

Why YouTube's kid issues are so serious

June 24 2019, by Jefferson Graham, Usa Today



Credit: CC0 Public Domain

To understand just how severe YouTube's kids problem is, take a look at the popularity charts.

You might expect the No. 1 channel on the most popular Google-owned video network to be a brash, foul-mouthed videogamer like PewDiePie (that was long ago), a new, up-and-coming teen sensation like a Kyle Hanagami or a celebrity-heavy tie-in, like [music videos](#) from Ariana

Grande or footage from the Kardashian sisters.

Not in 2019. For today, think nursery rhymes. Potty songs. John Jacob Jingleheimer Schmidt.

The No. 1, most-viewed YouTube channel in the United States belongs to a team of animators from Irvine, California, that produces weekly animated preschool sing-a-longs, under the Cocomelon brand.

In the last 30 days alone, Cocomelon has pulled in over 2.5 billion video views, which averages out to 83 million young viewers daily. Combined, the major four TV broadcast networks averaged just 13 million viewers daily during the TV season.

This is a problem? It is when you keep going down the chart and see that six of the top 10 channels are also targeting babies, toddlers and first-time students, with a mix of more nursery rhymes, playdates and toy reviews.

YouTube's most popular programming targets kids, the same group that's supposedly not allowed to watch the channel, per Google's terms of service. "The Service is not intended for children under 13. If you are under 13 years of age, then please do not use the Service. There are lots of other great web sites for you. Talk to your parents about what sites are appropriate for you."

This week, reports surfaced that the Federal Trade Commission was set to respond to complaints from interest groups to get YouTube to clean up its act for its handling of children's videos.

After all, YouTube is home to both nursery rhymes and coming out videos, sports recaps, makeup tips, tech reviews, and what critics have said are a cesspool of conspiracy, hate speech and racist videos.

Its algorithm uses data gleaned from Google accounts to match your viewing history with autoplay recommended videos of a similar genre. And sometimes the autoplay gets it wrong. If you watched a conspiracy video from the now-YouTube-banned InfoWars host Alex Jones, suggesting that, say, a high school shooting was fictional—not the truth—then slipped into cartoons for the kids, YouTube could slip more Jones-like videos into the autoplay mix.

Or just confuse the same child that's looking up Toy Story videos with something U.S. TODAY easily found this week. Instead of clips from the movies, YouTube could also offer up "Woodie (note the intentional misspelling) and Jessie Make a Porno," featuring the toy versions of the characters simulating sex, one of many Toy Story-meets-sex videos we easily found on YouTube this week.

This might not be what the parents had in mind.

Other recent controversies included pedophiles commenting on videos of young children, which provoked YouTube to say it would change its commenting policy, and not allow channels with minors to include a comment section.

(However, Cocomelon, with animated kids, is full of comments, as is the porn-tinged Toy Story [video](#) noted above.).

Now, according to the Wall Street Journal, YouTube is prepared to potentially do something radical, like remove all kid programming from the network, and put it instead on its little-used YouTube Kids app, which is aimed at babies and toddlers.

YouTube neither confirmed nor denied, saying "we consider lots of ideas for improving YouTube and some remain just that—ideas."

Clearly, Google needs to do something. Variety suggested this isn't the solution.

"What's going to stop pedophiles from seeking out videos starring young children on YouTube Kids, as opposed to YouTube proper?" wrote Variety's Janko Roettgers. "And how would a separate service prevent parents from exploiting their children for profit?"

Since the [machine learning](#) and [artificial intelligence](#), combined with some human involvement, aren't catching all the unsuitable submitted videos and comments, Roettgers suggests Google should turn its kids area into a curated platform, akin to how it's done on TV. Videos would need to be submitted, watched and approved.

I agree. It would be a lot more work and very expensive, but a whole lot cheaper than paying the government a giant fine.

And way more responsible, too.

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Citation: Why YouTube's kid issues are so serious (2019, June 24) retrieved 26 June 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2019-06-youtube-kid-issues.html>

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