

What I've Learned From Creating 100 YouTube Videos

Ali Mattu, PhD



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(alimattu@gmail.com) is a clinical psychologist in New York and assistant professor at Columbia University, Irving Medical Center. He hosts the very popular YouTube channel "The Psych Show" and has created over 100 videos which have been seen nearly 700,000 times. He has been interviewed by the *New York Times*, appeared on MTV, CBS,

PBS, and has the honor of being referenced, and not made fun of, on HBO's *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver*. A cognitive behavioral therapist, he specializes in helping kids and adults with anxiety disorders. Dr. Mattu also teaches a global audience how to use psychological science to achieve their goals. He sparks conversations about mental health through storytelling performances, school assemblies, and pop culture conventions.

Back in November of 2014, a patient showed me a YouTube video about bad habits. The video was going viral and my patient wanted to know if its advice was worth listening to. I was shocked to see how inaccurate the video was *and* how successful it had become. It was 20 minutes of a teenager mostly sharing discredited psychological myths, watched THOUSANDS of times. I wanted to give my patient something better to watch, but struggled to find a video that featured a psychologist, shared accurate information, and would resonate with young adults my patient's age.

That's when I decided to start *The Psych Show*, a YouTube channel designed to make psychology fun and easy to understand. According to Alexa, YouTube is the second most popular Internet website. The Telegraph's Cara McGoogan reports YouTube is increasingly being used as a place where people go to learn new information and has become more popular than any cable network for 18 to 49 year old Americans. I wanted to make sure real psychology was part of the conversation unfolding on this rapidly evolving platform. Four years later, *The Psych Show* has over 100 episodes, more than 36,000

subscribers, over 10 hours of content, and more than 750,000 views. Producing *The Psych Show* has taught me a lot about the differences between new media (e.g., YouTube, blogs, social media) and traditional media (e.g., television, radio, print). I share here three important lessons I've learned that could help psychologists create content for the Internet.

1. Prioritize Authenticity

The most frequent concern I hear from psychologists who want to make videos is, "I don't have the equipment" or "I don't know how to make a good looking video." This makes sense as many psychologists first get exposed to media work through traditional means (e.g., local news) which produce professional quality videos.

But the YouTube audience doesn't prioritize production value. Yes, you need to publish high definition videos with decent sound, but most smartphones do that. YouTube was built on handheld "real" footage and its audience craves authenticity. They want videos that directly speak to them and to make them feel like they are watching something honest, not formal.

If you want to become a successful content creator on the Internet, you must find a way to share some authentic aspect of who you are. If you're funny, be funny. If you're serious, make it serious. If you're really into baseball, talk about baseball! Your content doesn't need to look or sound perfect, but it does need to feel like you.

2. Lead with Awesome

When psychologists appear on traditional media, there is usually a short introduction and a few moments before the psychologist gets to the main point of the appearance. This works because audiences watching traditional media have fewer alternatives for similar content at that exact time and are willing to experience a less interesting segment of a program to get to something more interesting later.

YouTube audiences are not as forgiving. The platform provides detailed analytics on every video. I can tell exactly when people stop watching my videos. Having closely studied my data, I can assure you YouTube audiences decide within seconds of beginning a video if they are going to commit to it or

switch to another video on the same topic. The videos I created with a slow build up consistently lose viewers, pulling down my “watch time” score in YouTube (an important variable that determines how much YouTube promotes my videos in their algorithm).

This is why Derek Muller, creator of the popular science YouTube channel *Veritasium*, encourages creators to “lead with awesome,” to begin immediately with a powerful question, your most interesting idea, or a striking image.

This is not something psychologists like to do. We are trained to describe our qualifications, qualify our findings, and explain limitations. But viewers won’t stick around for quality psychology unless you start with something that grabs their attention, fast.

3. Give Away Value

Psychologists are often invited to participate in traditional media because we have expertise that a producer needs for a show. We don’t ask questions on the set, we answer them. But on YouTube, we must act as a producer and an expert. We must decide what type of content to create and most psychologists don’t know where to start.

YouTube functions as a search engine and it prioritizes videos that answer questions people usually search for. This often leads to YouTube prioritizing content related to pop culture, current events, or answers to frequently asked questions. If your videos don’t fit into these categories, they aren’t going to be discovered by YouTube’s audience.

Spend time searching for key terms related to your expertise on YouTube, see what suggestions appear in the search bar, and watch popular videos in the search results. Once you know what topics people are interested in and the questions that keep coming up, give away value by creating content that speaks to these issues and answers key questions. The more you give people something useful, a new perspective, a helpful tip, or connections to resources, the more your audience will grow.

Understand the Medium

My time on YouTube has helped me become comfortable in front of a camera. This has led to opportunities in traditional media, often the result of a television producer discovering *The Psych Show* on YouTube. I’ve had appearances MTV, CBS, NBC, and PBS. I even had the honor of being referenced, and not made fun of, on HBO’s *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver*. Through these appearances, I’ve learned that effective strategies for YouTube, prioritizing authenticity and leading with awesome, don’t work for primetime news or cable entertainment. Building value on these platforms means something very different than on YouTube. This is the larger lesson I’ve learned from my time as an online content creator – if you study what works on a specific medium before you use it, you increase the chances that an audience will discover your work

EDITOR’S NOTE: Dr. Mattu will present **Getting Psychology Out of Your Office and into the World** as the closing session speaker Sunday, April 7 from 10:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m.

and understanding the contributions of psychology.

For an extended version of this article, read my beginner’s guide to giving psychology away. If you are interested in learning more, I recommend the following articles and resources:

- Society for the Teaching of Psychology Presidential Task Force on Psychology in Communities.
- Banyard, P. & Hulme, J.A. (2015). Giving psychology away: How George Miller’s vision is being realised by psychological literacy. *Psychology Teaching Review*, 21(2), 93 - 101.
- Kazdin, A. E., & Blase, S. L. (2011). Rebooting psychotherapy research and practice to reduce the burden of mental illness. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 6(1), 21 - 37.
- Wedding, D. (2017). Public education and media relations in psychology. *American Psychologist*, 72(8), 764 - 777.
- Zimbardo, P. G. (2004). Does psychology make a significant difference in our lives? *American Psychologist*, 59(5), 339 - 351.



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