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Agency and Controversy in the YouTube Community

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YouTube as Patron

In her study of online photosharing and cellphone technologies, Virginia Nightingale (2007) draws on the anthropologist Alfred Gell (1998) to elaborate theories of agency and exchange for forms of participatory culture that take place at the nexus of corporate-controlled technological systems and everyday life. In the cameraphone context, Nightingale argues, ‘industry players maintain the ongoing operational environment and offer ‘patronage’ to site users’. As Nightingale explains, for Gell, patronage partly predetermines ‘the conditions under which the creative work is produced and the environment of reception in which the image is displayed’ (Nightingale, 2007: 293). Likewise, YouTube Inc can be seen as the ‘patron’ of collective creativity, inviting the participation of a very wide range of content creators, and in so doing controlling at least some of the conditions under which creative content is produced. This is true at a very concrete technical level: for example, the aesthetics of YouTube are partly shaped by the short video duration and the (until recently) low resolution. And as we have described elsewhere (Burgess and Green 2008), the design of the

website through which YouTube's content is re-presented for the interpretation of audiences, including especially the prominence of particular metrics of 'popularity' (Most Viewed, Most Discussed), order our understanding of what YouTube is 'for'.

But the purposes and meanings of YouTube as a cultural system are also collectively co-created by users. Through their many activities – uploading, viewing, discussing, and collaborating—the YouTube community forms a network of creative practice. In his book on the social worlds of art, music and design, Howard Becker (1982) described this kind of formation as an 'art world'—'the network of people whose cooperative activity, organised via their joint knowledge of conventional means of doing things, produces the kind of art works that art world is noted for' (Becker, 1982: x). He argues that the construction and negotiation of aesthetic values and 'proper' techniques is not confined to academics or experts, but involves everyone who contributes to the process of cultural production, including audiences. Similarly, on YouTube, aesthetic values, cultural forms, and creative techniques are normalised via the collective activities and judgements of the entire social network—forming an informal and emergent (and by far from homogeneous) 'art world' that is specific to YouTube.

As patron, YouTube provides the supporting and constraining mechanisms of a system whose meaning is generated by the uses to which it is put and within which, collectively, users exercise agency. The political implications of this arrangement, however, are undecided - with a recent proliferation of scholarship arguing that the participation of user communities can be read in terms of 'affective' or 'immaterial', and even 'free' labour (Terranova, 2000). Critiques of the 'creative industries' discourse point out the implications of this for the work conditions of already under-compensated creative practitioners and media professionals—who work within conditions of 'precarious labour' (Deuze, 2007; Ross, 2000)—pointing to a crisis of uncertainty in the economic structures of the cultural industries especially highlighted by the Writers Guild of America strike in 2007. Others are concerned with the various ways in which platform providers like game publishers profit directly from user productivity while simultaneously constraining users' rights (Humphreys, 2005a).

As in the case of Massively Multiplayer Online Games (MMOGs), YouTube's role is that of platform-provider rather than producer: indeed, even more so than in games, YouTube's

value, meanings and possibilities—what we mean in general conversation when we say ‘YouTube’—are produced out of the collective play-work of its users. But as Banks and Humphrey (2008) argue, the more literal transpositions of pre-existing labour-based critiques may not be very helpful in understanding the economic transformations that accompany these new models of user-participation in cultural production—transformations that are characterised by shifting roles and responsibilities, and ‘messy’ relations among platform providers, content producers, and audiences. Like multiplayer games, YouTube is a site of disruption to existing media business models, and is characterised by the same kinds of ‘messy’ and emergent relations among participants as Banks and Humphreys describe. The remaining sections of this paper explore the way these new models of cultural production and participation play out in YouTube and how they are understood and negotiated in practice by a group of core users—the ‘YouTubers’.

YouTubers as User Innovators

As is the case in other online user-created content communities, most people are far more likely to watch videos hosted on YouTube than they are to regularly log into the website, let alone to create and upload videos (Madden, 2007). But for a small proportion of users, YouTube functions as a social network site. Unlike more obvious social network sites like Facebook, where social networking is based on personal profiles and ‘friending’ (boyd and Ellison, 2007), in YouTube the video content itself is the main vehicle of communication and of social connection (Paolillo, 2008; Lange, 2007b). In this paper, we understand the users who spend time on the site contributing content, referring to, building on and critiquing each other’s videos, as well as collaborating (and arguing) with one another, as constituting YouTube’s social core; and in terms of innovation theory, a group of ‘lead users’ who collectively identify and exploit opportunities to improve the way YouTube works through their own practices (Von Hippel, 2005). We argue that the activities of these ‘YouTubers’ (a category that operates in the community itself as well as in academic discourse, as in Lange, 2007a) are important drivers of the attention economy of YouTube, and significant in the co-creation of a particular version of YouTube’s emergent culture.

Despite YouTube’s design focus on usability and a simple and limited set of features, a number of interesting and innovative uses of YouTube have originated in the user

community. Live video chat, for instance, is a service YouTube has not introduced to date because of perceived privacy risks (Stone, 2007). As a workaround, many of the most invested YouTubers are using relatively unregulated alternatives like Stickam,¹ the social network site based around live video chat, as a supplementary technology, maintaining consistent usernames across the two websites, and so effectively adding a ‘plug-in’ to YouTube. The use of Stickam amplifies the social network affordances of YouTube and allows the YouTubers to build their brands using ambient, ‘always on’ technology, rather than only through the production of static episodes of their vlogs.² Such a work around is necessary given the social networks that make use of YouTube are mobile and multiple, not contained within YouTube’s architecture or technologies. The microblogging service 12seconds.tv, launched in mid 2008, similarly spawned a flurry of cross-registrations, resulting in a YouTube ‘meme’ built around 12 second vlog entries.

One of the more striking features of YouTubers’ community-oriented activities is that they take place within an architecture that is not primarily designed for collaborative or collective participation. Despite its community rhetoric, YouTube’s architecture and design invite individual participation, rather than collaborative activity; any opportunities for collaboration have to be specially created by the YouTube community itself, or by special invitation from the company. YouTube provides no built-in, routinised methods of capturing video from other users and reusing it, or of making one’s own content available for this purpose. Nevertheless, collaborative and remixed vlog entries were a very noticeable feature of the most popular content in our survey. Sometimes, it was clear that a significant amount of planning had gone into the production of these videos and that they were attached to purposeful aims (like influencing the rankings, celebrating an event, and so on). At other times they appeared to function as ways of celebrating and representing YouTube as a community of practice. Within weeks of the launch of 12seconds.tv, several prominent YouTubers participated in a 12-second *collaborative* vlog entry posted at 12seconds.tv and linked to from a longer, individually-produced vlog entry by fantasticbabblings.³

¹ <http://stickam.com>

² See for example Chris Crocker’s stickam profile: <http://stickam.com/profile/itschriscrocker>

³ Fantasticbabblings’ vlog entry about 12seconds.tv is at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BBxjsefmon4>

Fantasticbabblings used the cross-post to muse about the proliferation of online identities across social network sites, expressing scepticism with regard to the faddish adoption and abandonment of these sites.⁴ This provides an illustration of the extent to which YouTubers, as cultural agents, are not captive to YouTube's architecture, and demonstrates the permeability of Youtube as a system. It connects with surrounding social and cultural networks, and users embedded within these networks move their content and their identities back and forth between multiple sites.

There are a number of less obvious things users do to make up for perceived lacks or missing affordances in the provided technology. For example, even though the technologies needed to embed clickable links or user-contributed annotations and comments within video streams have existed for quite some time, up until mid-2008 no such capability had been introduced *into* YouTube, and the ability to refer back to other YouTube videos as part of each new utterance in a conversation was likewise very limited. Adrian Miles' (2006) experimental and theoretical work on networked video and hypertext cinema centres on these questions of video's potential to become more like blogging, to be 'porous to the network', and 'to allow quotation, interlinking and to develop a media which is as permeable and granular as networked text' (Miles, 2006: 221). While this potential is very far from being realised, some of YouTube's competitors already offer the ability to tag and annotate other users' videos with comments, attached to various points in the video timeline.⁵ When YouTube did eventually add annotation to videos, its use was limited to the owners of the videos (presumably to avoid an onslaught of annotation spam). So YouTubers developed their own solution to the problem. Conventions have been developed to work around the absence of true media richness and interactivity in YouTube – we observed several YouTubers in our sample adding hyperlinks as annotations in the text of the video description or superimposing them over the video footage, and then referencing them by pointing on camera to the appropriate place on the screen. The collective development of analogue solutions to this perceived technological limitation points to the desires of the YouTube community to embed

⁴ The 12seconds.tv collaboration is available here: <http://12seconds.tv/channel/fantasticbabblings/9437> FantasticBabblings' longer vlog entry on the topic is here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BBxjscfmon4>

⁵ An example of a videosharing site offering this feature is <http://viddler.com>

their video practice within networks of conversation, rather than merely to broadcast themselves.

User-led innovation in YouTube extends beyond hacks of the technology (which is not really open to hacking by most users, either technologically or legally) to include incremental creative and aesthetic innovation on the basic vernacular forms associated with user-created content – a process involving repetition and imitation combined with the invention and recombination of new ideas. In particular, the very basic formal rules of the vlog entry – a talking head, a camera, some editing – may work, as generic constraints do in other art forms, to provide some of the necessary conditions for creativity and innovation. Some examples of innovations on the basic prototype of the vlog entry include the use of shot-reverse-shot-style editing to create the impression of the vlogger having a conversation with him/herself; the use of split screens and green screens; and a significant and growing level of generic hybridity, so that musical performances, stand-up comedy, and life-blogging merge and recombine to create new generic conventions and expressive possibilities.

Vlogging as Activism

These most visibly engaged users engage in shaping, contesting and negotiating the emergent culture of YouTube's social network, and their relationships to the company's interests, as an ordinary part of their participation in YouTube. In our study, we used some of the results of a content survey of 4,320 videos to look for patterns in the ways that YouTubers represented themselves as active participants – even activists – in the ongoing process of shaping and negotiating the meanings and uses of YouTube. As a starting point, we conservatively estimated that a substantial proportion—at least 10 percent—of the most popular YouTube videos uploaded between June and November 2007 were explicitly concerned with YouTube itself. Of these, more than 99 percent were user-created; that is, almost none of these videos that were in some way 'about' YouTube were coded as traditional media content. This finding is obvious in retrospect, because the mainstream media do not, as a rule, produce content specifically for YouTube, even though they do produce content destined generally for the web. If they were to make content for YouTube, it is almost certain to be designed around their own brands, and not that of YouTube or its audience.

These user-created ‘meta YouTube’ videos range widely in their forms and modes of address, from collaborative montages designed to evoke a sense of ‘community’ to simple slideshows using text and music designed to elicit responses in a bid for popularity. However, a full two-thirds of them were ‘vlog’ (or ‘videoblog’) entries, which is significant given that vlogging is an almost exclusively user-created form of online video production; and while vlogging itself is not necessarily new or unique to YouTube, it is an emblematic form of YouTube participation. It seemed in our study that, more than any other form, the vlog as a genre of communication invites critique, debate and discussion. Direct response, through comment and via video, is central to this mode of engagement. Vlogs are frequently responses to other vlogs, carrying out discussion across YouTube and directly addressing comments left on previous vlog entries.

As a direct function of their ‘talking head’ form, vlog entries implicitly address an audience of fellow YouTubers as well as a wider imagined audience. Indeed, one of the basic communicative functions of the vlog entry is purely phatic - it announces the social presence of the vlogger and calls into being an audience of peers who share the knowledge and experience of YouTube as a social space. But this subset of vlogs – the ‘meta’ YouTube videos that in some way are explicitly ‘about’ YouTube or other YouTubers do something else as well. Making videos about some aspect of YouTube demonstrates and in fact requires a reflexive understanding of how YouTube operates as a social network, rather than as a distribution platform used to ‘broadcast’ to an online audience.

These videos are characterised by a canny knowledgeability about the ‘attention economy’ of YouTube, and this knowledge is often performed playfully or humorously. It is becoming increasingly well-known that the crude measures of ‘popularity’ in YouTube’s constructed attention economy – including high numbers of views, responses or comments -- are increasingly the target of ‘gaming’ strategies on behalf of marketers; there are even companies that offer to send videos ‘viral’ for a fee. The YouTube user community is well aware of these developments - their discourse in the meta-YouTube videos articulates a link between the common characteristics of the most popular content (often described as an inauthentic overvaluation of sex, shock and stupidity) and the actions needed to draw large audiences. Some users cheerfully exploit this knowledge of the value system of YouTube’s ‘common culture’, while some critique it; but whatever their response, the most active

participants in YouTube are highly knowledgeable—perhaps even more so than the company itself—of the specific ways in which these measures of ‘popularity’ can work to support or disturb the ‘bottom-up’ culture of YouTube.

Controversies in the YouTube Community

YouTube’s status as ‘patron’ extends to everyone who makes use of the site - corporate and non-corporate participants. Every now and then within the self-constituted YouTube ‘community’, as in other sites of participatory culture (MMOGs, social networks), controversies arise around the implicit ‘patronage’ arrangements between the company and its users. To borrow from Bruno Latour (2005), such controversies should be seen as highly significant and analytically useful events: in the case of YouTube, they reveal the uncertain and contested quality of the power relations between the community and the company, the level of investment these users have in protecting YouTube’s ‘attention economy’ from the intrusions of ‘Big Media’, as well as the construction of symbolic boundaries between the YouTubers as a core group of ‘lead users’ and an imagined ‘mass’ of ordinary users. It is in these controversies that we can see the implicit ‘rules’ on which this relationship is based—because the uncertainties around these rules are at the centre of what is being contested. Most significantly, they provide an indication of the frequently competing logics of expertise, authority and value that are at work within the cultural ecology of YouTube. These controversies also help us to understand how participation in this self-constituted YouTube ‘community’ relies on various forms of vernacular expertise, combining a critical and literate understanding of the ‘attention economy’ and the affordances of the network with the ability to navigate the social and cultural norms of the community.

These controversies reveal competing ideas about what YouTube is for - a platform for communities of practice; a medium for weird, wonderful, and trashy vernacular video; a platform for the distribution of branded and ‘Big Media’ entertainment. Much of the discussion around these controversies centres around changes or perceived changes to the culture of YouTube as it ‘scales up,’ makes deals with major media players and attempts to create revenue from its ‘commodification of the gift economy’ business model.

The launch of Oprah Winfrey's YouTube channel in early November 2007 is a concentrated example of the way that the YouTube community uses their own video channels to contest and negotiate the way that YouTube is developing as a cultural system. The launch was cross-promoted via a 'YouTube special' episode on the Oprah television show ('YouTube's Greatest Hits With The Billionaire Founders', 2007), in which a number of the current and all-time 'most viewed' videos and their creators were featured as 'guest' stars. At some stage in that first week it seemed to commenters that the Oprah channel was granted the privilege of editing the 'featured videos' list that appears on YouTube's front page, result being that the featured videos that week were predominantly (and approvingly) *about* Oprah in some way. There was an intense and immediate flurry of protest videos, spawning discussion about the implications of this event for YouTube's attention economy. One point made by several YouTube commenters was that Oprah was importing the convergence of celebrity and control associated with 'big media' into the social media space (by disallowing external embedding of videos moderating comments on videos in her channel) and therefore ignoring the cultural norms that have developed over the life of the network (providing the site with the very value Oprah was capitalizing on). Late-arriving corporate partners were seen as exploiting the attention that had been produced by earlier, more 'authentic,' participants; a situation only exacerbated by YouTube's practice of proactively promoting their partnerships with mainstream media companies and celebrities who hadn't done the 'hard yards' in the subculture.

The blog devoted to YouTube, *YouTube Stars*,⁶ summed up the themes of the debates that occurred around this event:

The YouTube community has reacted with ambivalence to Oprah's new channel. Some think it will bring new viewers for everyone's videos. But others object to Oprah's apparent 'one-way conversation' - she seems to want to advertise to us without accepting feedback. It has also been lamented that the 'golden age' of YouTube is over. With the corporate accounts racking up lots of viewers, its hard to get on the most discussed or most viewed lists without resorting to histrionics and

⁶ The *YouTube Stars* blog post discussing Oprah's arrival on YouTube is available at <http://youtubestars.blogspot.com/2007/11/oprah-is-on-youtube.html>

sensationalism. YouTube seemed more like a community of videomakers before ‘partners’ came on to advertise to us. But, all this was inevitable. YouTube was spending millions on the computer power and bandwidth necessary to provide this free service to the uploaders and viewers of the thousands of new videos posted weekly on the site.

In ‘Noprah’,⁷ an entry from his humorous vlog, star YouTuber Nalts responded to the Oprah ‘YouTube special’ and her related move to establish a channel on YouTube. Nalts complained about the ‘same old’ videos, like the ‘skateboarding dog’, being used by ‘Big Media’ to represent YouTube; his irritation with Big Media not understanding the YouTube ‘community’; as well as Oprah’s own channel not allowing comments. Renetto, another A-list YouTuber and self-styled community leader, sarcastically commented that it was a good thing that Oprah got featured on the front page because, clearly, ‘she has trouble broadcasting herself’.⁸

Around the same time, popular British vlogger Paperlilies argued in an entry entitled ‘RIP the Golden Age of YouTube’⁹ that the entrance of corporate players had produced a ‘crazy playing field’. Asserting that her own videos are made ‘in [her] bedroom’, ‘using iMovie’, she proposed that YouTube needs to look at introducing new ways for visitors to navigate and find content that would allow people to find ‘good’ user-created content. She went on to express anxiety about the impact on the cultural ecology of YouTube of the company’s recent success in attracting corporate partners:

It felt like it was a community and it doesn’t feel like that anymore. It feels like we’re living in a tv channel and no-one’s looking at us, we’re just being trodden all over by corporate people who don’t give a shit about the people who make videos.

There is a palpable sense of betrayal here, and the idea that the investment of time and effort the YouTube community has put in has gone unrewarded. But it is only retrospectively, at the moment of perceived corporatisation, that these discourses of entitlement and fairness

⁷ The ‘Nalts on Oprah? Noprah,’ video is available at http://youtube.com/watch?v=c_ZNVES1wGw

⁸ Renetto’s video is at <http://youtube.com/watch?v=IYRucYmDsM0>.

⁹ Paperlilies’ vlog post is available at <http://youtube.com/watch?v=Jk05NZUqVZo>

emerge. This is not just a rights-based complaint motivated by jealousy or the loss of attention, however. Comments like these also exhibit an ethic of care for the ‘YouTube-ness’ of YouTube, and an aspiration to amplify the unique and diverse flavour of ‘bottom-up’ participation. For Paperlilies and other ‘lead’ YouTubers, this is an issue of cultural diversity and sustainability, as much as one of mutual responsibility. She says, addressing the company:

You’ve got the corporate thing now, you’ve got it down pat. Everyone wants to be on YouTube and that’s great. But now you’ve got to go back to those people who made YouTube what it is, and promote them. Because a lot of people are feeling neglected by YouTube. And the site that they grew to love last summer is no more. Now we have just another TV channel that happens to be on the Internet. And I don’t like that.

Whereas it used to be that ‘creative’ or ‘well-made’ videos could get a ‘huge amount of views’, she says, now it was the videos that are ‘sensationalist’ or represent the ‘lowest common denominator’ get a lot of views, providing what the ‘mainstream media’ was providing before the emergence of YouTube, and that the people who make up the ‘core’ of YouTube were ‘running away’ from the mainstream media to avoid.

At the same time, however, another very well-known YouTuber, Blunt, expressed skepticism about the extent of the threat that ‘real celebrities’ represent. He pointed out that the same debates occurred when Paris Hilton and P. Diddy got YouTube channels, occurrences which provoked a great deal of anxiety that later turned out to be unwarranted: “Neither P. Diddy nor Paris Hilton really affected the YouTube community in any way, shape or form,” he said. Blunt also argued that Oprah’s cross-promotion of her own YouTube presence would have the unintended consequence of bringing new audiences to user-created YouTube content. In the end, he concludes, Oprah is ‘just another YouTuber’, but one who may significantly expand the audience, hence benefiting the community as a whole; and, in fact, the protest videos themselves could be seen as a way of cashing in on the Oprah brand, but diverting the resultant attention back toward the YouTubers themselves.

The controversy around Oprah’s entrance to YouTube, then, functions partly as an opportunity for the community to explicitly reflect on, take stock of, and activate around the terms of participation within which they work. These videos are also part of a much longer-

term and more widespread pattern of community ‘protest’ videos, frequently led by the more well-known ‘YouTubers’, who are acting to continually establish their own expertise and standing in relation to the YouTube community as a whole. In her vlog entry entitled ‘YouTube is NOT involved with the Community’, xgobobeanx discusses a number of perceived inadequacies and inequities in YouTube’s community management practices. Her description of the video expresses annoyance that ‘YouTube does not answer emails’ and asks, “Why do partners get away with so much?”. There is a symbolic distinction in operation here, between commercial media partners coming from outside, and ‘the community’ (non-corporate ‘YouTubers’). The importance of this distinction to YouTube insiders is also illustrated by some of the counter-tactics employed by this group to gain some control over the public landscape of the site. For example, the YouTube blog *YouTube Stars* regularly publishes a chart of the ‘Non Corporate Top 100’ YouTube videos, which is similar to YouTube’s Most Viewed page, but with all content uploaded by known corporate partners filtered out.¹⁰

This pattern of resistance to the perceived commercial ‘appropriation’ of YouTube is not at all new or unfamiliar; it is very similar to the dynamics of emergence and diffusion, interpreted as mainstream ‘appropriation’, that have been well documented in regard to music subcultures and scenes (see, for example, Schilt, 2003), with 1970s ‘resistant’ subcultures, with punk being the early paradigmatic example (Hebdige, 1976). Protesting, parodying or participating in the turbulence around the perceived transformation of YouTube from DIY free-for-all to corporate media platform is also a way of performing subcultural capital (Thornton, 1996) and expertise. The discourse that takes places around these controversies reveals the tensions between the ‘active’ participants, or ‘core users’, who play by the rules that have been collectively established over time by the user community, and those who, according to the perceptions of the YouTubers, contribute to the erosion of the cultural value and integrity of the service by disregarding those norms: haters (who haven’t uploaded their own videos but leave abusive comments in the discussion threads of other users’ videos), big media players (like Oprah) who assume the privileges of cultural authority without earning them from the ‘grassroots’, and so on. What is at issue here cannot, however, simply be

¹⁰ The *YouTube Stars* most viewed list is available at <http://www.bkserv.net/YTS/YTMostViewed.aspx>

reduced to ‘early adopters’ feeling that the symbolic boundaries between the culture they have established and the mainstream are being eroded. The specific issues raised as part of these complaints work to reveal the implicit ‘social contract’ that had structured their participation, but which is only made explicit once it appears to be broken, at which time discourses of entitlement, fairness, and labour politics emerge.

As well as enacting the politics of participation in relation to the company and external media organisations, the controversies and debates among YouTubers also relate to the social norms within the social network itself. There are obvious issues with abusive comments (‘haters’), exacerbated by anonymity (so that there are few disincentives to behave badly) and scale (so that it becomes difficult to keep up with policing and moderating comments). To an extent, the communicative practices of the ‘haters’ have already become normalised in the cultural system of YouTube (Lange, 2007a), but the community finds its own ways of contesting and shaping them. In the collaborative video ‘Being a Chick on YouTube’,¹¹ a male and female YouTuber discussed the implications of the sexist and often abusive comments that prominent female YouTubers have to contend with. They demonstrated a sophisticated ‘insiders’ knowledge of the issue - rather than moralising about it, they discussed the possible negative impact of this culture of sexism on the participation rates of female vloggers. Cleverly, they addressed the assumed motivations of the male audience, arguing that the development of an overly masculinist and sexist culture among the YouTube community would result in a scarcity of female YouTubers with whom to interact. This is a good example of how videos by YouTubers represent attempts to shape social norms and reflexively negotiate the ethics of online behaviour, and emerge from the position of grounded, insider knowledge.

The other site of conflict and antagonism in YouTube as a social network is what, in earlier online communities, might have been called a ‘flame war’ – the YouTube ‘dramas’ that emerge when a flurry of video posts clusters around an internal ‘controversy’ or an antagonistic debate between one or more YouTubers. They can sometimes be based around controversial debates continuous with ‘offline’ issues (especially religion, atheism or

¹¹ This video has since been removed.

politics). But quite often they appear as face-offs between YouTube ‘stars’ based around the internal politics and power plays of the YouTube community itself, rather than any substantive topics or debates. Users often refer (with visible glee) to these short-lived but very intense community events as ‘YouTube wars’. Indeed, flame wars are represented as part of the fun of participating in the social network. The interpersonal YouTube ‘drama’, therefore, can be thought of almost as a ludic event, and a source of some of the energy that drives the system. A prominent example of this from the period in which our content survey took place was the controversy over LisaNova allegedly ‘spamming’ users with comments in order to attract audiences to her channel. In that case, it was quite evident that as part of the controversy playing itself out, the trolling, hating, and parodying became a spectacle in themselves.

The LisaNova flame war also reveals the internal tensions between the very small number of YouTubers who have become partners, the ‘core’ YouTubers (the 1% or so of YouTube users who make videos, with the vocal component of this group mainly being vloggers), and ‘casual’ users who do not produce but may comment on, or just view, videos. This core group often speaks as though it feels betrayed by the ‘stars’ who have forgotten their roots; as well as by the company whose value they produce. This discourse of entitlement and the impression of antagonisms between ‘A’ list YouTubers and the rest of the core user group is partly a result of the monetisation of popularity—since the introduction of revenue sharing, advertising revenue can be earned by partners (who may have started off as amateur producers, or ‘ordinary’ vloggers). Because of this, there is more at stake in popularity than peer recognition or social validation. But there is also more at stake in these controversies than popularity or revenue. What is at issue for all players in these controversies is the extent to which they have an influence on the future of the community in which they have so much investment.

How do the YouTubers Matter?

Despite its internal antagonisms, it is the YouTube community, produced out of interactions between participants via their videos, that provides the environment in which new literacies, new cultural forms, and new social practices – situated in and appropriate to the culture of user-created online video – are ‘originated’, ‘adopted’ and ‘retained’ (Potts et al, 2008a). In

order to operate effectively as a participant in the YouTube community, it is not possible to simply import learned conventions for creative practice, and the cultural competencies required to enact them, from elsewhere (e.g. from professional television production). Collectively, these most invested and knowledgeable ‘lead users’ mobilise their insider knowledge in attempts (whether effective or not) to shape and influence the culture of YouTube. It is this kind of engagement in YouTube as a communicative space and a community (rather than an inert ‘platform’) that produces YouTube as a space for situated creativity (Potts et al, 2008b) and reflexivity—necessary preconditions for user-led innovation and collective agency or activism. To what extent is YouTube Inc, as ‘patron’ for all this activity, responding?

In participatory culture, media businesses’ capacity to produce value relies on the support of co-creative users. In fact, platform providers like YouTube are no longer only in the ‘media’ business; they now are also in the social network business. In the context of games, Humphreys (2005b) argues that platform providers currently have a faltering understanding of this new role as community managers; certainly, it is unclear whether YouTube Inc is fully committed to the responsibilities as well as the benefits that flow from its role as patron for the creative and collaborative work of its core users – the work that actually produces YouTube *as* a community.

Recently there have been indications YouTube Inc has begun to concentrate some of the energy it puts into rolling out new features for propagating the social network, rather than just the scale of the website. The homepage has recently been redesigned, for example, so that upon logging in users encounter content related their social network (subscriptions and friends) and past viewing behaviour (recommended videos), rather than the most viewed content. The rhetoric in YouTube’s public relations materials appear to indicate future directions are designed to retain visitors, to strengthen the website’s stickiness and entice users to log in and build relationships with the website, as well as a desire to encourage advertisers to work within YouTube rather than just placing advertisements *on* YouTube. These hints gesture toward an ethos more consistent with the practices of YouTube’s social core, emphasising conversation and community over broadcasting.

But in some respects it seems community tools are added almost as an afterthought, long after the community themselves have created solutions, as we discussed earlier in this paper. For example, YouTube launched community ‘help’ forums in July 2008, before which there were very few onsite tools for participants to discuss or share ideas with each other. These conversations took place elsewhere– in forums maintained by users, on blog postings, and more significantly, within the videos themselves. That users sought to help themselves where no other help was available should come as no real surprise; what should be surprising is that it took YouTube, Inc. so long to provide effective support for the user community on which the enterprise relies so heavily.

At the same time, the company continues to court big media partners, increase advertising presence, and feature sponsored content on the front page. As a result of these partnerships, YouTube is under increasing pressure to ‘manage’ the community and ‘institute’ social norms more palatable to the public and the advertisers. For Kylie Jarrett (2008), this is what produces the corporate conflict between the slogan ‘Broadcast Yourself’ and the trademark symbol that is attached to it. Jarrett argues that ‘for users whose engagement with YouTube has been defined by the primacy of community, an over-reliance on professional, corporate content is likely to damage the all-important goodwill of the YouTube brand’ (Jarrett, 2008: 138).

As Jarrett argues, heavy-handed top-down community ‘management’, especially when designed to placate advertisers rather than to promote a welcoming environment for participation and user-led innovation, would run counter to the self-forming dynamics that have built YouTube as a community, but both the company and the community that co-creates its value would benefit from developing more sophisticated models of community-led governance. If YouTube is to remain or to become culturally diverse and innovative (and therefore sustainable as a site of participatory culture), then YouTube Inc, along with other ‘patrons’ of co-creative media, needs to take the collective agency of its core users very seriously indeed.

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