

A person wearing a full-body camouflage suit is lying on their back in a dense thicket of green foliage. The person's head is visible at the top right, and their legs are spread apart, showing the camouflage pattern. The background is filled with various types of green leaves and plants, creating a textured and vibrant environment.

HOCUS FOCUS

Ashley Mears meets the viral magicians
turning your attention into gold

PHOTOGRAPHS MITCH PAYNE



If you were online at some point last spring, there's a good chance you'll have scrolled past a video in which a woman squirts whipped cream and chocolate syrup into a toilet bowl. In the video, which was posted on Facebook and TikTok and picked up by various news sites, the woman garlands the mixture with maraschino cherries and rainbow sprinkles, prompting a man behind the camera to gush: "Oh my goodness, that is so extra!" Then she picks up a straw.

The woman later posted a photo of herself with a friend, both apparently sipping merrily from the bowl. "You're going to get dysentery," warned one disgusted comment. Of course, she isn't really drinking a toilet milkshake: the unnerving enthusiasm with which she swirls the whipped cream beneath the rim stops you realising that, unless you suck it, putting a straw in your mouth doesn't actually bring you into contact with what's at the other end.

Anna Rothfuss, the woman starring in the film, is neither a fetishist nor a desperate attention-seeker: she's one of the most successful entrepreneurs in the world of online videos. The man behind the camera is an accomplished magician called Justin Flom (he is now her boyfriend). The other woman at the toilet bowl is me.

As a cultural sociologist, I've embedded myself in some strange situations. But hanging out in this content factory was, well, extra. It wasn't just that people were doing ridiculous things with toilet bowls. It was that they were making so much money doing them. Each element of the video had been tested for its effectiveness in getting people to keep watching. On a good day, one of these short clips could earn Rothfuss enough to buy a Tesla.

Before I started looking into this corner of the content economy I assumed that the videos that went viral were made by Gen Z-ers playing around and

for an ad (this used to be three minutes but recently went down to one). Though the clips usually look like authentic user-generated material, all are scripted. Most fall into genres: DIY, crafts, hazards, adultery and proposals.

Lax manages his network like a cross between a Hollywood agent and a schoolteacher. He takes a slice of the ad revenue that creators earn. In exchange, he gives them online tutorials about how to make viral content: everything from how to hold the camera to which metrics matter to Facebook. He releases new instructions every time the algorithm changes substantially, and offers feedback on people's videos. He also posts his creators' videos on his own Facebook page, which has 14m followers.

The network is best known for what you might call appalling cooking videos. One of these, posted last summer under the heading "Ultimate Spaghetti Trick!! 🍝👉", featured a woman dumping pasta and tomato sauce onto a shiny white marble counter, mixing it up, then proudly proclaiming this to be the authentic Italian method. The clip was watched 33m times.

Rothfuss is tall and slim with dark hair and a pale, angular face (she was amused when one commenter described her as looking like "a pretty donkey"). She studied music and once dreamt of becoming a jazz singer. She downplays this ambition now, but for years she bounced between different gigs, including a stint on a cruise ship. At one point she worked as a nanny in Los Angeles to make ends meet between sporadic bookings.

A friend was making videos for Rick Lax, and invited Rothfuss to join in 2019. A year later she bought her first mansion. Entering the viral-content game involves a certain surrendering of artistic aspirations, but Rothfuss says she doesn't care. "I do not want to be famous," she says. "I love being low-key and flying under the radar, and just getting rich."



HE FRIED EGGS IN RED BULL AND THEN APPEARED TO STRETCH THEM LIKE RUBBER BANDS

occasionally surfing a serendipitous wave. But it turns out that there's a formula to getting people to watch you on social media.

Though that formula isn't perfect – you never quite know what the algorithms of the different platforms will favour or what will strike a chord with viewers – a group of people have come as close as anyone to creating a method for going viral. And that method is designed by magicians.

Rothfuss and Flom are among the 180 video-makers (or "creators" in the industry's jargon) working with a Las Vegas magician called Rick Lax. They produce short videos timed to last the precise number of seconds that Facebook requires a clip to run to be eligible





For my next click

There's more than an axe to watch out for (*opening image*). Magicians can earn thousands of dollars each year making videos. Justin Flom's Facebook page has 19m followers (*above and left*).

Some traditional magicians worry that videos reveal the mysteries behind magic (*next page*).

It was Rick Lax himself who led me to become straw-deep in toilet milkshake. He contacted me in 2020 to congratulate me on the book I'd just published, a sociological study of elite nightclubs, and suggested that perhaps I should look at the "new creative elites" next. "Randomly, I'm the most-viewed influencer on Facebook. And I've turned my fiancée and all our friends into FB influencers too." It was a characteristically bold introduction. He is not the only magician gaming the viral video economy (a British rival called Julius Dein operated his own empire in Mexico for 18 months), but he is arguably the most determined.

A few months later I drove to Henderson, a wealthy town outside Las Vegas, to meet Lax (he has since bought a larger property in the same area). Lax greeted me warmly, speaking with a faint Midwestern twang. His home was a mix of sleek minimalism and things a teenage boy might buy if he had the money. Decks of cards were stacked up between a ping-pong table and video-game consoles. The large white kitchen brimmed

with snacks. In one cabinet the premium whisky was labelled: "The Owner's Stash: please only drink if your previous month was \$100,000.00+."

For all his swagger and good looks, Lax seemed worried about how he'd come across on the page. If he was dissatisfied with his answer to one of my questions he'd stop and tell me it was off the record. Later on he asked if I'd been popular in high school, and looked disappointed when I said that I was. Lax was picked on as a child. He remembers a boy taunting him at summer camp: "I'm the fattest kid at camp and people still like me more than you." When his middle-school classmates played tag they pretended to be passing on a disease: "the Ricky touch".

For as long as he can remember he has been enthralled by magic, particularly the power it exerts over an audience. He used to watch old videos of David Copperfield shows over and over again at his grandparents' house. He once told a podcast interviewer that he remembers his grandmother doubling up "in pain with delight" at Copperfield's tricks, saying:





"Oy vey Ricky, how does he do it?"

Lax practised tricks every day throughout his childhood. At Hanukkah he'd ask for magic props: linking rings, marked cards. His parents encouraged him to pursue a steadier career. Eventually he buckled down and went to law school, like his father.

In 2008, after sitting his bar exams, Lax went to Las Vegas to let off steam. There he discovered Gary Darwin's Magic Club, a weekly event held at the back of a dive bar. He was so enthralled by Las Vegas that he ended up moving there and working at a local paper. In a book he wrote about that time, he paints a portrait of the community that congregated around the club, enjoying the fraternity of tricksters as much as the art of magic. "Deception and deceivers" appeal to him, he explained in "Fool Me Once". "I've always tried to learn their tricks and understand the psychology behind why they work. Not because I want to pull the tricks myself, but because I'm afraid of falling victim to them."

Lax's childhood dream seemed to be coming true. He recorded promotional videos for a website that sold magic tricks. In 2011, he began helping his childhood hero, David Copperfield, fine-tune the illusions he performed in Las Vegas. Two years later, Lax and Justin Flom, a friend from the Darwin club, successfully pitched a TV series to the Syfy channel. "Wizard Wars" was to be a reality show in which teams of visiting magicians would compete against a regular panel of conjurers to perform tricks with everyday objects.

Lax wanted to appear as a judge in "Wizard Wars", as well as produce it. But when he arrived at the studio to audition, the production-company executives told him not to bother – he was too "cheesy". Instead, they asked him to perform tricks for other potential judges to critique as part of their auditions. His friend Justin Flom – good-looking, with a more relaxed performance style – got a role on the regular panel of magicians. Lax stayed off camera.

The experience was "humiliating", Lax told me. "Being told I just couldn't be in the show because I wasn't good enough. I said, 'No, I think that's wrong. I think you don't like me, but actually I'm better than these other people. Here, let me prove it to you.'"

After the "Wizard Wars" debacle, Lax began uploading his own magic performances straight to Facebook. No one could stop him being cast in these. In the first ones, filmed on his phone in Starbucks, a stony-faced Lax looked into the camera and asked the viewer to pick a number between one and ten. This is a basic opener in mentalism, a branch of magic that creates the illusion of mind-reading through a mixture of showmanship, suggestion, trickery and, sometimes, basic maths (for example, there's a certain formula for adding and dividing which, if done right, will always produce the number five).

The clips were low on production values – you could see Lax's white earbuds, and the brightly lit Starbucks

counter in the background – but hard to look away from. At the end of each one, Lax commanded the viewer to share the video if he'd correctly guessed their number, birth date or favourite colour. Some racked up over 10m views within weeks.

Lax spent a year filming these videos in Starbucks. Within two minutes of posting one, he could tell if it was going to take off; if it wasn't, he'd delete it and try something else. He'd do this for hours until his laptop ran out of battery, then go home, charge it and return. He started to develop a sense of what kind of things worked, tracking when people stopped watching and which sorts of set-up performed better with viewers. After a while his research showed he'd be better off

SHE USED TO BE A NANNY. NOW, ON A GOOD DAY, ONE SHORT CLIP CAN EARN HER ENOUGH TO BUY A TESLA

getting out of Starbucks and recording at home. The move paid off: his kitchen-counter videos were wildly popular ("bangers", as the creators say).

One particularly successful strand involved him applying energy drinks to everyday food items. These clips look like frat-house fare, but they're part of a tradition going back to Jean-Eugène Robert-Houdin, a 19th-century illusionist. Houdin (whose name was borrowed by escape artist Erich Weisz for his stage persona, Harry Houdini) liked to exploit popular curiosity about ether, an anaesthetic that was just starting to be used in medicine, and pretended to give his son the substance before performing a levitation illusion on him. Lax pulled off something similar with Red Bull, frying eggs in it, pulling them out of the pan and then appearing to stretch them like rubber bands (in fact he had switched the real eggs for toy ones).

By 2017, Lax's videos were regularly getting 100m views. This was great publicity for his day job selling tricks to other magicians. He also got a lucrative deal with Diply, a clickbait publisher, to post a link to its site on his Facebook page. But he still wasn't making any money directly for the output he spent most of his time on.

Lax often talks about a dinner he had at that time with a group of friends who worked in Hollywood. The conversation turned to his social-media popularity. "They laughed at me," he recalls. Whenever he tells the story, a hostile edge creeps into his voice. "They literally laughed at me for just spending so much time making these videos that were paying zero."

He wasn't the only one wondering how to make money in the battle for eyeballs. An hour's flight away in Silicon Valley, executives at Facebook were also trying to work out a business strategy. In just ten years, Facebook (whose parent company is now known as Meta) had attracted 2bn users worldwide, simply by offering a space for people to interact online. It was

beginning to make huge profits by offering companies the opportunity to focus advertising on particular types of consumers. But by 2018 those consumers were spending ever more of their time online watching videos, a sphere dominated by Facebook's rival, YouTube (TikTok hadn't yet taken off).

Though Facebook did host videos, it paid only a select group of people for them, typically celebrities and established publishers such as TV channels and newspapers. People who wanted to make money out of their films usually posted them on YouTube, which offered creators 55% of the ad revenue. In 2018, in a bid to improve the quality of its video content, Facebook introduced the idea of "paid creators", people

IT FEELS LIKE A DRUG. WHEN THIS VIDEO STARTS TO GO DOWN, YOU'RE CHASING YOUR HIT AGAIN

eligible for the same proportion of ad revenue as YouTube was offering.

To qualify for this status, you had to have at least 10,000 followers and regularly post videos on your feed. Once registered as a paid creator, you could access Facebook's Creator Studio dashboard, which helps you track how many people are watching content and for how long, what emojis or comments they leave, likes, shares and the demographic breakdown of the audience.

Lax was one of the first to sign up to Facebook's scheme, and that summer he got his first cheque. By this point, he'd dispelled any lingering regrets about devoting his talents to mindless video clips. His partner (now fiancée) Elly Brown, a former singer, had just undergone gruelling treatment for oral cancer and the episode had dragged him into depression. Dumb TV programmes had helped get him through the months-long ordeal. He decided there was no shame in making the social-media equivalent.

Soon, Facebook's payments to him were hitting six figures most months. He noticed that videos did better if scenes were raw and looked as though they captured real people in a moment of awkwardness. To increase his output, he started buying existing videos from sites such as Jukin Media, which is a warehouse of videos generated by people online. He might pay \$500 for a video of a marriage proposal gone awry and tinker with it until it fit the format of a viral clip.

Lax found it frustratingly hard to get other people's videos quite right: something about the visuals or timing usually remained stubbornly outside the parameters of what he knew worked. So Lax and Brown started to stage scenes themselves. Their living room became a studio in which women dumped their boyfriends, ridiculous bar bets were waged and surreal DIY projects enacted. The videos would regularly get 100m views across different platforms (Facebook counts anything



watched for more than a few seconds as a view). Lax realised that appetite for these videos was insatiable: the only obstacle to earning more money was how many clips he could make in a day.

In 2020 the pandemic threw up a surprising opportunity: magicians and singers were stuck at home. Lax and Brown invited friends who worked in the entertainment industry to help them make videos. Traffic was soaring with the world under lockdown. Lax brought 20 more people into the network, then another 20 and another 20. By late 2021, Lax's creators were generating a total of about \$5m a month across Facebook, Snapchat and YouTube.

Lax wouldn't go into details of his profit-sharing arrangement but his creators are clearly flourishing. Many told me they felt like they were taking part in a 21st-century gold rush. "This doesn't happen to that many people," says Amy Boiss, a one-time Uber driver whose magician boyfriend introduced her to Lax's network. "To make more money than neurosurgeons."

Lax and his crew weren't the first people to make overnight fortunes through social-media videos. In 2009 a group of college friends posted a video to YouTube of them shooting hoops in their backyard; two years later Dude Perfect, as they called themselves, were guests on "Jimmy Kimmel Live" and they're now estimated to be among the highest earners on the platform. A teenager from Connecticut, Charli D'Amelio, started filming TikTok clips of herself dancing in 2019: last year she made \$17.5m, according to Forbes. But there's a difference. These stars made their millions by establishing a recognisable brand which meant people consciously sought their output. Lax and his friends got rich without anyone knowing who they are.

That anonymity partly reflects how videos are consumed on Facebook. The platform is a less obvious destination for video entertainment than YouTube or TikTok – many of us are sucked into watching clips



Two-faced

Jibrizy Taylor is a creator in Rick Lax's team (*left*). Lax often shoots videos at home (*below*). Flom does card tricks at a party in Lax's Las Vegas mansion (*next page*)

posted there after coming to it for updates on our friends or family (this may be changing: Meta has said that 1.25bn people visit its dedicated video section each month). Videos such as Lax's represent the rawest form of the social-media campaign for our attention: they don't need to inform, or inspire, they simply have to make it hard for us to look away.

It's perhaps no coincidence that the two most-viewed Facebook creators in 2021, Lax and Julius Dein, both started out as magicians (as did many of their affiliates). Their videos aren't magic performances as such, but they're informed by the art of magic. "Magicians start by looking for blind spots, edges, vulnerabilities and limits of people's perception," wrote a former Google employee (and amateur magician) in an essay published on Medium in 2017, "How technology hijacks your mind". Social-media companies, wrote the author, "influence what people do without them even realising it", just as magicians do: "Once you know how to push people's buttons you can play them like a piano."

Last August, I spent a day filming bangers at Anna Rothfuss's rented condo. Lax's team often shoot in each other's homes, to give videos the authentically amateurish feel that Facebook's algorithms favour (the professional lighting rigs are just out of shot). Boundaries between personal and creative space are almost non-existent: Rothfuss has a costume wardrobe at home which contains, among other things, 12 wedding dresses. In the collab house, in which Lax lets his creators crash and film, it's hard to move in some rooms for all the masks and fake feet.

Over the course of six hours I cranked out five videos with Elly Brown, Lax's fiancée. The one that performed best online was a cheater drama, a tried and tested genre in the viral-video world (a "bucket", as creators call it). Cheater dramas involve an unsuspecting spouse walking in on their partner with someone else. The suspense of waiting for a cuckolded spouse to find out keeps viewers gripped enough to sit through the ad.







The first thing creators have to get right is “stopping the scroll”, so the viewer doesn’t reflexively move down to the next post in their feed. That means the opening has to titillate or intrigue, ideally both, in the first three seconds (I saw one begin with a hotdog being lowered into a woman’s mouth). If a viewer stays for those initial moments there’s a good chance they’ll commit until the ad plays.

The ad is the holy grail on Facebook: making money on the platform is all about getting someone to watch it. Even if you achieve that, however, the compensation structure is opaque. Creators don’t know what the ad rate will be on any given video. It could be as high as \$40 per thousand views if the audience is deemed “high value” (ie, North American). That fee drops sharply the further a video travels from wealthy countries: advertisers pay as little as \$1 per thousand views in Pakistan. Rates, and the calculations underlying them, change all the time. A viral hit doesn’t necessarily translate into a big payout, and it’s not always easy to work out why.

Despite this uncertainty, Facebook remains the preferred platform for video-makers such as Lax. For a long time, TikTok paid creators only nominal sums and didn’t share ad revenue – people who’ve made money from TikTok videos have usually done so by becoming famous enough to get sponsorship deals. (That could change: TikTok recently started offering top creators a 50% split.) YouTube, like Facebook, gives creators 55% of the ad revenue, but its user base is not as large (around 2.2bn to Facebook’s 2.9bn), and it isn’t engineered for virality as Facebook is.

On Facebook, stopping the scroll informs the aesthetic of the entire video. Just as a good casino never lets a gambler’s cocktail glass sit empty, viral creators don’t give you any reason to leave: no bad lighting, no stagnant action. Viewers from Manhattan to Mumbai should be able to understand every second, when watching on a phone screen without sound.

As the video continues, the action (known as the “beats”) must build tension while also creating the feeling that the pay-off – the cheater getting busted, the prank revealed – could happen at any moment. Even if someone doesn’t watch all the way to the ad, Facebook’s algorithms will promote a video more aggressively if it has a high “watch time” from users.

The cheater banger I filmed started with Brown, who was playing the mistress, dressed in a bright orange tank top and rolling off the bed as the wife (played by me) walked through the door. It was a dramatic opener.

At some point, Lax’s creators typically treat the viewer to a surreal twist, which they call “triggering”. Triggers exploit the psychology of curiosity: people pay closer attention when they are trying to fill in missing information or making sense of a weird detail (did I just see tampons in that woman’s freezer?). Sometimes the trigger is an object that’s out of place. In one cooking video, the camera catches a glimpse of a dirty hairbrush on the countertop. In another a woman scoops relish out of the jar with long manicured nails instead of a spoon, all the while playing it straight. Triggers

don’t just keep you watching, they also often elicit comments, which can be a factor in helping videos get promoted on Facebook.

In our cheater video, I marched around the flat after coming home from work while Brown surreptitiously changed into a disguise under the bed. The trigger was the outfit itself: an astronaut costume. Brown’s team had already tried out different versions of this disguise. A pool cleaner gleaned 99m views, a soldier got 234m. None of the choices of what to wear made sense – that was the point. Your confusion makes you linger and then, as one magician in Lax’s network put it: “Boom! Gotcha.” You stay through the ad.

The work of creators doesn’t finish when the camera

“SO CRINGE,” SAID ONE PERFORMER ABOUT A VIDEO IN WHICH SHE EATS A CONDOM OUT OF A CUPCAKE

stops rolling. After filming the cheater scene, we went back and recorded slightly different versions of the same video. Using Facebook’s data on how videos perform, you can run tests to help predict which version of a video, thumbnail picture or title has the greatest appeal. Some creators I met had made their own spreadsheets to better analyse the resulting data.

There are no prizes for originality. Lax and his rivals shamelessly rip off and refine each other’s “buckets”. A media company in Cyprus that produces videos for Facebook and YouTube recently put out a recruitment ad that openly called for video producers who could mimic the output of Lax and his fellow magician Julius Dein.

Though copyright is rarely an issue, Lax’s creators have to keep an eye out for Facebook’s filters, which may remove videos that don’t clearly disclose that they’re staged. Most creators now put disclaimers at the top of captions accompanying their videos saying that the clips are “scripted dramas, satires (and parodies)”. Some continue to play with the idea that the content might be real, however, through videos with titles such as “When She Pulled off the Covers! 🤔👀”

Our astronaut-cheater video took us about 20 minutes to set up and film. Glancing at the thumbnail a few weeks after we posted it, I felt proud and a little unnerved to see that it had 50m views (to date, 164m people have seen it). Brown was unfazed by its success. “You’re seeing a compelling video, and we’re seeing a formula that we practise,” one magician-turned-creator told me. “It’s like a magic trick.”

Breaking into the arts became almost impossible after the pandemic. Theatres and venues closed, some permanently: the entertainment industry was one of the worst-hit sectors of the American economy in 2020. Job losses were particularly heavy in Las Vegas, where Lax is based.

There are no signs of such trouble in Lax's milieu. I went to a party at his home recently, to which Rothfuss turned up with an \$8,000 Chanel handbag. Kate Heintzelman, a former schoolteacher who out of habit still collects discount points from Target, used to earn about \$28,000 a year after tax. Now she makes that in a single week. The other day she treated herself to a handbag without even looking at the price. "I didn't need a Gucci bag", she told me, "but it was a pretty purse and I was like, 'yeah, I want that. And I can afford it because I know that today I've made 20 grand.'"

Success on this scale is intoxicating, particularly for creators like Brown and Rothfuss who spent years trying to get a break in the conventional entertainment industry. "You don't have to go through an agent or booker or casting director telling you that you're good enough or not to do their roles," said Brown, over dinner one night. "We make our own roles," Rothfuss chimed in. "If I feel like it, 'OK, I'm a teen model today!'" (Rothfuss, who was 34, had in fact played a teen model earlier that day and her hair was still in two plaits at dinner.)

I spent several weeks with Lax's crew. At times, being part of his network seemed like being a college student with a massive bank balance. They're in and out of each other's houses all the time, filming pranks in Walmart and Target, trawling junk shops for surreal props. On occasion, though, it was as if a capricious boss or casting agent had simply been swapped for a capricious algorithm.

Rothfuss spends most of her days replying to comments and live streaming, as well as shooting, editing, posting and studying the data about her videos. Producing relentless iterations of the same videos doesn't always feel like a very creative process. The internet, says Lax, "rewards influencers who recognise the disposability and fluidity of content".

Most of Lax's creators used to work in the performing arts. Not all are as comfortable as he is about giving

wasn't just the monetary rewards that were driving them on, but the same dopamine rush they were exploiting in us. If you're looking at the data, you can actually see your earnings go up as people watch your work: making viral videos can be just as addictive as watching them.

"It feels like a drug," said Tommy Wind, one of the magicians in Lax's network. "When this video starts to go down, now you're chasing that hit again. And that's the next post and you'll do whatever you gotta do to get to that next post. You'll hire as many actors, you'll go wherever you have to film. You'll get kicked out of places." ("Half the network is banned from Target," his wife adds.)

In March, Meta announced a change that had wide-reaching implications for Lax and his creators. The company was going to stop promoting what it called "watchbait" – videos that "create an arbitrary curiosity gap" or promise sensational revelations. Both Lax and Dein saw their audience and earnings fall abruptly.

This didn't deter Lax. He and his creators have been posting videos of different lengths on their pages to "clean" them up for the watchbait filters and making it clearer that their work is scripted. Facebook seems keen to promote feel-good videos these days, so they've been doing fewer pranks and more crafts and cooking (with a surreal twist, naturally: pianos painted with garden rakes; dyeing children's shoes with Skittles). The network is now climbing back to the same viewing levels it was achieving before.

Lax's rival, Julius Dein, closed down his production hub and moved back to London; his small community of creators, who described themselves to me as a family, disbanded overnight. He now regards his participation in the viral gold rush as damaging to his reputation, he said, though it's clearly a hard habit to kick. He recently posted a video – similar to one from the Lax network – in which he and his ex-girlfriend ate pasta

"WAIT, THERE ARE 100m PEOPLE THAT WATCHED THIS STUPID VIDEO I MADE. WHY?"

themselves over to the production of clickbait. "So cringe," said one performer, about a hit video in which she eats a condom out of a cupcake. Another creator called his videos "shittainment", because they were the kinds of things people would watch in the bathroom. "Wait, there are 100m people that watched this stupid video I made. Why?"

Many comments under such videos are hostile, threatening and pointedly personal. "Wasted three minutes of my life I'll never get back," is a common one. Lax reckons he's received more than 10,000 death threats over the years. When I looked through his Facebook messages the toxicity and menace were palpable.

As I spent more time with Lax's creators I realised it





Look into my screen

Magicians film tricks in the garden. Some teams create four to eight videos a day

together in silence. "It's so easy to be delusional when you're living in a content house, with all your friends, like, 'Oh this is amazing! We're making so much money, we're getting millions of likes,'" he said.

He plans to start producing magic videos again soon. "Let me give you my two cents as someone that went to number one in the world. I made a lot of money out of it. I would give every penny back, to reverse everything I did and to not have a single one of these views."

It's great to have money", Lax told me once, as we drove through the gleaming strip malls of Henderson in his new Mercedes, "because that's how society keeps score." Lax remains unrepentant about producing time-sucking videos. The notion of what he refers to as "quote unquote good art" is merely a creation of "elites", he says. "If people are upset that we're getting so many views, I think it's because we're the only ones in this game of actually entertaining people and giving people what they want." He has even learned

to be blasé about death threats, he claims.

One community of critics still has the power to wound him: fellow magicians. There's a long thread in the magic community's forum on Reddit called "What happened to Rick Lax". One typical post lays into Lax and Justin Flom: "[They] started doing fake prank videos and ended up being the laughing stock of the magic community and losing all respect. They're probably hiding under a rock somewhere in embarrassment." Similar rants persist in a Facebook group, "Magicians Only", and on another forum, themagiccafe.com.

When Lax first told me how much he'd been hurt by "the cool kids in magic", I stifled a laugh. But any aspect of your social life can end up feeling like high school, with hierarchies of status and the anguish of not fitting in. Several magicians referred to the film "Mean Girls" when describing their fellow magicians.

In some ways magic is inimical to social media. Magicians are not natural sharers. They can't copyright tricks, so they rely on a code of honour. The greatest sin is to reveal on social media how someone else's trick works.



Lax himself has never crossed this Rubicon, but his friend and colleague Justin Flom did. In December 2020, Flom posted a three-minute video on his Facebook page titled “whoa”. This exposes the secret behind the Crystal Casket, a stage illusion invented in the early 1900s, in which a woman magically appears inside a glass box that was previously empty. The video quickly racked up 95m views on Facebook, and Flom earned \$60,000 in advertising revenue.

This was a big departure for Flom, who comes from a family of magicians. Magicians heaped scorn on him, both privately and publicly. The Fellowship of Christian Magicians, of which Flom and his father have been members since his childhood, threatened to expel him. A famous magician, one of his childhood heroes, left him a string of angry late-night text messages on his birthday (“who do you think you are?”). Creators in Lax’s network were trolled just for being associated with Flom.

In the months that followed, Flom attracted further opprobrium by exposing several more magic tricks in videos that went viral. He insists that making information public can only improve the art of magic, and that secretive communities shouldn’t stand in the way of market forces. Last year he bought himself a new mansion. “I took my ego out back”, he told me calmly of his decision to dive into viral video-making, “and shot him.”

In 2020 Lax and his friends were uninvited to a local magician’s party in Las Vegas, an annual event that marks the start of the MAGIC Live! convention, when nearly 2,000 magicians from around the world gather

Death trap

Rick Lax’s production studio includes a funeral parlour

to see new tricks and network.

Lax decided to host his own pre-convention party. The invitation he posted on Facebook included a picture of his multi-million dollar home overlooking the Las Vegas Strip. “Beautiful hotel,” one magician joked in the comments.

It was a glitzy affair. Rothfuss and Brown wore matching satin gowns in green and pink, and milled about with performers between the tapas and the open bar. Lax had also invited some models to move around and liven up the scene. The event, Flom told me, was a signal to the magic community that, “We are here, we’re successful, we’re not going away.” He added, “And that we’re nice.” Lax kept asking me if I had talked to any of the “magicians’ magicians” in the room, to find out what they thought of the evening.

Shortly afterwards, Lax returned to his data. From his office you can see his swimming pool, terrace and, far below, the Strip. At night the lights of the hotels are mere tiny twinkles from his balcony.

As the pandemic has waned, performers have gone back on stage. Lax is still analysing data, steering content, dealing with accountants and devising how to make more money. “I wonder whether what we’re doing is ‘really’ significant,” he wrote to me once, in a rare moment of doubt. Lax has changed the lives of his friends for ever, and is watched by billions of people. But nobody sees him. ●

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