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FROM YOUTUBE TO TV, AND BACK AGAIN: VIRAL VIDEO CHILD STARS AND MEDIA FLOWS IN THE ERA OF SOCIAL MEDIA

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Introduction

While talk shows and reality TV are often considered launching pads for ordinary people seeking to become celebrities, we argue that where children are concerned, especially when those children have had viral success on YouTube or other platforms, their subsequent appearance(s) on television highlight far more complex media flows. At the very least, these flows are increasingly symbiotic, where television networks harness preexisting viral interest online to bolster ratings. However, the networks might also be considered parasitic, exploiting viral children for ratings in a fashion they and their carers may not have been prepared for. In tracing the trajectory of Sophia Grace and Rosie from viral success to *The Ellen Show* we highlight these complexities, whilst simultaneously raising concerns about the long-term impact of these trajectories on the children being made increasingly and inescapably visible across a range of networks and platforms.

Methodology

This paper is an extension of two overlapping projects: one based in traditional anthropological fieldwork with microcelebrities and Influencers and how some of these actors eventually groomed their own children as micro-microcelebrities (Abidin, 2015); and the second, a long-term cultural studies and media analysis of how tracking devices used by parents among infants and young children impact wellbeing and notions of privacy (Leaver, 2017). As such, this paper draws on an extended data set largely comprising screengrabs, archived comments, press coverage, and volumes of field notes

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tracking historical events that unfolded in public trajectory of young children who go viral on the internet and on the media, but also utilises data derived from an ethnographically informed content analysis of young internet celebrities and a data-driven cultural studies analysis of childhood in the age of tracking devices. This paper takes as its primary case study the trajectory and progress of cousins Sophia Grace Brownlee (b. 2003) and Rosie McClelland (b. 2006), who went viral on YouTube in 2011 at the ages of 8 and 5 for covering Nicki Minaj's Super Bass and were subsequently groomed by *The Ellen DeGeneres Show* into multi-platform celebrity.

Networked factories of child celebrity: Sophia Grace & Rosie

Sophia Grace Brownlee (b. 2003) and Rosie McClelland (b. 2006) are a pair of cousins from Essex, England. Better known on the internet as "Sophia Grace and Rosie", the duo went viral on YouTube at ages 8 and 5 when Sophia Grace's mother uploaded a video of the girls singing Nicki Minaj's Super Bass in September 2011. The viral video was the debut post on the YouTube channel "Sophia Grace", and has accumulated over 52 million views as of August 2017. A month later in October 2011, the girls were invited on *The Ellen DeGeneres Show* to be interviewed by show host Ellen and to reenact their viral performance. In a later segment, Nicki Minaj sprang a surprise on the girls where she appeared on stage at a last minute request to chat and sing with them. The two videos have recorded over 32 million and 122 million views respectively.

So well received were the girls on *The Ellen DeGeneres Show* and its YouTube channel that shortly after, behind-the-scenes footage of Sophia Grace & Rosie were released on the Show's YouTube Channel, in a bid to capitalize upon their virality and extend the length of their appeal to the show's audience. Subsequently, the girls were subsumed into the programming of *The Ellen DeGeneres Show* as they represented the show at various red carpet events and starred in branded content in the YouTube content vernacular of a vlog, promoting various brands and events. Sophia Grace & Rosie eventually became a bona fide staple on *The Ellen DeGeneres Show*, hosting their own segment known as "'Tea Time' with Sophia Grace & Rosie", with eight episodes between September 2012 and May 2013. It appears that *The Ellen DeGeneres Show* spotted talent and viral uptake of the girls early on, inviting them to celebrate their 100 millionth view on YouTube. Over subsequent years, the girls would frequently be featured talking about their personal lives, the experience of Britons regularly visiting America, their family lives, and the impact of their YouTube success, all of which both appeared on *The Show* and the Show's YouTube channel.

As the years passed and the cousins approached teenhood, it became clear that the social media presence of Sophia Grace was more intentionally curated and branded for a career in the (internet) entertainment industry while Rosie faded into the background, evident in the structural expansion of rebranding her YouTube channel to focus on Sophia Grace rather than the duo and starting a Facebook page as "Sophia Grace The Artist". Sophia Grace's digital estates also underwent content expansion as she began to produce her own music meet mainstream entertainment industry and collaborate with fellow internet celebrities. Since turning 13 in 2016, Sophia Grace formally launched her Influencer career by engaging in Influencer content vernacular and YouTube tropes including participating in internet viral trends unrelated to her music career such as the

Oreo challenge, engaging in the attention economy of clickbait such as Q&As addressing her budding romantic life and expanding her presence in other genres on YouTube such as makeup tutorials.

Complex Media Flows

To some extent, the rise and popularity of the cousins can be understood as part of what Graeme Turner calls 'the demotic turn', the increasing repositioning of everyday people into the media spotlight, creating a form of celebrity via reality TV, talk shows and so forth (Turner, 2013). This is reinforced by Sophia Grace (& Rosie)'s acknowledgement of *The Ellen DeGeneres Show* as the springboard for their expanded and extended fame post-virality in several of their public messages. However, we argue that the media flows relating to viral children as exemplified by Sophia Grace & Rosie are more complex. Rather than 'creating' the fame of these children *The Ellen DeGeneres Show* and similar TV talk show formats opportunistically capitalize upon the social capital of such viral video children by harnessing their fame and packaging it into more accessible, commercial, and deliberate consumption bytes. The girls were viral stars before they were on TV, but the networks channeled, amplified and significantly capitalized on their emergent (viral) fame. So successful is this model of viral kid celebrity factories that *The Ellen DeGeneres Show* has curated its own series of adorable kids in a playlist of over 200 videos with such viral children engaging in various (commercial) activities on *The Show*.

Emerging Conclusions and Further Work

Viral fame online and more recognised televisual fame are increasingly blurring, with both symbiotic and parasitic relationships emerging as television networks seek to harness, and create, online attention. Viral children such as Sophia Grace and Rosie exemplify this complexity, where the televisual and online flows are multiple and complex. At the heart of these flows, though, are an increasing number of children whose amplified viral fame must be carefully positioned in commercial, social and care terms. As more and more children are featured online as proto-influencers and microcelebrities, often managed and produced by their parents, and sometimes being amplified and harnessed by more traditional media forms such as television, the rights of the children in these instances – to privacy, to self-determination and so forth (Livingstone & Third, 2017) – must be more robustly and transparently discussed. Historically, child stars have often not fared that well after bursts of fame in the media industries; viral kids need more successful and more carefully mapped trajectories.

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