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### Learning the Five Lessons of YouTube: After Trying to Teach There, I Don't Believe the Hype

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services, improving the products, forming the communities, and producing the knowledge that characterize digital media. We are entering an era of user *productivity*, not expert *representation*. It is now possible to think of consumers as agents, sometimes enterprises, and to see in consumer-created content and user-led innovation not further exploitation by the expert representatives, but rather “consumer entrepreneurship” (once a contradiction in terms).

Once again, as was the case for print in early modern Europe, a means of communication has become an agent as well as a carrier of change, extending the capabilities of the publisher across social and geographical boundaries, and producing unintended consequences that have hardly begun to be exploited. The attention-grabbing aspects of digital media have been those related to private self-expression (albeit conducted in public), social network markets, entertainment media, and celebrity culture. Already it is evident that all three of print’s unplanned progeny—science, journalism, and realist imagination—have also begun to colonize the Web, using it for the “higher” functions of objective description, argumentation, and research. Now, however, instead of abstracted individual authorship using spatialized monologue, users can exploit the social-network functionality of iterative and interactive digital media to create new knowledge using such innovations as the wisdom of crowds and computational power.

There is, of course, plenty of resistance to such changes. One thing that stands in the way, ironically, is print, or rather a print mentality that, because of the suspicion of embodied audiovisual media by modernists, persists in characterizing “new” media as somehow demotic and unworthy, even untruthful. This is especially prevalent in schools, many of which still ban students’ access to Google (especially Google Images), Wikipedia, social networking sites, YouTube, and so on, preferring to insist on the control culture of the expert paradigm rather than facilitating the open innovation networks of digital media. Given that this is indeed what students need to know (and to be able to do) in order to navigate the evolving digital mediasphere, the world of print-based scholarly modernism falls further out of step with the times, and scholarship threatens to become just as irrelevant as professional practitioners like to say it is.

There is, therefore, a clear choice to be made if those who wish to pursue the serious study of communications media wish to avoid the standoff that persists between print and its latter-day competitors. We must follow science, journalism, and realism across from the arts to the sciences, and from print to digital media. We are entering a period in which the tensions between print-based scholarship (cinema) and practice-based training (media) can and should be superseded. Such a move would also challenge the current disciplinary distinctions between humanities (cinema) and social sciences (media) on the one hand, and the math-based sciences (particularly evolutionary theory, game theory, and complexity/network studies) on the other hand. Indeed, so far has change proceeded, in both digital media and in the history of science, that film, media, and journalism scholars must face the question of how and what they know, and consider afresh whether their

scholarly and pedagogic armamentarium needs a makeover. Instead of retreating (further) into hyperliterate philosophical speculation (cinema) or postliterate vocational guidance (media), it may be time to consider a digitally literate and unifying alternative, which I am calling cultural science. (See <http://cultural-science.org/>.)

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## Learning the Five Lessons of YouTube: After Trying to Teach There, I Don’t Believe the Hype



by Alexandra Juhasz

Author’s note: The following article is best read online (<http://www.cmstudies.org/>), where its many links, here represented in bold, efficiently illustrate my argument with telling videos found on—and frequently lost or taken off of—YouTube. The clumsiness of this typographic sign of what is missing, rather than the efficiency and richness of the live media link, points to another lesson in media education, scholarly publication, and academic writing raised primarily by the form, but not the content, of this offering. In the first two paragraphs, I gesture at what is lost without the links, but the ungainliness of this effort proves not worth the word count.

“DIY” is new media’s latest buzz-word:<sup>1</sup> “prosumers” mashing up the Simpsons, Jessica or Bart; YouTubers uploading streams of lonely video. **Bollocks!**<sup>2</sup> Let us pay mind to the buzz-cocks. **DIY**<sup>3</sup> is nothing new. While Web 2.0 may radically expand access and distribution of media to its erstwhile viewers, DIY was once **punk** (cut to “a peek into the lives of Islington Squatter punks of 1983, who spare-change and charge 2 quid a photograph!”),<sup>4</sup> and it meant much more than **friendly citizen-practitioner** (we see the “do-it-yourself hovercraft” video of Miles Community College physics class).<sup>5</sup> Wikipedia explains, “Common punk views include the DIY ethic, rejection of conformity, direct action for political change, and not selling out to mainstream interests for personal gain.” Punk was **Rotten** and **Vicious** (if you were online, hello Johnny and Sid!). **Sincere**, or even **Cynical**, contributions to the corporate machine do not a DIY ethics make (the digital reader might choose to view the marketing campaigns for the contemporary artists Rohff, singing his song “Sincere,” and Bill Maher, in “Be More Cynical Part 1,” sponsored by Hostile Records, Capitol/EMI, and Comedy Central, respectively).

I am a professor of media studies whose work has focused upon the activist media of nonconformists. In the fall of 2007, I decided to look more closely at YouTube. The **banal** videos I regularly saw there did not align with the **ethics**

underpinning the revolutionary discourses I study, nor those **heralding** the new powers of online social networking. So, I taught a **course**, “**Learning from YouTube**,” about and also **on** the site: all class **sessions** and **course work** were posted as **videos** or comments and were open to the public. One press release later, and we actually became the **media relay** we were attempting to **understand**. Immediately networked, to be largely **mocked** through the predictable anti-intellectual stance used at least annually to report on events like the meetings of the Modern Language Association (a scholarly paper on melancholy? and Keanu Reeves!), my students and I will have the last **laugh**. We learned a great deal about how this site **limits** the truly revolutionary potential of the technology. These are our five lessons of YouTube.<sup>6</sup>

**Lesson #1. YouTube is not democratic. Its architecture supports the popular. Critical and original expression is easily lost to or censored by its busy users, who not only make YouTube’s content, but sift and rate it, all the while generating its business.** The word “**democratic**” (free and equal participation), like “**DIY**,” is often repeated in celebration of the new possibilities enabled by Web 2.0 technology. Certainly, more **people** than ever can get to and use tools that allow for the easy production, distribution, and networking of media. Cindy enjoys this new freedom. She shoots and uploads her daughter Sissy’s trip to **American Girl**. However, once there, Sissy’s poorly shot and unedited adventure in consumerism languishes unseen, except by Gramps and maybe a few hundred pals, never to equal the movement, attention, or possibilities afforded to the hottest ripped clips of **American Idol**. That which we already **know** and already **like** enjoys the special treatment offered to the “**most viewed**”: videos that are easily found, and always **visible**, whether you search for them or not. Hey, the **most viewed** deserve such **attention**! These special videos, well, they look like **television**, featuring the **faces**, **formats**, and **feelings** we are already familiar with, or at least aspiring to them.

As is true in high school, **popularity** gauges something. It lets the **talented**, if unoriginal and **uncritical**, rise to the top (think high-kicking blond babes of the pom-pom squad). Interchangeable and indistinguishable, **entertaining** but not threatening, popular YouTube videos speak to a middle-of-the-road sensibility in and about the forms of **mainstream culture** and **media**, pushing underliers into the weird cliques and **hidden halls** of high school—what I call **NicheTube**—where a video immediately falls off the radar, underserved and **unobserved** by YouTube’s systems of ranking. Yes, it is great to be doing your own **weird thing** for your **wacky friends**, but anyone else who might be interested is sure never to join in, given YouTube’s size and poor search systems.

While we can all **personally attest** to whether popularity (or its reverse) worked for us in high school, I will suggest the obvious: it is not the best or most “**democratic**” way to run our culture’s most visited archive of moving images. As we learned through my students’ research project on race on YouTube, the most

popular videos about **black** people reflect and reinforce the standard views of our society (about black hypersexuality, low intelligence, and gonzo violence), while only on NicheTube can you find videos that support black **self-love** or analysis. Meanwhile, the most wacky (or ideological) outliers are quickly **flagged**, **flamed**, **tamed**, and **absented** from YouTube’s pages (my students’ video, mentioned above, “Blacks on YouTube Final,” has been flagged for “**inappropriate content**,” which I deem to be their analysis and not the black booty they feature, which itself is featured all over YouTube). The more controversial your ideas or methods, the quicker your **demise**. Free and easy to get on, the mob-rule system by which you get pulled off YouTube is user-initiated but corporate-ruled. Democracies maintain protections for minority positions, and ours has **labor laws**, too, that compensate workers for hours logged.

**Lesson #2. YouTube functions best as a postmodern television set facilitating the isolated, aimless viewing practices of individuals while expertly delivering eyeballs to advertisers. YouTube’s corporate ownership limits the form and content of its videos, further curtailing the democratic promises touted for Web 2.0.** YouTube is an at-home or mobile, viewer-controlled delivery system of delectable media morsels. It is really good for **wasting time**. On our private postmodern TV of **distraction**, discrete bites of cinema are controlled by the discrete eye of each viewer, linked intuitively or through systems of popularity into an endless chain of immediate but forgettable gratification that can only be satisfied by another video. The best YouTube **entertainment** integrates and condenses three methods developed in earlier media—**humor**, **spectacle**, and **self-referentiality**—to create a **new video form** organized by plenitude, convenience, and speed. (But maybe this is not so new: TV ad, anyone?)

The signature YouTube video is easy to get, in both senses of the word: simple to understand—an idea reduced to an icon or gag—while also effortless to get to: one click! A visual or aural sensation (car crash, big booty, celebrity’s maw, signature beat, extreme talent) or an already recognizable bite of media serves as the best videos’ iconic center. Understandable in a heartbeat, knowable without thinking, this is media already encrusted with social meaning or feeling (leave Britney Spears alone!). YouTube videos are often about YouTube videos, which are most often about popular culture. They steal, **parody**, mash, and **rework** recognizable forms, hence maintaining standard styles and tastes, and making nothing new at all. And so, humor enters through **parody**, the play on an already recognizable form, or else slapstick, a category of spectacle.

What then of the videos of millions of **regular people** speaking about their daily lives, and to each other, in talking-head close-ups (the vlog)? While in many ways a statement against corporate media, **humor** (self-mocking, ironic), **spectacle** (of authenticity, pathos, or individuality), and **self-referentiality** (to the vernacular of YouTube) still combine in this signature YouTube form to create their unique entertainment value.

**Lesson #3. YouTube reifies distinctions between professional (or corporate) culture and that of amateurs (or citizens) even as it celebrates its signature form, the vlog, and the flattening of expertise.** There are two dominant forms of video on YouTube: the vlog, characterized by its poor quality and vox populi, and the corporate video, easily identifiable because it is all the vlog is not: high-quality production values referring to corporate culture. “Bad” videos are made by regular people, using low-end technology, paying little attention to form or aesthetics while attending to the daily life, feelings, and thoughts of the individual. Bad form marks the hand of an amateur and the space of the mundane while propelling a video’s movement around the Internet, for this is also the mark of its veracity and authenticity. These videos are unedited, word- or spectacle-reliant, and accrue value through the suffering, talent, or humor of the individual. “Corporate” videos look good—like mainstream media—because they are made by professionals, are stolen from television, or are recut movies. They express ideas about the products of mainstream culture, in the music-driven, quickly edited, glossy, slogan-like vernacular of music videos, commercials, and comix. They consolidate ideas into icons; meaning is lost to **feeling**. Vlogs depend upon the intimate communication of the spoken word. Corporate videos are driven by strong images, sounds, and sentiments.

YouTube could be a radical development in media because the video production of real people holds half of the medium’s vernacular. However, by reifying the distinctions between the amateur and the professional, the personal and the social, in both form and content, YouTube currently maintains (not democratizes) operating distinctions about who seriously owns culture. YouTube is already thought of as a **joke**, a place for jokes, a place for regular people whose roles and interests must also be a joke. A people’s forum, but not a revolution, YouTube video manifests the deep hold of corporate culture on our psyches, reestablishing that we are most at home as consumers (even when we are producers).

**Lesson #4. In the name of opening channels of communication, YouTube forecloses community. The world’s largest archive of moving images is, and will stay, a mess. A searching eye creates the greatest revenue.** YouTube draws users by fueling a desire for self-expression and **community**. While many come to the site to be seen and heard by others, or to make **friends**, they are much better served by places like the real world or **MySpace**. For, the very tools and structures for community-building that are hallmarks of Web 2.0—those that link, gather, **index**, **search**, and allow participation, commenting, and networking—are studiously **refused** on the site, even as YouTube remains its poster-child. Why can’t you comment in real time? Why are there no bulletin boards? Why does the site make it impossible for you to post other things next to your videos? YouTube does not **answer**, so people go elsewhere for these (rudimentary) functions, dragging their favorite YouTube videos behind them to more hospitable climes (with YouTube’s permission: goodbye and good riddance, we do not

need your photos or friends here!). YouTube is a place to upload, store (and move off) videos. The very paucity of secondary functions underlines its primary purpose: moving its users’ eyeballs aimlessly and without direction, scheme, or map, across its unparalleled archive of moving images and associated **advertisements**.

Why is YouTube such a mess? Google owns it, and they categorize and find things for a living. Meanwhile on YouTube, videos are hard to find, easy to misname, and quick to lose. While its millions of users would be well served by a good archivist or two, in its calculated failings YouTube signals that it is not a place to hunker down or hang out with others, not a place within which to seriously research or study, not a place for anything but wasting time on your own. Even the most moving of videos needs to be connected to something (other than another short video)—people, community, ideas, other videos to which it has a coherent link—if it is to create what community does best: action over distraction, knowledge instead of free-floating ideas, connection over the quick link.

**Lesson 5. YouTube may be DIY, but it just ain’t punk. That is, unless you hack it.** Unlike the punks of yore, in “Learning from YouTube” we burrowed within the corporate system, respecting its rules and limitations, all the while repurposing its aims, and using its vernacular to engage in its analysis. We learned that it is **hard to learn** from YouTube. Its architecture and ownership undermine fundamentals of academic inquiry and higher **education: depth of dialogue**, capability to find and link data, ability to sustain intimate and committed community, and structures of order and discipline. However, I hope that the great many class videos I have used to illustrate this article establish that on its pages, we learned to model new forms of academic exchange based upon the concise **summary** of complex ideas expressed through **words, sounds, and images** and open to the public.

Obviously, neither YouTube nor Google **cared**. There is ample room for NicheTube critiques in its unruly pages. Yet, while **corporations** dominate YouTube, and their directives organize decisions about its structure, applications, forms, and provenance, everyday DIY users do have a voice within its pages, as well as other pages, like those here, and we need to make our demands for a radical public technological culture **clear**. Just because corporations control nearly everything in our society doesn’t mean that they should, or that they are the best suited to choose all that we need from new technology. It is true: punk is long dead, it is the era of Web 2.0, and so I prefer to rethink the lessons of “Learning from YouTube” as a series of successful hacks at one site that allowed us to better understand it, speak what we learned on its terrain, and in its own **terms**.

#### Notes

1. USC’s Institute for Multimedia Literacy recently held the conference 24/7: A DIY Media Summit: <http://iml.usc.edu/diy/stream>.
2. Here you’d see John Lydon speaking about the Sex Pistols’ “Never Mind the Bollocks” album, from a 1998 UK television interview.

3. Here you could see BlankTV's YouTube Channel, "the Net's largest, d.i.y., free, uncensored punk, ska, hardcore and indie music video site, featuring 3,000 kickass music videos and live clips spanning the past twenty-five years of punk, hardcore, ska, oi, psychobilly, indie and underground music." <http://www.youtube.com/user/BlankTV>.
4. "1983 Islington Squatter Punk Documentary," <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c0IZdP3x66Y>.
5. "Stan Taylor and his physics class at Miles Community College built a hovercraft powered by an average electric leafblower—watch it in action!" <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xQmHqb42qDQ>.
6. This paragraph holds fifteen links to diverse YouTube videos, including corporate forays into DIY; the Learning from YouTube class page (<http://www.youtube.com/user/mediapraxisme>); my "highly viewed" intro to the course; scenes from the media frenzy that surrounded the class; and the students' varied responses: humorous, analytical, and reactionary. For the remainder of this article, if you were online, the bold links would be to the many videos made by myself and my students as part of the course work for the class. Elsewhere, I have attempted to organize this voluminous production, otherwise as overwhelming in quantity and quality as is YouTube, by creating six "tours" found on the class page that cover themes of some relevance to media scholars: education, entertainment, popularity, vernacular, user/owner, community/archive.

## On Digital Scholarship

by Anne Friedberg



*Instead of writing criticism, I make a film, but the critical dimension is subsumed.*

Jean-Luc Godard, *Cahiers du Cinéma*, no. 93, 1961

**Writing and Reading in the Digital: The Page and the Screen.** Why not start by acknowledging the elephantine paradigm shift in the room? We are in the midst of a profound change in our scholarly environment. The contours of this change are large and indistinct: as print and media archives are digitized; as we acquire online access to those archives and databases; as search tools allow us to compile materials from a wide range of sources; as new software for annotation and note-taking aids writing and research; as we learn to capture and digitize work that we wish to study; as digitized material is fluidly cited and repurposed; as we increasingly deploy the link instead of the cite; as social networks, wikis, and other modes of writing and distributing collaborative work evolve; as electronic publication speeds the process from page to print; as books are digitally distributed; as we upload to YouTube, make podcasts, remix, hyperlink, and embed prior work—we are now able to write with the very images and sounds that we have been analyzing. But even if we have the technical ability to quote and cite and embed moving images/texts/archival documents, will every media scholar want to follow the Godardian imperative and "write" with images and sounds?

Rather than attempt to describe the elephant of digital media scholarship (its consequences—legal, political, social, economic, and disciplinary—unfold as new wrinkles in its ever-expanding skin), in this piece I will briefly address one thin slice of digital scholarship's thick potential: the translation of writing and reading to digital format, the material specificities of the paper-based book, and the potentials and liabilities of its translation to digital form.

Just as the codex was an improvement over the papyrus scroll, (it could be opened to a flat page, it could be opened anywhere in the text, its pages could be written on *recto* and *verso*, it was more compact, it could travel), and just as the printed book was an improvement over the codex (it could be mechanically copied and mass-reproduced), the digitally mediated "page" offers yet another paradigm shift in the processes of writing and reading. The digital page yields a new axis of depth—a page that layers to other pages, can be seen next to other pages, and can include moving images, still images, sounds.

But the digital page must be read on the computer screen. (Amazon's book-size Kindle has pages that "turn"; it is held more like a book than a computer screen, but its pages are—as of now—no model for multimedia scholarship. The text appears in only one font, in black and white, and largely unillustrated.) The computer screen is both a "page" and a "window," at once opaque and transparent; it commands a new posture for the practice of writing and reading—one that requires looking into the computer page as if through the frame of a window. And that window is simultaneously a scroll, a codex, a mechanically copied and mass-reproduced text.

For scholars who write about visual, audio, and multimedia, writing in the digital has some obvious advantages. When we are teaching or giving talks, we are able to take performative advantage of a range of illustrative examples—we can show slides, video clips, Web pages, or use the digitally enabled formats of Keynote or PowerPoint presentations. But when we turn to writing up our lectures, to writing essays and books, our critical, theoretical, and historical analyses must rest on ekphrasis, on a descriptive approximation of our object of study. Whether our methodology is historical, theoretical, critical, or merely analytic, we still must rely on the eloquence of language (for better and for worse) to perform our close analysis and ground our arguments.

In the first flush of digital scholarship—let's call it Writing in the Digital 1.0—media scholars began to take advantage of the illustrative potentials of the digital format. Conventional print books would add a digital concordance as a packaged CD or provide links to an online digital compendium in order to provide more images and sounds; primary texts and documents served as companions to the print document. In these cases, the digital material was largely illustrative and functioned as a supplement. At the same time, as DVD reissues of films and television series began to add analytic essays, production documents, and archival materials, scholars began to purpose-build, as "extra features," various annotational texts. In these cases, the moving image material was primary, yet supplemented with writing