

Review:

Pelle Snickars and Patrick Vonderau (eds.), *The Youtube Reader*, National Library of Sweden, Stockholm, 2009, ISBN: 9789188468116.

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It can be difficult to believe that YouTube's first video (co-founder Jawed Karim's 'me at the zoo') was uploaded as recently as April 2005. Just over a year later, a similarly amateur video made by fellow founders, Chad Hurley and Steve Chen announced YouTube's multi-million dollar sell-out to Google. Now that over 2 billion videos a day are viewed on YouTube, and 24 hours of video uploaded to the site every minute [\[1\]](#), the rest is history. It is an embryonic history though, and one that Pelle Snickars and Patrick Vonderau, editors of *The YouTube Reader* make clear is still very much in the making.

As recently as 2008, reviewing the literature for a research project into YouTube responses to the disappearance of Madeleine McCann turned up very little in the way of dedicated scholarly work on the site. Alongside Jean Burgess and Joshua Green's excellent *YouTube: Online Video and Participatory Culture* (2009), *The YouTube Reader* (published by the National Library of Sweden) makes a welcome contribution to the field and provides a lively resource for readers wishing to engage with the YouTube phenomenon from a range of critical perspectives.

Editors, Snickers and Vonderau have curated a dynamic collection of essays from media and film scholars around the globe positioning YouTube as a significant new form of mass mediation and a growing digital repository of popular culture. From the outset, Snickers and Vonderau are interested in exploring the site's apparent contradictions. On the one hand, a media community with democratizing potential of global reach, on the other a clip-culture land

of opportunity for viral marketing and industrialized usage. Attention is drawn to YouTube's apparent transparency around its own operational identity in terms of community and commerce. Their online factsheet does after all refer to the site as "a forum for people to connect, inform and inspire others across the globe and... a distribution platform for original content creators and advertisers large and small." The editors call for a critical perspective on YouTube's insistence on its status as a "platform" rather than a distribution site, a status the site draws on in defence against claims of copyright infringement. Successful integration into new social network markets depends entirely on the migration of videos from the site into the broader blogosphere. In this sense, YouTube as a corporation is infinitely distributable and distributed outside of its own self-declared "community". Through an exploration of these tensions the book opens up broader questions pertinent to contemporary media studies about the political economy of new media markets in general.

A strength of the collection is its organization into a number of discrete sections. The opening section "Mediality" lays the conceptual foundations as authors in this section locate YouTube within a tradition of histories and theoretical frameworks of media production and consumption. William Uricchio opens the contributions with an exploration of YouTube as "next-generation television" as it extends its reach into TV websites via games consoles. Bernard Stiegler offers up the concept of YouTube as the "carnival" of the new screen, nudging the hegemony of traditional media industries towards a potential isonomy amongst users. Richard Grusin ends the section by questioning whether YouTube's logic and aspiration of mobile social networking supercedes the current definition of "new media" as those predominately concerned with issues of hypermediality and virtual reality. Does YouTube represent a newer form of "new media" than that which we are currently working to integrate into critical frameworks for understanding?

The "Usage" section focuses on a broad range of the everyday practice of YouTube users. Amongst other essays, this section covers the negotiation of social networks created through video dialogues (Patricia G Lange); entrepreneurship in user generated content (Burgess and Green), and a case study of 'geriatric 1927' as a means of exploring the internet age barrier (Bjorn Sorensson).

"Form" explores the aesthetics of uploaded content and how narrative trajectories through vast repositories of material and discrete genres within that might be negotiated. The diverse nature of YouTube itself is reflected in the various interests of the essays here incorporating (amongst others): early cinema archives (Joost Broeren); home dance videos (Kathrin Peters

and Andrea Seir); setting the Iraq war to music (Christian Christensen); YouTube memorial sites (Malin Wahlberg), and political accountability (Vinzenc Hediger).

In "Storage", the significant archival potential of YouTube is approached from a number of perspectives. Pelle Snickars reminds us in his own essay in this section that on the web there are no media "just files in databases". This echoes previous observations on database culture by Lev Manovich (1998) and Geert Lovink (2008). The notion of YouTube as an archival space is not unproblematic though. This is perhaps most eloquently summed up by Trond Lundemo's metaphor of the site as a "kingdom of shadows". For Lundemo, the all-embracing inclusivity and constant re-cycling of content that characterizes the site creates inaccessible archival corridors "haunted" by the traces of lost or unreachable material. As with every element of this book, the potential gains and losses of the YouTube landscape are approached with equal consideration.

That this book provides no easy comfort zone for utopian idealism around user generated participatory culture is particularly apparent in the "Industry" section and its focus on efforts to monetize the YouTube community. This is effectively summarized in Janet Wasko and Mary Erickson's political economic analysis of YouTube, in which they critique the site's promotional orientation towards users in the light of Google's continuing efforts to produce an economic return on its investment. This is predicated on the site's strategic privileging of already established media companies and other corporate partners. As the authors note, those most likely to prosper from such strategies are not the users but the sites owners and corporate partners themselves. The thoroughgoing exploration of all aspects of the YouTube phenomenon offered by this volume mean that the attentive reader can hardly be disillusioned by the economic realities that characterize this section. Conflicts between commerce and community characterize the debates throughout. Yet they do little to dampen the contributors' tangible joy, excitement, humour and wonder at the strange pageantry of YouTube's networked carnival of user generated video.

Although some of the examples and case studies in this volume inevitably have a look of "yesterday's YouTube news" about them, the editors themselves acknowledge that this volume is already becoming a historical perspective on "how things looked back then in 2009". Such rapid relegation of content to history is after all a feature of the unavoidable lag encountered by any print-based text addressing emergent digital forms.

Like the mash-up culture it seeks to represent, this book is a lively montage of observation, and opinion. Its thoughtful organization and engagement with the broader overarching media and cultural debates framing the YouTube phenomenon pave a genuinely lively and accessible pathway in to critical interventions with YouTube. I recommend this text to anyone interested in contributing to those critical interventions, or simply to understanding them. I also recommend readers to explore curator Giovanna Fossati's companion website, her "mirror-maze" of reflections on YouTube's content curated at the request of the editors. Try the "exhibition" first at www.youtubereader.com, then dip in to this book as a way of framing your own reflections on the socio-cultural impact of the richest online repository of popular cultural content available.

References

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Notes

[1] according to YouTube's own fact-sheet.

Biographical Note

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