Pelle Snickars and Patrick Vonderau

Introduction

On October 9, 2006, an intriguing video was uploaded on YouTube. A little more than a minute and a half long, the clip had a gritty, low-resolution look, marked by jerky camera movements and sloppy framing. Apparently shot near a highly frequented street, the two persons appearing in it had to move into position to address the camera. "Hi YouTube, this is Chad and Steve. We're the co-founders of the site, and we just wanted to say thank you. Today we have some exciting news. We've been acquired by Google."[1]

The short clip, entitled "A Message from Chad and Steve," formed part of YouTube's official statement declaring that the deal with Google finally had been settled, making the two young Web entrepreneurs Chad Hurley and Steve Chen billionaires. In one of the most talked-about Web acquisitions to date, Google paid $1.65 billion in stock for YouTube, a company that had begun as a venture-funded technology startup only a year earlier. As a matter of fact, the Hurley and Chen clip bears some resemblance to the very first video uploaded on YouTube in April 2005—"Me at the Zoo," featuring the third co-founder Jawed Karim—and not only in its seemingly coincidental recording of what would later prove to be a turning point in YouTube's history. In retrospect, Jawed even seems to have had some foreboding about the heavyweight corporation allegedly sucking the YouTube community dry. Speaking in front of two elephants, and partly covering them up, he tersely commented on their "really, really, really long trunks." "And that's pretty much all there is to say," he noted before the camera was turned off.[2]

Posting the clip "A Message from Chad and Steve" in many ways became a performative Web 2.0 act. Since then, more than three million users have watched the video, and almost ten thousand people have left comments. The apparently coincidental recording demonstrated how video could be used as an unobtrusive channel of communication to address the community that had built up YouTube as a proprietary platform in the first place. But it also contributed to the hype around the platform and its many ways of creating business opportunities. For

a while YouTube grew at an inconceivable rate of 75 percent a week, and by the summer of 2006 the site had 13 million unique visitors every day that watched more than a hundred million video clips.[3] YouTube quickly outperformed rivals, including previous competitor Google Video, in its ability to attract and distribute content. At the same time, YouTube's management continued to promote the site via Web videos, press releases, interviews and the company blog as being co-created, as a more or less "empty" platform to be filled by the YouTube community with originally produced content of various kinds. In addressing amateurs, advertisers and professional producers alike, YouTube in fact made the term "platform" what it has become: a sales pitch that skips over tensions in services to be sold, as well as a claim that downplays the way YouTube as a cultural intermediary has fundamentally shaped public discourse over the past few years.[4] "A platform enables. It helps others build value," as Jeff Jarvis has stated.[5] It was hardly surprising that Steve Chen made a similar claim in the Google acquisition video: "Thanks to all and everyone of you guys who has been contributing to YouTube and the community. We wouldn't be anywhere close to where we are without the help of this community."

The promotion of YouTube as a community-driven platform certainly strikes one as odd at second glance, not least because of the Google subsidiary's current attempts to increase profits by prompting its users to deliver "better content."[6] After all, monetization is said to be the "no. 1 priority in 2009."[7] Certainly, partnership programs and individual deals with media companies have already allowed YouTube to place ads alongside videos for some time, splitting revenue with its partners. Because of the unpredictable nature of amateur content, however, an estimated less than five percent of the clips on YouTube still carry advertisements, hence the need to find ways "for people to engage in new ways with video," as the YouTube Fact Sheet states.

Turning from an interpersonal video-sharing service into "the world's leading video community on the Internet,"[8] YouTube has transformed not only the very notion of "platform," but also the character of its "community," and will continue to do so in a neat competition for industrializing "usage." As of this writing, Hulu.com has only a sliver of YouTube's traffic volume, but was predicted to bring in the same amount of advertisement revenue, precisely by virtue of providing "better," that is professionally produced, content for advertisers.[9] Hulu and YouTube in fact are "increasingly going after each other's turf, including jockeying for video programming that could generate the most advertising dollars."[10]

But as the fastest-growing site in the history of the Web, YouTube also remains the default site for video and the prototype for all similar sites to come. In March 2009, for example, the site had more than 90 million visitors — in terms of traffic ten times as many users as its closest competitor.[11] And it is YouTube, and none of its rivals, that has been making the news constantly, not least because of the democratizing potential the platform still holds for nations worldwide. Speaking of Hurley and Chen's subtly patronizing address to the community, one therefore should not forget how often YouTube has challenged all forms of outspoken paternalism, especially in the political domain. In our globalized, corporate-controlled mediascape, it is also liberating to see a madly laughing toddler attracting more viewers than *Harry Potter* and *Pirates of the Caribbean* together.[12] YouTube has become the very epitome of digital culture not only by promising endless opportunities for viral marketing or format development, but also by allowing "you" to post a video which might incidentally change the course of history. Establishing a clip culture that outpaces cinema and television, the brand-named video-distribution platform holds the broadest repository of moving-image culture to date.

The peculiarity of YouTube, then, lies in the way the platform has been negotiating and navigating between community and commerce. If YouTube is anything, it is both industry and user driven. Consider music videos, which dominate categories like "most popular" and "most viewed," while still being marginal to the site's overall content in terms of clips uploaded. Then again, the long tail of content generated by amateurs seems almost infinite, and that sort of material often appears to be the "most discussed." "A Message from Chad and Steve" testifies to this very same dialectic. The video promoted YouTube as being community driven, although the company's founders had, prior to the Google buyout, been in talks with media corporations with the intention of increasing their services' value. Arguably, YouTube's management knew that the platform's "community value" derived from the exponentially growing number of videos generated by amateurs, but it also knew that professionally produced entertainment would increase traffic and solidify the binary rule that on the Web, money tends to follow users.

Consequently, it would miss the point to criticize YouTube for employing doublespeak, since the community and the market pair perfectly in its own operational self-conception. Yet it would also be misleading to exempt YouTube's community ideals from criticism. Renowned digital anthropologists like Mike Wesch have analyzed YouTube for its creative and grassroots potentials, but according to the so-called "90-9-1 rule," that 90 percent of online audiences never interact, nine percent interact only occasionally, and one percent do most interacting, ordinary YouTube users hardly see themselves as part of a larger community. The typical "YouTuber" just surfs the site occasionally, watching videos and enjoying it.[13] And most YouTube "stars" never make it outside their own small Web community.[14]

In Lawrence Lessig's view, translating such delimited community spaces into global commercial ventures is a general feature of the Internet's new "hybrid economies."[15] The dialectics of commerce and community, copyrighted material and user-generated content, and the way video is being distributed all relate to economic features of so-called emergent social-network markets.[16] On the one hand, YouTube.com presents and views itself as a platform and not a regular media distributor, especially when copyright issues are involved. At the core of the Viacom lawsuit, for instance, lay an understanding of YouTube as a distributor that does not comply with copyright law, while YouTube stated that it is nothing but a platform, pointing to the rules and regulations for the YouTube community. Videos in fact are constantly taken down — in the first three months of 2009 the site YouTomb recorded nearly three times as many takedowns than in 2008.[17] On the other hand, Google clearly is a vertically integrated corporation operating in distributed ways. Bits of Google are all over the Web, and both the migration of videos to new and old media and the embedding of clips into various sites, blogs and social-networking platforms is undoubtedly crucial for understanding the success of YouTube. Like Google, YouTube has distributed itself constantly. Whereas YouTube.com rapidly established itself as the default site for online video, with average users and dedicated partners using the platform to perform their interests, the public also encountered YouTube videos everywhere on and off the Net. YouTube thus was and is both a node and a network.

YouTube Metaphors

The notion of "platform" is only one of several metaphors widely used to stress YouTube's social, economic and technological importance. When plunging into YouTube discourse, one indeed begins to wonder about the apparent resemblances YouTube bears to a number of established cultural institutions. YouTube is often spoken about as if it were a library, an archive, a laboratory or a medium like television, with the respective metaphor inviting hypothetical exploration of what YouTube's possible, probable and preferred futures might be. This clearly mirrors earlier periods in media history, with early cinema being compared to theater and vaudeville, or television to radio, cinema and theater, in an emergent, that is unforeseeable and uncontrolled process of a new media phenomenon fitting into an existing culture. From a computer-science viewpoint, YouTube is nothing but a database, but in any given cultural context, moving onto the platform and watching a video obviously entails more than that. It is therefore debatable whether "we watch databases" only, as Geert Lovink has stated,[18] even if the pragmatics of viewing moving images have changed in YouTubean times. After all, the functionalities of databases might change too. For instance, up to the 1960s, US cinemas regularly screened movies in a *séance continue*, that is in a continuous showing without a specific starting time, with viewers randomly walking in from the street at the beginning, middle or very end of any given picture. It took a Hitchcock and *Psycho* to enforce more disciplined viewing habits.[19] There is thus no firm ground for making any substantial claims about what YouTube is, despite the institutional pressure to do so.

Suffice it to say that YouTube is not either-or. When changing the metaphor, one faces different horizons of use and enters an open-ended process of experiments and enterprises. Take the archive as a metaphor to designate what "you" might want to do with YouTube. Countless blogs link to YouTube the archival database in order to substantiate an idea or to pass something newly found to others. "Why pay an institution to archive media from around the world when users seem to be doing it for themselves? Open source archiving I suppose it is," as one blogger proclaimed in a post entitled "The Great YouTube Archive."[20] Corporate media has been using the site as an archival outlet for its material, and deals are signed constantly to include older TV series and

feature films. In April 2009, YouTube announced a partnership with Sony to expand its library of movies and TV shows. Various treasures from the archive will be promoted at youtube.com/movies and youtube.com/shows, and YouTube has also confirmed rumors about a new advertising model "which allows program makers to place commercials into the ad breaks of television shows being watched online."[21]

Taking advantage of YouTube as an archival platform also entails some sort of media transfer. Within the traditional media archival sector, there are those who mourn the apparent loss of media specificity in the 21st century[22] and others who portray the current archival convergence in a brighter light. For some, the archival mode of online media has become evident with YouTube's collection of perhaps 200 million videos, making the Internet the world's largest vault for moving-image material. Others stress the lack of quality and preservational strategies. Some, like Kristin Thompson, have argued that the celestial multiplex is a myth, and that there will "never come a time when everything is available [online]." And besides, most film "archives are more concerned about getting the money to conserve or restore aging, unique prints than about making them widely available."[23]

Whether or not one likes the distinctiveness of media dissolving into a pulsing stream of bits and bytes, traditional media archives are facing the fact that sites like YouTube and Flickr have become default media-archive interfaces. Every initiative a film archive might launch on the Web will be measured against YouTube's ease of access. The Library of Congress, for example, has already had its own YouTube channel for some years. During spring 2009, the Library announced that it would start uploading millions of clips to YouTube. It already offers most of that moving-image material on its own website, and the expansion to YouTube — and to Apple's iTunes for sound recordings — is part of an effort to make more than 15 million digital items even more widely accessible. The initiative parallels that of Flickr Commons, the "broad strategy" being "to 'fish where the fish are,' " using highly frequented sites that may give content added value.[24] Yet since YouTube actually lacks a centralized "curator of display," as Robert Gehl has noted, large media companies may "step into the curatorial role and decide how each object in YouTube's archives will be presented to users."[25] Mining the vaults of an established media archive remains subject to corporate interests as well.

Interacting with YouTube is reminiscent of using archives or libraries, but is also similar to zapping through television channels, the difference being that tags link content to similar content in YouTube's media flow. If a clip turns out to be uninteresting, there are still millions of other trails to be followed, either by clicking on a linked video or by performing a new search. Since YouTube also contains vast quantities of material that has been broadcast, the platform has often been likened to television. As a medium emerging after the digital turn, YouTube appears to imitate television's specific practices. Arguably, among old 20th century media, television has been the most successful in attuning itself to the new digital environment. Radio is ubiquitous on the Web, but within the visual culture that will allegedly dominate the Internet in the future, digital video has been vital.

"Have you ever wanted to just sit on your couch and watch YouTube on your TV?" YouTube announced on its blog in January 2009. Thanks to a joint project with Apple, www.youtube.com/tv users are now offered "a dynamic, lean-back, 10-foot television viewing experience through a streamlined interface."[26] In an effort to emulate a traditional TV experience using a gaming console, users/viewers are now able to watch YouTube videos on any TV screen. In other words, just as commercial and public broadcasters have been trying to establish themselves on the Web over the last decade — the BBC and its iPlayer probably being the prime example — YouTube's management has also experimented with including the website in an old media environment. Given that new media remediate old media, there is also economic value in "downgrading" to a previous platform in order to stay competitive. In this sense, it seems that YouTube indeed wants to be like your TV. While news media is involved in the introduction of new e-reading devices, YouTube is currently partnering with TV set-top box manufacturers to bring the platform into the living room. At present, few TV sets contain a Web browser. For a site like YouTube, this might prove to be critical, not least since audience ratings in various countries repeatedly show that traditional television remains far more popular than online video. At the same time, two of every three Web surfers who watched video did so on YouTube, so the site has a clear advantage over broadcasting and cable-television networks that are trying to further establish themselves on the Web.

As consumption patterns change, digital screens will arguably become the default interfaces for media access. Providers of Web services, video-recording devices and mobile technology have in any case put great effort into marketing new patterns of media consumption to the younger generation. "YouthTubers" are targeted in both online and offline advertising, and any use of YouTube videos is regularly translated into metadata. Metaphorically speaking, the site thus appears to work not only like an archive or a medium, but like a laboratory registering user behavior also. From this perspective, YouTube appears to be not so much a platform for any individual presenting her- or himself to a community (as in a social-networking system like MySpace or Facebook), but rather as a way of strategically combining video content with numerical data. It can hardly have escaped anyone that YouTube presents videos in conjunction with viewer statistics, not detailed user profiles. As a matter of fact, "users" are by definition reducible to quantified traces of actual usage. With views, clicks, comments and ratings counted, user behavior becomes a byproduct of all the informational transactions taking place on the site, and raw data constantly gets fed back into the You-Tube machinery. In this view, YouTube seems to serve as a technology of normalization, as a symptom for a wider social strategy Jürgen Link has called "flexible normalism."[27]

An incident illustrating the laboratory relevance of user-generated data occurred in July 2008, when Google was ordered by federal judge Louis L. Stanton to turn over to Viacom its records of users who had watched Viacom content on YouTube. The range and depth of data available was staggering, and many YouTubers expressed fear that viewing habits might potentially become public. YouTube's management reacted via the company blog, expressing its concern about "the community's privacy." "Of course, we have to follow legal process," the blog stated. "But since IP addresses and usernames aren't necessary to determine general viewing practices, our lawyers have asked their lawyers to let us remove that information before we hand over the data they're seeking."

Interestingly, YouTube not only acknowledged storing user data, the company also felt it was necessary to explain why this information was kept in the first place. "Why do we keep this information? [...] It helps us personalize the YouTube experience, getting you closer to the videos you most want to watch." Viewed from the laboratory perspective, and in light of the fact that Google had been collecting information

for years to make its search algorithm more efficient for advertisers, this hardly seems plausible. Exploring YouTube as a laboratory, one might instead point to the uses made of user data, and to the normalizing effect of viewer statistics constantly being presented to viewers. "Broadcast yourself" and be metered—YouTube's display of numbers suggests that communities might relocate to the artificial realities of statistical data fields.

About this Book

When examining YouTube by way of metaphors such as the archive, the medium or the laboratory, one is immediately confronted with a number of inherent (and not easily solvable) conflicts and problems vying for more detailed answers. How does, for instance, the practice of open access relate to traditional archival standards, legal constraints, "old" media distribution and the entrepreneurial interests of the Google subsidiary? To what extent do clip aesthetics challenge traditional notions of, for example, textuality, episodic and serial narrative, documentary forms and also the very basic requirements of teaching and research? And what about the relationships between free-for-download video and mobile devices, between mashup software and patented hardware? How does the promise of empowering the "broadcasters of tomorrow" (YouTube) correspond to the realities of careers in broadcasting and film, to fan participation and management strategies? And finally: if YouTube is to be regarded as the world's largest archive, how do the texts and practices associated with its use work for and against cultural memory?

As the metaphorical explorations above have shown, studying YouTube presupposes a broader theoretical framework and a critical distance vis-à-vis YouTube discourse itself. Consequently, a reader like this one would provide researchers, teachers and students with a programmatic selection of foundational texts, permitting them to mount an intervention. But is there anything to be read about YouTube? So far, media studies have all but ignored the public interest in the YouTube phenomenon. In a marked contrast to anthropologists, educators, IT specialists and scholars of marketing and the creative industries, who have pioneered research on YouTube over the last years, film and media

studies have avoided eye contact by lowering their view on random cases of post-television and amateur practice, or by making rather general claims about the nature of "Web 2.0." With the notable exception of Geert Lovink's *Video Vortex Reader*, and the individual research of scholars such as Patricia G. Lange, José van Dijk, Michel Bauwens, Jean Burgess and Joshua Green,[29] no comprehensive work has been done on YouTube as yet. By directly confronting YouTube as an industry, an archive and a cultural form, this book addresses issues hitherto dealt with at the margins of our disciplinary field only. Deviating from what the term "reader" usually implies, our volume consists exclusively of original and actual contributions, thus offering its present readers an update on the frantically changing YouTube sphere, and, for the future present, an historical view of how things looked back then in 2009. As with any selection of readings in a particular academic discipline, this book is also programmatic in its comparison (but not necessarily reconciliation) of conflicting views on the phenomenon at hand. By doing so, it aims at prompting further studies on the cultural and capitalist, social and material, amateur and professional logic of YouTube.

The contributions in this volume analyze various relationships between technology, community and commerce characterizing YouTube practice. The idea was to invite renowned scholars from both the US and Europe to send us short, essayistic articles, employing their own research interests and approaches as a vantage point. As a consequence, the book has been roughly organized into six sections. "Mediality" offers conceptual arguments about YouTube, relating the new phenomenon to prevalent concerns in media theory and history. "Usage" follows those on YouTube in the twisted forms of practice. "Form" examines what was called aesthetics in the days of old media, while "Storage" deals with the archival implications the YouTube platform holds. "Industry" is concerned with the economic relevance of YouTube for society. Finally, "Curatorship" came as an invitation to Giovanna Fossati, curator at the Netherlands Film Museum in Amsterdam, to organize a YouTube exhibition on the Internet. Since it wouldn't make much sense to write a book about YouTube without keeping its moving-image culture alive, we kindly invite all our readers to visit the exhibition at www.youtubereader.com.

In many ways, this book has been developed as a partisan project. In the same way as many clips on YouTube, it was deliberately planned outside the routines of academic presses. "Packaged" like a global Hollywood deal, but produced in less than a year, it involved a Berlin beer garden (research and development) and a major public institution relating to Swedish cultural life (deep pockets), inspired contributions and design (creative talent), and also saw the participation of a Lithuanian printing facility and an industrious UK publisher (distribution). We are grateful to all those who made this book possible, not least our wives and kids who, despite their enthusiasm for YouTube, might sometimes have felt displaced by the uncanny production schedule. We dedicate this book to all our girls — Malin and Lea, Asta, Luka and Ieva.

Endnotes

1 The video "A Message from Chad and Steve" was uploaded on 9 October 2006. See www.youtube.com/watch?v=QCVxQ_3Ejkg [last checked 15 May 2009].

2 See www.youtube.com/watch?v=jNQXAC9IVRw [last checked 15 May 2009].

3 Pete Cashmore, "YouTube is World's Fastest Growing Website," *Mashable*, 22 July 2006 – http://mashable.com/2006/07/22/youtube-is-worlds-fastest-growing-website/ [last checked 15 May 2009].

4 Tarleton Gillespie, "The Politics of 'Platforms'," paper presented at the MiT6 Conference, Cambridge, April 2009, submitted to *New Media & Society* for publication, December 2008. Thanks to Tarleton for pointing the importance of the platform metaphor out to us.

5 Jeff Jarvis, *What Would Google Do?* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009), p. 32.

6 Chad Hurley, quoted by Brian Stelter, "YouTube Videos Pull In Real Money," *The New York Times*, 11 December 2008.

7 See for example Tom Steinert-Threlkeld's blog post "Time for change at YouTube: Monetization 'No. 1 Priority in 2009'" at http://blogs.zdnet.com/BTL/?p=11142 [last checked 15 May 2009].

8 YouTube Fact Sheet at www.youtube.com/t/fact_sheet [last checked 15 May 2009].

9 Frederic Lardinois, "Online Advertising: Hulu Catching Up With YouTube?" *ReadWriteWeb,* 17 November 2008 – www.readwriteweb.com/archives/online_advertising_hulu_youtube.php [last checked 15 May 2009].

10 Jessica E. Vascellaro, Elizabeth Holmes & Sarah McBride, "Video Sites Duke It Out for Content. YouTube, Hulu Race to Sign Deals for Movies, Shows That Draw Advertising," *Wall Street Journal*, 17 April 2009.

11 See the heading "YouTube" at http://topics.nytimes.com/top/news/business/companies/youtube/ [last checked 15 May 2009].

12 As of April 2009, the video "Hahaha," at www.youtube.com/watch?v=5P6UU6m3cqk, had been watched approximately 83 million times. This figure clearly exceeds the attendance numbers for *Harry Potter and the Order of Phoenix* (36,869,485 tickets sold) and *Pirates of the Caribbean: The Curse of the Black Pearl* (29,382,065 tickets sold) in Europe as they were reported on the European Audiovisual Observatory's Lumière database, www.obs.coe.int [last checked 15 May 2009].

13 José van Dijk, "Users Like You? Theorizing Agency in User-generated Content," *Media, Culture & Society* no. 1, 2009, pp. 41 – 58.

14 In her ongoing research on YouTube celebrities, Alice E. Warwick consequently imported Terri Senft's term "microcelebrity" in order to describe characteristics of YouTube fame. See tiara.org for an overview of Alice's projects.

15 Lawrence Lessig, *Remix. Making Art and Commerce Thrive in the Hybrid Economy* (New York: Penguin Press, 2008).

16 Jason Potts, "Social Network Markets: A New Definition of the Creative Industries," *Journal of Cultural Economy* no. 32, 2008, pp. 167 – 185.

17 YouTomb.mit.edu is a website — operated by MIT Students for Free Culture — built to track videos removed by YouTube. YouTomb records the title, description, screen shots, etcetera of videos taken down, thus documenting what happened to them.

18 Geert Lovink, "The Art of Watching Databases: Introduction to the *Video Vortex Reader*," in The Video Vortex Reader: Responses to YouTube (Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures, 2008), p. 9.

19 See for example Linda Williams, "Learning to Scream," in *Horror. The Film Reader*, ed., Mark Jancovich (London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 14 – 17.

20 See www.vi-r-us.com/the-great-youtube-archive/ [last checked 15 May 2009].

21 BBC, "YouTube to stream Hollywood films," 17 April 2009 – http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/entertainment/8003881.stm [last checked 15 May 2009].

22 The film-archive organization FIAT is one example. For a discussion, see Paolo Cherchi Usai et. al, eds., *Film Curatorship. Archives, Museums, and the Digital Marketplace* (Vienna: Synema Publikationen, 2008).

23 Kristin Thompson, "The Celestial Multiplex," blog post, 27 March 2007 – www.davidbordwell.net/blog/?p=595 [last checked 15 May 2009].

24 "Library of Congress Makes More Assets and Information Available Through New-Media Initiatives. YouTube and iTunes Launches Will Follow Groundbreaking Flickr Pact to Bring More Treasures to the Public," press release, 25 March 2009 – www.loc.gov/today/pr/2009/09-055.html [last checked 15 May 2009]. For a discussion, see Grant Gross, "Library of Congress embraces YouTube, iTunes" *NetWorkWorld*," 27 March 2009 – www.networkworld.com/news/2009/032709-library-of-congress-embraces-youtube.html [last checked 15 May 2009].

25 For a discussion, see Robert Gehl, "YouTube as archive," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* no. 1, 2009, pp. 43 – 60.

26 "Coming Up Next... YouTube on Your TV," blog post, 15 January 2009 – www.youtube.com/blog?month=1&year=2009 [last checked 15 May 2009].

27 See for example Jürgen Link, Mirko M. Hall, "On the Contribution of Normalism to Modernity and Postmodernity," *Cultural Critique* no. 57, pp. 33 – 46.

28 "The Law and Your Privacy," blog post, 4 July 2008 – www.youtube.com/blog?month=7&year=2008 [last checked 15 May 2009].

29 See the General Bibliography at the end of this volume.