

157,374
SUBSCRIBERS

454,077
SUBSCRIBERS

2,648,055
SUBSCRIBERS

1,825,883
SUBSCRIBERS

519,922
SUBSCRIBERS

BIGGER THAN THE BEEB

While you were watching TV, these people became the biggest stars in the country. You've probably never heard of them, but they're changing things forever...

Words Matt Blake
Photography David Emery



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:

POET STEWART
AGE: 28
FROM: LONDON
CHANNEL: COPAGO

KIM RICHARDS
AGE: IT'S A SECRET
FROM: BRISTOL
CHANNEL: YOGSCAST KIM

TOM RIDGEWELL
AGE: 22
FROM: CAMBRIDGE
CHANNEL: TOMSKA



JACK HOWARD
AGE: 22
FROM: NOTTINGHAM
CHANNEL: JACK HOWARD

TANYA BURR
AGE: 24
FROM: NORWICH
CHANNEL: TANYA BURR

DAVID VUJANIC
AGE: 21
FROM: LONDON
CHANNEL: COPAGO

WE

used to know where we stood with celebrities. They walked into a room and we knew who they were because we'd seen them on the telly. We may not have even liked their work. But it had been forced through our eyeballs by TV execs in meetings to which we weren't even invited.

But *FHM* is standing in a room full of celebrities, and we have no idea who any of them are. Bright-eyed and all in their early twenties, they are the new generation of on-screen stars who are not-so-quietly transforming our world. Their revolution, though, will not be televised – it's already online. And it's bigger than you can probably imagine. Meet the YouTube superstars of 2014.

"We got bored, so we took over," says Tom Ridgewell, a 22-year-old from Cambridge, who attracts more viewers to his TomSka comedy channel (2.6 million) than MTV does in a week (2.01 million). "Imagine if a school trip to the BBC turned violent and suddenly the kids were in charge of TV," he adds. "Who wouldn't

watch that? No one knows where we came from or how long we'll be around for but, right now, we're in charge. We're pushing no one's agenda but our own."

We meet Tom and five other YouTubers at the company's mothership in Google's central London HQ. Walking through YouTube feels a bit like we've stumbled on to the set of a futuristic remake of William Golding's *Lord Of The Flies*, staged inside a massive submarine. Nobody here is over the age of 30 and the corridors are lined with yellow airlock-style doors. Behind them lies an array of themed studios: a living room full of leather sofas with a wall-mounted telly; a Western-style saloon bar; and a TV newsroom, as well as various editing suites in which YouTubers are actively encouraged to do whatever the hell they want (as long as they don't break anything). It's a Willy Wonka wonderland for the webcam generation.

► **The new fame game**

These aren't just geeky kids holed up in their bedrooms with a broadband

connection. To their fans, they are a massive deal – bigger in their own way than the majority of stars sat on the *Jonathan Ross Show* couch on a Saturday.

"When I attended Comic-Con in London last year, people were queuing for hours in the cold to get a picture with me," says Kim Richards from Bristol, who hosts the hugely popular gaming show Yogscast Kim. "There were girls shaking and crying just because they'd met me. It blows my mind – I'm just a girl who loves gaming and put some videos about it on the internet."

All six have similar stories – they're recognised in the streets wherever they go and idolised by teenagers not only in Britain, but across the world.

"Kids don't watch TV any more," says 22-year-old Jack Howard from Nottingham, whose two comedy channels Jack Howard and OMFG! It's Jack & Dean have a combined fanbase of more than 450,000. "They used to sit and watch Saturday morning cartoons, but now the first thing kids do is go online or check their phone. YouTube gives you the

freedom to choose – you don't have to surf a limited set of channels in the hope there might be something on you want to watch."

► **Comedy and football**

Do you still watch TV? You need to let go. YouTube is no longer just a portal for lonely people to post videos of their cats in washing machines or of pole-dancers falling on their heads. It's now a world where those who 'get it' can do whatever they want, whenever they want... and can turn it into a lucrative business as well.

"I was in this class in college and there was this 50-year-old director trying to inspire us," says Tom. "He was saying how he started out as a runner when he was 21, worked his way up and here he was having just done his first film. I was like, 'Fuck that – I'm going to do this now.' The idea of clawing my way up working for idiots who know nothing except what has worked in the past is boring. I want to innovate and challenge. If I have a funny joke idea, I can just put it out there."

It's this no-holds-barred freedom that also attracted Londoners Poet Stewart, 28, and David Vujanic, 21, to YouTube. Together they host the site's largest independent footy channel, Copa90, which entertains more than half a million subscribers worldwide.

"If I want to do cartwheels across the studio during filming, I'll do cartwheels across the studio during filming," says Poet. "Our viewers like us because we're like them. We're real."

He goes on: "*Match Of The Day* is now boring and stale. I don't want to watch Alan Hansen talk about football – no disrespect to Alan, he's a gorgeous-looking guy, but he's my dad's generation. The pundits on TV now are all ex-footballers and are so concerned with relationships in the game, about breaking ties, that they don't actually say what they think. I call it tell-lies vision."

"We're natural and honest," adds Serbia-born David. "The only people telling us what to do are our viewers. If they don't like something, they tell us through the comments section or Twitter or Facebook. It's an ongoing conversation between us and them. Now, TV producers are starting to see how we do things and copy us."

► **Strictly business**

YouTube launched on 23 April 2005 with an upload of a video from the elephant enclosure at San Diego zoo. The site was bought by Google for just over £1 billion the following year and, despite growing, barely made a profit. That changed in 2010 when the site introduced TrueView, a system that allowed users to skip almost two-thirds of its adverts easily, meaning Google could now charge much more for

the ads people *did* watch. In the last year, YouTube's subscribers have increased by 60%, with more than 6 billion hours of video watched each month on its site – almost an hour for each person on Earth.

The corporate pound can no longer afford to ignore the power of YouTube. Just take Tanya Burr, for example. The 24-year-old from Norwich runs a hugely popular beauty channel and has just been taken on by Superdrug to stock her own make-up range. With more than 1.8 million viewers, it makes *E!*'s weekly average of 1.4 million seem rather pathetic.

"My fans listen to me because, through YouTube, I've developed a relationship with them," she says. "I see them as my friends, every single one."

It's not real friendship, though, is it? "It's so real," Tanya argues. "Girls email me every day to tell me I've given them confidence and made them feel good at school. And I try to reply to every one."

We'd be inclined to doubt her were it not for the fact that in May last year, an almost-riot was caused in London's Covent Garden after Burr tried to organise an impromptu meet-and-greet outside the local Apple store.

And, of course, where there's an audience, there's money. Frustratingly, YouTube prefers to keep the exact details of its financial model a mystery to anyone from whose profits it isn't taking a cut (it wouldn't tell us what that was, but our research points to around 30%). None of the YouTubers we've met will tell us exactly what they earn either, but you can bet, for most of them, it's more than their parents.

It starts with a YouTuber's CPM (cost per thousand impressions). That can range from 50p to £10, depending on the kind of advertising deals you have in place. After your video hits an unspecified threshold, YouTube starts paying. "Google approach agencies with the opportunity to advertise on our page and we decide if we want them or not," says Tom. "But because we own everything on there, we can say no if we don't like the company or product they want to promote."

There's also merchandising. Tanya sells make-up, Jack sells T-shirts and posters while Tom sells tees, wristbands, books and more. Kim also does rather well creating parody songs and selling them on iTunes for 79p a download. Her last one, a reworking of John Lennon's *Happy Xmas (War Is Over)*, reached number two in iTunes' UK comedy charts in December.

Speaking to these YouTubers, it's hard not to wonder what those bonus-hungry TV execs would say. This generation loves YouTube because it's what they grew up with. It's theirs right now and nobody

else's. They make videos, uninterrupted by grown-ups, and put them out into the world where they're judged by their peer group. YouTube is their home and their core understanding of the importance of community and audience interaction is undoubtedly the future of entertainment.

But, most importantly, it's better than 'working' for a living. "My mum always used to ask me when I was going to get a real job," says Tom. "Then I got recognised in the street with her and she was like, 'Oooh, I still don't understand it, but good for you.' They're proud of me now. Though they still don't get it." **FHM**

THE INDEX OF POPULARITY

What are the key ingredients to success? YouTube's biggest vloggers all tend to have these strengths...

