



Selected Papers of #AoIR2018:
The 19th Annual Conference of the
Association of Internet Researchers
Montréal, Canada / 10-13 October 2018

WHAT CAN “WHY I LEFT BUZZFEED” VLOGS TEACH US ABOUT INVISIBLE LABOUR?

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Introduction

When individuals seek out new employment of their own volition (as opposed to being fired) this usually necessitates resigning from job, colloquially known as “quitting”. Previously, a person’s reason(s) for quitting might have only been shared with friends and family, but thanks to the ubiquity of social media these reasons can now be relayed to audiences far removed from their day-to-day life. In this paper I explore the growing trend of posting videos to YouTube (vlogging) to explain the reasons for why an individual has quit their job, detailing a collection of 10 vlogs posted by 11 former BuzzFeed employees to explain their reasons for leaving the company. Founded in 2006, BuzzFeed is a media company famous for its listicles (a portmanteau of list and articles) and popular YouTube series (e.g. *Ladylike*, *BuzzFeed Unsolved*, etc.) receiving 65 billion views in 2017 (Spangler, 2018).

This research was initially motivated by the desire to understand *why* the “Why I Left BuzzFeed” videos went viral, so much so that there are now more parodies than videos made by actual ex-employees. However, in conducting this research I found that while the formulaic structure and content of the real and parody videos were striking and warrant further investigation, what was surprising was how the vlogs made by ex-employees are a deliberate attempt to expose the invisible labour that is prevalent in the post-Internet media industry. By posting “Why I Left” vlogs, former employees reclaim their authorship of creative productions previously uploaded without individual attributions and instead credited to the faceless corporate monolith of “BuzzFeed”. Furthermore, these vlogs act as a means to subvert notoriety earned by being a (now former) public face of BuzzFeed to attract hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of viewers to announce their personal pivot and rebranding as content producers now working independently from the company that had launched them into Internet fame.

Suggested Citation (APA): Bergstrom, K. (2018, October 10-13). *What Can “Why I Left Buzzfeed” Vlogs Teach Us About Invisible Labour?* Paper presented at AoIR 2018: The 19th Annual Conference of the Association of Internet Researchers. Montréal, Canada: AoIR. Retrieved from <http://spir.aoir.org>.

Methods & Analysis

The data for this paper was collected by means of a snowball sample. Data collection began by collecting links to YouTube videos related to the topic of quitting BuzzFeed using the keywords “quit” or “leave” and “buzzfeed”. Additional videos were sought out by means of searching for videos posted by other ex-BuzzFeed staff mentioned by name in the previously collected videos as well as those named in the popular press articles about employees who quit or had been fired.

After watching each of the videos, I divided them into two categories: vlogs by ex-BuzzFeed employees and vlogs by people who had never actually worked for the company. These videos were transcribed then analyzed using thematic coding (Saldaña, 2013) using Nvivo 11 for Windows.

Reclaiming authorship and rebranding

Setting aside the parody videos made by people who had never worked for BuzzFeed (which will be discussed in a subsequent paper) the vlogs posted by former employees become an explicit attempt to pull the curtain back and reveal the invisible labour (Crain, Poster, & Cherry, 2016) associated with creating video content for BuzzFeed. I also draw on the concept of microcelebrity (Senft, 2008) as a means to explain the why these videos were initially able to garner the attention that they did. I note that in recent years Senft’s work has been extended in multiple directions, such as documenting the amount of “behind the scenes” labour that goes into becoming and then maintaining microcelebrity status in the tech industry (Marwick, 2015) or amongst influencers (Abidin, 2018) as well as the aspirational labour performed by would-be influencers (Duffy, 2017).

All of the ex-employees who posted “Why I Left” videos were at one time prominently featured in at least one of BuzzFeed’s YouTube channels. Because they are mostly known for their on-screen presence, these former employees were typically assumed to be actors and referred to as such in media coverage or by fans who converse about their favourite BuzzFeed personalities on YouTube or on other social media sites. These vlogs served as a way to educate the audience about the extensive work they did behind the scenes (e.g. scriptwriting, editing) in an attempt to make clear that while they were the ones in front of the camera, they often did all the undocumented work behind the scenes to ensure the video went from idea to reality. For example, in Chris Lam’s vlog he sought to “set the record straight” and reclaim authorship over videos on which his name never appeared despite the company’s assurances that it would attribute producers by name moving forward, adding the attributions retroactively long after a video has outlived its viral lifespan does little to acknowledge his labour to an actual audience.

In addition to emphasizing the amount of work that went into the videos they created to highlight their talents beyond acting, these vlogs also act as a way to rebrand and advertise a new post-BuzzFeed venture. Former employees stated they left on their own volition – the notable exception being Jenny Lorenzo, who had been fired for breach of contract because she appeared in non-BuzzFeed video (Sutton, 2016) – and

all of the videos contained an explanation of what the vlogger planned to do next and why they couldn't do that work at BuzzFeed. In some cases the "Why I Left" video actually served as being the pilot for their new ventures, for example Michelle Khare produced a fully choreographed action sequence to announce she had left BuzzFeed to create her own series about learning how to perform famous Hollywood movie stunts. The videos shared a common theme of thanking BuzzFeed for the opportunity and praising their former coworkers, but also made it clear that in order to have full creative control (and ownership) of their productions, they had to leave the company and return to independent work.

Implications

When viewed individually, each vlog primarily serves the function to rebrand and alert fans about their new post-BuzzFeed career. Yet when taken together, the "Why I Left" videos document a concerning trend in which viral media stars are offered a steady paycheck (approximately \$55k USD/year) at the cost of a non-compete clause and signing away authorship of any creative and intellectual work conceptualized during their employment. Furthermore, BuzzFeed would own this property in perpetuity, retaining the right to use their name and likeness even after they leave the company. Contractual obligations prevented them from speaking on the subject while at BuzzFeed, but in each vlog the former employee stated they returned to a precarious employment situation in order to reclaim ownership over their creative work moving forward.

While perhaps not intentional, these vlogs ultimately act as a warning about the uneven playing field between employer and employee. Each year BuzzFeed posts record profits, and yet these vlogs illuminate how employees are actively prevented from being able to grow a personal brand beyond BuzzFeed, stifling future career prospects and additional sources of income. Ultimately this leaves BuzzFeed employees with the option to quit or to stagnate in place, or what Gaby Dunn (2015) stated are ultimately the two options for a BuzzFeed viral video star: "Get Rich, or Die Vlogging."

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