

Beyond Broadcast Yourself™: The Future of YouTube

Abstract: Since its launch in early 2005, video sharing website YouTube has emerged as a culturally, politically and economically significant medium and as one of the inheritors of the social role played by broadcast television. However its continued growth and journey to profitability is not guaranteed. This paper queries the future of YouTube by exploring the tension inherent in the site's 3 key characteristics embodied within its slogan Broadcast Yourself™. The site is based within regimes of consumer production and identity practices, yet it is also located within a traditional fiscal economy as indicated by the trademark identifier. The contradictory pulls of these positions pose challenges for YouTube and its parent company Google. The difficulty of sustaining an emergent social economy alongside the requirements of advertising driven economics raises questions about the future of YouTube and indicates the complex terrain of what lies beyond broadcasting.

Key words: YouTube, Google, Web 2.0, political economy

From a single home video of a trip to the Zoo when launched in February 2005, video sharing website YouTube has experienced almost absurd growth in the range of videos it hosts and in the number of users who upload to and stream content from the site. In July 2006, a little over a year after its launch, YouTube was delivering an average 100 million video streams per day, a figure drawn from a monthly total of 3 billion streams for 63 million visitors (comScore 2006). At this time an additional 65,000 new videos were being uploaded daily (Reuters 2006). This unprecedented growth led to YouTube being declared *Time* magazine's Invention of 2006 for creating a "...new way for millions of people to entertain, educate, shock, rock and grok one another..." (Grossman 2006). YouTube has also been registered as playing a role, with unknown consequence at the time of writing, in both US presidential politics and the 2007 Australian federal election campaign. The economic significance of the site was manifested in the October 2006 decision by industry juggernaut Google to acquire YouTube for the extraordinary price of US\$1.65 billion in stock.

YouTube is more than a site for viewing digitised video. Originally intended by creators Hurley, Chen and Karim as a platform for users to upload video, with early ideas focussed around providing additional content for eBay auctions or sharing of home videos, the site was 'hijacked' by its users who began posting original content and using that within other online socialisation activities (Grossman 2006; Cloud 2006). With this provenance, YouTube has developed as a user-driven, anarchic, social networking site. This makes it typical of the current trend of Web 2.0 media forms and, as such, an heir to the economic and cultural role once played by broadcast media. As the expansion of channels and media forms increase competition for audiences, as taste cultures fragment into multitudes of ill-defined niche markets, and as technological changes normalise greater control of the viewing experience, broadcasting's viability is threatened. Web 2.0 sites offer a mass audience an alternate interactive and self-defined media experience. In doing so, they reinvigorate the possibilities of advertising driven audio-visual mass media (Garfield 2006; Rose 2006; Kirkpatrick and Schlender 2006). The high monetary value of YouTube is thus based not on the quality of the content available on the site, nor for the advances of its particular technological system, but on the economic potential of the eyeballs it has attracted (Garfield 2006). Furthermore, the site adds better targeting of those eyeballs through the consumer profiling capacities of Web-based commercial media, an avenue for existing marketers to test and tailor campaigns and the co-optation of users to create and virally distribute advertisements (Story 2007; Rose 2006).

Yet despite this successful beginning, a bright future for YouTube is not a *fait accompli*.

There are significant tensions associated with the site which have the potential to re-shape its form and content and thereby derail its journey to profitability and sustained social ubiquity.

This paper interrogates the key features of YouTube, perfectly encapsulated by the company slogan Broadcast Yourself™, to ask: If YouTube *is* the future of broadcasting, what is the future of YouTube?

DIY Broadcasting

The nature of the YouTube universe is clearly articulated within its imperative slogan: Broadcast Yourself™. Firstly, it indicates the centrality of user involvement as it urges us to *do the broadcasting ourselves*. YouTube's key function is as a global, mass medium of distribution for amateur video producers. It is broadcasting 'democratised' by the development of simple functionalities to enable mass participation. Users can upload videos in a simple two step process, which involves titling and describing the content, including optional tags, and then uploading the video file. The broadcast option is set by default to public access encouraging use of the site as a mass distribution medium, although private networks are available. The site also encourages users to produce polished content by offering production advice from *Videomaker Magazine* and through the addition of the YouTube Remixer¹ which enables editing, remixing and titling of YouTube content on site.

YouTube is also DIY as a consumption experience in that it is a 'pull' technology. Users are more active than in many earlier audiovisual media forms where, despite the choice of programming, content was scheduled and initiated by producers. The television viewer, whose incorporation into the audience commodity in broadcast ratings systems (Smythe 2006; Ang 1991) offered an indirect determining role, has now become directly involved in managing content and programming. The vast array of search and browse facilities available

on YouTube - via producers' names; tags and other textual content; related links; related playlists; categories; channels; filtering by community preferences - instead offer the user relative control over his/her viewing experience. The individual user navigates the site using her or his own viewing preferences, with her or his individual playlist becoming a personal DIY TV Guide.

These two aspects combine in the other DIY aspect of the site which is the aggregation of user consumption choices and community involvement to organise the site. Many of the facilities by which a user can navigate from video to video, including the tags which categorise content, are a direct result of user input. Consumers rate each other's contributions, either actively in the form of comments, 'favoriting' or ratings, or passively through the recording of views. YouTube's users are called upon to manage the site's content, either through the terms of use which delegates responsibility for policing copyright to the individual user or in the practice of flagging inappropriate content for review by the site's administrators. As Lange's study of users' responses to antagonistic 'hating' behaviour indicates (2007a), YouTube users also indicate a wariness of external controls even over these negative posts, for fear of diminishing the positive guidance of the user community. As exemplified in the fuzzy YouTube community guidelines², the site is organised around what Jenkins describes as a 'moral economy': "a sense of mutual obligations and shared expectations about what constitutes good citizenship within a knowledge community" (2006: 255). Doing it yourself, for YouTube's benefit as well as your own, is at the heart of the site.

Broadcast Your Self

The second key feature of YouTube as represented in its slogan is involvement in regimes of identity production and reproduction. The success of the site has been built on the desire for users to express themselves within a public medium - to engage in 'mass self-communication' (Castells 2007). As *Wired* magazine phrased it, YouTube tapped into "...the hitherto futile aspirations of the everyman to break out of his lonely anonymous life of quiet desperation, to step in front of the whole world and *be somebody*, dude" (Garfield 2006, original emphasis). YouTube wants you to *broadcast your Self*.

The key principle of YouTube both as a suite of technical affordances and as a cultural practice is individual visibility (Colman et al. 2007). Whether an amateur Tuber produces an edited sample from a copyrighted television program with commentary³, a video blog (vlog)⁴, a political 'rant'⁵, a mash-up of other media content⁶, a scripted work of fiction by a 'pro-am' production team⁷ or a candid home video⁸, the choice to upload that video to a public distribution space casts that video as a performative statement of that user's public identity (boyd and Heer 2006). Each video indicates something about the producer whether that is an affinity with a particular taste culture or information relating to his or her political orientation, religious beliefs, sense of humour, or everyday leisure activities. Collected under the user profile, these indicators aggregate to form the public face of that user for the Tuber community and to provide the grounds for initiating dialogue with others.

Acts undertaken on social networking sites such as YouTube are intended to be shared and to provide entrée into a community of users (boyd and Heer 2006). A 2006 Pew study indicated that teenagers use social networking tools, including posting video files, to receive affirmation and feedback about their social status and as both a public and private

communication tool (Lenhart and Madden 2007). Content is posted so that it might be seen by others with half drawing responses, making it "...as much about interaction with others as it is about sharing with them" (Lenhart and Madden 2007: 29). On YouTube posting responses is a key affordance opening up each video to dialogue, evaluation and discussion and is central to the formation of social networks. As Lange states, "...frequent interaction between video makers and viewers is a core component of participation on the site. Viewers and commenters are often themselves video makers, who comment with the strategic intent of forming social relationships with others who will support their work" (2007b). These responses in the forms of ratings and honours, as well as the public display of linkage statistics, bind each publicly accessible producer to the social judgement of the community.

YouTube is also implicated in identity display within the context of consumption. For instance, the Embeddable Player allows videos to be easily disaggregated from the site and distributed through other digital media such as home pages or MySpace profiles. Donath and boyd (2004) argue that the public display of connections in 'friending' links provides context for the person and becomes an important aspect of that person's self-presentation. Similarly a user's choice to publicly display and share her or his affinity for a video represents something about that user to others. Thus the acts of 'conspicuous consumption' *and* 'conspicuous production' of a Tuber, or even a casual user, are a means of social positioning.

TM

The final component of the YouTube universe is embodied in the superscripted trademark identifier of the slogan. With this addition, YouTube identifies its location within regimes of property rights, copyright ownership and commercial interests. Although potentially a site for

resistant identity practices and for challenging established media power relations, its sale to Google indicates that YouTube is nevertheless a valuable piece of commercial real estate. Indeed it is *because* of the non-commercial relations of consumers that the site has traditional economic value. YouTube's model requires consumers to do most of the immaterial and affective labour (Terranova 2000; Hardt 1999; Lazzarato 1996) of providing the content and creating the communities (market niches) which make the site compelling for users. It is also "...the tastes, preferences, and social narratives found in user entries which comprise the quotidian motherlode..." of advertising microtargeting that is the revenue stream of the site (Coté and Pybus 2007: 100). This cost-efficient production couples with the site's integration with advertisers from the 'old economy' to create a relatively stable, although still unproven, business model (Pascu et al. 2007). By marking its relationship to intellectual property conventions in its slogan, YouTube indicates its prime location within the conventional political/economic regime.

However, the inclusion of the TM in the site's slogan also manifests a significant tension in the site's defining properties. It co-locates the personal engagement of individual users and the communities these individuals collectively create - the moral economy of the site - and the corporate agenda framed by the fiscal and political economy of the media sector. As Banks and Humphreys (2007) point out, it would be overly simplistic to define these aspects of the company as necessarily oppositional, but they have historically co-existed only in a state of tension (see also Lamla 2007). The unstable, perhaps uncontrollable nature of norms which are emergent from user practices may be in fatal tension with the more structured and hierarchically ordered needs of the traditional fiscal economy. To Broadcast YourselfTM is, therefore, a difficult negotiation and the biggest threat to the future of YouTube.

Trust and goodwill

The key defining feature of the networks which allow user-generated sites such as YouTube to function and to create wealth is the cooperative and non-market creation of information and control structures (Bruns 2006; Benkler 2006; Jenkins 2006). This economy is based on the trust which organically emerges through the social interactions of users. For instance, the tagging systems which archive images on Flickr are authenticated and validated by the 'provenance' provided by other users pre-existing tagging (Hogan 2006). The Wikipedia and social bookmarking site del.icio.us rely on the collective intelligence of all users to create trustworthy systems, as in part does the Google search engine. On eBay trust in the sales environment is driven by the policing provided by other users (Jarrett 2006; Boyd 2002). On YouTube, the plethora of search functions and browsing options utilise the aggregation of individual choices (e.g. tagging, honours, links, the option to link through into a particular poster's profile to view more of their input, etc.) to create a viral, peer-to-peer system of trustworthy recommendations which are vital to the user's experience and navigation of the site.

This mobilisation of users and user communities may be, as it is with eBay, a useful strategy to avoid liability relating to content (Baron 2002), but it is nevertheless the appeal of, and control provided by, community structures rather than corporate intervention which is fundamental to the success of these sites. These provide the 'authenticity' which Castells (2007: 254) argues is crucial to sustained involvement in social networking media. Just as the youth described by boyd utilise MySpace as a public environment outside of the parental

line of sight, Web 2.0 sites such as YouTube have typically been "...found in the interstices of controlled space" (boyd 2006) . In this context, owner companies impose external controls at their peril. Indeed, there are numerous examples of the tension between corporate need and user community relations causing damage to the site's sustainability. For instance, user outrage at price increases and inconvenient outages in the early years of eBay - known as Black Friday - lead to a breakdown in trust within the community and damaging public relations (Robinson 2006). As Six Apart, the owner of LiveJournal discovered when it deleted hundreds of sex-themed journals in 2007, the user community can be virulent in protesting the imposition of corporate (and non-community) standards (McCullagh 2007). boyd (in press) describes the terminal decline of the Friendster social networking service as the company systematically challenged early adopters' use of 'fakester' identities to extend the affordances of the site. For early adopters, this direct intervention into the organisation of the site, "...was the end of a period of freedom in which the participants defined the context of their sociability" (boyd, in press). Direct corporate intervention does not gel with the kinds of emergent moral economies (Jenkins 2006) found in Web 2.0 sites.

YouTube's current FAQ states repeatedly that the company is 'committed to preserving the quality of the user experience' for the "...community is still in control on YouTube, and, at the end of the day, they decide what's entertaining"⁹. This aligns with YouTube's deliberately crafted tenor (brand identity) as a collection of grassroots, user-created videos (Cloud 2006). The value of this brand, which is the legal fiction upon which the site's market value rests, is tied inextricably to the 'goodwill' generated by the user experience of the site. As Hermann et al. (2006: 186) write:

goodwill is generated when the corporation delivers a positive experience for the consumer, thus encouraging the continued consumption of the corporation's good. As a legal fiction, goodwill enables corporations to claim as economic value consumers' affective relation to the corporation as the only legitimate source of what they desire in the commodity form.

The reiteration of community control as a guiding principle indicates the site's recognition that the anarchic, self-organising systems that have historically constituted YouTube are a fundamental and financially significant component of the site-as-experience and the site-as-business. To damage the community is to damage the company. However, the sustainability of this *laissez faire* position, and consequently the future of YouTube, is under threat by the very success these mechanisms have produced.

The Viacom problem

For YouTube there are obvious pressures which are poised to force potentially damaging interventions into the functioning of the community. The increased visibility of the site has put it under scrutiny for its social role, in particular the protections it offers underage users. YouTube, along with MySpace, have introduced what *The New York Times* referred to as 'school hallway monitors' to police nudity and violence in the site (Stone 2007; Zeller 2006). YouTube has also deliberately chosen to disallow streaming webcasts which are discouraged by child safety advocates. These limiting interventions have opened niches for smaller, less visible competitor videosharing sites to exploit. LiveLeak, for instance, positions itself as the home of reality-based footage, including images from the war in Iraq which have been barred from YouTube (Stone 2007). Stickam's webcam live streaming community is a growing but

still 'lawless' competitor drawing from the potential YouTube consumer base. The increasing limits on uses of the site have already prompted user migration as they seek sites offering the "...freewheeling environment that typified YouTube's early days" (Stone 2007).

YouTube's most pressing problem though is the thorny issue of copyright (O'Brien and Fitzgerald 2006). Since the site's purchase, the lure of Google's growing pockets has made it a viable litigation target and offers greater purchase for established media producers to apply pressure over the presence of copyrighted materials (Castells 2007: 253; Nack 2007).

YouTube's solution to this problem has been two-pronged. Firstly, they have removed content, including the very popular posting of snippets from Comedy Central's *The Daily Show* and *South Park*, in response to requests by copyright holders (although their terms of use continue to avoid liability by attributing sole responsibility for content to individual users).

The company's other response has been to strike commercial deals with copyright owners to become a distributor of their content. Established media companies can utilise YouTube's capacity as a promotional vehicle while remaining in control of their intellectual property.

The AudioSwap function, which is currently in beta testing mode, is an example of the deep embedding of these licensing deals as it allows users to legally add copyrighted music to their videos¹⁰. YouTube founder Chad Hurley believes that these kinds of partnerships and 'symbiotic relationships' with established media will "... be an important part of our growth in the years to come" (Hurley 2007: 68).

This solution may be an untenable economic proposition however. Studies indicate that the majority of content on the site, and indeed the most compelling content, is unique product (Li 2007; Kumar 2007). Although these surveys' methodologies are questionable, the continual growth of the site after the removal of more than 100,000 copyrighted clips in February 2007 indicates that it is not a desire to watch readily available commercial content which necessarily drives consumers to the site. Adding more non-community generated product thus may not produce increased growth nor add the necessary markets for advertising generation. What this solution may only achieve is to shift the texture of the site to a more obviously commercial environment where the goal is promotion rather than social interaction. For users whose engagement with YouTube has been defined by the primacy of community, an over reliance on professional, corporate content is likely to damage the all-important goodwill of the YouTube brand.

This increased use of professional product threatens the 'authenticity' of the user's experience of the site and thus constitutes a threat to the trust-based social economy. This is not because the videos and the community through which they circulate are absolutely non-commercial. Indeed the opposite is often true with many communities organising around specific commercial products, advertisements, music videos or professional/amateur video producers and consumers are actively involved in viral marketing processes. YouTube has sought to capitalise on these features of its broad community by offering the development of 'brand channels' as a key marketing platform for corporate partners. Video production contests run by advertisers are also a significant feature of the site with the 'community' section subdivided into the generic types 'groups' and 'contests'. These contests are also the home for the aggregation of grassroots political communication serving as a platform for

publicly generated debate questions for the US Republican presidential primary debate¹¹ to cite one instance.

However as the nature of this debate ‘contest’ indicates, the focus in these groups is on community-produced content and perspectives rather than any mainstream corporate (or political) agenda. It is a bottom-up, user driven phenomenon and is seen to be so. Like the fan products described by Jenkins (1992; 2006), user produced videos in these categories are typically unruly, failing to respect the copyright (or preferred brand identity) of corporate producers or that of other users (Story 2007). Bruns (2006) argues that these kinds of alternative approaches to intellectual property are vital to the continuous, emergent, self-reflective dialogue with others which produce community in ‘produsage’ environments. Any commercial producer posting videos to YouTube attempting to impose a strict interpretation of copyright law or to strictly control consumer input will thus negatively intervene in the socialisation practices of the site¹².

The same is true for political parties seeking to mobilise grassroots support through YouTube. As Ansley and Sellers (2007) describe, this tactic requires parties to decentralise control over messages which has the potential benefits of giving voice to opinions too potentially divisive for the mainstream campaign, for instance the unauthorised ‘Hillary 1984’¹³ video produced by an Obama supporter during the 2007 Democrat presidential nominations. But there are also potential risks as the “...nuance and caution...” with which political messages are usually shaped is lost (Marinucci 2007). However to use YouTube as a marketing tool and gain the benefits of its viral properties, organisational producers must either embrace this loss of control, or risk damaging the play with ideas which makes the site

a powerful promotional medium. Whether a broad enough spectrum of corporate and political institutions can become this flexible is yet to be determined and consequently YouTube's viability as a promotional platform remains in doubt.

The increasing commercialisation of content is also manifested in YouTube's decision to share advertising revenue with highly successful video creators such as the teams behind Lonelygirl15 and Christine Gambito who created the series HappySlip (see Holahan 2007). This may initially be read as a positive decision to compensate users for their labour and avoid the 'enforced volunteerism' which has led to conflict on other successful sites (Bigge 2006). However, it is also a risky option as it monetises the historically non-economic forms of capital which sustain user involvement in social networking sites (Benkler 2006). As Banks and Humphreys' (2007) exploration of the Trainz user community indicates, when the fan labour of consumers begins to look too much like traditional forms of labour, a hobby may turn into a chore, driving users from the site. By paying popular users for content, the distinctions from the labour of established media company employees becomes less clear and YouTube threatens the basis of its wealth – the community of users.

To market? To market?

Another problem for YouTube is the more practical issue of how to effectively leverage the marketing potential of its videos without imposing increased functionality changes on the existing culture of the site. Although YouTube's brand channels and partnering relationships are used to monetize the site's viral marketing possibilities, involvement of the site itself is not essential to successful promotion of this kind. It is therefore limited as a revenue

generator with video advertising emerging as the key potential earner for the site. The addition of advertising at either end of videos has long been dismissed due to its negative effects on the viewing experience (Garfield 2006; Morrissey 2006). In 2007, YouTube's careful and considered response was to introduce transparent advertising running within videos of selected partners designed to be a 'non-intrusive overlay'. However given the limitations of this format – its restriction to a few thousand partner sites; consumer targeting based only on location, demographic, viewing time and video genre; indications of general consumer discontent with widespread use of this format (Sandoval 2007) – it is unlikely that this will be financially viable, especially to the tune of US\$1.65 billion (Blodget 2007).

The other key place for advertisements is and will remain the frames of the site. However, the Embeddable Player which allows users to disaggregate videos from the site means that many viewers will not encounter YouTube content on the site proper. This in turn means that these viewers will also not encounter the advertising which frames it. This compelling, identity and community-building functionality of the site has been removed 'by request' from at least one YouTube partner, The Oprah Channel¹⁴. However as many in the blogosphere have commented this 'misses the point' of a social networking site and the promotional possibilities of viral marketing that entails (for instance Saremi 2007; Heffernan 2007). The incredulity expressed towards Oprah Channel's choices by the YouTube community¹⁵, indicates that permanent disabling of the Embeddable Player, along with other dialogic functions of the site, is unlikely to be a popular and widespread format.

User-generated tags and content within a self-regulating system may also not provide an adequate classification system for marketing purposes based on search terms. Garfield (2006)

describes the problems of an advertiser of cat food and pet accessories who finds their advertisement placed next to the “ma907h eats dead cat” video which, although tagged as bearing a relationship to cats, does not promote the appropriate brand identity for the advertiser. A self-regulated, user-generated tagging system may not be rigorous enough for the market’s needs (Sandoval 2006). Unless Google can find an alternative system for targeting advertisements, such as Yahoo’s use of extensive data mining and behavioural targeting (Sloan 2007), the site’s status as a mass advertising medium may well require the imposition of greater control over emergent community norms. This again would pose a threat to the mass appeal of YouTube. As marketer Garry Stein (cited in Sandoval 2006) notes it would be helpful for the site to establish ‘safe areas’ allowing users and advertising partners alike to avoid unsavoury content. However he goes on to add: “But YouTube can’t say we’re shutting all the iffy content down because it becomes one more control of the man. You eventually kill the reason for being there”. It would be ironic if Google’s reluctance to fully exploit its vast archive data because of the perceived relationship between privacy and consumer trust (Chavez 2007; Sloan 2007) resulted in greater damage to the community relations on which their brand value is built.

Conclusion

There are significant challenges facing YouTube and Google (indeed all commercially successful Web 2.0 properties and their owners) as the companies attempt to incorporate a cultural economy with a standard fiscal economy; to incorporate the TM into the rest of the slogan. The potential contradictions of the YouTube universe identified here, which in no way correspond with an exhaustive list, leave the company vulnerable as an economically

successful, culturally compelling and socially significant entity. YouTube will need to develop innovative responses, and perhaps reconsider some of its existing resolutions, in order to ensure the sustained growth of the site and its user community.

It is important to note however that although the trend-setting company of YouTube faces risks, the same may not be true of the trend for social networking through video sharing. As Pascu et al. (2007) remind us, it is important not to confuse the underlying practice and technical possibility with the particular institutionalised form it is currently taking.

Questioning the future of YouTube in his final Media Impact column for *IEE Multimedia*, Nack similarly predicts that: “The community, on whose creativity a lot of that hype was built, doesn’t care at all about these problems, and will do what it always did. Like a caravan, it will push along once the fun part vanishes to try finding a site that suits its members better” (2007). And so in many ways, the future of YouTube is of no consequence. The genie of user-driven, customisable, interactive social networking web based media is well out of its bottle and the demise of YouTube will do little to affect that. Nevertheless, identifying the difficult journey ahead for Google, YouTube and its community of users highlights the treacherous terrain of the new media environment and how predicting what lies beyond broadcasting may not be a simple proposal.

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¹ <http://youtube.com/ytremixer_about>

² <http://www.youtube.com/t/community_guidelines>

³ <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yOZgLWTSFLk>>

⁴ <<http://www.youtube.com/user/Daxflame>>

⁵ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_stZoYMIInY>

⁶ <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NWsQI5RqCQI>>

⁷ <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q29CY76Mo9U>>

⁸ <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eIGynQKRmoc>>

⁹ <http://www.youtube.com/t/fact_sheet>

¹⁰ <http://www.youtube.com/audioswap_about>

¹¹ <<http://www.youtube.com/contest/RepublicanDebate>>

¹² See below for discussion of the Oprah Channel as an example of such an attempt to control content.

¹³ <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6h3G-IMZxjo>>

¹⁴ <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WVssEHODO5M>>

¹⁵ <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OABluiDhSiU&eurl=http://youtubestars.blogspot.com/>>