts Linda Dong and Gina Darling try out unique and sometimes bizarre trends that are popular in Asia.

“They Inspire Us” with links to 17 other channels owned by Asian American YouTubers. Although some of these channels are run by the co-owners of ISAtv (Wong Fu Productions, Far East Movement, and DANakaDAN), others are just the channels of Asian Americans they seek to promote—each of which carries an array of content that is outside the realm of ISAtv, and thus would be seen as promoting the competition with the traditional logic of TV channels.

While the language of television provides a useful structure for channels like ISAtv to organize their content, some of this language takes on a different meaning in this context given that nearly all of the staff and performers on these programs are volunteering their labor. When a television network decides to renew a program and produce a new season, this language indicates the negotiation of a financial contract, or a monetary relationship without which the program could not exist. The talent featured within ISAtv operate within what they casually deem “YouTube style,” which indicates a grassroots, guerilla form of production premised on the idea that they value the work outside of monetary compensation. Moreover, participants are always free to produce their own content and share it on their own YouTube channel in the absence of support from ISAtv—and indeed, even while producing programming for ISAtv, individual YouTubers continue to develop programming for their own channels. This is most clear in the case of Wong Fu Productions, who play a guiding role at ISAtv but are consistently developing content for their own channel as well, including their own web series, as well as comic and dramatic short films that are indistinguishable from the material that they post on ISAtv.

This sense that the content on ISAtv is indistinguishable from the content on the channels of its individual YouTubers can in some ways be seen as a failure to effectively create a brand. It would be difficult to say what sets ISAtv apart from any of its competitors within the world of Asian American YouTube, and a distinctive identity is difficult to isolate in interviews with the production team. Yet this “failure” points to the success of ISAtv’s actual stated goal, which is to “elevate Asian Pacific American culture and entertainment.” As mentioned earlier, Asian Americans are well aware of the fact that they are conspicuously absent from mainstream media, facing a systemic lack of recognition and support for their projects. In this case, it seems that the failure of branding for ISAtv is in part due to a larger desire to participate in branding Asian America, or collectively raising the valuation of Asian American bodies, stories, and media. When considering this larger goal, we can more accurately assess the way that YouTube channels participate in a cultural economy that may operate on a different set of values than television.

CHANNELING ASIAN AMERICA

Given the pervasiveness of branding within contemporary society and identity, it seems natural to extend the notion of brand cultures toward racial groups. We can start from the idea that all identities have been segmented into markets, and thus become commodified. For media industries whose economic structure depends upon audiences becoming the product that is being sold to advertisers, this means that racialized

audiences have already been conceived of as a commodified entity. Media studies scholars have examined the way that African American media like Black Entertainment Television (BET) or the ads produced by Latino advertising agencies work to commodify blackness and Latinidad because these racial groups are the target audience for their media (Davila 2001; Smith-Shomade 2007). Although race is not a product or service that can be bought, it is clearly a signifier that possesses cultural value within society and thus plays a part in financial transactions. As we see here, media industries play an important role in creating race through processes of marketing and commodification. This perspective on the value of race is commensurate with theories of race as an ideological construction (Omi and Winant 1994), or something that cannot be understood outside of culture and is upheld through both individuals and social institutions.

This focus on the value of race and racial identities helps us to better understand how YouTube channels like ISAtv seek to benefit from the work of creating and shaping understandings of Asian America, rather than merely the value of their own channel or its contributors individual channels. We often theorize race using deficit thinking—reasoning that race is important to acknowledge only because of the ways that it systemically oppresses racial minorities. Particularly with regard to Asian Americans, the idea that Asians have very little in common with one another demands that unity can only be accomplished as a political protest against being seen and improperly treated as a collective (Espiritu 1992). Similarly, post-racial ideologies denying the continued salience of race and racial critiques have been roundly condemned because they fail to take the realities of discrimination and suffering into consideration. In response, it is asserted that the reason race still exists and continues to matter is because racial minorities continue to suffer inequalities due to overt racism (Bonilla-Silva 2009).

Yet the work of media producers in fighting for control of their own images moves beyond this kind of thinking to further posit that there is something to be gained from shaping a distinct racial identity outside the mainstream. In this case, YouTubers are working together to create and reify an Asian American consumer audience that will view and respond to their online content. This move toward thinking about race as a brand is mirrored within the work of Comaroff and Comaroff (2009) in their examination of the branding of ethnicity. They argue that “ethnic incorporation,” or turning ethnicity into a corporation, is an increasingly popular economic strategy for ethnic minorities. They worry that this move can lead to homogenization and abstraction despite internal differences, which is indeed problematic. Yet they also concede that taking ethnicity to the marketplace is perhaps the only way for certain ethnic groups to survive. By commercializing identity, communities who had been formerly dispossessed of their past can participate in a process of reflection, self-construction, and authentic identity production.

One concern about using the logic of branding to understand racial identities is that branding is sometimes assumed to impart a kind of unity and simplification, where brands stand in as shorthand for a complex reality. Racial groups like Asian Americans are diverse, encompassing millions of individuals who hail from diverse countries of origin, who speak dozens of different languages, who participate in specific cultural

practices that often have nothing in common with those from other Asian backgrounds. Given this diversity, it would seem counterproductive to reduce the group to a fixed set of attributes. Yet this way of thinking fundamentally misrepresents how the branding of something like a television channel actually works. Although branding may seem like a process for simplifying meaning, it is actually itself a complex process that is co-created by competing parties and resists stability. It is a continual process of shaping ideas wherein the interplay between different contexts and participants contributes to multiple meanings. Although brand managers and corporations may seek to control their brand, the reality is that they are merely one party who participates in the process of competing for their desired brand identity. In the same way, race and identity mean different things to different people invested in them, and there are many different voices competing to shape the way that racial groups are commonly understood through branding processes.

For ISATv, this means that processes of branding take place through the voices of the hosts and performers, but also the viewers who participate in commenting, upvoting and downvoting, linking to videos, and promoting the talent of its hosts. As a deeply interactive platform, YouTube provides a rich space for discussing and sharing content—in this case, giving participants the opportunity to speak up about an image immediately after it has been posted, and for the creators to immediately respond. In doing so, both content creators and consumers collectively become invested in the project of shaping what it means to be Asian American. By focusing on the way that ISATv is creating, promoting, and shaping the image of Asian America, we can better understand the way that channels on YouTube can build upon but also differ from the market logics of mainstream television. When the work of ISATv succeeds, viewers are drawn toward more than simply ISATv's own videos, but also toward the benefits of associating with Asian American media more broadly. Together, this YouTube channel helps to communicate to others what it means to be Asian American, rather than letting outsiders continue to see race as an assemblage of negative stereotypes and disadvantages. But more importantly, such brand valuation can spread outside of this individual channel and its particular content in order to collectively raise the profile of other Asian American performers and content producers on YouTube and beyond.

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