Executive Summary

YouTube: Online Video and Co-Created Value

By Joshua Green

With Jean Burgess (Queensland University of Technology)
Introduction

Love it or loathe it, YouTube has emerged as a significant part of the mainstream cultural landscape. Though not the only video-sharing website on the Internet, YouTube’s rapid rise, diverse range of content and public prominence in the Western, English-speaking world makes it an important space for understanding the evolving relationships between media, business, citizens and popular culture.

YouTube is one of the most heavily trafficked video sites in the English-speaking world. As of April 2008, the site hosts upwards of 85 million videos, a number that represents a tenfold increase over the previous year, and which continues to increase exponentially. In November of 2007 it was the most popular entertainment website in Britain, ahead, even, of the BBC, and in early 2008 it was consistently in the top ten most visited websites globally, according to various web metrics services. Internet market research company comScore reported that in March 2008 the service accounted for 37 percent of all Internet videos watched inside the US. As a user-created content community, its size and reach are now utterly unprecedented, and YouTube is a key site where disputes about new business models, forms of media, and modes of participation in culture are taking place.

Yet despite intense interest and increasing attention from both scholarly and business circles, there is still little work that examines YouTube as a cultural system, that looks at the range of content on the site and the way videos move through the service. This paper starts to fill that gap, reporting on a three month study of over 4,300 of the most popular videos on the site. It takes a broad look at the way content moves across YouTube, looking at where videos come from, who uploads them, and what they appear to be.

It looks at the role of Big Content, small-to-medium enterprises or independent producers, and amateurs in contributing material to the system, and provides an overview of what types of content are popular. It reveals patterns in uploading and popularity. Drawing content from the Most Viewed, Most Favorited, Most Responded and Most Discussed categories, it highlights the various ways popularity can be measured on YouTube, and the importance of understanding YouTube as a diverse space.
Key Findings

- Just over half the material in this sample, or **2,177 videos**, were coded as coming from user-created sources;
- Videos that originated in the traditional media made up 42 percent of the sample (1,812 videos);
- Those working outside of the media industry uploaded the majority of the most popular content in this survey. Over half of the videos in this sample were uploaded by ‘users’ - amateurs outside of the media industry. Small-to-Medium Enterprises or Independent producers contributed the next largest number - 20 percent;
- Traditional media producers and large rights holders uploaded only 8 percent of the content studied;
- Despite this, Traditional media uploaders were amongst the top 5 most active uploaders (in terms of number of videos) in three of the four categories of popularity studied;
- **Vlogs** - YouTube’s emblematic user-created form - made up the single largest category of content identified;
- **Scripted Material**, while significant in the ‘Most Viewed’ category, was only the fourth-largest category of content overall, behind Vlogs, Informational Material, and Live Content, and only marginally more popular than Music Videos;
- **Content from traditional media sources**, not matter who it is uploaded by, is the largest category of content in the Most Viewed and Most Favorited categories;
- User-created content accounted for the most videos in the Most Discussed and Most Responded categories;
- Informational content is the largest category of content in each of the four popularity categories - Most Viewed, Most Favorited, Most Discussed, Most Responded.
- **Vlogs** comprise the largest category of content from user-created sources in the Most Viewed category.
- **Music videos and Informational content** both make up the largest categories of user-created content in the **Most Favorited category**.
• **A Terms of Use violation** is the number one reason content is removed from the site. **A claim of copyright infringement is likely the key reason for violating YouTube’s Terms of Use.**

This content survey reveals a number of key developments and approaches to YouTube it is helpful to understand:

• That the use of copyrighted media is part of the experience being a participatory audience;
• The conversational form of the vlog is a key mode of engagement on the site;
• We need to move beyond binary distinctions between ‘professional’ and ‘amateur’ media producers as a way to understand participation in convergence culture;
• That YouTube is not only diverse but multi-faceted, co-created through the top-down influence of YouTube, Inc. and the bottom-up participation of uploaders, community members, and casual viewers - along with advertisers, Big Content players, ‘premium content partners,’ and those cutting revenue-sharing deals;
• The space requires media producers to accept their role as one distributor amongst many.

### Key Developments and Conclusions

**Quotes, Clips and Participatory Audiences**

Rather than characterizing YouTube as a space for copyright infringement, it is more helpful to see the site as a space that helps us rethink what it means to be an audience member in participatory culture. Media studies scholar Axel Bruns (2007) notes participatory culture and digital tools mean audiences no longer need to resort to auxiliary media forms to respond to the culture around them. **Recognizing this suggests the everyday experience of being part of the media audience might need to be rethought to include new forms of cultural production that occur as part of ordinary media use.** The ‘ordinary’ users of YouTube conventionally understood as audiences clearly do engage in new forms of ‘publishing’, but they do so, in part, as a way to narrate and communicate their own cultural experiences which are bound up with commercial popular media.
This study uncovered some instances of the type of uploads Big Content companies seem to dread most—entire episodes of programming divided into sections. In particular, the sample included two soap opera series, one each from the Philippines and Turkey. Not only was this material flagged as copyright-infringing fairly quickly, but in both instances, the videos made for a poor-quality viewing experience. **Compared to alternative technologies, YouTube is a poor site for ‘filesharing’ and the uploading of traditional media content to the website is part of a more sophisticated range of cultural practices than simply the attempt to ‘fileshare’ or to avoid nationally or commercially bound distribution systems.**

Rather than complete episodes, **YouTube is filled with short ‘quotes’ of content—snippets of material users share to draw attention to the most significant portion of a program.** The practice of quoting, then, is quite distinct from that of uploading entire programs. **We can view this uploading of clips and quotes by audiences as a meaning-making process, rather than an attempt to evade the constraints of mainstream media distribution mechanisms.** Particularly through this practice of uploading media ‘quotes,’ YouTube functions as a central clearing house service that people use as a way to catch up on public media events, as well as to break new stories and raise awareness, as in the ‘citizen journalism’ model.

**Vlogs and YouTube’s Conversational Forms**

Vlogging, YouTube’s emblematic form, reminds us of the residual character of interpersonal face-to-face communication and provides an important point of difference between online video and television. Not only is the vlog technically easy to produce, generally requiring little more than a webcam and basic editing skills, it is a form whose persistent direct address to the viewer inherently invites feedback. While television content—news, sketch comedy, clips from soap operas—may draw people to the service for catch-up viewing, Traditional media content doesn’t substantially engage in the measures of conversational and inter-creative participation (Spurgeon, 2008; Meikle, 2002) vlogging and other user-created content types do, as measured by the numbers of comments and video responses.

**Beyond the Professional/Amateur divide**

**YouTube’s popular videos are contributed by a range of professional, semi-professional, amateur, and pro-amateur participants.** Some of this content is an uncomfortable fit with the available categories of either ‘traditional’ media content or the ‘ordinary’ forms generally associated with the concept of ‘amateur’ content.
lectures and educational materials, online presentations developed by Google for forthcoming products, or footage of military aircraft landing uploaded by the Royal Australian Air Force -- this content strains to fit anywhere in the traditional media/user-created content dichotomy.

This dichotomy also fails to accurately characterize uploaders like Ford Models who use YouTube for both promotional purposes and to identify talent. Ford, much like Google, the RAAF, colleges and universities, is not a traditional media player; its presence on YouTube capitalizes on the same self-publishing and conversational opportunities as other non-media participants, despite their size.

Similarly, the category of ‘user’ is complicated by web-tv start-ups, such as JumpTV Sports, who put together sports packages and deliver content to a range of sports sites around the world, and nogoodtv, who produce vaguely risque, masculinist programming. Many of these uploaders resemble traditional television producers using the Internet as a way to distribute niche programming or specialized content without needing to negotiate cable or television distribution deals.

So too, although videoblogging is a dominant form of user-created content and fundamental to YouTube’s sense of community, not all vlogs are personal journal entries created in bedrooms. Indeed, a number of prominent vloggers are quite clearly using YouTube as a business venture. They participate in YouTube’s advertising sharing scheme and draw revenue from their presence on the site. Even though they use their vlogs and YouTube pages to advertise their expertise and promote their services, they are also active participants in the YouTube community. Their online success is as much due to their grounded knowledge of and effective participation within YouTube’s community architecture as it is the savvy with which they produce content, and they are virtuosic in their mastery of YouTube’s home-grown forms and practices.

**YouTube is a many-faced thing**

Despite it often being discussed as a coherent whole or in broad generalizations, there is no singular object that might be meaningfully considered ‘YouTube’. The desires of corporate or community participants construct YouTube in very different ways, and the site is a large enough entity, and loosely enough managed, that it can almost be whatever its various participants wish it to be. The site is big enough to support a multitude of uses, and it does, but it is important to realize that YouTube is not a dedicated, exclusive space for any of these uses, and
successful participation requires an awareness and appreciation of the role others play in the co-creation of the site.

The multiplicity of Youtube is furthered by the way the site complicates the distinctions between ‘producer’ and ‘audience’ ported over from the broadcast media space. ‘Using’ YouTube can legitimately mean uploading or watching content on the site, and regularly describes doing both. Each is legitimate as a mode of engagement, even if there is a continued tendency in work around participatory culture to privilege those who upload content as ‘active’ or ‘engaged’ users over those whose engagement is primarily watching content. YouTube points to the need to redefine the idea of the audience in participatory culture, to realize and start to take advantage of the fact that being an audience member is a productive act, rather than a consumptive act.

**YouTube is a space where all participants are ‘users’**

As noted above, some Big Content players seem uncomfortable with their role as participants in a space where they are not the sole controllers of the flow of their media content. In some respects, the frictions between Big Content players and YouTube can be seen as in part due to a re-adjustment of the media landscape to the presence of what David Weinberger refers to as metabusinesses, those who don’t produce content but act as distributors, making content searchable and findable. Often when dealing with metabusinesses, Big Content don’t hold the balance of power in negotiations regarding advertising revenue they may be accustomed to, as television conglomerates generally do in the broadcast space.

Engaging with YouTube requires Big Content players to adjust to a landscape where they may not be necessarily afforded the privilege monopoly over access to broadcast distribution has provided them. While there are premium deals done which offer different revenue sharing deals to different participants, the site is a space where media producers both large and small can be considered ‘users,’ disrupting broadcast-era understandings of the relationship between ‘producers’ and ‘audiences;’ **on the site, all participants are members of the macro YouTube community.**

Successfully negotiating this space requires companies to realize their position within the space is not necessarily privileged in relation to the rest of the site. This requires us to understand all those who upload, view, comment on or create content for YouTube as participants, whether they are businesses, organizations, or private individuals.
This model asks us to understand as practices of participation, the activities of both audiences and content creators. Audience practices – quoting, favoriting, commenting, responding, sharing, and viewing – all leave traces, and therefore all have effects on YouTube’s multiple and malleable identity. Rather than treating it with antagonism, YouTube reveals the value of flexibility and dexterity for successful audience engagement in the evolving media landscape. *Those who insist on treating YouTube as if it is only a broadcasting platform are probably less likely to achieve the aims of their participation, whatever they may be.*