

KDocsFF 2023 Opening Night Report

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Founded by Kwantlen Polytechnic University instructor, Janice Morris, KDocsFF—Metro Vancouver’s premier social justice film festival—has hosted a plethora of powerful documentaries. Aiming to educate and create discussion within social justice circles, the theme this year was “People. Places. Power.” With 23 feature-length films, two short docs, and nine Q&As/Panel Discussions across February 22–February 26, the festival’s opening night was a welcome sight for both returning guests and new ones. The Vancity Theatre in downtown Vancouver, British Columbia offers cozy seating and an even more cozy atmosphere with its kind staff and volunteers. Before moving to opening keynote speakers Alex Winter and Carol Todd, the festival began with a land acknowledgment, with Morris thanking Kwantlen, Musqueam, Katzie, Semiahmoo, Qayqayt, and Kwikwetlem peoples, on whose unceded sovereign lands the theatre and KPU campuses stand (Fig. 1).

The YouTube Effect (2022), created and directed by Alex Winter, premiered the five-day-long event (KDocsFF’s longest yet), offering an in-depth investigation into the YouTube platform and its parent company, Google (Fig. 2). The documentary follows the history of the platform from its humble beginnings with creators Chad Hurley, Steve Chen, and Jawed Karim, who met while working at PayPal. Chen gives his perspective on how the site started—crediting early creators such as Smosh for helping the site take off. Chen also recounts Google’s 2006 acquisition of YouTube as a turning point, followed by Chen’s and Hurley’s departures in 2011 (as YouTube’s first Chief Technology Officer and CEO, respectively), and the eventual appointment of Susan Wojcicki as



Fig. 1 | KDocsFF Founder and Festival Director Janice Morris opens KDocsFF 2023

CEO [Chen, Hurley, and Karim—who always remained an informal advisor—remain Google shareholders]. Wojcicki offers her own recollections and insights, further explaining the site’s algorithm which, prior to 2012, optimized the system for clicks and views. The onset of clickbait and thumbnails that left users unsatisfied needed to change, Wojcicki recalls.

This change, Winter highlights, is when YouTube’s algorithm shifted to optimize user watch-time and satisfaction, leaving the platform’s creators in a constant cycle of changing formats to keep up (Fig. 3). Since 2016, the algorithm and transparency envisioned by Wojcicki and the YouTube team are arguably more muddled than ever. With the addition of YouTube Kids—a sub-platform of the YouTube

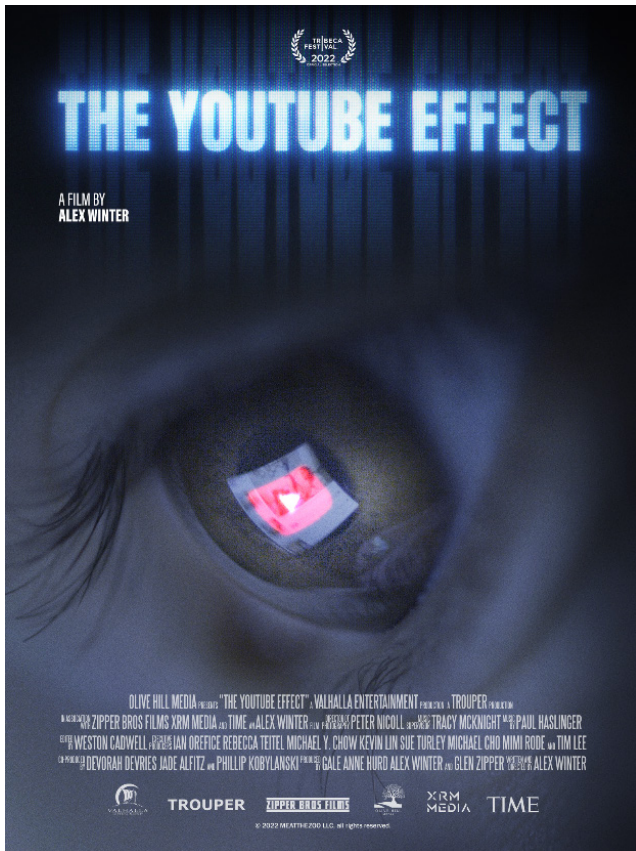


Fig. 2 | KDocsFF 2023 Opening Night film, Alex Winter’s *The YouTube Effect* (2022)



Fig. 3 | KDocsFF 2023 Opening Night Keynote Speaker, director Alex Winter (*The YouTube Effect*)

brand targeted towards children and preadolescents—and its many controversies regarding allowing gore, violence, hate-speech, and scary imagery seemingly “approved” by the YouTube safety filters, the platform’s professed transparency regarding site recommendations and video filters has been voided, according to some.

The documentary highlights how YouTube’s algorithm has radicalized some now far-right users—specifically, young,

white men—and how they fall down a rabbit hole that starts with seemingly well-intentioned mental health videos and ends with misinformation and conspiracies theories. The algorithm targets these viewers’ insecurities, slowly grooming them and their worldview into one of “us vs. them.” These viewers feel a connection to radical speakers—charismatic individuals who appear intelligent and knowable. These conspiracists eventually turn their victims towards ethnocentrism, misogyny, homophobia, and transphobia. The film demonstrates how the cycle endlessly repeats itself, creating isolated and insular conspiracy communities. Once primed, these communities are then called into action—“cleansing”—and thus begins a second cycle of violence and hatred outside the Internet.

When asked about this phenomenon, YouTube remains incredibly vague about its call to action, the documentary contends. YouTube’s persistent claim that it is working on the filtering system and monitoring the algorithm only holds so much promise when large-scale acts of violence against marginalized communities continue and its abusers proclaim YouTube their rite of passage. This is further emphasized when considering live streaming—the film highlights the atrocities committed during the 2019 Christchurch attack, in which a terrorist live-streamed himself on Facebook while attacking multiple mosques, killing over 40 people. The killer attributed his radicalization to YouTube and the enclave of white supremacist content he found there. Such an incident raises questions about the ethics of social media—how can we continue to allow white supremacy and neo-Nazism to run rampant in online spaces? What are these companies doing to combat this rampancy, if combating it at all? *The YouTube Effect* raises questions like these throughout its 99-minute runtime and challenges the notion of not only YouTube’s ethics and accountability, but also those of social media sites everywhere.

After a brief 15-minute break, the festival resumed with Keynote Speaker Carol Todd, mother of Amanda Todd and Founder of the Amanda Todd Legacy Society, a non-profit organization that aims to raise awareness about bullying (especially cyberbullying), online safety, and exploitation (especially sexploitation) (Fig. 4).

Todd introduced the night’s second film, *Backlash: Misogyny in the Digital Age* (2022), a hard-hitting and thought-provoking documentary that focusses on how misogyny navigates through the digital world and the resultant violence that women face daily. Co-directed by Guylaine Maroist and Léa Clermont-Dion, the film presents stories of women facing intense misogyny through online harassment, bullying, and violence (Fig. 5). In part, the film interviews and reflects upon the experiences of two politicians: Laura Boldrini, an Italian politician, and Kiah Morris, an African American politician who left her state of Vermont after receiving intense threats from extremists. Both Boldrini and Morris received death and rape threats, and Morris experienced a break-in in her and her family’s home.

Shifting its focus to Marion Séclin, a French YouTuber, *Backlash* expands on the tens of thousands of death and other



Fig. 4 | Opening Night Keynote Speaker, parent, teacher, and advocate Carol Todd (Founder, Amanda Todd Legacy Society)

violent threats she received after making pro-feminist videos on her channel around the peak of the #MeToo movement in 2017. Eventually, she took a hiatus from the site for the safety of her mental health. Séclin is now back on the site, continuing her work through pro-feminist videos and sharing her personal experiences with misogyny, and she also is pursuing an acting career.

The film then introduces Laurence Gratton, a Quebecois teacher who was verbally harassed by a classmate while at university. She, alongside countless other female students, was harassed by the same man and received no help from her university or the local police. These students were threatened, verbally abused, and cyberbullied. Gratton herself admits she was afraid to go home, as the abuser knew where she lived. She now lives in relative peace as a teacher and routinely instructs her students on online safety. Finally, the film shares the experiences of Glen Canning, father of Rehtaeh Parsons, a young woman who committed suicide after photos of her alleged rape were shared online. Rehtaeh was 17 when she took her life, and Canning now speaks to schools across Canada about abuse, bullying, and the dangers of rape-culture.



Fig. 5 | KDocsFF 2023 Opening Night Film, Guylaine Maroist and Léa Clermont-Dion's *Backlash: Misogyny in the Digital Age* (2022)

Backlash: Misogyny in the Digital Age sheds light on the harsh reality that women face online, and asks, *why?* Why is so much misogyny ingrained in our society, and to such extremes? How can we let harassment continue like this? What can we do to stop it? Inevitably, there are no simple answers. Centuries of misogyny, sexism, and systemic oppression of women cannot be undone with words alone. However, it is films like *Backlash* that give voices to the victims of violence, that allow us to see and recognize the extremes of hate, and that spark action. As the film shows, the victims did not go quietly—they fought (and continue to fight) for their stories to be heard because their existence as women cannot be silenced so easily. Hate and oppression are acts of anxiety and power—misogyny originates in the insecurity in one's own identity.

After *Backlash: Misogyny in the Digital Age*, Winter, Todd, and Maroist were joined by Harvard School of Education PhD candidate Avriel Epps-Darling for a 50-minute Q&A/panel discussion, moderated by Morris. The panelists discussed their films and how they relate to each other—how online circles (re)produce the misogyny and hate depicted in the films. The panelists discussed what the future of online spaces looks like,



Fig. 6 | KDocsFF 2023 Opening Night Joint Panel Alex Winter, Carol Todd, Guylaine Maroist, and Avriel Epps-Darling

and they conclude that, despite the fear, despite the violence, there is hope to be found. With more free online resources and other educational texts becoming increasingly available to the public, there is some light at the end of the tunnel. The job now is to continue the fight against oppressive systems and continue raising awareness around the world (Fig. 6).

Finally, to finish up the festival's opening night, KDocsFF hosted a stand-up reception in the Vancity Theatre atrium. Having succeeded in kicking off another great year of stories worth telling, KDocsFF 2023's opening night came to an end. With now twelve years of experience, the film festival undoubtedly will continue to grow for years to come, with plans for KDocsFF 2024 now well underway. ■