YOUTUBE'S VIEW MASTER

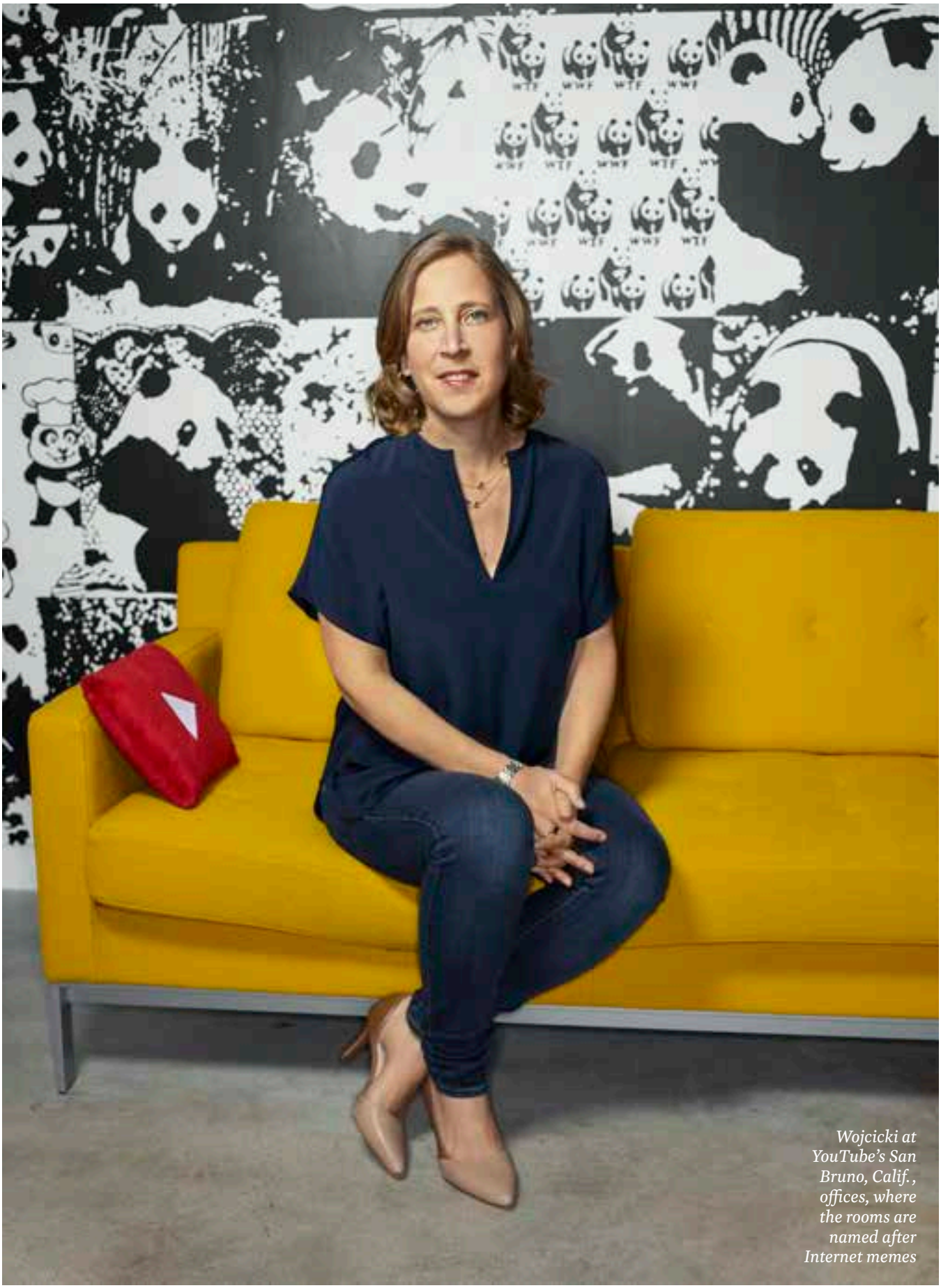
YouTube is the ultimate destination for kids on the Internet. How Susan Wojcicki plans to keep them hooked

By Belinda Luscombe

THE CEO OF YOUTUBE cannot stand up. She keeps falling to the mat like a cat off a ceiling fan. Or a guy cannonballing into what turns out to be solid ice. Her helmet is awry. Her trousers have slipped to plumber level. A bunch of YouTube employees are watching their boss, Susan Wojcicki, 47, take on the "Meltdown," which is like a large blow-up kiddie pool with a big foam propeller rotating in the middle that people are supposed to duck or leap over. Wojcicki has mastered the duck but takes a pummeling when she tries the leap.

The Meltdown, along with a bouncy castle, a slushy machine, some jumbo-size board games, oceans of red candy and a DJ, has been installed in the back of YouTube's blocky California offices so the company can celebrate 10 years of helping people make a spectacle of themselves, which Wojcicki would be doing right now, except nobody cares. This is a bit of a nerd crowd; if she were to fail on the giant chess set installed in the office foyer, now that would be embarrassing.

Wojcicki (Wo-*jiss*-ki) is at the helm of YouTube at a time



Wojcicki at YouTube's San Bruno, Calif., offices, where the rooms are named after Internet memes

PHOTOGRAPH BY IAN ALLEN FOR TIME

when almost every female executive of a big technology company is a cause célèbre, often for making significant contributions to the national discussions around feminism and work-life balance. People far outside Silicon Valley know, for instance, how much (or little) maternity leave Yahoo CEO Marissa Mayer took in 2012 to have her first baby. And many a nontechie's shelf holds a signed copy of Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg's 2013 best seller *Lean In,* a call for women to do what it takes to become business leaders.

But the fanfare around Wojcicki is more muted. When she took over YouTube in February 2014, the New York *Times* ran a photo of her sister Anne by accident. "They actually had a picture of both of us, and they cut me out," says Wojcicki, smiling. "I will say Anne thought it was great."

This is all the more unlikely because of her colorful pedigree: Google, which bought YouTube for $1.65 billion nine years ago, was started in Wojcicki's garage. She was its 16th employee. She has five kids with her husband (also a Google employee). Her dad escaped Poland at the age of 11 by hiding in a ship's coal bin. Her mom is close personal friends with James Franco. Her sister is recently divorced from Google co-founder Sergey Brin, meaning Wojcicki more or less works for her ex–brother-in-law.

Then there's the hydra she's in charge of. YouTube is now the world's third most popular online destination. Of the 3.2 billion people who have Internet access, more than 1 billion watch YouTube.

According to a 2014 survey, 66% of kids visit YouTube daily, including 72% of 6-to-8-year-olds

It has more American viewers ages 18 to 49 just on mobile than any cable network. Revenue increased by an estimated $1 billion last year. (Google is coy about profits.) The site is available in 61 languages. It has a million advertisers.

And more than ever, YouTube is the ultimate destination for kids logging on to the Internet. It pretty much owns kids' eyeballs at this point. One of its core demographics is 8 to 17 years old. According to a 2014 survey of 6,661 kids and their parents by youth researchers Smarty Pants, 66% of children ages 6 to 12 visit YouTube daily, including 72% of 6-to-8-year-olds. When *Variety* asked a bunch of teens to choose their favorite stars among 20 names, the top five were all from YouTube.

That's just the data. Less quantifiable is the way YouTube's free, searchable, mobile, all-you-can-see video buffet has changed the way we navigate the Internet and thus understand what's happening. Yes, people now have unfettered access to crotch-injury videos. But they can also see protests from Tahrir Square or hear directly from ISIS on their phones. Consider this: almost everybody now agrees that police sometimes use unwarranted violence against African Americans. Two years ago that wasn't true. Online video—and specifically YouTube—did that.

One of the ways Wojcicki (rhymes with "the whiskey," if you're still having trouble) has avoided public scrutiny is by being deeply unflashy. She's not charismatic, like Sandberg, or forceful, like IBM chief Ginni Rometty. Her defining quality appears to be pragmatism. She eschews the trappings commonly associated with power, wearing light makeup and modest heels, driving sensible cars (an SUV and a minivan) and living not far from her parents' home in Stanford, Calif. Her office is large but unglamorous. Her answers to questions are direct.

That few people can name the woman running arguably the most important new-media business in the world may be an anomaly or by design. Either way, it's worth spending time with her because we're all subject to the increasing impact of her content. And the pressure of how to direct that power is only going to grow in the coming year.

On Aug. 10, Google announced it was renaming itself Alphabet and creating a conglomerate of subsidiaries to pursue wide-ranging ventures from delivery drones to self-driving cars. That means YouTube, which will remain a part of a subsidiary of Alphabet called Google, will become even more vital to the search gi-

YOUTUBE (7)

The YouTube culture economy

In just a decade YouTube has become a launching pad for careers in new and mainstream media alike. Here's a closer look at the channels and stars launched by the site

ABBI JACOBSON AND ILANA GLAZER
The comedy duo posted two dozen episodes of their series *Broad City* on YouTube starting in 2010; now it's a program on Comedy Central.
Subscribers: 50,000

PEWDIEPIE
The most followed YouTube personality posts videos of himself playing games and making commentary; last year he took home a reported $7 million in ad revenue.
Subscribers: 38.9 million

JUSTIN BIEBER
The "All That Matters" singer has YouTube to thank for his meteoric rise: his manager first discovered his amateur singing on the platform and quickly signed him.
Subscribers: 12 million

ant's bottom line. That will put Wojcicki's pragmatism to the test.

WHEN WOJCICKI and her two sisters were growing up on the Stanford University campus, they lived next to the Dantzigs. George Dantzig created the simplex method, an algorithm used for linear programming, considered one of the top 10 algorithms of the last century. (The scene in *Good Will Hunting* in which Matt Damon's character solves a vexing math equation on the board is based on an incident in his life.) Dantzig also grew lemons. At a young age, the Wojcicki sisters used to pick the fruit and sell it door-to-door for 5¢ each. "People called us the Lemon Sisters. They thought it was a great deal," says Wojcicki. "We thought it was a great deal too."

The parallels with her current job are hard to miss. Wojcicki brings something made by someone else to other people's homes for an unbeatable price. And there are two ways to regard what she delivers: either it's the product of a genius, or it's a lemon. In any case, it's a great deal.

The Lemon Sisters are all remarkably accomplished—think of the Brontës, but with indoor plumbing and access to science labs. Anne, the youngest, is the cofounder and CEO of the genetic-testing company 23andMe. The middle, Janet, is an assistant professor of pediatrics at the University of California, San Francisco. Their childhood was idyllic: bike rides, swim club and family gatherings with brainiacs. Susan was a nerdy kid, but not mega-nerdy. She didn't take a computer-science class until college. In high school, she considered herself bad at math.

Her parents were both educators: Stanley Wojcicki taught physics at Stanford, and his wife Esther is a highly regarded high school teacher in the Bay Area, where she's known as Woj. Woj is not a woman to leave people guessing about her opinions. Wojcicki remembers, with a fond cringe, her mother's loud and official complaints about the quality of education at her school, which eventually led to Woj's creating a well-regarded journalism program. She has co-written a book about it (with a foreword by Franco) called *Moonshots in Education*.

According to Woj, Susan was a model child, a great student and a hard worker and never went through a rebellious phase. "She was boring like that," recalls her mother. This character assessment seems rosily colored by parental bias until Woj talks about her next child: "That's why I had Janet so quickly. But then Janet didn't come out the same way. The most jealous kid you ever met." Directness seems to run in the family.

The only tiny rebellious act the eldest Wojcicki daughter ever committed, according to Woj, was to move to India after finishing Harvard, to be a photographer, covering the Gulf War–inspired anti-American protests there. That was followed by an economics degree and colorful part-time jobs for firms as varied as garbage companies and tech-finance startups. She decided she preferred the startups. Her friends Sergey Brin and Larry Page asked her to join Google, as marketing manager, when it still had no marketing budget. And she was pregnant. But she jumped. As her sister Janet learned years ago, there's no mistaking her drive to win.

She worked for firms as varied as garbage companies and tech-finance startups

Similarly, when Page mentioned the opportunity at YouTube, she went after it straightaway. She says she didn't even need to think about it. But when she took over in February 2014, it took employees a while to warm up to her, partly because of the unexpectedness of her arrival and partly because her management style favors efficiency over chumminess. "I'm not the kind of person who hangs out in the coffee area for an hour and has random conversations with people," she says. "I like to be home for dinner with my kids, so I am ruthless about blocking my time."

For an executive who has spent most of her career in advertising, Wojcicki is not particularly silver-tongued: she shrugs, raises her eyebrows and says "I mean" and "like" a lot while she talks, like a novice debater. "I think, if I would sort of outline

MICHELLE PHAN
The makeup tutorialist has built a loyal following of fans who tune in for her tips on everything from perfect brows to clubbing looks; now she has her own line with L'Oréal.
Subscribers: 7.9 million

SMOSH
Comedy duo Ian Andrew Hecox and Anthony Padilla have been making spoofs and sketch videos since 2005. This year they got their own movie from Lionsgate.
Subscribers: 21 million

ISSA RAE
The actor launched her popular web series *The Misadventures of Awkward Black Girl* on YouTube; now she's developing her own show for HBO.
Subscribers: 202,000

BETHANY MOTA
The style vlogger known for offering advice on subjects like "lazy-days hair" and DIY decor has gone on to launch a line with Aéropostale and appear on *Project Runway*.
Subscribers: 9.3 million

my vision and my strategy, [it] is to have a great service, keep making it better, keep updating it for the times, like keep making it more mobile, faster, etc.," she says. "But then let's really dig into these areas that we know are really important for us like music, gaming and kids."

As visions go, this is pretty practical too. Of the 100 most watched clips on YouTube as of August 2015, 89 are official music videos. Ten of the other 11 are for really little kids. (The remaining one is the 2007 classic "Charlie Bit My Finger—Again," a story of love, pain and forgiveness, all in a tight 55 seconds.) And YouTube's gaming channels are crazily popular; the Swedish gamer PewDiePie (rhymes with cutie pie) has nearly 39 million subscribers. He reportedly made $7 million from his videos and endorsements last year.

Wojcicki's straightforwardness is what colleagues say makes her effective: she's a simplifier in a group that tends to see things as complicated. "If you're part of Google you have to be analytical. There's no way around it," says YouTube's global head of business, Robert Kyncl. (Apparently an unspellable last name also helps.) "But Susan also has five kids. She's a very regular person-mom who knows what regular problems mean for a lot of people. And so she's able to bring normalcy to a lot of different decisions."

In other words, Wojcicki is more adept at ducking than leaping. Or even more accurately, she's willing to stand and absorb the blow. In 2007, while in advertising, she orchestrated Google's purchase of DoubleClick for $3.1 billion, which many Googlers thought was antithetical to the company's founding principles, because it gave the search giant the dubious honor of being one of the largest users of the Internet tracking devices known as cookies. She held her ground; now most people don't care about cookies. And Google's ad-sales business soared. (Of the $66 billion in revenue it brought in last quarter, some 90% came from ads.)

"She's great at taking a place that has overcomplicated a problem and basically ignoring all the complexities and doing the thing that is brain-dead obvious," says a former Google employee who doesn't wish to be identified because he still does business with the firm. "And then living with the consequences."

One of her chief approaches, say both her critics and friends, is to spend a lot of Google's money. "Sometimes rather than doing the hard work of making something, she'd rather just buy it," says another former colleague. But to Wojcicki (rhymes with "so risky"), this is merely pragmatic. "If I see a shortcut, by hiring the right person or buying the right company or building the product one way as opposed to another way," she says, that's the route she takes. "I just want to get things done."

That decisiveness helps her push through new products, like those unveiled earlier this year. In February, Wojcicki launched YouTube Kids, an app that fences in a safe corner of the Internet for parents to let their kids explore. It also redesigned its app to make it more mobile-friendly and announced a new service that will offer nothing but gaming videos, so that, as product manager Alan Joyce puts it, "when you want something specific, you can search with confidence, knowing that typing 'call' will show you *Call of Duty* and not 'Call Me Maybe.'"

But it can also mean those products aren't perfect. The algorithm that decides what's appropriate for kids occasionally lets the wrong stuff through. (A brief search for "candy" on the YouTube Kids app, designed for children under 5, led this reporter pretty quickly to a video of actors simulating sex, one of them partly disrobed.)

And an algorithm can't really calculate the infinite variations in parents' opinions about what's appropriate. Millions of parents let their toddlers watch toy unboxing videos. But to many others, a 55-minute clip of hands opening and playing with various Play-Doh and Disney toys is nothing more than back-to-back, feature-length ads. These issues have drawn the attention of consumer groups and the Federal Trade Commission. In June, Bill Nelson, the ranking member of the Senate Commerce Committee, sent Larry Page what could be called a please-explain letter.

Wojcicki has not yet solved YouTube's most nagging issue: creating a paid music-video subscription

For all her willingness to simplify and press play on new initiatives, Wojcicki has not been able to solve YouTube's most nagging issue: how to create a paid music-video subscription, which it has been promising for at least two years and which several rival companies have already released. Since music is the backbone of YouTube, and the music industry is fed up with the tiny share of revenues it receives for those videos, this is what tech people would call nontrivial. Wojcicki's argument—that YouTube is different because people discover music there, rather than just play what they know they like—is unlikely to placate the music industry for long.

But she bristles at the idea that this delay—or her plans for the company—suggests a lack of vision. "I've been able to see a lot of trends before other people," she says. "I've invested and tried to make the trends a reality." The myth persists, she believes, because Silicon Valley hasn't seen enough female leaders yet. "I also have a style where I'm casual and nice to people. That, and being woman, causes people to underestimate what I can get done."

She certainly doesn't let a family feud stop her. Wojcicki laughs off the suggestion that her sister Anne's split with Brin makes life at work awkward. "I've always had to keep home at home and work at work," she says. "I have a really good relationship with [Brin]. I've worked with Larry and Sergey for more than 16 years. And I lived with them when they worked in my house. I've seen a lot."

PERHAPS IT WAS that confidence that enabled Wojcicki to make another unusually bold career move shortly after taking over YouTube. She got pregnant with her fifth child, seven years after her fourth. "Once you have a big family, like, the kids are just like, 'Bring one more on for the club!'" she says. Her husband Dennis Troper also works outside the home, and the two have help and stacks of money,

A 2002 meeting at the fledgling Google with then CEO Eric Schmidt, co-founders Larry Page and Sergey Brin, Wojcicki and Marissa Mayer, now CEO of Yahoo

but that doesn't mean it has been easy.

She thinks motherhood might be one of the reasons she's one of the less well-known tech executives. "Having young kids has in some ways made it a little bit harder for me," she says. "It was a little bit harder to travel. I was probably a little bit less willing to go to lots of evening events." But she says what she learned at work made her a better mother. "At work I have to delegate," she says. "At home I got better at getting people to help me so I can focus on the things that are important."

Not surprisingly she's a big advocate of paid family leave. Her favorite YouTube video as of this writing is a 12-minute rant by *Last Week Tonight*'s John Oliver on why mandating paid maternity leave is a really good idea. On the other hand, she's a realist. New parents who work at Google get 18 weeks' leave, but since her fifth was born last December, Wojcicki has taken only 14.

Wojcicki's experience with kids—hers range in age from 8 months to 15 years—is now a business advantage. They are her first guinea pigs for many of her ideas. "There are two very different kinds of users of YouTube," she says. The first kind come to the site for a specific video—they're looking for information or they've clicked on somebody else's link. "Those tend to be older people. But the younger generation has found content that they connect to in a specific way. That content is on YouTube. And it's not on TV."

Younger viewers subscribe to channels of the YouTubers they like and interact with them in the comments. They're a very engaged bunch, and not surprisingly, advertisers love them. To keep them coming, YouTube has to keep putting up a lot of new content. More than 400 hours of video is uploaded to YouTube every minute (that's 65 years a day), three times as much as was being posted two years ago. That means more sharing and more engagement. So it's crucial the company keeps its creators happy.

This year YouTube shrewdly combined Brandcast, its dog and pony show for advertisers in New York City, with a meet-up between YouTube stars and their fans. As media buyers walked in, they could not miss the long lines of teenagers waiting to meet their favorite video stars. The marketers nibbled their canapés and swirled their cocktails on a mezzanine floor with ample viewing opportunities of tweens and teens—some of whom had lined up for more than six hours for a 30-second interaction—not quite keeping it together during their selfies.

"Young people have created a fascinating and complex world of deep engagement online," author John Green said at the event. "A world in which they are not just watching content online but becoming part of it." Green credits YouTube with helping him meet Esther, on whose life he based his mega best seller *The Fault in Our Stars,* and with finding and connecting with most of his readers. He and his brother Hank have made quite a business out of YouTube engagement, although not primarily through advertising, even though their videos have been watched 800 million times. They sell services to other YouTubers, and they organize VidCon, a conference for online-video creators, many of whom are under 25. It sold out this year. "I'm not here to entertain you or to educate you or to kiss up to you," he told the advertisers. "I am here to scare you."

Both at Brandcast and VidCon, Wojcicki went out of her way to make the creators feel special. There were billboards promoting them. She addressed them directly in her speeches and spent time visiting them. The company has built studios they can use in Los Angeles, New York City, London, Tokyo, São Paulo and Berlin, with two more opening next year in Toronto and Mumbai. Much as Netflix got a bump from original programming like *House of Cards,* YouTube is making original programming with its stars. Four shows have been announced so far.

As Wojcicki plots a future for YouTube she will need their help. Not only must the company contend with youth-savvy tech firms—your Snapchats, your Spotifys, your Vines—but established media companies are onto the fact that kids are just future users. In August HBO signed a five-year deal with *Sesame Street* to carry new seasons of the childhood classic on its streaming services. This month, both Amazon and Netflix launched new kids' shows.

Google execs did not choose a mother of four (at the time) to head up YouTube because she knew how to deal with kids or relate to young creative types. But the online video portal is Google's most unruly product. "YouTube is as much a community product as it is an algorithm," says Hunter Walk, a former Googler and YouTuber, who worked with Wojcicki at AdSense. "It involves humans to a greater degree than some other of Google's products do." So, as it faces increasing competition from all corners of the Internet, it only makes sense to have it headed by someone who speaks human. ◻

PETER DASILVA—THE NEW YORK TIMES/REDUX