

“YouDanger” by Justin O’Neill – *Scope Magazine*, September 24, 2012

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In 2009, a 15-year-old boy decided to become famous. His plan was to soak a basketball in gasoline, set it on fire, and sink a perfect three-pointer. He would film the entire stunt, post it on YouTube, and, he hoped, become an Internet celebrity.

But things didn’t go the way he imagined. As he took the shot, his clothing burst into flames. He was rushed to the hospital with second- and third-degree burns on his chest and legs. He will have scars for the rest of his life.

DEADLY RISKS

YouTube hosts millions of clips of people, many of them kids and young adults, attempting wild, dangerous, and downright stupid stunts. The videos are...

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...often inspired by shows like *Fear Factor*, *Stunt Junkies*, and *Wipeout*, and they feature pretty much any hazardous activity you can imagine: playing with fire, “surfing” on top of moving cars, soaring off flimsy homemade ramps on skateboards, shooting people point-blank with paintball guns.

Some experts say that by hosting these videos, YouTube encourages young viewers to take deadly risks. Research by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention shows that more than 180,000 Americans die from accidental injuries each year. That’s one person every three minutes. More than 14,000 of those killed are kids under the age of 19.

Is YouTube to blame?

LAUGHING AT VIOLENCE

Daredevils are nothing new. In the 1800s, “human cannonballs” were popular circus attractions. In the 1970s and ‘80s, legendary daredevil Evel Knievel earned fame for his crazy motorcycle stunts. (He broke 433 bones

over his lifetime.) Today, Johnny Knoxville has made a name for himself showcasing ridiculous stunts on MTV and in movies.

The fact is, people have always found it entertaining to watch others try risky things—and also, sometimes, to watch them fail. Audiences love a good wipeout or blowup, as long as it's not *too* serious. In fact, viewers often shriek with laughter at stunts gone wrong.

Laughter may seem like an odd reaction to seeing people get hurt, but according to family therapist Clair Mellenthin, laughter is a defense mechanism—a way of coping with disturbing situations. “Even little babies laugh when they see people fall down,” she says.

Some of the earliest Greek comedies featured characters being chased by wild animals, falling off stage, or smacking into walls. Now, in the age of the Internet, anyone with a camera and a YouTube account can create this kind of “entertainment.” And YouTube provides access to an audience that numbers in the millions daily.

Many viewers—particularly teenagers—are inspired by what they see and eager to try it themselves. “YouTube has taken the one-upmanship of playing in the neighborhood to a global level,” says Mellenthin. “The peer pressure is greatly increased, because now we can see what others are doing around the world.”

BRAIN BLAME

There is another reason, beyond peer pressure, that many young people are willing to risk their lives for the sake of a 30-second video: Their brains are telling them to.

During adolescence, the area of your brain that seeks pleasure and reward is well-developed. The area of your brain that controls judgment, the prefrontal cortex, is not. This, combined with the hormones surging through your body and your natural desire for new experiences, can lead to serious risk-taking. In other words, the voice in your head that tells you to do something exciting is a lot louder than the one that tells you why you shouldn't.

This doesn't mean risk-taking kids aren't thinking. Often, they see clearly how dangerous a certain activity is. They just do it anyway. “A lot of risk-taking is not impulsive,” says Valerie Reyna, a psychology professor at Cornell University in New York. Teens are simply more likely than adults to decide that a high-risk activity is worth it for the thrill.

It's true that the odds of getting killed leaping from your bedroom window into your pool may be small, but there's a problem with

this logic that most kids don't quite get. No matter how small the risk, the worst possible...

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...thing can happen to you. As Reyna says, "it only takes once to die.

Reyna believes that kids can behave sensibly, even while their brains are still developing. Most kids know that no matter how exciting or hilarious something in a video might be, they shouldn't attempt it if it's clearly dangerous.

Defenders of YouTube's right to display stunt videos argue that it isn't YouTube's responsibility to censor its content. Parents, they say, should be the ones to ensure that kids are behaving safely.

It's not as if YouTube doesn't care, though. According to its Community Guidelines, YouTube "draw[s] the line at content that's intended to ...encourage dangerous, illegal activities that have an inherent risk of serious physical harm or death." Indeed, YouTube staffers comb the site 24 hours a day, looking for videos that violate their policies.

But is this enough?

Whether or not you believe YouTube should have stricter rules, here's a piece of advice: Never light a basketball on fire.