



Complex Networks experiments with new formats to bring hard news topics to life

Complex Networks is a video-first publisher of content relating to sneakers, hip hop, fashion, and pop culture.

OPPORTUNITY

Complex Networks wanted to grow its audience, and saw an opportunity to build up their news channel by exploring a range of harder-hitting topics pertinent to its Gen Z and millennial viewers.

APPROACH

Complex Networks expanded its news team, then experimented with a new in-depth, longer format that tackled hard-hitting issues relevant to its audience.

Building up the team: Complex Networks hired new staff who had experience developing longer form, in-depth digital videos, and trained existing news editorial staff to be more video-focused. In addition, producers from across the company collaborated to bring different perspectives and experiences to the project. After the team started developing the new, longer format, Complex Networks hired freelance staff on an ad hoc basis to help across areas where the team lacked expertise.

Restructuring production and programming: The team then developed updated workflows and timelines for pre-production, production, post, and delivery of the new format. This included a longer post-production timeline to accommodate higher production values. The team also examined their current programming schedule and restructured it to give the new content room to breathe.

Defining topics: Producers worked closely with the video, development, and editorial departments to identify fresh, original topics that the audience would be interested in. They also leaned into YouTube's Community tools to get a sense of subjects that would resonate. Linking to popular cultural figures was a handy way to get audience attention, then expose them to bigger issues (e.g., the team interviewed young hip hop artists about the prevalence of Xanax in their industry to talk about the wider issue of drug addiction. And to deep-dive into politics they created a series called "Rappers call their Reps," where artists would call their local representative on camera). The team also sought to partner with external experts/newsrooms to cover certain topics (e.g., they worked with The Flint Journal on a report about the water crisis).

Promoting new formats and gauging success: Complex Networks implemented a weekly launch schedule (which they ultimately changed to bi-weekly to allow more production time) and used YouTube Community posts to promote the new formats and engage audiences. To measure success, they utilized YouTube Analytics (looking at watch time, views, average view duration, and traffic sources). They could then ascertain how things like topic and episode length impacted engagement, and tweak as necessary.

RESULTS

Complex Networks built up their news team so they could experiment with hard-hitting news topics that would appeal to their existing audience — something they hadn't tried previously. Two new videos received a combined **600K views** and **55K hours watch time**.

LEARNINGS

Lean into the niche interests of your audience:

Specificity for your audience is important when deciding which topics to cover. You don't need to report on the same things as large, national broadcasters to provide relevant and hard-hitting news coverage. On the contrary, find the topics and areas that your viewers care about and go deep on those. This will also help you stay true to your authentic brand voice.

First impressions count: Through strategic choices in art, graphics, and topics, Complex Networks was able to deliver new formats that had a look and feel their audiences were familiar with. The team also found that thumbnail imagery didn't always translate as desired (e.g., some imagery or personalities were not recognizable) so they leaned heavily on the title to draw viewers in.

“**This is our largest journalistic effort as a company to date. We've discovered that, as a brand, we're capable of covering hard news topics and creating a new avenue for pulling our audience in. These pieces have elicited some of the most passionate responses from our audience as well as our own staff because of the subjects and the way they're covered.**”

