

Broadcasting the bedroom: Intimate musical practices and collapsing contexts on YouTube

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In an era of social media and online participation, uploading a personal video to a platform such as YouTube appears to be an easy and natural activity for large groups of users.ⁱ Various discourses on online narcissism and exhibitionism (Balance, 2012; Keen, 2007, 2012; Twenge and Campbell, 2010) give the impression that current generations have become extremely comfortable (perhaps even too comfortable) with the online possibilities of self-exposure and self-representation (Mallan, 2009). As I will argue in this chapter, however, this is largely a misrepresentation of the everyday struggles and experiences of online participants. For many, posting a video on YouTube is a rather ambivalent activity: joyful and fun at times, but also scary and accompanied by feelings of insecurity, especially when the content is relatively delicate.

This shows itself perhaps most clearly in a particular genre of online videos: the ‘musical bedroom performance’. On YouTube, this genre has become a popular trope in the last couple of years. In these videos, a person sings and/or plays a musical instrument in front of the camera from the private sphere of the home. As Jean Burgess (2008) argues, the musical bedroom performance ‘draws on the long traditions of vernacular creativity articulated to ‘privatised’ media use’ (p. 107).ⁱⁱ Historically, the bedroom has functioned as a crucial site for cultural expression and experimentation. This is especially true for teenagers and young adults, for whom the bedroom is, as Sian Lincoln (2005) writes, a domain ‘in which they are able to exert some control, be creative and make that space their own’ (p. 400). In the case of music, particularly, the bedroom is also a major site of informal learning. As many researchers in the field of popular music have argued, (beginner) musicians often pick up skills and techniques by playing along with records, rather than attending formal music classes (Bennett, 1980; Finnegan, 1989; Green, 2001; Miller, 2012; Toynbee, 2000). In such practice, the private sphere of the home also functions as a key site for people to explore their musical talents in a controlled and safe environment – one that is occasionally intimately shared with family or close friends.

With the rise of webcams and social media websites, however, such domestic forms of musical learning and play have become increasingly public. Through the help of platforms such as YouTube, any small-scale bedroom video can be distributed to a wide group of viewers, extending its impact far beyond the domestic sphere. The result is what in academic circles is often called a ‘context collapse’; that is, a clash between multiple performance situations in which different (and often opposite) norms, expectations and conventions play a role (boyd, 2008, 2011, 2014; Wesch, 2009). As I will illustrate in this chapter, the concept of a context collapse can be an important tool in understanding the daily worries and struggles of bedroom musicians on a platform such as YouTube. However, while previous research has mainly theorised the concept in relation to issues of privacy (see, e.g., boyd, 2014; Lincoln and Robards, 2014; Marwick and boyd, 2010, 2014; Vitak, 2012), I argue that it can be extended to other aspects of online interaction, as well. Indeed, bedroom videos not only blur the lines between the private and the public; they also complicate the boundaries between the domains of practicing and rehearsing, as well as product and process. Moreover, while it is sometimes suggested that participants are not aware of such complexities (see, e.g., Regan, FitzGerald and Balint, 2013), my argument underscores that the opposite is the case. Participants on YouTube are quite conscious of their situation. They view their online musical practices as important opportunities to establish intimate connections with audiences and peers around the world. But they are also very aware of the potential problems that come with trying to explore such intimacies on an open and popular platform such as YouTube.

Indeed, if we understand intimacy as being centred on aspects such as self-disclosure, reciprocity and mutual understanding (Chambers, 2013; Farci et al., 2016; Mashek and Aron, 2004), musical bedroom videos on YouTube both enhance and problematise issues of intimacy. While YouTube provides bedroom musicians with the opportunity to disclose their personal and otherwise hidden musical practices in new collective and shared ways, the rise of context collapses on this platform also means that these practices (and their underlying intentions and goals) are often misinterpreted and misunderstood by everyday users and social critics, alike. For this reason, bedroom musicians on YouTube are forced to continuously negotiate their activities. In fact, as I will show, participants often develop specific tactics in order to openly share their musical activities while simultaneously preventing the clashing of contexts from getting out of hand.

Drawing on 18 months of ethnographic research within a community of online bedroom musicians, this chapter investigates how users deal with the opportunities and challenges that come with practicing their musical activities online. By zooming in on the concept of ‘context collapse’, this chapter puts claims of alleged exhibitionism and narcissism into perspective and aims at contributing to a better understanding of the more contemplative and vulnerable aspects of online participation.

Collapsing contexts and YouTube

In recent years, the notion of ‘context collapse’ has gained quite some attention in academic studies on online participation and self-representation (boyd, 2008, 2011, 2014; Hodkinson, 2015; Lincoln and Robards, 2014; Marwick and boyd, 2010, 2014; Vitak, 2012; Wesch, 2009). The way the concept is used in these studies draws heavily on Erving Goffman’s (1967, 1990 [1959]) theories on social interaction. In his work, Goffman understands all social interactions as ‘performances’ that are ideally addressed to (and fit to) specific contexts and audiences. For Goffman, it does not matter whether such interaction involves an employer conducting a job interview, a professor giving a lecture or a stage performer doing a routine for a paying audience. In all cases, people try to adjust their performances to fit certain conventions and expectations. This is a process that Goffman calls ‘impression management’ (1990 [1959]). Managing such impressions, however, can be difficult in contexts where there is a relatively unknown audience or where different social relations and cultural conventions overlap and blend (the so-called ‘context collapse’). In such contexts, participants may feel vulnerable and misunderstandings between a performer and an audience can easily arise.

Although context collapses can occur in any social situation (mediated or unmediated, online or offline), they are often thought to be particularly apparent in today’s online networked spaces and social media environments (boyd 2008, 2011, 2014; Hodkinson, 2015; Lincoln and Robards, 2014; Vitak, 2012).ⁱⁱⁱ According to boyd, context collapses should even be understood as one of the defining aspects of the current social media landscape (boyd, 2014). This has primarily to do with the fact that social media bring a wide variety of practices and participants together in a single (virtual) environment. Most social media platforms operate on a global basis, turning every discussion (at least potentially) into a worldwide conversation, far

exceeding the context in which the message was originally sent. Moreover, participants often have the opportunity to communicate under pseudonyms or to be present in a fully covert way (through a process called ‘lurking’). This can make it difficult to demarcate separate social groups.

In the case of YouTube, in particular, context collapses are bound to occur because of the complex forms of transmission the platform allows. YouTube has become famous for its slogan ‘Broadcast Yourself’. As other media scholars have pointed out, however, one can question the extent to which ‘broadcasting’ is the correct term for the types of transmission made on this platform (Kant, 2014; Kim, 2012; Van Dijck, 2008).^{iv} On YouTube, different media logics blend and interact. Some content is produced by professional media companies and/or taken directly from mass media outlets such as television and film, while other content is fully user-generated. Some videos are directed at a global audience, while others are targeted at specific subcommunities, or even just family and friends. Moreover, we increasingly see small-scale productions going viral (either purposefully or accidentally), gaining huge global audiences. As such, the practices on YouTube navigate constantly between forms of broadcasting and ‘narrow casting’ (Kant, 2014; Kim, 2012) – a type of transmission directed towards highly segmented audiences and specific communities.

To make things more complex, many practices on YouTube (such as those of bedroom musicians) are grounded explicitly in the private sphere of the home. As such, they pertain to a category that José van Dijck (2008) calls ‘homecasting’. In her definition, homecasting distinguishes itself from both broadcasting and narrow casting, not only due to the role of the domestic sphere, but also due to the manner in which this particular form of media production lowers the threshold of participation and interaction. As she writes, ‘Homecasting accommodates the individual in the private sphere who feels the urge to make his or her opinions, insights and experiences available to everyone out there’ (Van Dijck, 2008, p. 7). Conceptually, homecasting has strong ties with so-called ‘home-mode’ forms of cultural production, which were part of the cultural landscape long before the rise of social media (Chalfen, 1987; see also Lange, 2009, 2014). However, if home-mode forms of cultural production were traditionally consumed within fairly small and intimate circles of individuals (Lange, 2009, 2014), in the current media landscape, such practices tend to move freely between ‘relatively private and more public practices’ (Lange, 2014, p. 17; see also Buckingham, Willett

and Pini, 2011), thus complicating issues of privacy and intimacy. Indeed, if we understand the private as that which is relatively personal and secluded and the public as that which is relatively open and revealed (Weintraub, 1997), many homecasting practices on YouTube are positioned precisely in-between these realms (Lange, 2007), and can best be described as ‘privately public’ or ‘publicly private’ (Lange, 2007).

While current generations of media users may seem unaware of such complexities, recent ethnographic research suggests otherwise. According to boyd, for example, online participants actively negotiate the lines between the private and the public in their social media practices (boyd, 2014). In a similar way, in her work on teenage bedroom cultures, Sian Lincoln (2005, 2014) describes a process she calls ‘zoning’, whereby participants tactically navigate the ways in which they open (and close) their private lives to the outside world. Such zoning practices can involve the strategic use of ‘tags’ or privacy settings in order to ensure certain messages or performances stay within a particular context. By creating such zones, participants are able to influence when, how and with whom they establish intimate connections online, and can minimise the negative consequences of potential context collapses.

During my own empirical research, I found that bedroom musicians actively negotiate context collapses, as well. For them, however, these contextual issues are not solely related to the issue of private versus public. Their daily activities also involve other balancing acts, which are closely tied to aspects relating to music, collaboration and learning. Looking into these aspects in more detail, as I do below, can give us more insight into the different ways in which context collapses occur online.

Investigating a community of bedroom musicians

As part of a larger research project on online musical participation (Michielse, 2015), I conducted virtual ethnographic fieldwork (Hine, 2000) in a community of bedroom musicians on YouTube. This fieldwork took place mainly between December 2012 and May 2014, although some of the contact with participants continued until 2015. The community I investigated was formed around the ‘Gregory Brothers’ – a musical band that was particularly popular and influential around that time. In their videos, the Gregory Brothers performed so-called ‘songified’ versions of famous Internet videos. They took existing, non-musical content

from YouTube and turned it into a song, complete with elaborate musical arrangements, backing vocals and a beat. At the end of their videos, they explicitly invited viewers to upload their own versions of the songs. Often, such invitations would lead to dozens of uploaded musical reinterpretations from people all around the world. Most of these videos would be recorded in or near a bedroom, although occasionally they would be performed in other parts of the house, such as a kitchen, attic or basement. Some participants would perform the song with their voice, while others would play along with the tracks on guitar, piano or drums.

I chose to focus on the Gregory Brothers' 'songify' projects because these were some of the most popular participatory musical events on YouTube at the time. As such, they enabled me to come into contact with a large number of participants. Moreover, by using the 'songify' projects as a starting point for my investigation, I also got the chance to explore other types of musical performances that did not immediately pertain to the Gregory Brothers' work. Some of the people I met, for example, did performances of songs from bands such as Maroon 5 or Daft Punk, as well; others performed musical interpretations of film scores or soundtracks from popular computer games. By looking into these different practices, I was able to get a better idea of the wide variety of musical activities that bedroom musicians engage in on YouTube.

During my fieldwork I watched relevant videos, read comments, monitored new uploads and asked questions via email or private messages. Furthermore, I conducted longer qualitative interviews via Skype with 20 participants.^v These interviews lasted between 50 and 150 minutes (sometimes spread over multiple sessions). The male and female participants in these interviews were between the ages of 18 and 40 and were based in countries around the world, including Australia, Brazil, Belgium, Sweden, the United States and the United Kingdom. During the interviews, I asked them about their motivations, experiences and struggles, as well as about particular activities or interactions I had seen during my fieldwork. All participants gave me permission to use their quotes and usernames in my research.^{vi} They also gave me permission to discuss their experiences and examples in my work.

Apart from the issue of private versus public, two other examples of collapsing contexts seemed key to the everyday experiences and struggles of the bedroom musicians. First, their practices tended to waver between rehearsing and performing. As I show below, this balancing act was

not always understood or appreciated outside the community of practitioners. Secondly, the bedroom videos often straddled (individual) products and (collective) processes, which could give rise to worries and misunderstandings. While both examples are of course intertwined with the issue of private versus public, they also point at other struggles and negotiations that, to date, have rarely been explored and discussed from a scholarly angle.

Between rehearsing and performing

The bedroom has historically functioned as an important space for musical experimentation and learning (Lincoln, 2005), and the YouTube videos I studied clearly show traces of this, although in a new way. During the fieldwork, it became clear that it is quite common for bedroom musicians on YouTube to ‘play along’ with recorded songs, rather than to reperform a song from scratch (see also Miller, 2012). Some participants wear earplugs or headphones, while others have the original track (or an instrumental version) playing on a laptop or stereo set. In these videos, they try to keep up with the pace of the original track when playing their instrument or singing. While some participants look into the camera, others turn inwards, concentrating on their musical instrument or their voice. Often, little mistakes are audible and occasionally a performer has to start over. Indeed, as became clear during the interviews, many of these videos are recorded early on, in what Bennett (1980) calls the ‘song-getting’ process; that is, the process by which musicians familiarise themselves with the melody, chords and sound of a particular song. While participants usually go over the song a couple of times before they film, it normally does not take long before they press the record button. As a result, their performance is often far from polished when it is uploaded online. In fact, the video presented online may be seen as an integrated part of the song-getting practice.

By uploading such semi-rehearsals to an open platform such as YouTube, the producers challenge what Goffman (1990 [1959]) calls the ‘front region’ and ‘back region’ of performance (or the frontstage and backstage). If rehearsing is traditionally a backstage affair – an activity through which performers prepare for and strategically plan the way they will present themselves to the outside world – these bedroom videos explicitly open up such backstage practices and turn them into a shared activity. As my fieldwork revealed, bedroom musicians do this purposefully. Few of the participants I met are interested in (or striving for) perfectionism in their work, as they associate it with a sense of distance and a lack of personal

contact between the performer and viewers. Instead, they consider their bedroom videos opportunities for them to disclose relatively vulnerable moments of the song-getting process and to create a sense of intimacy by letting viewers in on their musical struggles and explorations.^{vii} Moreover, many bedroom musicians see their practices as opportunities for learning. They use their videos to train particular musical skills, to experiment or to get feedback from fellow music enthusiasts. Thus, they explicitly allow room for more undeveloped aspects of musical performance in their videos.

However, combining such practices of performing and rehearsing on an open platform such as YouTube is not an easy task. Participants sometimes receive critical remarks about the way in which they present themselves in front of the camera. For example, one of the interviewees, JTehAnonymous, told me: ‘People watch like if you’re smiling, or if you’re like totally into your music or, you know? [...] Sometimes they don’t even comment on the music, they are just like “You look really sad when you play, you should smile”, you know?’ (30 March 2013). While such remarks may seem rather innocent, they are sometimes accompanied by harsher criticisms, especially from viewers who are outside the community of bedroom musicians. During my fieldwork, it became clear that participants sometimes get fiercely attacked for their lack of skill (‘You suck’; ‘This sucks hardcore’) or lack of musical originality (‘Stupid meaningless copying’; ‘Stupid copy’; ‘Welcome to the world of copying an already successful song’).^{viii}

While comments and critiques are often sought after and welcomed by bedroom musicians, they can also be demotivating and hurtful, especially when they are grounded in adverse expectations. Even in more professional social-critical commentaries (Keen, 2007, 2012; Carr, 2016), online participatory practices are sometimes dismissed for their lack of quality, side-stepping the fact that many of these activities are meant as forms of learning and experimentation. During the interviews, participants were actually quite humble about their performance skills. As Guilherme (username zzzzzzzwakeup) phrased it: ‘I’m not a stage artist. I am just a guy who likes music as a language and as a communication tool’ (3 April 2013). During our conversation, he described his bedroom video to be ‘more akin to singing in the shower’ than to any professional musical production. On a platform such as YouTube, however, where bedroom videos appear alongside content from more established musicians and bands, such differences in artistic standards and motivations can easily be mixed up by the audience.

In order to minimise misunderstandings, some participants include small warning signs or disclaimers in and around their videos. Participants state phrases such as: ‘I was in a rush making this’; ‘[E]xcuse the struggle’; or ‘[It is] not flawless but what is?’^{ix} Such disclaimers can be either phrased verbally in the video or articulated in the video’s title, description or comment section. For relative outsiders, warning messages and disclaimers might perhaps point at a false sense of modesty. During the fieldwork, however, I found that these functioned as an important tactic to temper expectations and avoid reaching the ‘wrong’ audience with a video. Thus, such disclaimers should be regarded as a good example of what Lincoln calls ‘zoning practices’ (Lincoln, 2005, 2014). By adding phrases about the still underdeveloped nature of their performances, the bedroom musicians explicitly try to shield their videos from contexts and expectations with which they are incompatible. Thus, this is an important way for them to reduce the negative consequences of the context collapse surrounding these practices.

Between (individual) product and (collective) process

While bedroom musicians sometimes feel misunderstood in their practice, this is not only because their work is judged according to the ‘wrong’ standards, but also because their videos are evaluated as individual products rather than parts of larger, collective *processes*. Though bedroom videos are usually produced and uploaded in relative isolation, they are ultimately meant to function in larger networks of other performances and interactions. These networks give the individual videos meaning and purpose. On YouTube, bedroom musicians sometimes strategically select songs that have already been covered by their peers. Moreover, participants explicitly link their own work to that of others. They write comments on work made by peers, upload video responses and take part in online collaborations. In this way, they actively and purposefully engage in ‘pooling’ practices through which they embed their work in larger networks of participants.

While such ‘pooling’ practices are sometimes regarded as a simple tactic for generating traffic and views (DeMers, 2015; Lastufka and Dean, 2009), they actually serve important other purposes. First, they make it possible for participants to socialise and to create a sense of reciprocity (see also Lange, 2009). As one of the interviewees, Vincent J. Wicker, explained: ‘Views just means that someone saw it, it doesn’t mean that someone engaged in it [...] I am

looking for people to interact with, I'm looking for people to comment on my stuff, to tell me what they like or what they didn't like' (30 May 2013). During the interviews, participants continuously stressed how they enjoy being part of a 'group' or a 'circle' of peers, highlighting the social and intimate aspects of their practice as much as the musical aspects. Besides this, many of the bedroom videos are, as I have shown above, explicitly based on practices of learning and experimentation. These activities do not take place in isolation, but are supported by larger networks of peers. A good example of this is the production and exchange of so-called 'tutorial videos'. In these videos, participants explain to each other how to approach a given song on a particular musical instrument (see also Miller, 2012). These tutorial videos are often purposefully interlinked with, and circulated amongst, existing bedroom videos. By creating and sharing such educational videos, bedroom musicians purposefully embed themselves in larger communities of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991) in which different forms of peer directed learning can take place.

Even when there is no explicit tutorial available, the sheer fact that YouTube makes it possible to navigate from one video to another is crucial for some participants. Many of the interviewees described, for example, how they value the ability to watch all of the different iterations of a particular song that have been uploaded to YouTube, in order to see what other bedroom musicians have done with it. By comparing slight changes in the iterations of these songs – called 'small creative acts' in other research (Michielse and Partti, 2015; Toynbee, 2000, 2001) – bedroom musicians are able learn a lot about processes of musical variation and interpretation. Moreover, they can gain a better understanding of the possibilities of different musical tools and instruments. Thus, the pooling practices of these bedroom musicians function not only as a way for them to gain a sense of reciprocity, but also as an important opportunity for them to improve their skills by mutually comparing personal approaches and struggles.

Seen from this perspective, an individual bedroom video (taken as an isolated product) is much less important to the participants than the collective processes, experiences and relations that such a video allows. It is for this reason that participants sometimes feel hesitant and anxious about leaving their videos online for longer periods of time. Especially in an era of viral media, the interest in particular artists or songs can rise quickly, but also disappear rapidly. This implies that the musical communities around a particular artist or song may swiftly dissolve. For bedroom musicians, such a situation poses a risk as it means that their videos will stop being

part of a collective endeavour and start functioning again as individual, isolated events. In order to avoid such a situation, many participants choose to update their video libraries regularly. This may involve adding, removing or ‘privatising’ particular videos. Indeed, many of the participants I followed have taken down one or more of their videos from their YouTube channels simply because they felt the videos were no longer relevant or because interest around a certain song had died down. Such practices can also be seen as important strategies of ‘zoning’, as they are meant to ‘shield’ the musical practices from misunderstanding and reduce the chance that the videos will be consumed out of context.

Conclusion

On YouTube, bedroom musicians find new possibilities to disclose their otherwise private musical practices and establish new connections with people all around the world. At the same time, their activities are met with criticism and misunderstanding, especially from relative outsiders to the community of practitioners. In this chapter, I have explored this double-sided situation with the help of the concept of context collapse. As I have shown, bedroom performances not only blur the boundaries between the private and the public, but also complicate the distinction between rehearsing and performing, and product and process. By zooming in on these blurry boundaries, my argument reveals the precarious situation of bedroom musicians and their occasional struggle to produce or maintain meaningful and intimate connections with other viewers and peers on YouTube. At the same time, my discussion highlights some of the tactics and strategies used by participants to negotiate this position and turn their online practices into meaningful and valuable shared activities.

As the fieldwork for this study reveals, bedroom musicians are hardly oblivious to the tensions surrounding their daily activities. If participants, despite these tensions, decide to upload their work to YouTube, it is not because they believe themselves to possess a special set of skills or because they are exhibitionists or narcissists. Rather, it is because they see important possibilities and advantages in doing so. As I have shown, posting bedroom covers on YouTube can form the basis of different forms of musical experimentation and learning. In addition, the sharing of videos has important social functions. YouTube gives musical performers the ability to connect with others and share musical activities between one bedroom and another, anywhere in the world. This opportunity is historically unique. As authors such as Bennett (1980) and

Green (2001, 2008) have shown, informal processes of musical learning and experimentation have long remained hidden in the privacy of the home. Before the rise of social media platforms, domestic learning practices were rarely discussed or shared amongst (beginner) musicians, making it difficult for them to learn from peers or to establish personal contacts. Today, however, such processes are increasingly revealed and opened up. While this is something both performers and audiences may still need to get used to, it also brings important new possibilities for current and future generations of music enthusiasts.

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ⁱ Parts of this chapter are based on my PhD dissertation (Michielse, 2015).

ⁱⁱ Burgess uses the term ‘virtuosic bedroom performance’ in her work (2008, p. 107). In this chapter, I use the more neutral term ‘musical bedroom performance’, as part of my argument is that many of these videos are actually quite modest in their showcasing of technical and musical skills.

ⁱⁱⁱ It is for this reason that Goffman’s theories (which were originally largely grounded in non-mediated encounters) have been widely adopted in new media studies.

^{iv} This slogan is no longer used by the platform (see also Burgess, 2015).

^v Most of the interviewees clearly fit the label of ‘bedroom musician’. A few of them, however, also experimented with different variations on the bedroom performance. They would record their videos, for example, in other domestic places, such as the attic, basement, kitchen or living room. A couple of the interviewees even experimented with moving their performance outside the home, in some of their videos. While the study of such variations was highly relevant to my larger research project on online musical practices (Michielse, 2015), in this chapter I focus mainly on the participants, performances and experiences that related explicitly to the bedroom.

^{vi} Usernames are not completely anonymous, as they may carry traces of the user’s offline life. As such, the use of these names in research requires careful handling by the researcher. At the same time, however, as authors such as Bruckman (2002) and Bakardjieva and Feenberg (2000) have argued, working with usernames can be an important way to pay respect to online participants and their creative practices. This is especially true for amateur performers, who might feel alienated from their creative labour when their work, experiences and practices are not properly credited. In this chapter I refer to usernames, where possible, but refrain from mentioning such specifics when discussing particularly sensitive examples or issues.

^{vii} One of the performers, JTehAnonymous, explained that he imagines his viewers to be literally positioned close to the screen, potentially with headphones on, when watching his videos.

^{viii} These examples come directly from my field notes, taken between December 2012 and May 2014.

^{ix} These examples also come directly from my field notes, taken between December 2012 and May 2014.