Nine Propositions towards a Cultural Theory of YouTube

Henry Jenkins

Column – December 31, 2007

1. YouTube represents the kind of hybrid media space described by Yochai Benkler in *The Wealth of Networks* – a space where commercial, amateur, non-profit, governmental, educational and activist content coexists and interacts in ever more complex ways. As such, it potentially represents a site of conflict and renegotiation between different forms of power. One interesting illustration of this is the emergence of Astroturf – fake grassroots media – through which very powerful groups attempt to mask themselves as powerless in order to gain greater credibility within participatory culture. In the past, these powerful interests would have been content to exert their control over broadcast and mass-market media, but now they often have to mask their power in order to operate within network culture.

2. YouTube has emerged as the meeting point between a range of different grassroots communities involved in the production and circulation of media content. Much that is written about YouTube implies that the availability of Web 2.0 technologies has enabled the growth of participatory cultures. I would argue the opposite: that it was the emergence of participatory cultures of all kinds over the past several decades that has paved the way for the early embrace, quick adoption and diverse use of platforms like YouTube. But as these various fan communities, brand communities and subcultures come together through this common portal, they are learning techniques and practices from each other, accelerating innovation within and across these different communities of practice. One might well ask whether the 'You' in YouTube is singular or plural, given the fact that the same word functions for both in the English language. Is YouTube a site for personal expression, as is often claimed in news coverage, or for the expression of shared visions within common communities? I would argue that the most powerful content on YouTube comes from and is taken up by specific communities of practice and is thus in that sense a form of cultural collaboration.

3. YouTube represents a site where amateur curators assess the value of commercial content and re-present it for various niche communities of consumers. YouTube participants respond to the endless flow and multiple channels of mass media by making selections, choosing meaningful moments which then get added to a shared archive. Increasingly, we are finding clips that gain greater visibility through YouTube than they achieved via the broadcast and cable channels from which they originated. A classic example of this might be the entertainer/writer Colbert appearance at the Washington Press Club Dinner. The media companies are uncertain how to deal with the curatorial functions of YouTube: seeing it as a form of viral marketing on some occasions and a threat to their control over their intellectual property on others. We can see this when Colbert and his staff encourage fans to remix his content the same week that the media conglomerate Viacom seeks legal action to have Colbert clips removed from YouTube.

4. YouTube's value depends heavily upon its deployment via other social networking sites – with content gaining much greater visibility and circulation when promoted via blogs, Live Journal, MySpace and the like. While some people come and surf YouTube, its real breakthrough came in making it easy for people to spread its content across the web. In

that regard, YouTube represents a shift away from an era of stickyness (where the goal was to attract and hold spectators on your site, like a roach motel) and towards an era where the highest value is in spreadability (a term which emphasizes the active agency of consumers in creating value and heightening awareness through their circulation of media content).

5. YouTube operates, alongside Flickr, as an important site for citizen journalists, taking advantage of a world where most people have cameras embedded in their cell phones which they carry with them everywhere they go. We can see many examples of stories or images in the past year which would not have gotten media attention if someone hadn't thought to record them as they unfolded using readily accessible recording equipment: George Allen's 'macaca' comments, the tazering incident in theUCLA library, Michael Richards's racist outburst in the nightclub, even the footage of Sadam Hussein's execution, are a product of this powerful mixture of mobile technology and digital distribution.

6. YouTube may embody a particular opportunity for translating participatory culture into civic engagement. The ways that Apple's '1984' advertisement was appropriated and deployed by supporters of Obama and Clinton as part of the political debate suggests how central YouTube may become in the next presidential campaign. In many ways, YouTube may best embody the vision of a more popular political culture that Stephen Duncombe discusses in his new book, *Dream: Re-Imagining Progressive Politics in the Age of Fantasy*. 'Progressives should have learned to build a politics that embraces the dreams of people and fashions spectacles which gives these fantasies form – a politics that employs symbols and associations, a politics that tells good stories. In brief, we should have learned to manufacture dissent. . . . Given the progressive ideals of egalitarianism and a politics that values the input of everyone, our dreamscapes will not be created by media-savvy experts of the left and then handed down to the rest of us to watch, consume, and believe. Instead, our spectacles will be participatory: dreams that the public can mold and shape themselves. They will be active: spectacles that work only if the people help create them. They will be open-ended: setting stages to ask questions and leaving silences to formulate answers. And they will be transparent: dreams that one knows are dreams but which still have power to attract and inspire. And, finally, the spectacles we create will not cover over or replace reality and truth but perform and amplify it.'

Yet as we do so, we should also recognize that participatory culture is not always progressive. However low they may set the bar, the existing political parties do set limits on what they will say in the heat of the political debate and we should anticipate waves of racism, sexism and other forms of bigotry as a general public, operating outside of those rules and norms, deploy participatory media to respond to a race which includes women, African-Americans, Hispanics, Mormons, Italian-Americans, Catholics, and the like as leading figures in a struggle for control over the White House.

7. YouTube helps us to see the shifts which are occurring in the cultural economy: the grassroots culture appropriates and remixes content from the mass-media industry; the mass-media industry monitors trends and pulls innovations back into the system, amplifying them and spreading them to other populations. Yet as they do so, they often alter the social and economic relations which fuelled this cultural production in the first place. We will see increasing debates about the relations between the gift economy of participatory culture and the commodity relations that characterize user-generated content. There is certainly a way that these sites can be seen as a way of economic exploitation as they outsource media production from highly paid and specialized creative workers to their amateur unpaid counterparts.

8. In the age of YouTube, social networking emerges as one of the important social skills

and cultural competencies that young people need to acquire if they are going to become meaningful participants in the culture around them. We need to be concerned with the participation gap as much as we are concerned with the digital divide. The digital divide has to do with access to technology; the participation gap has to do with access to cultural experiences and the skills that people acquire through their participation within ongoing online communities and social networks.

9. YouTube teaches us that a participatory culture is not necessarily a diverse culture. As John McMuria has shown us, minorities are grossly under-represented – at least among the most heavily viewed videos on YouTube, which still tend to come most often from white middle-class males. If we want to see a more 'democratic' culture, we need to explore what mechanisms might encouraged greater diversity in who participates, whose work gets seen, and what gets valued within the new participatory culture.

This text was taken from Henry Jenkins' weblog: henryjenkins.org, 28 May 2007.

Henry Jenkins (USA) is the Director of the MIT Comparative Media Studies Program. His newest books include *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* and *Fans, Bloggers and Gamers: Exploring Participatory Culture*. See further: www.henryjenkins.org.

Tags

Media Society

This text was downloaded on October 15, 2026 from
Open! Platform for Art, Culture & the Public Domain
www.onlineopen.org/nine-propositions-towards-a-cultural-theory-of-youtube