

TV is dead. Long TV.



live

JAMAL EDWARDS IS THE FOUNDER OF YOUTUBE CHANNEL SB.TV. GEOFF BROKATE MET THE 23-YEAR-OLD WHO, WITH 200 MILLION VIEWS AND EIGHT MILLION IN THE BANK, BELIEVES THAT TRADITIONAL TV IS DYING



Jamal Edwards grew up on a social housing estate in Acton, West London. He did not do well in school. He got a kick out of vandalism and, by his own admission, would resort to violence when pushed. When he was 14, he assaulted one of his peers for saying the wrong thing. The boy ended up in hospital, in a critical condition, and Jamal ended up in a jail cell for 24 hours. “Being locked away for that day was an eye opener, it made me realise that I didn’t want that for my life,” he says. “Nowadays, I look back at it and think I’d be in a lot more trouble [if I hadn’t changed my attitude to life]. When something bad happens to you, sometimes that is a good thing, because it helps you grow into whatever character you want to be.”

Today, Jamal Edwards, now 23 years old, is a multi-millionaire – an internet media mogul who rubs shoulders with Richard Branson and Bill Clinton, and has toured with Dr Dre. Following our photo shoot, at lunchtime on a Saturday afternoon, we retire to a nondescript bar in gentrified Fulham in West London – not Jamal’s scene at all. With his trademark baseball cap, which casts a shadow over most of his baby face, he couldn’t

look more out of place. Choosing a table by the window, Jamal orders an orange juice – he will nurse the soft drink throughout the interview, taking occasional tiny sips – and takes a seat.

He seems distracted, as though he’s already thinking about where he needs to be next. I was supposed to meet him at his London home three days ago, but on my way there I noticed a tweet saying that he was in Bristol on his UK book tour. “Sorry about the other day,” he apologises. “I have two weaknesses: my phone, I can’t live without my phone, and organisation. I’m doing so many things, and I’m always struggling to fit everything in.”

As if to highlight his point, he starts swiping the screen of his iPhone – he admits to owning ten or 15 mobile phones, and always carries a Samsung, as well as his iPhone – and continues to speak without looking up.

“You just reminded me, I need to reply to an email from the Bill Gates Foundation. They want to do something together,” he says.

The book that Jamal missed our first appointment to promote is *Self Belief: The Vision*. Recently published by his friend Richard Branson’s Virgin Books, it chronicles his path to success and reads like a guide for young people on how to follow their dreams.

Jamal wasn’t a naturally gifted pupil and struggled to achieve average grades. Entrepreneurial skills, he believes, should be taught in schools. His first taste of entrepreneurship was at age nine. He collected football cards and traded them at school. He used to parade around the grounds, seeking out the highest bidder, enjoying the thrill of earning money and being the person everyone came to when they needed a particular card.

At 15 Jamal received a video camera as a Christmas gift and started uploading videos to YouTube.

“I was just doing silly videos,” he says. “I was going into my back garden and filming foxes, filming my mum making macaroni and cheese.”

The videos may have been silly, but Jamal started to feel the buzz of waking up to see how many hits his videos had received. While he studied for a media diploma, he worked part-time in a popular UK clothing store, a job that earned him enough money to follow his real passion – filming the rap artists from the emerging London Grime scene.

He established his own YouTube channel, SB.TV, in 2006, at the age of 16, and built it up until, in July 2009, after the third time trying, he finally became an official YouTube partner. YouTube began giving Edwards a share of the advertising revenue raised by SB.TV, and he received his first cheque in the post for £100, setting him on the path to success. It was only then that his mum allowed him to give up his part-time job. “I think my passion for filming came first, and when I started making money from

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it, I was like, 'I can make money from something I love doing,' he says.

Jamal decided that networking was a means to promote SB.TV to an ever-wider audience, which is a strategy he still follows today. He seems to possess a quality that allows him to see the potential in every opportunity. While he was working in the clothing store he used to take the long way home, because it would take him past the BBC's London studios. He would walk by in the hope that he might meet someone who could help him further his career – a celebrity, or even a technician. Eventually it paid off, people started to recognise him, and he managed to arrange a work placement in the BBC's sound engineering department in 2009.

He has continued to be resourceful. In November 2009 he wrote to Daren Dixon, CEO of AAB Talent Management, and by January 2010 he had landed

his first big interview, with US singer Kelly Rowland. It was a masterstroke, which increased SB.TV's clout overnight.

He was completely unprepared for the interview; he didn't even have a presenter, only managing to find one the day before via a request on Twitter. He is not afraid to take a risk.

"I don't let anything stop me from doing what I want to do; I never say I can't do it. If I have any doubts I'll just go and do it anyway," he says.

In January 2011 Jamal scored an interview with US rapper Nicki Minaj. Minaj's record company had told Jamal that he wasn't allowed to go down with her in the elevator after the interview. But he was desperate to capture footage of her as she walked out into a crowd of adoring fans. So he jumped into the elevator with her and filmed it anyway. That night he uploaded the video, and the next day he had more than 100,000 views; the record company contacted him to tell him how great the video was.

But none of his early successes could prepare him for the furore that was to come after Google chose him to star in their Chrome advert in August 2011. The advert chronicles Jamal's journey into popular culture, from the early videos of his mother cooking to interviewing big names in the music world. It was the perfect platform to introduce Jamal Edwards the brand. The ad concludes with the tagline: "the web is what you make of it".

"It was the second most popular advert on YouTube that year [with more than six million views]," Jamal says. "It was all over TV, it was on during the first ad break of [UK TV talent show] *X-Factor*, so everyone saw it. I was sweating, and my Mum's friends were calling. My parents didn't really know what I had been doing, because when I'm filming these Grime artists, Mum's like, 'Who are all these people? Who's Skepta? Who's Chipmunk?,' and when she saw that ad on the

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TV, she was, 'Oh wow!' My parents actually recognised what I'd been building."

Jamal attributes his achievement to the fact that SB.TV is not a "faceless business". He claims that contemporary society wants to know the person behind the brand. He refers to his mentor, Richard Branson,

noting how people are drawn to his brands because they relate to Branson's story. Jamal has been open and honest about his life.

"It's important to be honest, I had stories in the book that I'd never told before, but I waited for a certain time," he says. "If people had asked me when I was younger, 'Tell me about the time when you got arrested, when you were sitting in a cell, when everything was going pear shaped,' people could have looked at me and thought, 'woah!' But because I've done what I've done, and I've reached a certain stage, now when I tell the story people say, 'Oh, he's doing what he's doing and that's in the past.' So it's about doing it at the right time."

The most powerful tool in Jamal's promotional arsenal is, of course, social media, which he has used to create a buzz around himself, as well as to promote SB.TV directly. The best example of this is his Twitter flirtation with pop star Rihanna. "Oh yeah, basically I was in Cannes and I found out she was in the hotel next to me, and I started tweeting her, and it trended," he says, becoming animated and putting down his iPhone, which he has been checking on a regular basis throughout the interview. "People started putting pictures of Rihanna and me together. I think that was a bit cheeky. I was a bit embarrassed when I actually met her, because I didn't know if she had seen all

CELEBRITY FRIENDS /

(Clockwise) Jamal with UK Labour Party leader Ed Miliband, front row at London Fashion Week with models Alexa Chung and Poppy Delevingne, and Jamal's mentor Richard Branson

the things I'd done. Maybe she would think I was a stalker or whatever?" When he did meet Rihanna, he just said "hi", he admits with a laugh,

In March 2012 *Q* magazine named him one of the most influential people in music, hailing him as the next Simon Cowell. The following month SB.TV hit 100 million views, and this year the Manchester International Festival billed him as "the voice of a generation".

It might come as a surprise, considering his flair for self-promotion, but Jamal doesn't like the label.

"I don't talk for all young people, 'cause there are loads of different social circles," he says. "You'll get people talking about a certain youth demographic, but that doesn't represent another demographic. I can only talk from my perspective and experience, and then I try to forecast as many young peoples' opinions as possible."

Whether he feels like the voice of a generation or not, it hasn't stopped governments and charity organisations approaching him in the hope that working with him will help them reach 'the youth'.

"It's overwhelming," he says. "It's a huge responsibility. I used to only do music, but now I feel that because I've got a large following of young people I have to throw in some social issues, something that will make people actually think."

Jamal's latest hit is a video featuring Prince Charles, outlining the difficulties young people face while living with disabilities such as autism and depression. He has also arranged entertainment for an event for Bill Clinton's foundation and conducted interviews with the UK Prime Minister, David Cameron, and the opposition leader, Ed Miliband.

"If I could give something back, it would be transforming politics in a way that young people can understand," he says. "That's the bridge

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that's broken at the moment. There's no connection between young people and parliament."

At just 23, Jamal is now considered one of the early pioneers of online broadcasting. The media has even coined a new phrase, 'The Jamal Effect', which refers to the group of young directors and producers trying to follow Jamal's model.

"I was born in a digital space, whereas people from print or TV are trying to move into it," he says, explaining his success. "SB.TV has shown that it's possible, and I'm glad to be recognised as someone who has been doing things for a little while... There's no blueprint for doing online. Online allows you creative freedom, and it allows you

to do things much quicker at a lower cost. You can try something out first to see if it works, and then go to a brand. With TV the costs are much higher." SB.TV will upload a video and promote it on Twitter, allowing users instant access to the content, while television viewers need to wait days or weeks for the scheduled programming. "Everyone's on [the] internet, they won't wait around to watch something if they can watch it online," says Jamal. "I think young people are impatient. If you've released something, they don't want to wait for it."

Major broadcasters' viewer numbers are in decline. The four big networks in the US all announced profit losses for the first quarter of 2013, with ABC announcing a 40 per cent drop off from the same period last year. Prime-time ratings are falling faster than ever, with the most significant drop being between the ages of 18 and 49, the demographic most coveted by advertisers.

Broadcasting networks once controlled the advertising market: during its heyday, TV could boast 50 million viewers watching one programme at the same time. Now the numbers are closer to five million. It is a growing concern for companies who

have substantial advertising contracts with TV stations. Traditional television, an industry estimated to be worth US\$9 billion in the US, is now in a very uncomfortable position and, if trends continue, its livelihood will be decimated as companies take their contracts elsewhere.

A significant indication that advertisers are starting to look for alternative avenues is the advent of Brand Cast, a new YouTube initiative. Jamal's channel was one of a handful chosen to show their content to more than 700 companies. Held in a room full of CEOs paying for the chance to have their brands associated with the latest content, the event allows companies to reach target online audiences. Due to the success of channels like SB.TV internet audience numbers are increasing, encouraging major brands to jump ship and move away from television.

Jamal is unimpressed with what traditional TV is currently offering.

"We will be witnessing the end of [traditional] television, if there are no new ideas. I don't watch anything on TV these days. What is there to watch on TV? I wouldn't say it's dead, but if it doesn't fix itself it will die." Meanwhile, as television struggles to adapt to the changing environment created by social media and digital broadcasting, Jamal is sitting pretty.

In 2012 *The Sunday Times* included him on its young rich list, estimating Jamal's fortune to be £6 million. In October 2013 SB.TV secured funding from Marc Boyan, founder and CEO of Pinterest backer Miroma Ventures, in a deal that estimates that SB.TV is worth £8 million.

So where could Jamal possibly go from here? He finally puts his phone away, before enthusiastically reeling off a well-rehearsed list.

"I wanna branch out from music and do fashion, comedy, sports, gaming, gadgets and culture, SB.TV USA, get involved in films, live merchandising, e-commerce. I wanna build it into a 360° global youth media platform." He takes a breath. "I'm on it!"



COURTING ROYALTY /
Sharing a joke with Prince Charles, who features in Jamal's latest video