

The omnipresent theme of obsession fills a lab. The obsession can spring from intense curiosity or desperation, appearing romantic or creepy. It can gaze serenely at a scientific problem with an adoration tempered by experience, or it can stare with foolish and feverish puppy love, destined for heartbreak. The obsession can be rewarded with discovery or rejected with inconclusive data and failed experiments. But it unifies the laboratories, drawing the characters from one chapter to the next.

Reading and Writing About YouTube: The You in YouTube

Catherine Zimmer

WHEN *TIME* MAGAZINE CHOSE TO DECLARE “You” their Person of the Year for 2006, their cover presented this choice with a square reflective material intended to offer the reader back to him- or herself at the same time that it indicated a computer screen.

Of course, the Person of the Year was not, in fact, *me* (or *you*, for that matter). What *Time* referred to was the rise of YouTube, the Internet video-sharing site that revolutionized the dispersal, and thus, in many ways production, of digital moving images. *Time* chose YouTube as not only representative of that particular website (and apparently, you), but also the larger arena of “peer production” or “consumer-generated content” characteristic of websites from YouTube to Wikipedia to MySpace.¹ Implicit in *Time*’s selection of You/YouTube/etc. as “person” of the year is the question of how much Internet users are themselves present in YouTube versus how much that site and the culture surrounding the Internet have already defined the persona of the “you” in YouTube (as well as other related sites). In other words, to what degree is our self-presentation via this website influenced or even determined by the technological, economic, and cultural milieu of YouTube? Arguably, despite the fact that a peer-produced website such as this provides a platform for “anybody” to share or view a diversity of video works, YouTube ultimately reflects the possibilities and limitations of the Internet market as much as, if not more than, it reflects “you.”

The site’s very name indicates the manner in which we must begin to consider the history and stakes of YouTube as a media environment. The “tube” seems to be a clear reference to one of the core televisual technologies: the cathode ray tube.² This tube was the primary element in the display, but not production, of both television and video images.³ In other words, the cathode ray tube was the central technology literally behind the screen of your television monitor; “the tube” eventually became common slang for television. This did not, however, carry a particularly positive connotation. The added designation of “boob tube” to the term suggested a morose dependence on television, an attitude that was in large part a result of the kinds of media critics that arose with the television era—most significantly, Marshall McLuhan. McLuhan’s fa-

¹ Lev Grossman, “*Time*’s Person of the Year: You,” *Time* December 13, 2006, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1569514,00.html> (accessed July 2, 2007).

² Although if YouTube had not emerged the year before Congressman Ted Stevens infamously declared the Internet to be a “series of tubes,” we might also read the site’s name as an ironic commentary on the (mis)characterization of the Internet by legislative bodies.

³ The distinction between television and video technologies is a vague one at best, because they are inter-related, but suffice it to say for now that the specificity of television has to do with the transmission of the television signal, whereas video seems to refer more to the magnetic tape technology on which video images were recorded in the era before they were immediately converted to digital information.

mous quote that “The medium is the message” has gained renewed attention in the digital era, when the content of our media seems increasingly informed by the manners in which that content can be produced and delivered technologically.⁴ In other words, what we might find on the Internet is at times only marginally as important as the fact that we might be able to get that information on the new Apple iPhone.

Thus, YouTube, by virtue of its very name, as well as its base in a highly technologized media culture, seems to want to cast itself as both in the tradition of television entertainment, “the tube,” and as a departure—this departure apparently constituted by the “you” in YouTube. So who, and what, is the “you”? If the tube is the form, is the “you” the content? Not exactly. Quite simply, the idea is that one

can find virtually anything on YouTube. Anything, everything, and conceivably, nothing people might want to see is available on YouTube—crucially, this content is entirely uploaded by users. YouTube thus markets itself as user-generated media, as truly democratic entertainment, information, and artistry. But, to what degree is this possible? Home videos are indeed a staple, particularly humorous videos, music, or stunts. In addition, you can find snippets of previously broadcast/published materials, such as clips of television shows that have become topics of conversation, or materials that are re-edited/digitally manipulated (these manipulations of existing material are a mainstay of digital audiovisual culture). Where else can one go to find a video of a housecat nursing an orphaned chipmunk, followed by a Duran Duran video from 1984, followed by a clandestine recording of Lindsay Lohan falling down drunk? It is also a simple matter to either “embed” the video stored on YouTube into an alternate website, or to link to YouTube from other sites. This is all to say that the premier site for video on the Internet *produces no content* itself—it is simply the platform for storage and dispersal.

It is this element that seems to suggest a you-ness to the system. In a television era in which, despite the proliferation of channels, media outlets are increasingly controlled by very few multinational media conglomerates, a democratizing resource such as YouTube and the other sites championed by *Time* in their cover story would seem to suggest that the peer-produced quality of the Internet is the most significant site of resistance to the kinds of entertainment and information control that have tended to characterize television, the original tube. Certainly, there is a



⁴ McLuhan began to elaborate this concept in his book *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, originally published in 1964 by McGraw-Hill, New York.

kind of “wild” element to both YouTube and the Internet at large—an “anything is possible” attitude that contrasts starkly with the sense of entrenchment, repetitiveness, and powerlessness that seems to reign broadly over other American media and political arenas. But despite the characterization of Internet media intervention as an uncontained organic force, I think we are still hard pressed to determine where the “you” is that has some sort of power in this environment.

A casual survey of the YouTube site reveals a mixture of self-produced video and material captured from already produced work. Any small video produced can catch hold of a wide Internet audience. Your video could gain international notoriety within a couple of days if your YouTube contribution gets taken up by any number of popular referring sites, such as Digg or BoingBoing. These videos are then forwarded between individuals (“Check out the video of this drummer I found on YouTube!”). Literally millions of people could see your video of your talented skateboarding dog. And despite the fact that I am using the more amusement-based, inconsequential examples of YouTube possibilities, there is the theoretical implication here that a talented filmmaker could gain a foothold in the popular imagination and eventually in the media industry without necessarily operating within the traditional power structures of the entertainment industry. Political interventions could be made on this site, as they have been on others, by providing alternative sources of news and a wider reach for activism and organizing. Thus, YouTube would seem, as a neutral web platform for video, to have endless possibilities for the democratization of media and the leveling of the information playing field.

A notable example of the kind of intervention possible via YouTube is the (in)famous video of former Senator George Allen from the 2006 election (dubbed “The YouTube Election” by *The New York Times*).⁵ The video shows Allen during his reelection campaign, at a small speaking engagement, twice using the word *macaca*, a racial slur (<http://youtube.com/watch?v=r90z0PmnKwI>). The video was posted on YouTube, where it “rocketed to the top of the site’s most viewed list.”⁶ It was then picked up by larger print and broadcast media; Allen eventually lost the election, despite having been favored to win. Obviously, the exposure of the Virginia senator’s racism was a coup for the opponent’s campaign, and it was, in fact, no accident: The video was recorded by a student working for Allen’s opponent. Even more remarkable was the fact the racial slur was not just recorded by, but directed at the student recording the video. This student thus produced (through both his presence at and his recording of the event) and distributed an amateur video that constituted him as a very potent “you” on YouTube.

The form of the video itself suggests ways that we can understand the action and power of this “you.” After a straightforward introductory title providing the senator’s name, the name of the event, and the date and location, the video is simply an approximately one-minute recording of a moment from the event in which Allen points directly at the camera and refers to the man recording him as *macaca*, later repeating the word and saying, “Welcome to America.” There is no commentary, editing, or anyone else visible within the frame of the video, seeming to allow the material to speak for itself and suggesting a lack of manipulation of the image and thus of the viewer. The camera is clearly handheld, shaking somewhat and zooming rather inexpertly. Positioned slightly below the eyeline of Allen, the video is presented to us as recorded by an “average person,” a “you,” a spectator at the Allen event. As viewers of the video, we are thus looking from the position of that student (through his “eyes” as it were), and when George Allen points at the young man holding the camera

⁵ Ryan Lizza, “The YouTube Election,” *The New York Times* (August 20, 2006).

⁶ *Ibid.*

and demeans him racially, he is also pointing at *us*, putting us in a position to perhaps feel personally attacked by his comments, whatever our racial background might be. Thus, beyond simply providing a record of the senator's racism, we might see that the amateur structuring of the video itself encourages political action by creating a community of "yous."

And yet, it also seems reasonable to suggest at this point, despite this moment of apparent intervention, and despite *Time's* cover story, that the democratization of media via the Internet, and the accompanying political possibilities, has not undermined the power of the larger media machine; despite the proliferation of "you" on the Internet, there does not seem to be any threat to the existing and overarching structures in place in both media and politics.⁷ The Allen video, after all, only became what is considered "news" after it was picked up by newspapers and broadcast news shows—the established media outlets. Furthermore, it is not inconsequential that the student was working for the Democratic opponent of George Allen, and even if the video did influence the outcome of the election, that election was still defined by the *de facto* two-party system in place in the United States.

The fact is that we are living with what would seem to be a striking contradiction: the unparalleled democratizing power of information exchange on the Internet and the unprecedented centralization of media corporations. How can we explain why these two seemingly opposite situations co-exist fairly easily? One primary thing we must recognize is that YouTube and the Internet at large, although radical in their seeming existence as pure space that anyone might occupy with whatever they like, do not exist outside of an already present global economy. Despite the frequent characterization of the Internet as a free non-space of endless possibility for everyone, it is in fact a very real material space composed of technologies to which access is limited by social circumstances and a market economy. The Internet is *not* an alternate universe where all may play freely—it is part of the material world in which we live, and both the problems and the pleasures of that world find their place there. After all, when you go to YouTube you are as much surrounded by paid advertisements as you are by democratic content. And although the videos might be user-generated, everything from the software that makes them viewable to the established categories of video on the site are out of your hands. The idealism surrounding the Internet on the part of both the public and some media theorists thus comes up against a wall when we encounter the realities of the way technologies are deployed. Although it is certainly—and thankfully—true that the Internet has dispersed the control of information, and the possibility for creative distribution has thus greatly increased, to suggest that the Internet is entirely free of the economic and ideological constraints of the rest of media culture would be naive.

Beyond this general point that we cannot entirely separate the functioning of YouTube from other media outlets, it is instructive to return to some of the terminology with which we began in discussing the "tube" and the "you," and in that way to return to our initial investigation of what and who is presented/represented on YouTube. For instance, when a video (or, in fact, any item) takes hold and achieves a certain reach on the Internet, it is said to have "gone viral." Some websites even have a category for "viral videos." This is certainly not the first time

⁷ Even the intensive restructuring of music distribution forced by Napster, Limewire, and other file-sharing sites has been relatively reabsorbed unclear into a corporate economy via Apple iTunes, Verizon VCAST, and others that take advantage of the new possibilities of digital music sales. This is not to deny that the digitally aided rebellion did, indeed, lower music prices and allow independent artists increased possibility for distribution; merely that although some of the players have changed and positions have shifted, the game remains the same in many significant ways.

that the idea of the “virus” has been used in relation to computer culture—obviously, it is the term most frequently used to describe computer code that makes its way into your computer system and breaks down certain elements of its functionality. The rhetoric of virus, infection, bugs, and so on, is prevalent here. What the notion of the viral video has done is reframe the thinking about infection in terms of the positive possibility of the Internet. Used to connote the infectious quality of certain Internet items that come and go like a brief hysteria, a viral video is generally very short, and usually has an immediate effect of great hilarity, amazement, or shock. In this way, viral videos, in both their short length and generally nonnarrative nature, can be broadly compared to the earliest forms of motion pictures, what Tom Gunning famously dubbed “the cinema of attractions.”⁸ In many ways, this is not a new form of entertainment, but a very old one, in which motion pictures were initially enjoyed in the same way as a brief circus attraction or magic trick, rather than immersed as one would be in a novel and later a narrative film (not that these need to be considered necessarily mutually exclusive). A recent example, “Dramatic Chipmunk” (<http://youtube.com/watch?v=a1Y73sPHKxw>), first picked up by Digg and then Gigglesugar, swept the Internet in days, and within a week had undergone at least five video incarnations as it made its rounds.⁹

But it is the characterization of the distribution of these works as “viral” that can be our best indicator of both their possibilities and limitations. As I note earlier, Internet media have the strength of an organic force, but what does it mean if that force is one characterized as microbial and infectious, rather than as that of a thinking, speaking, human subject? What I would like to suggest is that the organizing models of digital culture is both organic and dehumanizing at the same time. The “you” in YouTube begins as the human subject who places a video online, but only emerges as an Internet entity in the form of an infectious agent. Within traditional thinking, we might be asked to mourn this loss of the originary “human” subject in the rise of an Internet presence, but perhaps we should instead ask what we might gain by embracing both YouTube’s and our own status as carriers of infection. If a virus is, arguably, the most powerful organism on Earth, we might look into what is to be gained by infecting certain systems (cultural, computer, political, and otherwise) with ourselves—and our creative productions—as viruses.

However, this characterization of the individual dispersal of media on the Internet as viral also carries with it a notion of a thoughtless, instinctive, parasitic, and thus wholly unethical existence. If we are again to ask why there has not been a media overhaul given the incredible possibility of YouTube and its like, I argue that it is partly because despite the great power inherent in the metaphor of the virus, the virus seems unable to have a political or social conscience. Its purpose is merely to reproduce itself—thus, the elements that “go viral” tend to be things that we consider relatively innocuous and without an agenda: kittens, songs, jokes. Indeed, one video, significantly to be found on an *alternate* video site, glumbert, parodies the rise and fall of a viral Internet sensation: Mustard Face Dancing Guy (<http://www.glumbert.com/media/internetsens>).¹⁰ As this video aptly points out, those things that go viral are often so completely arbitrary that they defy any reasonable explanation for their appeal beyond that very randomness. Thus, it seems reasonable to suggest that these are things that both we and the Internet are happy to serve as carriers because they seemingly propose no threat to the system at large. What seems clear is that if the ambiguous “you” in YouTube is to become the piv-

⁸ I am indebted to my student, Tucker Dyer, at Pace University for initially pointing out the similarity between YouTube and the cinema of attractions to me.

⁹ Accessed July 3, 2007.

¹⁰ Accessed July 2, 2007.

otal player in Internet culture in a way that truly has effects on systems of media, one must consider the ways in which one's participation in that system is being offered and characterized, and how that characterization to a certain degree already positions your place in that system and your contributions to it. Viruses, after all, must mutate if they are going to progress.

Reading and Writing About Advertising: Two Case Studies

Dean Rader and Jonathan Silverman

YOU PROBABLY ENCOUNTER ADVERTISEMENTS on a daily basis. On television, on the radio, in magazines, on the Web, and now even at the movies, we confront advertisements in almost every aspect of our lives. Researchers suggest we see between 100 and 300 advertisements per day, whereas it would be unusual if you were to read 100 poems in an entire year. What's more, most experts agree that the American public believes or is open to at least one advertisement out of every eight that it sees. That

may not sound like much, but if you see 100 ads per day for 365 days, that's 36,500 ads per year. If researchers are correct, then you probably believe or consider at least 4,562 commercials per year. Think that's a lot? Consider this: The average nineteen-year-old has probably been paying attention to advertisements for about thirteen years. So, if these estimates are correct, most nineteen-year-old Americans have taken into their consciousness and devoted some aspect of their reasoning ability to more than 59,000 ads over the course of their lifetime. If you are nineteen, then you have likely seen more than 450,000 ads. By the time you are thirty, it's probable that more than one million ads have made their way into your brain.

By now, it is a cliché to claim that ads sell an image, but . . . ads sell an image. They not only sell images of us and their products, but also of a culture. In advertiser's lingo, this is called the "promise." Ads make promises to people all the time, but they tend to be implied or suggested promises. When you read an advertisement, ask yourself what kind of promise the ad is making to you. In addition, ads also work to cultivate another image—their own. This is why so many companies are very protective of their names, trademarks, and product use. For instance, you may be familiar with the court case in which Mattel toys sued the rock band Aqua over a critical song about "Barbie." And, in an example closer to home, we were denied permission from Tommy Hilfiger to reprint the advertisement we describe later—even after personal letters from the authors. We suspect Tommy was worried about what our reading might do to their branding. So, keep in mind that although ads may be funny, informative, and persuasive, they also help promote the company's image.

Thus, reading the image that a company tries to cultivate is all part of the larger experience of reading an advertising text. It would appear that many advertisers worry about how we might *use* their ads. Understandably, they are concerned about how their ad, their product, their image might look out of context. So, because so much of advertising is about branding, where an ad appears is as important as the ad itself. Sadly, that means we must *describe* the ad, rather than provide it. At press time, the ad appeared as the first image on the following Web site: <http://lime.mediacorpublishing.com/2000-07/win.htm>.

We have chosen a widely published Tommy Hilfiger ad that features six young, handsome/beautiful, smiley people (two white men, two black men, a white woman, and a black woman) lounging around in red, white, and blue Hilfiger clothes on the expansive front lawn of a country home. The large house stands in the right corner of the photo, and in the upper left corner of the photo, a big American flag waves just over the left shoulder of one