Figuring It Out
On YouTube, watch John Fish grow.
by Jacob Sweet

The first two years of college were a time of adjustments for John Fish ‘21. Like any other student, he made mistakes, contemplated new ideas, and tried to best manage his time. But most students don’t go through this process in front of an audience of hundreds of thousands. Fish does.

During his senior year of high school in Waterloo, Canada, Fish started making daily video blogs (vlogs) and posting them on YouTube. Much in the style of one of the site’s most popular video-makers, Casey Neistat, he shared stylized summaries of his everyday life, filming his daily routine.

Those interested could watch him spend time with friends, cook, and prepare for track meets.

A few days into that daily vlogging, a distracted driver blind-sided Fish’s car (the immediate aftermath of which is on YouTube). His vehicle was crushed, and even though his injuries weren’t major, doctors told him to rest. Confined to his house and unable to take viewers—to the extent there were any—out and about with him, he decided to make a video exploring a popular YouTube topic: college admissions. His first college-related video, “HOW I GOT INTO HARVARD,” detailed his test scores, running accolades, and athletic recruitment. The 10-minute opus brought him hundreds of thousands of views.

On YouTube, the Harvard name is powerful. Search for it, and you’ll find dozens of popular videos in which students (or accepted students) discuss how they got in, vlog through a typical college day, or discuss an aspect of campus culture, like the dating or party scenes. In the “college decision” category, for which people record their joyful or subdued reactions to an acceptance, waitlist, or rejection, Harvard videos are especially in demand.

Often, though, Harvard-centric videos are one-hit wonders. Someone being swarmed by classmates moments after getting accepted might generate a few hundred thousand views (or an appearance on The Ellen DeGeneres Show), but in the competitive world of YouTube, it doesn’t guarantee a sustained audience. The few handfuls of Harvard students who’ve tried building a following usually receive only a fraction of their peak viewership for non-Harvard material, and
Nevertheless, Fish, like many who taste YouTube fame, began obsessing over his views and likes. When he reached 100,000 subscribers—people notified when he posts something new—in a month, he felt compelled to roll his success over to the next, churning out crowd-pleasing videos. “HOW TO GET INTO HARVARD,” “HOW IVY LEAGUE RECRUITING WORKS,” and others drew thousands of viewers to his channel. Even on his non-college videos, commenters requested tours of his dorm, a review of the computer-science concentration, and general inside looks into the alluring world of Harvard.

When he finally arrived in Cambridge, the potential for YouTube growth was undeniable. A sharply edited daily vlog from a Harvard student would likely work wonders. But Fish realized that attracting a huge audience wasn’t why he’d started making YouTube videos in the first place. “Making a video a week was fun for me,” he said recently. “But then over the summer, it kind of progressed into something that I was doing for external pressures.” Making videos had been a creative challenge. Now it was a burden. During that first September and October, as his viewers requested and expected a number of College-related videos, commenters requested tours of his dorm, a review of the computer-science concentration, and general inside looks into the alluring world of Harvard.

When he reappeared in December, his tone was different. Standing on the Science Center roof, with the campus sprawled out behind him, he looked into his camera and confessed: “Things might be a bit different because I was a completely different person, so I want to change that.”

Instead of talking about how he got something—a college acceptance, a co-op internship—he began focusing more on the day-in, day-out work that helped him achieve his goals, hoping others would find his perspective useful. Soon he didn’t have to include “Harvard” in his titles to draw

**OPEN BOOK**

**Things Fell Apart**

*How It Changed America.* In *Transaction Man: The Rise of the Deal and the Decline of the American Dream* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, $28), he traces dislocations in the political economy to developments during the New Deal, at Harvard Business School, and on Wall Street. His point of departure, in the prologue, is a car dealership.

On May 15, 2009, FedEx dropped off an ominously slender package from General Motors at the parts department at D’Andrea Buick, on the South Side of Chicago....The parts department got the package to Nick D’Andrea, the owner, a strutting bantam rooster with a broad chest, a head of curly white hair, and sharp eyes that move around, taking everything in. He tore it open and found out that he was out of business.

What was happening? The world was falling apart....General Motors...had gone bankrupt. It meant that the whole dense, built-up web of arrangements that gave some protection to a small one-store auto dealer like Nick was null and void. President Barack Obama had appointed a “car czar,” a guy from Wall Street....and he had decreed that in exchange for its $50 billion in government bailout money, GM, along with Chrysler, which was also bankrupt, would have to close more than a thousand dealerships all over the country....The letter told Nick to sell his inventory and close his store in a month.

Nick had lived his whole life in Chicago. He thought he knew how life was supposed to work: it was far from perfect, but at least it was understandable. Loyalty, being straight with people, and maintaining connections was everything....GM used to send a guy around to visit D’Andrea Buick every so often—a good guy, who could see how well Nick was running the dealership. Then the Internet came along, and the visits were replaced with teleconferences. At one of the teleconferences it was announced that GM was going to start combining several brands into single dealerships; Buick was going to be put together with Pontiac and GMC trucks. ...[In 2007] the company gave [Nick] an ultimatum: do this, or your business will be in jeopardy, because we control your supply of cars and...the franchise that lets you operate as a GM dealer. So Nick, who’d been proud to operate a debt-free dealership, borrowed money—from GM’s credit company, GMAC—and bought out the Pontiac dealer. Then he had to get a “floor plan”—another loan, also from GM—to stock his dealership with new Pontiacs. And he had to renovate the building, using a GM-approved architect, again with money borrowed from GM. By the time he reopened, he was in debt to GM for close to a million dollars...and he had mortgaged both the dealership and his house.

Nick started selling Pontiacs along with Buicks in August 2008. In September, the financial crisis hit. On the South Side of Chicago, everybody buys cars with borrowed money—but suddenly you couldn’t borrow....Then, in October, Nick got a letter from GM saying that in a few months it was going to terminate Pontiac as a brand.
"Find My Real Husband"

Arthur Kleinman—Rabb professor of anthropology, professor of medical anthropology, and professor of psychiatry—crosses disciplinary and cultural boundaries (he has long worked in China) to explore and enrich the dimensions of care beyond the familiar domains of health technology and finance. In The Soul of Care: The Moral Education of a Husband and a Doctor (Viking, $27), his most personal work, he looks inward, to the demands imposed by, and the caregiver’s response to, his late wife’s catastrophic dementia. From the prologue:

"Get out! Get out!"

My wife, Joan, is screaming, and hitting out wildly at the stranger in her bed. She is greatly agitated and frightened. "Get away from here. Get out!"

But the man she perceives as a stranger is me, her husband of more than 40 years. Joan has just woken up from a midday nap. It is summer 2009 in Cambridge, Massachusetts. We are in the bedroom of the home we have lived in for 27 years.

I try to keep my voice calm and hide the panic rising inside me. "I'm your husband, Arthur. Don't be so upset, I'm here with you!"

"You are not! You are not Arthur! You are an impostor! Get out! Now!" she yells, shaking and intensely alert, like a trapped animal.

I try in all the ways I can think of to calm her and to prove to her that I am calm and hide the panic close to her and even the physical space person systematically misperceives those close to her and even the physical space she is occupying as unreal and fake. As in Joan's case, it most often is episodic, short-lived, and readily forgotten, but for those close to the sufferer, it can be world-shattering—as if a bond that has taken decades to forge can be broken in an instant.

I'm a trained psychiatrist. I should have the tools to deal with this. But right now, in this moment, I am a shocked and devastated husband. This episode, like the first, lasts a few terrible hours. During that time, I have to retreat to another part of our house, and wait until it burns itself out and she has returned to a calm state. I am also, however, a caregiver—Joan's primary caregiver. Several times I try to engage her in normal conversation, but she rejects me. Finally, I make believe I am someone else, there to help her.

"Well, get rid of this impostor and find my real husband," she implores.

an audience. “How I Fight Unproductivity” received hundreds of thousands of views; “Reading a Book a Week Is Changing My Life” drew millions.

Fish has a distinct confessional style in his videos, mostly sitting on a chair in his bedroom and addressing viewers directly. He speaks animatedly from a script, but leaves room for improvisation. One could argue he fits into the YouTube world of self-help, but he tries to show the process behind his decisionmaking, rather than delve out inspirational quotes and promises. He explains, for example, why he decided to read one book a week (not a day, like other gurus), how the wide variety of books has changed his thinking, and how he remembers what he’s read. The “hidden secret” that he tries to express, he says, “is that everything in the self-improvement niche is going to change a lot based on what you want, who you are, and why you’re doing this.” In a note-taking video, he presents studies that convinced him to take notes by hand, but acknowledges that typing may work better for others: the particular mechanism is less important than the process as a whole. Fish often stresses that he’s just figuring out his life, too.

High school and college students across the world likely relate most to his videos, but for those outside that group, his channel provides a look inside the head of a highly motivated student trying to do his best. Viewers can watch how he dealt with heartbreak, mental health, or a creative lull, and then click a later video to see how his thinking has evolved. His personal website lists every book he’s read for the past year (not a day, like other gurus), how the wide variety of books has changed his thinking, and how he remembers what he’s read. The “hidden secret” that he tries to express, he says, “is that everything in the self-improvement niche is going to change a lot based on what you want, who you are, and why you’re doing this.” In a note-taking video, he presents studies that convinced him to take notes by hand, but acknowledges that typing may work better for others: the particular mechanism is less important than the process as a whole. Fish often stresses that he’s just figuring out his life, too.

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