YOUTUBE

YOUTUBE

DIGITAL MEDIA AND SOCIETY SERIES

JEAN BURGESS & JOSHUA GREEN

YouTube

YouTube

Online Video and Participatory Culture

JEAN BURGESS AND JOSHUA GREEN

With contributions by

HENRY JENKINS AND JOHN HARTLEY

polity

Contents

Preface

Love it or loathe it, YouTube is now part of the mainstream media landscape, and a force to be reckoned with in contemporary popular culture. Although it isn't the only video-sharing website on the Internet, YouTube's rapid rise, diverse range of content, and public prominence in the Western, English-speaking world make it useful for understanding the evolving relationships between new media technologies, the creative industries, and the politics of popular culture. The aim of this book is to work through some of the often competing ideas about just what YouTube is, and what it might or might not turn out to be for.

The site's value – what YouTube has turned out to be 'for' so far – is co-created by YouTube Inc., now owned by Google, the users who upload content to the website, and the audiences who engage around that content. The contributors are a diverse group of participants – from large media producers and rights-owners such as television stations, sports companies, and major advertisers, to small-to-medium enterprises looking for cheap distribution or alternatives to mainstream broadcast systems, cultural institutions, artists, activists, media literate fans, non-professional and amateur media producers. Each of these participants approaches YouTube with their own purposes and aims and collectively shape YouTube as a dynamic cultural system: YouTube is a site of participatory culture.

The fact that YouTube is co-created is not always apparent to either YouTube Inc. or the participants within the system. Indeed, as we argue throughout, many of these different participants engage with YouTube as if it is a space specifically designed for them and that should therefore serve their own particular interests, often without an

appreciation of the roles played by others. This is the source of the many ongoing conflicts around the way that YouTube as a site of participatory culture should develop.

In the chapters that follow, we begin by looking at YouTube's origins and the prehistory of the debates around it, contextualizing them within the politics of popular culture, especially in relation to the emergence of new media. Drawing on a survey of the website's most popular content, we uncover some of the ways YouTube has been put to use, deploying this discussion to think through the implications of the practices of cultural participation that take place there, and their relationship to long-running debates about the place of media in everyday life.

Moving beyond the affordances of digital technologies and their potential to enable active cultural participation, YouTube also presents us with an opportunity to confront some of participatory culture's most pressing problems: the unevenness of participation and voice; the apparent tensions between commercial interests and the public good; and the contestation of ethics and social norms that occurs as belief systems, interests, and cultural differences collide. In the later chapters we focus on some of the most important new debates around the creative industries, the new media, and the new economy: user-led innovation, amateur production, and questions of labour; the apparent tensions between global connectedness and commercial monopolies; and definitions of new media literacy.

At the conclusion of the book are two specially commissioned essays, one by Henry Jenkins and one by John Hartley. They look outward from our detailed study of YouTube, which is grounded in the contemporary moment, to provide more expansive explorations of the challenges and opportunities developments like YouTube represent to some of the central areas of concern in media and cultural studies, past, present, and future. Jenkins asks us to remember the often under-acknowledged prehistories of

YouTube that are to be found in minority, activist, and alternative media, in order better to understand the potential and limits of YouTube to support cultural diversity. John Hartley's concluding chapter casts an even wider net, situating YouTube within the *longue durée* history of media, popular literacy, and the public. It addresses the question of the extent to which user-created, self-mediated expression is capable of being 'scaled up' to contribute to a more inclusive cultural public sphere and the growth of knowledge.

Acknowledgments

It is common practice these days to acknowledge that academic books are produced out of collective rather than individual effort, but in this case it is especially true. This book is not only the result of a collaboration between authors; it is also the outcome of a longstanding and fruitful partnership between two institutions on opposite sides of the planet – Queensland University of Technology in Brisbane, and Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Boston. The research project that informed this book was supported by the ARC Centre of Excellence for Creative Industries and Innovation and the Creative Industries Faculty at QUT, and the Program in Comparative Media Studies (CMS) at MIT. Additionally, some of the data we draw on throughout this book were collected as part of a project completed by the Convergence Culture Consortium. The Consortium is a partnership between CMS and MTV Networks, Yahoo!, Turner Broadcasting, Fidelity Investments, and GSD&M Idea City.

We need to offer special thanks to the diligent coders who worked on gathering data with us: Sam Ford, Eleanor Baird, Lauren Silberman, Xiaochang Li, Ana Domb Krauskopf, and Eli Koger. We are grateful to them not only for their hard work but also for their intellectual engagement and spirited contributions to the project. We thank Rik Eberhardt at CMS for his help collecting and managing the data; Jenny Burton for last-minute editorial assistance; and Paul Brand for his research assistance as part of a QUT Creative Industries Faculty Vacation Research Experience Scholarship.

At Polity, we are grateful to our commissioning editor John Thompson for originally championing this project, to Andrea Drugan for supporting it as part of the Digital Media &

How YouTube Matters

Founded by Chad Hurley, Steve Chen, and Jawed Karim, former employees of online commerce website PayPal, YouTube's website was officially launched with little public fanfare in June 2005. The original innovation was a technological (but non-unique) one: YouTube was one of a number of competing services aiming to remove the technical barriers to the widespread sharing of video online. The website provided a very simple, integrated interface within which users could upload, publish, and view streaming videos without high levels of technical knowledge, and within the technological constraints of standard browser software and relatively modest bandwidth. YouTube set no limits on the number of videos users could upload, offered basic community functions such as the opportunity to link to other users as friends, and provided URLs and HTML code that enabled videos to be easily embedded into other websites, a feature that capitalized on the recent introduction of popularly accessible blogging technologies. With the exception of a limit on the duration of videos that could be uploaded, YouTube's offerings were comparable to other online video start-ups at the time.[1]

Most versions of YouTube's history conform to the Silicon Valley myth of the garage entrepreneur, where technological and business innovation comes from youthful visionaries working outside of established enterprises; where, out of humble origins in an office over a pizzeria with a paper sign on the door (Allison, 2006), a multi-billion dollar success story emerges. In this story, the moment of success arrived in October 2006, when Google acquired YouTube for

$1.65 billion.[2] By November 2007 it was the most popular entertainment website in Britain, with the BBC website in second place,[3] and in early 2008 it was, according to various web metrics services, consistently in the top ten most visited websites globally.[4] As of April 2008, YouTube hosted upwards of 85 million videos, a number that represents a tenfold increase over the previous year and that continues to increase exponentially.[5] Internet market research company com-Score reported that the service accounted for 37 percent of all Internet videos watched inside the United States, with the next largest service, Fox Interactive Media, accounting for only 4.2 percent.[6] As a user-created content community, its sheer size and mainstream popularity were unprecedented.

How did this happen? There are three different myths about the emergence of YouTube into mainstream popularity. According to the tech community, the rise of YouTube can be traced to a profile of the site written by prominent technology-business blog TechCrunch on 8 August 2005 (Arrington, 2005a), which itself made the front page of Slashdot, an agenda-setting user-driven technology news site.[7] The 'news for nerds' site was prompt both to critique YouTube's technological architecture and add YouTube to their roster of sites to watch.

As told by Jawed Karim, the third co-founder who left the business to return to college in November 2005, the success of the site is due to the implementation of four key features – video recommendations via the 'related videos' list, an email link to enable video sharing, comments (and other social networking functionality), and an embeddable video player (Gannes, 2006). These features were implemented as part of a redesign after the failure of previous attempts to popularize the website, attempts that included offering $100 to attractive girls who posted ten or more videos. According to Karim, the founders reportedly didn't receive a single

reply to this offer, which they posted on Craigslist (Gannes, 2006).[8]

The third narrative of YouTube's success relates to a satirical sketch from *Saturday Night Live* featuring two nerdy, stereotypical New Yorkers rapping about buying cupcakes and going to see the *Chronicles of Narnia.* In December 2005 this clip – entitled 'Lazy Sunday' – became something of a break-out YouTube hit. The two-and-a-half-minute sketch was viewed 1.2 million times in its first ten days online and had been seen more than five million times by February 2006, when NBC Universal demanded YouTube remove it, along with 500 other clips, or face legal action under the Digital Millennium Copyright Act (Biggs, 2006). The rise and fall of 'Lazy Sunday' brought YouTube to the notice of the popular press as something other than a technological development. For *The New York Times* (Biggs, 2006), 'Lazy Sunday' demonstrated the potential of YouTube as an outlet for established media to reach out to the elusive but much-desired youth audience. As much as a viral marketing wonderland, however, the site was reported as a looming threat to the established logics of the broadcast landscape (Kerwin, 2006; Wallenstein, 2006a). Although early reporting in the features, technology, and business pages discussed YouTube and video sharing as the Internet's new 'new thing' (Byrne, 2005; Graham, 2005; Kirsner, 2005; Nussenbaum, Ryan, and Lewis, 2005; Rowan, 2005) it was through this 'big media'-related event that YouTube became a regular *subject* for the mainstream media.

Each of these narratives created a different idea of what YouTube was: was it another online fad, beloved by the tech crowd? A clever invention that people needed to be convinced to use? Or a media distribution platform, kind of like television? While attention from early adopters and the mainstream press certainly moved the service forward, YouTube's ascendancy has occurred amid a fog of

uncertainty and contradiction around what it is actually *for*. YouTube's apparent or stated mission has continuously morphed as a result of both corporate practices and audience use. In August 2005, only a few months into the life of the service, the 'About Us' page offered only the most tentative and vague hints at the possible uses of YouTube:

> Show off your favorite videos to the world
> Take videos of your dogs, cats, and other pets
> Blog the videos you take with your digital camera or cell phone
> Securely and privately show videos to your friends and family around the world
> . . . and much, much more!

In these early days, the website carried the byline 'Your Digital Video Repository,' a statement which conflicts somewhat with the now-notorious exhortation to 'Broadcast Yourself.' This shift from the idea of the website as a personal storage facility for video content to a platform for public self-expression matches YouTube to the ideas about a user-led revolution that characterizes rhetoric around 'Web 2.0' (Grossman, 2006b). Despite the insistence that the service was designed for sharing personal videos among existing social networks (even, as above, explicitly referring to the paradigmatic amateur video genre – the cat video), it was a combination of the mass popularity of particular user-created videos and the uses of YouTube to distribute broadcast media content that captured the public imagination. It is also this combination that has positioned it as a key place where disputes over copyright, participatory culture, and the market structures of online video distribution are taking place.

As a media company, YouTube is a platform for, and an aggregator of, content, but it is not a content producer itself. It is an example of what David Weinberger (2007) calls

'meta businesses' – the 'new category of business that enhances the value of information developed elsewhere and thus benefits the original creators of that information' (224). Weinberger's examples include Apple's iTunes store, which profits through music purchases but doesn't 'provide' music in the way that record labels do – bearing the costs of discovery and production; rather, iTunes makes aggregated information about music 'more searchable, more findable, and more usable' (225). So too, YouTube serves a discovery role for video producers, drawing attention to content, as well as offering revenue streams from advertising sold on the website.

Similarly, YouTube is not actually in the video business – its business, rather, is the provision of a convenient and usable platform for online video *sharing*: users (some of them premium content partners) supply the content, which in turn brings new participants and new audiences. To a certain extent then, YouTube is in the reach business as understood in traditional media business models; supporting a high volume of visitors and a range of different audiences, it offers participants a way to garner wide exposure. But Karim's proposition that the website's success can be traced to four key features that enabled media sharing reveals the most about the success behind the service. While it would eventually seek premium content distribution deals and, once utilized, a tiered access program that provided paying users with the ability to upload longer videos, YouTube has always oriented its services toward content *sharing,* including the sharing of mundane and amateur content, rather than the provision of high-quality video.[9]

YouTube's business practices have proven particularly controversial, both with the old media and with some of the most active members of YouTube's social network. While some Big Content players – large media producers and rights holders such as the Warner and Universal Music Groups – have signed revenue sharing deals with YouTube,[10]

others such as US conglomerate Viacom have rejected these deals, arguing that the service induces and profits from copyright infringement (Helft, 2008). Many of these companies seem uncomfortable with their role as participants in a space where they don't exercise complete control over the distribution and circulation of their cultural products. At the same time, some of the most active members of the YouTube social network have expressed discomfort with the interjection of corporate players into a space they experience as community generated.

The discomfort of both corporate interests and community participants points to the uncertainty associated with the meaning and uses of YouTube. This uncertainty can also be interpreted as the source of YouTube's cultural 'generativity' (Zittrain, 2008), which emerges from its multiple roles as a high-volume website, a broadcast platform, a media archive, and a social network. YouTube's value is not produced solely or even predominantly by the top-down activities of YouTube, Inc. as a company. Rather, various forms of cultural, social, and economic values are collectively produced by users *en masse*, via their consumption, evaluation, and entrepreneurial activities. Consumer co-creation (Potts *et al.*, 2008b) is fundamental to YouTube's value proposition as well as to its disruptive influence on established media business models. When we think in this way, we can begin to think about how YouTube matters in terms of culture. For YouTube, participatory culture is not a gimmick or a sideshow; it is absolutely core business.

Making Sense of YouTube

At the heart of this book is an attempt to treat YouTube in itself as an object of research. Writing about the methodological challenges of making sense of television nearly two decades ago, Stephen Heath described it as:

a somewhat difficult object, unstable, all over the place, tending derisively to escape anything we say about it: given the speed of its changes (in technology, economics, programming), its interminable flow (of images and sounds, their endlessly disappearing present), its quantitative everydayness (the very quality of this medium each and every day). (Heath, 1990: 267)

YouTube, even more than television, is a particularly unstable object of study, marked by dynamic change (both in terms of videos and organization), a diversity of content (which moves with a different rhythm to television but likewise flows through, and often disappears from, the service), and a similar quotidian frequency, or 'everydayness.' It is further complicated by its double function as both a 'top-down' platform for the distribution of popular culture and a 'bottom-up' platform for vernacular creativity. It is variously understood as a distribution platform that can make the products of commercial media widely popular, challenging the promotional reach the mass media is accustomed to monopolizing, while at the same time a platform for user-created content where challenges to commercial popular culture might emerge, be they user-created news services, or generic forms such as vlogging – which might in turn be appropriated and exploited by the traditional media industry. Because there is not yet a shared understanding of YouTube's common culture, each scholarly approach to understanding how YouTube works must make choices among these interpretations, in effect recreating it as a different object each time – at this early stage of research, each study of YouTube gives us a different understanding of what YouTube actually *is*.

An ambition to contribute to an understanding of how YouTube works as a site of participatory culture also requires dealing with both specificity and scale, and so presents epistemological and methodological challenges to the humanities as well as to the social sciences. The methods of cultural and media studies (and anthropology) are

particularly adept at the close, richly contextualized analysis of the local and the specific, bringing this close analysis into dialogue with context, guided by and speaking back to cultural theory. Work based on these approaches is used throughout this book. But scale at the level which YouTube represents tests the limits of the explanatory power of even our best grounded or particularist accounts. As cultural studies researchers, if we determined at the outset we were interested in exploring remix culture, or music fandom, or foot fetish videos, or DIY cooking shows, or any number of other niche uses of YouTube, we would be sure to find sufficient examples among the more than 85 million videos (and counting) that are currently available in the YouTube archive – although, we may not find as many as we would expect. The challenge we set ourselves in this book is to get beyond the level of particular examples or themes, and to gain some perspective on YouTube as a mediated cultural system.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, approaches to YouTube that attempt to comprehend it as a system have, so far, been restricted to the 'hard' end of social science – usually, from computer science and informatics, employing methodological tools like social network analysis (Cha *et al.*, 2007; Gill *et al.*, 2007). These studies are used, for instance, to reveal content patterns, to explore the popularity life-cycles of videos across the website, and to map the behavioral patterns of users based on the traces that they leave behind.

Such approaches draw heavily on the most obvious and accessible features of the information architecture of the website itself, trading scale off against nuance and complexity. For example, hyperlink analysis can be used productively to map large-scale patterns in connections between videos or users, but only if those connections have been 'hard-wired' as hyperlinks. What this analysis misses are the many social connections and conflicts between

participants in the YouTube community that are created via the *content* of the videos. Much of this large-scale, computer-assisted research also tends to rely on YouTube's own categorization and tagging systems, which enable uploaders to describe and sort their videos by content, theme, and style. The limited choices of categories YouTube provides, with titles such as 'Pets & Animals' and 'Cars & Vehicles,' at best offer a very general framework for organizing content across the website; and one that is imposed by design rather than emerging organically out of collective practice. They are necessarily broad and unable to contain much information about the videos themselves – they tell us little that is useful about genres, aesthetics, or the modes of communication associated with them. Similarly, the strategic use of the website's tagging functionality – where uploaders apply popular but perhaps inaccurate tags and titles to content and mark videos as responses to popular but unrelated content in order to increase the chances of a video being seen – make analyses of YouTube based primarily on those data problematic. It is naive simply to treat user-assigned tags, titles, and descriptions as matters of fact; indeed the *misuses* of tags may well turn out to be more interesting than their 'proper' uses.

At the other end of the methodological spectrum, Patricia Lange's two-year ethnography with the YouTube community has produced a number of important insights into the ways YouTube operates as a social networking site for certain participants, and the rich mundanity of the communicative practices that take place there. Most importantly, her work insistently reminds us of the need to consider fully the lived experience and materiality of everyday cultural practice.

This work is important because it asks us to think about the *uses* of YouTube by real people as part of everyday life and as part of the mix of media we all use as part of our lives, rather than thinking about YouTube as if it is a

weightless depository of content. Like millions of other people, we use YouTube this way ourselves – we watch videos after we stumble across them on blogs, or click on links sent to us in emails by our friends, and we pass them along to others. We have our own YouTube channels and even occasionally upload and/or make videos to contribute to the growing archive of material available there.

But, while the book benefits greatly from the insights of ethnographic work on YouTube, we didn't do any ethnographic research ourselves. Such an investigation would have taken us in a different direction, telling us more about how YouTube works as part of the lived experience of our research participants than it would about how YouTube is structured and evolving as a media system in the economic and social context of broader media and technological change. Also, ethnographic approaches tend to emphasize the significance of the social networking aspects of YouTube, and so tend to focus on individual users who operate outside the commercial media system (see, for example, Lange, 2007a; Lange 2007b). In her work on the YouTube community, Lange (2007a) develops a typology that breaks down the notion of a singular 'casual user' and helpfully problematizes how we can understand participation in YouTube. But inevitably this typology excludes YouTube participants who might make use of the website for its promotional capacity, rather than its social networking aspects – a group that would include professional media producers and brands, both large and small.

Attempting to address the missing middle between large-scale quantitative analysis and the sensitivity of qualitative methods, we combined the close reading of media and cultural studies with a survey of 4,320 of the videos calculated to be 'most popular' on the website at a particular moment – gathered between August and November 2007. As humanities researchers, this survey of content provided a way to order a relatively large body of