



## FEATURE

# Covid-19: The doctors turned YouTubers

**Chris Stokel-Walker** reports on the medical professionals whose YouTube channels have become vital sources of public information

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In times of uncertainty we seek information and increasingly that comes online. The world's second most visited website—also the second biggest search engine in the world—has a big role to play. That site is YouTube.

Global search queries on YouTube for coronavirus spiked between mid-February and the beginning of April 2020.<sup>1</sup> A typical search finds some doctors newly taking to the platform with confessionals, voicing frustrations, concerns, and observations of what is still a confusing medical emergency. Such emotional videos are moving but can be dangerously confusing to a public desperate for expert answers.

Elsewhere on the platform, however, is an already established YouTube community of medical professionals battling to continue to keep their existing audiences informed during the pandemic.

"We've seen colleagues across the world sharing their lived experiences of covid-19 on social media. We view this as positive, serving to build our global healthcare community in the face of this pandemic," Maggie Rae, president of the UK Faculty of Public Health, told *The BMJ*.

"While social media channels can be a hotbed of misinformation, we do also see genuine medical experts and healthcare bodies using channels such as YouTube as a tool to disseminate advice and guidance."

## Skyrocketing views

"I'd never really seen the channel as providing a public service," said Rohin Francis, a cardiologist studying for a doctorate at University College London, who has been posting videos on YouTube for the past two years under the name Medlife Crisis.<sup>2</sup> Until March, his videos were jokey clips answering pop science questions such as why humans feel the need to pee when they get into water, or analysing the latest research about red meat in our diet. Francis purposely stuck to talking about cardiology, until he realised confusion in UK government guidance on covid-19 was sowing public uncertainty.

He uploaded his first video about covid-19,<sup>3</sup> a 10 minute rumination on how the crisis might end, on 6 March. It has since been seen more than 200 000 times. Since then he's uploaded

five more videos on the coronavirus which have been seen 1.8 million times. He believes he contracted covid-19—though he hasn't been tested—and posted a 10 minute vlog detailing his symptoms which has been seen nearly a quarter of a million times.

John Campbell has seen a similar increase. "It's gone from about half a million views on a good month, to 22 million views in the past 28 days," he told *The BMJ*. Campbell spent some 27 years teaching nursing, and he spent three years from 2016 as a staff nurse at an accident and emergency department. For 12 years, his YouTube channel<sup>4</sup> has been an educational resource for nursing students, going through the "basic information every medical student in the world needs to know," some of which he feels is often skipped over in courses. But in recent months his channel has become a base for the wider public looking for information on covid-19.

Campbell posted his first video on the subject on 26 January and has since posted more than 150 videos on the coronavirus—nearly two a day. He spends roughly four or five hours a day poring through medical journals, epidemiological analyses, and open letters from medical societies including the British Ear, Nose, and Throat Society, whose letter raised awareness of the link between anosmia and covid-19.<sup>5</sup>

"You've got to look for the most definitive opinion you can get—whether a conglomeration of expert opinion or individual research data published in journals," he said. "But there's not a great deal of high quality stuff at the moment."

## Cutting through the noise

That's part of the big challenge for YouTubers. Danielle Jones, an obstetrics and gynaecology doctor based in Texas, who posts on YouTube as Mama Doctor Jones,<sup>6</sup> admits being a respected face broadcasting about the pandemic is a challenge. "I want to get the information out quickly, because it's changing so fast, but I want to make sure it's accurate."

As medical understanding of covid-19 increases, and the literature expands and matures, the pressures on YouTube creators to try to agglomerate different guidance eases while country-by-country differences converge.

Jones relies on publications and guidance released by all the major obstetrics and gynaecology organisations worldwide and synthesises the information into easily understandable support for her viewers. “They vary a little bit, but not enormously,” she told *The BMJ*. “The main audience I have is in the English speaking world, and they’re pretty much all saying the same thing now,” said Francis: stay at home, wash your hands, check for symptoms including a persistent cough and fever.

That’s important because the two billion monthly active users on YouTube come from all corners of the globe in search of reliable, reputable information. “I don’t know if there’s ever been a time where we’ve had something like this, applicable to every audience,” said Jones.

## Great influence, great responsibility

YouTube can be monetised by allowing Google to sell commercial advertising, shown before, during, and after videos, and tailored to the audience watching. None of the medical YouTubers *The BMJ* spoke to had advertising attached to their coronavirus videos. (YouTube has since revised its policy to decouple adverts from covid-19 content after complaints from non-medical YouTubers.)

All the medical YouTubers *The BMJ* spoke to were wary about hailing new innovations. “I know as a doctor if I say this drug has promise, it carries more weight, so I’ve been careful,” said Francis.

Campbell was also keen to stress his role as a generalist, one who refers to the experts when he knows he is straying out of his area. “It would be good to get more material from experts in the field,” he said. “If an ear, nose, and throat surgeon says something, that carries a lot more weight than someone like me.”

“Because we’re a face on YouTube, people tend to place trust in us which we don’t necessarily ask for,” said Francis. “People might give what I say undue weight because they’ve built up trust in me.”

Trust and familiarity are the currency that brings viewers back to a channel. YouTubers generally speak directly to camera, making their videos feel more personal than a typical mainstream broadcast. This is crucial as YouTube has become part of the daily information diet for many demographics, not just teenagers.

A YouTube spokesperson told *The BMJ*, “We’re committed to providing timely and helpful information at this critical time, including raising authoritative content, reducing the spread of harmful misinformation, and showing information panels, using data from the World Health Organization and the NHS, to help combat misinformation.”

None of the YouTuber medics are doing this for reward—either financial or egotistical. It’s a public service, a duty, almost an extension of the oath they took as healthcare workers.

Competing interests: I have read and understood BMJ policy on declaration of interests declare the following interests: I am the author of a book about YouTube, *YouTubers: How YouTube shook up TV and Created a New Generation of Stars*, published in May 2019 by Canbury Press

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