YouTube is the New Tube: Identity, Power, and Creator-Consumer Relationships in a New Culture (Cottage) Industry

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ABSTRACT

YouTube is a new kind of media, offering new ways to search for meaning and identity in the digital information age. In this study, I explore how the struggle to establish meaning and identity is played out in this new cultural space, centering on amateur creators as they navigate tensions and test semiotic relationships with their productions online. I first situate YouTube within a larger context of cultural criticism that sees meaning as socially negotiated by consumers as active participants with cultural productions. I then discuss television as a cultural force and the effects of a new digital territory for these forces. By grounding my discussion in an understanding of media ecology that assumes a more varied and diverse collection of available cultural material will yield a healthier media ecology and thus healthier cultural subjects, I argue that YouTube is a positive intensification of television because it allows more viewers to participate in and more importantly participate in this media system. I then use two particular YouTube creators (Philip DeFranco and Hannah Hart) to demonstrate how these ideas are articulated in practice and how this process is not without its own problems.

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I. Introduction

It is impossible to say exactly what YouTube is. Its content spans a vast range from the incoherent to the inane, the brilliant, and the absolutely mundane. It is popularly conceptualized, at least here in the United States, as a place for mindless diversion. But it is much more than this. YouTube is largely a user-generated, interactive, creative, and democratic space, where one may find anything from poorly shot home videos of silly pets to professionally edited music videos for wildly successful musical acts. More than just another outlet for cultural productions, YouTube offers a fundamentally different opportunity for users to engage with culture as not only consumers but potential producers.

YouTube allows for a new relationship between individuals and cultural artifacts by facilitating new kinds of manipulation, reproduction, subversion – in short, *participation* – with audio-visual media, which were simply not possible before. In this way, YouTube is the younger, more agile, and more capable offspring of television. YouTube is the "new tube," streaming over 6 billion hours of video each month worldwide and reaching more American young adults than any cable network ("Statistics – YouTube"). This is not to say that television is not still a culturally relevant force; it persists as one of the primary systems of mass cultural communication in America and the world at large. But YouTube seriously challenges television's hold as the sole method for mass dissemination of audio-visual cultural messages.

The study of YouTube provides a new voice in the conversation that has dominated the cultural study of mass media over the last half-century. This debate has traditionally been fought over the existence or extent of homogenization in mass media as an effect of widespread dissemination of cultural messages from a few centralized producers and senders to large national and global audiences which in turn creates a need to tailor content to a lowest common

denominator as established by corporate marketing departments. The study of cultural productions has thus become intimately intertwined with the study of the effects of capitalism and Western economic production where, ironically, the audience in these conversations tends to be also characterized as largely homogeneous, or at least susceptible to being made homogeneous. Whatever the case, the idea of a large, coordinated, omnipresent, and arguably malicious force set in conflict against the individual has pervaded the study of mass-distributed cultural messages. And while this debate predates the existence of television, the very idea of "mass culture" itself was informed by the existence of a corporate- or state-controlled media system of electronic communication with television as its central medium. (Castells 359).

Television and "mass culture" in general have drawn criticism on all fronts, but most interesting to me are the ideas of what I dub the "apocalyptic" culture critics exemplified particularly well by Theodor Adorno in his polemics against the culture industry (Adorno and Horkheimer). Such thinking critiques the conceptualization of human beings as consumers and, by virtue of that consumption, as mere cogs spinning in vast entertainment machines busy churning out cultural expressions for society en masse. The broad scope of such a process, according to Adorno, bestows a pervasive "sameness" to all cultural productions differentiating them only by calculated, superficial degrees to create the mere illusion of authenticity, individuality, and novelty.

Implicitly underlying the often progressive agenda of these theorists is an understanding of human beings as endlessly manipulatable consumers of cultural productions, thus passive recipients of cultural programming and so rather helpless in the face of such massive, pervasive, and relentless indoctrination. The image of a child staring vacantly into the lurid glow of a television screen is the classic visual here. However, while messages are important and cultural

productions in the form of entertainment are excellent sites to explore power relations and the creation of meaning, this kind of thinking denies the real autonomy that audiences do have. As W. Russel Neuman concluded in 1991, "The accumulated findings from five decades of systemic social science research reveal that mass media audience, youthful or otherwise, is not helpless, and the media are not all-powerful. The evolving theory of modest and conditional media effects helps to put in perspective the historical cycle of moral panic over new media" (87).

Still, while we might be able to put our moral panic to bed, Adorno's chagrin over the homogeneity of cultural productions is not completely unwarranted. Whether marketing interests have truly sculpted the mental landscape to their own aims or not, the realm of cultural expression – especially the mass distribution of messages, stories, and personalities across television, broadcasted in real time to living-rooms both nationally and globally – is undeniably influenced, constrained, controlled, and homogenized to some degree by market interests under the dictates of capitalism. Any analysis of culture via television programming is thus complicated either implicitly or explicitly by the interaction of market interests and the interests of individuals. In short, to have large-scale reach and influence, cultural productions and their messages need to be translated to television, and to do so, they are filtered and modified by the interests of the corporations and politics that dictate what may or may not be aired. In most respects, for a cultural message to appear on television, a price must be paid or criteria must be met, usually with respect to an artifact's predictable market success.

YouTube is a direct offspring of television: an electronic visual-audio-textual medium for the widespread availability and distribution of cultural messages. However, YouTube is also the progeny of the digital information age, and in this new medium there are much different prices to be paid for cultural messages and creative expression to be available for mass distribution and

viewing. True, money and power are still reliable ways to get more people in larger numbers to view cultural productions via YouTube, and there is still some degree of macroscopic control (e.g., YouTube rules that ban certain sexual, violent, harassing, or copyrighted material). Still, the nature of the medium is such that any individual can connect instantly to an incredibly large variety of content on the basis of a mere search query and can easily contribute his or her own content to the mix. Beyond the initial barriers of technological access and competence (both of which continually dissolving as technology costs, ease of use, and connectivity improve), any message can now be placed on the new television, ready for distribution to a larger and more diverse audience than television could ever have hoped for.

Given this context, it is not particularly useful to attempt to determine whether or not YouTube is completely freed of or still enslaved by a totalizing force of modern mass culture, or even to contrast the relative level of such liberty or enslavement in contrast to television. The issue is, as usual, much more complicated. Media consumers and producers have always been engaged in a unique relationship of signification and meaning-making where the influence of macroscopic power and individual semantics interact in the experience of cultural production and consumption. As an effect or feature of Web 2.0 culture, YouTube creators and consumers pull much more readily and frequently from one another in addition to their corporate overlords. YouTube videos are excellent examples of how the interaction between producer and consumer has become much more dynamic and how both roles have begun to blend with that of the cultural/rhetorical critic.

Thus, this work will explore how YouTube is being used as a new kind of media – a new form of distribution for cultural messages and meaning. In particular, YouTube represents a further dissolution of the line between popular "mass" culture and homemade/remix/self-

expressive cultural signification. This is a site for new ways to search for meaning and identity in the digital information age – a site in which new forms of power and identity function across new digital iterations of cultural texts. This study attempts to answer new questions. How has the relationship between content and corporate or state interests that once held almost hegemonic control over that content changed in the context of YouTube and its ability to transform users into simultaneous consumer/creators? How is the struggle to establish meaning and identity played out in these "homemade" cultural productions as they center on the producer/creator as an individual or small-scale collective entity that is itself navigating tensions and testing semiotic relationships in a new cultural landscape?

To answer these questions, I first devote a small portion of this writing to establishing a larger context by defining the term "culture" in the context of its development in the Western tradition from notions of a "high" culture that must be preserved, through worries in the mid-1900s about aesthetic stagnation, homogenization, and deterioration of the common man via culture, up to a more complex and nuanced definition informed by an understanding of meaning as socially constructed. I then briefly discuss television as a cultural force and the effects of a new digital territory for these forces, addressing how some of the predictions and points made by theorists of the digital landscape and Web 2.0 technology are either played out or rendered inaccurate by the existence and function of YouTube. I then use two particular YouTube creators, both in terms of their whole channels and individual videos, to demonstrate how these ideas are articulated through the real practices and experiences of real YouTube users.

II. Culture, Critique, and the Social Construction of Meaning

> In a world of global flows of wealth, power, and images, the search for identity, collective or individual, ascribed or constructed, becomes the fundamental source of social meaning. This is not a new trend, since identity, and particularly religious and ethnic identity, has been at the roots of meaning since the dawn of human society. Yet identity is becoming the main, and sometimes the only, source of meaning in an historical period characterized by widespread destructuring of organizations, fading away of major social movements, and ephemeral cultural expressions. People increasingly organize their meaning not around what they do but on the basis of what they are, or believe they are.
>
> -Manuel Castells, *Rise of the Network Society*, 3

Culture is a notoriously difficult term to define. Its etymology (the Latin, "cultura") suggests cultivation and maintenance in a horticultural sense, and this early connotation associated "culture" with the idea of intellectual, spiritual, and/or aesthetic progress. Thus, culture early on was understood as that which established a kind of normative standard and measurement of progress for intellectual and artistic output. As Matthew Arnold put it, culture was "the best that has been known and said in the world." This early understanding differentiated culture from other metrics that measured social progress such as economic growth, industrial output, or the quality of civilian life. Thus was born the distinction between "culture" and the "common." Culture, a kind of refinement, perfection, completeness, complexity, depth, or rarity, was not intended to be understood nor enjoyed by the average citizen who was seen as a continual threat to this "high" culture. Early cultural theorists worked from the perspective of culture as maintained by a besieged upper class. That is, it was the job of the culturally elite to protect real and valuable culture from being tainted or tarnished by lower class culture (Bennett, Grossberg, Morris, and Williams 64).

However, the gradual transition from feudal economic systems to capitalism signaled the beginning of a transformation in the traditional "high against the low" characterization of culture. Social elitism became increasingly established not by ties of pedigree or tradition but rather by the control of capital. Intellectuals and cultural critics were dethroned as economic production diversified and intensified, making it possible and profitable to have a common man manufacture his own culture to the specifications of a corporate manager. This was the birth of cultural "industries." In response, cultural critics maintained the distinction between "high" and "low" as defined in a horticultural sense – that is, true culture was distinguished by taste, refinement, and complexity as that which was most beneficial to man's social, moral, and aesthetic betterment. But no longer was "high" culture being threatened by the tastes and values of the "low" common man; rather, the common man's tastes and values were being threatened by his own "low" culture as was manufactured explicitly for common and widespread consumption. Thus from the mid-19th century till today, many theorists have become concerned with mass culture as a dominating, tyrannical, and standardizing force that keeps the masses in check and keeps cultural progress stilted.

Karl Marx is a key theorist in this movement, explaining social interaction as an effect of the dynamics of production. In the *Preface and Introduction to A Critique of Political Economy* he writes, "The mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political and intellectual life process in general. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but on the contrary it is their social being that determines their consciousness" (quoted in Storey 193). Social consciousness thus corresponds to economic structure, and culture arises as a direct effect of an individual's position in the dynamics of economic production. Specifically, the social being arises out of an unequal relationship between

the bourgeois (those in power who control the means of production) and the proletariat wage laborers. Marx saw these two classes in an antagonistic relationship where proletariat labor was exploited by bourgeois business interests. At the same time, the bourgeois maintained a vested interest in keeping the proletariat in their place, and one of the means by which they could do so was by influencing proletariat culture to control the desires, interests, and consciousness of their workers.

Marx had predicted that eventually the exploited proletariat would reach a breaking point of suffering and rise up against their masters in a revolution, but this never happened. In fact, as time went on, capitalism only increased in power and scope. Marxist Antonio Gramsci thus proposed that one of the methods by which the bourgeois stayed in power was by maintaining a cultural hegemony – a control and influence over proletariat culture that infused and naturalized bourgeois values into non-bourgeois workers. In this way, labor workers could not recognize their exploitation as they identified their own good in the interests of the bourgeois (Gramsci and Buttigieg).

This top-down understanding of how culture works – as a system dominated over by a minority of cultural elites using their socially dominant position to change the material and ideological content of culture in order to maintain the unequal or exploitative relationship of their class over others – echoes throughout the works of many cultural critics. Theodor Adorno, for example, was particularly concerned with the idea of cultural industry as a unification of economic and cultural production into a single cultural factory designed to mass-produce art and entertainment that would, in turn, enslave consumers to the very same machine. He postulated that in their leisure time, laborers were still "at work" as consumers. Leisure had become yet another economic activity supporting the interests and values of those who held the means of

material (and thus cultural) production. By consuming leisure products and artificial experiences via entertainment, the man at rest is actually a man at work, busy shoveling coal in the form of capital into the blazing furnaces of repetitive cultural production. Meanwhile, the leisure goods he consumes all perpetuate the myth that a worker, tired after a long day toiling in an economic machine, only desires to "escape" from the world by means of entertainment to gather his strength for another day. Not only does this myth prevent the worker from obtaining any real psychological relief or aesthetic enjoyment, its relentless articulation destroys any notion that resistance to such a system is possible. An eternal consumer and thus employee, man becomes an object of the culture industry (Adorno and Horkheimer). The impetus to produce a cultural artifact or experience does not arise out of any actual need or desire but rather out of the particular efficiency and profitability of the artifact or experience as a sellable product. Cultural productions perpetually refuse to deliver that which they promise, thereby intensifying desires rather than satisfying them. Meanwhile, real needs are incessantly conflated with artificially constructed needs to such a degree that men as consumers now willingly allow their values and needs to be determined for them. The culture industry thus tells men what to want and subsequently what to feel, what to aspire to, what to dream, what to love, what to hate, what to value, what to disregard, and ultimately what to think.

Versions of this kind of thinking are apparent in a number of cultural critics' work. There is, for example, Fredric Jameson's contention that significance and symbolic meaning are determined solely in the context of multinational capital as the result of marketing interests.[1] Guy Debord in his seminal *Society of the Spectacle* argued that new commodities and cultural productions kept men complacent and docile. Louis Althusser was greatly concerned with the

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[1] See, for example, Fredric Jameson. *Postmodernism, Or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1991. Print.

way that the quotidian rituals, motivations, and material accoutrements bind people to a

hierarchical order rife with financial and social inequality.[2] Roland Barthes wrote extensively

about mass culture as a new kind of mythology that worked to mask the artificiality of consumer

culture, presenting it instead as a natural and spontaneous condition – a mere fact of life.[3] In his

One Dimensional Man, Marcuse wrote about "false needs" as those "superimposed upon the

individual by particular social interests in his repression: the needs which perpetuate toil,

aggressiveness, misery, and injustice" (5). These false needs coupled with technical progress

claim to free men from toil and domination but in reality, they enslave him even further into

systems of exploitation and domination. The constant barrage of mass-produced culture and

artificially constructed needs distances man from his idealized human potential and blunt his

faculties to the point where he cannot think for himself let alone engage critically with these

fictions.

What is constant among these and other critics is the idea that culture should enhance the

human experience and that popular or mass-produced culture fails to reach this progressive, life-

affirming, intellectually challenging, and aesthetically complex standard. And while such a

cultural perspective is indeed useful for thinking about how power and semiotics function in the

production and consumption of culture, one must be careful in adopting these theories wholesale.

For example, a strict reading of Marcuse's *One Dimensional Man* has the potential to undermine

itself. If all interaction between individual subjects and mass-media is controlled utterly and

completely by hegemonic, macroscopic forces, wouldn't Marcuse's own interaction be similarly

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[2] Louis Althusser. "Ideology and ideological state apparatuses (notes towards an investigation)." *The anthropology of the state: A reader* (2006): 86-111.
[3] I'm thinking here specifically of Roland Barthes and Annette Lavers. *Mythologies*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1972. Print.

subsumed? What criteria or characteristic does Marcuse possess that allows him to engage critically with mass-mediated culture while others cannot?

This contradiction illustrates a more general problem with these theories in that they imbue the "powers that be" with a seemingly supernatural degree of understanding, power, and authority over cultural subjects that would be entirely inescapable. Even if it were possible for a counter-culture to arise, it seems only inevitable that it must eventually fail. They must, as John Storey describes in his overview of Dick Hebdige's concept of bricolage, "always move from originality and opposition to commercial incorporation and ideological diffusion as the culture industries eventually succeed in marketing subcultural resistance for general consumption and profit" (81). The game appears to be rigged, and we as players, are powerless. Castellis notes that "it is one of the ironies of intellectual history that it is precisely those thinkers who advocate social change who often view people as passive receptacles of ideological manipulation, in fact precluding the notions of social movements and social change except under the mode of exceptional, singular events generated outside the social system" (363-364). How, one might ask, is one within the system expected to move to this supposed, physical or metaphysical outside space, especially under the omnipotent and ubiquitous pull of the culture industry?

As with any theory that seems predicated on an understanding akin to a conspiracy theory, the level of sophistication, coordination, and consensus it would take for any group of cultural elites to manipulate a system to such a comprehensive degree seems ludicrous. After all, these cultural theorists are noteworthy precisely because they have been able to generate these insights into the cultural system. It is as if there exists an implicit assumption that a collective of malicious doppelgangers are somewhere at work, able to perceive social relationships among cultural subjects even more accurately than the theorists themselves and then to use this

information to consciously and inconspicuously manipulate with nefarious intent. This is extremely unrealistic.

Furthermore, when cultural critics bemoan mass-produced cultural productions as banal, stultifying, pacifying, and disposable, they must implicitly establish in opposition a kind of "real" or "folk" culture that rises independently and from the ground up despite macroscopic market forces. This pure culture, somehow isolated and unaffected, would be original, stimulating, and provocative as an effect of such origins. Yet, the existence of such purely "folk" culture made "real" by individuals that have somehow escaped the interests and concerns of capitalism and production is, like the cabal of evil villains above, extremely implausible.

Even were we to assume that such extremes might exist (these super-villains and untouched god-poets), macro-level perspectives tend to presuppose a mental tabula rasa for all individuals upon which all cultural productions work. That is, such theories assume that each individual is set up psychologically to understand any given ideology encoded in a cultural message in exactly the same way and would adopt it with the same method and to the same effect. However, practice reveals that human beings are endlessly more complicated than this. If Adorno and Marcuse can lament the homogenizing effects of mass media and cultural production, then one should expect a continuing and widespread homogenization of tastes, values, and desires, compressing the masses down into carbon copies of the same person. Again, history has not demonstrated this – quite the opposite in fact. As an effect of increasing globalization and the connectivity enabled by the World Wide Web, the array of cultural productions available for consumption has never been wider or more diverse than it is currently.

Alongside the increasing diversity of cultural offerings, theorists of the last three centuries – especially feminists, African Americans, members of the LGBT community, and

others working within fields traditionally marginalized and discriminated against by the kind of cultural universalism and elitism that buttressed earlier evaluations of "high" and "low" culture – have demonstrated how theories of cultural perfection do not tend to approach an objective and universal standard of human progress, but rather reflect the particular practices, productions, and social values of the dominant culture at the time.[4] That is, in any given era, those with social and thus cultural power were not steadily approaching some epitome of human perfection in their evaluation of culture but rather working to maintain the legitimacy of their particular values by delegitimizing those of other classes. Consequently, the conceptualization of the singular and capitalized "Culture" has morphed into an understanding of the pluralized *cultures."* Yet even so, if one were to narrow down what constitutes a particular culture categorically, in practice, cultural subjects are not easily placed within any single category as they tend to trespass over and so redefine these boundary lines for membership. Thus, cultures, as an effect of their complexity, rarely form stable, singular wholes and are better understood as unstable categories of difference that function much like biological organisms as they grow, adapt, combine, overlap, and interact.

I agree with Umberto Eco that "there doesn't exist a Mass Culture in the sense imagined by the apocalyptic critics of mass communications…" but rather "depending on sociocultural circumstances, a variety of codes or rather of rules of competence and interpretation" (quoted in Castellis 363). These rules and codes themselves are subject to change and form an interactive and dynamic relationship between macro-level forces (such as corporations, governments, and political or economic ideologies) and the autonomy of the individual as an interpreter. As Betsy Rymes puts it,

> By assuming all individual interactions had been subsumed by some grand
> controlling mass-mediated culture, [Marcuse] neglected to account for the

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[4] See, for example, the work of Johann Gottfried von Herder.

indeterminate variation in even the most highly standardized media encounter. Like any instance of human engagement with the symbolic world, marketing of goods entails a communicative event in which an active consumer must enter into some kind of interaction with those products. …[B]ecause the same semiotic elements take on varied and localized communicative functions, no matter how massively produced and ubiquitously distributed a product is—and no matter the degree of corporate sponsorship—any text contains repertoire elements that are selected for differently by different groups. As such, the more widely circulated and mass produced a message is, the more highly diverse the interactions with it will be. (214)

This kind of thinking dispenses with any overarching metanarrative that purports to *fix* the meaning of symbols and signs that determine the value or interpretation that any cultural production might contain; there is no master script that establishes universally the meaning and significance of any element of culture whether it be a performance, idea, or physical material.

It is important to establish this theoretical foundation in a study such as this one, which attempts to explore the relationship between macro-level forces and individual autonomy within the context of cultural production and consumption. On the one hand, I am basing my study on an understanding of reality, identity, and culture as all socially negotiated, which contradicts many of the assumptions that underlie the "top-down" theories of cultural production and consumption mentioned above. Yet on the other hand, a socially constructed theory of cultural development cannot disavow the real existence and power of macro-level forces and influences, just as top-down theories cannot deny the inherent but not impenetrable autonomy of the individual as a signifying and interpreting being. The goal, then, is to try to "preserve culture's

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differentiating functions while conceiving of collective identity as a hybrid, often discontinuous inventive process" (Clifford 10).

This is a much more difficult but potentially more fruitful position from which to launch a study such as this one. I am not concerned here with demonstrating how YouTube as a new digital medium for widespread distribution of cultural productions frees its users completely from macro-level influence to create a completely independent and autonomous "folk" culture that counteracts the negative effects of homogenized mass-media content from the culture industry. Nor am I concerned with demonstrating how pervasive and hegemonic the power of the culture industry continues to be, i.e., how YouTube and its digital ilk are the next, even more inescapable iteration of cultural domination and homogenization via the progression of technology. Instead, an understanding of cultural production, consumption, and identity formation as dynamic and socially negotiated categories allows me to investigate how these dynamics and relationships between "the machine" and the individual are played out across new digital landscapes and new mediums for distribution.

III. Implications of The Digital & YouTube as the New Television

> On the one hand, a site like YouTube can be addictive, as one video drags you along to another. Yet after an hour or so, one realizes on what fine a line one has to balance to keep one's sanity, between the joy of discovering the unexpected, the marvellous and occasionally even the miraculous, and the rapid descent into an equally palpable anxiety, staring into the void of a sheer bottomless amount of videos, with their proliferation of images, their banality or obscenity in sounds and commentary. Right next to the euphoria and the epiphany, then, there is the heat-death of meaning, the ennui of repetition and of endless distraction: in short, the relentless progress of entropy that begins to suck out and drain away all life. The point of the exercise is thus not one or the other, not cherry-picking the gems … and skipping the rest, but to sense the trembling tightrope at all times, to remain suspended between epiphany and entropy: *am schönsten ist das Gleichgewicht…*
>
> - Thomas Elsaesser

The etymology of the name "YouTube" might not be as obvious to late millennials born after the turn of the century than to the rest of us. The cathode ray tubes that gave classic television sets their bulky back ends and "tube" moniker have been on their way out since LCD televisions started taking a larger global market share in late 2007 (Gruener). Indeed, the only "tubes" that come with most modern televisions are coaxial cables. Still, most are able to recognize the implicit connection between YouTube and television; they are very similar media – both primarily audio-visual with content publically available for mass distribution. But YouTube is more than similar to television; it is television's progeny.

Manuel Castells wrote that "a few years after its development television became the cultural epicenter of our societies; and the television modality of communication is a fundamentally new medium, characterized by its seductiveness, its sensorial simulation of reality, and its easy communicability along the lines of least psychological effort" (361). If this is true, then YouTube and the rise of online video are not only a modern iteration but also an *intensification* of television. It is, in many ways, *more* seductive: it features the ability to watch video while simultaneously previewing and cueing up new viewing material; it automatically generates (and sometimes automatically plays) suggestions for related content; and allows for a greater level of interactivity as enabled by text-based comment sections, "reply video" features, and ranking systems. Secondly, videos on YouTube present more realistic simulations of reality as most user generated content is of a lower quality and professionalism than what is available on television, giving it a "home video"-like feel which adds a kind of authenticity or intimacy to

these productions.[5] And finally, YouTube videos tend to be even more easily communicated with even less psychological effort: content tends to be hyper-edited into short, "bite sized" clips; YouTube can be accessed with most smartphone, tablet, and laptop technology, making videos available in virtually any internet-connected environment; and all content is delivered for free, on demand, and can be stopped, rewound, saved, and replayed at any time. Psychological effort has never been less taxed.

If YouTube as a medium is thus a modern intensification of television, what effect does this intensification have on our shared cultural repertoire? I'm referring here to the conceptual pool of a community's shared experiences of cultural productions. These productions, as Castells notes, serve as "the symbolic fabric of our life" working "on consciousness and behavior as real experience works on dreams, providing the raw material out of which our brain works" (365). Drawing on the ideas established in the previous chapter, I assert again that this raw material does not irresistibly and automatically condition the consciousness and behavior of cultural subjects, nor does it have a standardized and predictable effect on all who consume it. By the same argument, however, it is also neither random nor chaotic; otherwise, communication between one subject and another would be impossible. Rather, media, the individual interpretations of that media (which, when shared, form the social symbolic order), and culture (in terms of patterns in thought and behavior across groups of individuals) are connected in dynamic and complex relationships. Castells likens this process to "a system of feedbacks

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[5] This, in part, is what accounts for the number of controversies in recent years over various "fake" YouTube accounts and content, the most notable of which is lonelygirl15. For an analysis of this YouTube channel with respect to authenticity from within the YouTube community, see Becky Ross. "Authenticity on the Tube." Online video clip. *YouTube*. YouTube, 22 May 2007. Web. 15 Mar. 2014. For an analysis of these events from the side of the producers and actors, see Denise Mann. "Next Gen Web Workers: LG15's Industrial Self-Reflexivity On Steroids." *Journal of Popular Film & Television* 38.2 (2010): 89-94. Print.

between distorting mirrors: the media are the expression of our culture, and our culture works primarily through the materials provided by the media" (365).

The "problem" (if it can be called such) with this system and with respect to television is that within the reflecting mirrors, the vast majority of consumers are largely byproducts of culture rather than signifying agents within it. When media provide expressions of culture, it does so only through a group of signifying agents that directs it to do so. Thus, for television, the possibilities for cultural expression are limited to the collective imagination inscribed by the lived experiences of all those involved in the line of production (e.g., producers, writers, directors, set designers, and makeup artists) all contributing to the available pool of cultural materials. This might indeed be a diverse and deep pool of resources from which to draw, but in the realm of mass-distributed cultural productions, the ratio of producers to consumers is incredibly small. Thus, in this system, media can be only the expression of the shared culture of the relatively small group of producers, not of the larger collective culture of which they form a part.

On YouTube, the pool of immediately available cultural resources is even more severely limited as much of its content is created by single signifying agents in makeshift, one-person studios. But while the cultural repertoire is much more limited when it comes to individual productions, YouTube is a much more interactive medium than television with a much larger diversity of content and an incredibly large number of creators that can form collectives *via* their content. Thus, with respect to all of its available content as a whole, YouTube is formed by a much larger pool of raw cultural material from a much more varied collection of creative interests. This is one of the themes of Web 2.0 development as identified by Lee Manovitch: "…during this decade we see a gradual shift from the majority of Internet users accessing

content produced by a much smaller number of professional producers to users increasingly accessing content produced by other non-professional users" (33).

This eclectic bevy of creative material sets YouTube in stark contrast to television in terms of its potential function as a multimedia system in the 21st century. It is worthwhile here to read Castells's prediction for such a system and show how his thinking is influenced by television as a medium and has been contradicted by the existence of YouTube:

> …[T]he possibility of the emergence of an integrated multimedia system in the early twenty-first century does exist. But its fully fledged development requires not only a huge investment in infrastructure and in programming content, but also the clarification of the regulatory environment… Under such conditions, only very powerful groups, resulting from alliances between media companies, communication operators, Internet service providers, and computer companies, will be in a position to master the economic and political resources necessary for the diffusion of multimedia. Thus there will be a multimedia system but, in all likelihood, it will be decisively shaped by the commercial interests of a few major conglomerates around the world. The issue then arises about the ability of these conglomerates to identify accurately what people really want from the media system. Indeed, unlike standard television, which people did not have to pay for, except in terms of their time as forced advertising viewers, most of the multimedia broadcast will come in pay-per-view form to recover the costs of the huge investment necessary for their diffusion. Thus, the connection (or lack of connection) between the interests of media business and people's taste and resources will shape the future of communication. (397)

First, YouTube did not require a huge investment in infrastructure, as the platform piggy-backs off of the physical communications layer first laid in the telephone's golden age and now carried forward by Ethernet and 4G wireless technology. As long as digital video distribution can be carried by the same wires as all other internet-related content, YouTube and online video in general need no separate investments in infrastructure to maintain a multimedia system. At the level of coding, the investment in software infrastructure comes only at the point of video-conversion technology (which is usually open-source free code), and the code of the site itself, which did not require tremendous funding at its inception. In fact, the site was started by a handful of former employees of PayPal and had garnered over 200,000 registered users and 2 million video views per day *before* their $3.5 million in funding support from Sequoia Capital (Wesch).

As we have seen, there has not arisen a single multimedia system but rather multiple multimedia systems. In the case of YouTube, while the commercial interests of a few major conglomerates do decisively shape the form, format, and some of the content of the medium (see, for example, YouTube's posted codes for decency and copyrighted material), it is certainly not the case that content on YouTube is largely *generated* under the direct influence of corporate sponsors' market interests. At the same time, the ability of YouTube or its partners to identify accurately what people really want from the system is no longer tied to a need to generate content. Rather, it is tied to the need to *filter* content. In short, the question of corporate control over content no longer exists in the same terms as it did for television. Instead of corporate control over content in terms of content production (figuring out what users will like what kind of programming and then generating that programming), corporate control is now concerned with matching users to content that has already been generated. This is crucial because it opens

up windows for subversive or minority content to at least be accessible to the general public. It is the *degree* and *method* of this accessibility that are now the key metrics in discussions of macro-level cultural influences and individual autonomy.

The interests of media business will always be aligned with acquiring market share and generating profit; this is a given. What has changed are the means by which they do so, and this is fundamentally important. The older paradigms that characterized the creation of television programming featured large corporate owners looking to mass-market content; producers would thus select content that would be of greatest interest to the greatest common denominator with the goal of generating the largest possible profit. This is the basic and classic assumption behind many complaints about the homogenization of television programming and cultural production in general. However, in this new digital context, content is no longer the purview of corporate overlords. Rather, content is as diverse and free as are the participants on YouTube. This statement can certainly be problematized, as it will be later in this paper. But for the present discussion, it should be apparent that YouTube as a medium presents a fundamentally different context for the relationship between large-scale corporate interests and individuals as autonomous, signifying beings.

An assumption that has underlined most of the statements I've made above comes from a conceptualization of media in a biological context that I've taken from Michael Shamberg's *Guerrilla Television.* Shamberg argues, "We can best understand and manage technology in a biological context. ...Indeed, all technologies evolve like organisms; toward doing more with less" ("Part I: Meta-Manual" 5). Here, he presents the basic, fundamental principal behind his concept of "media ecology." Just as with an ecological system, the media and technological landscape of any given society is in a constant and dynamic relationship with the subjects that

use, consume, and provide the semantic connections within that landscape. Like organisms, elements of culture bloom and die. "Man's media processes are cultural DNA; the assimilation of them we call education. For a medium to function like DNA, its genetic analogue, it must have three modes: record, storage, and playback." This has much in common with "meme" theory, popularized by Richard Dawkins in his book *The Selfish Gene.* Dawkins coined the term "meme" for what he described as "a unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of imitation" that "survives" in a cultural landscape by possessing or assimilating the same qualities as successful biological genes (206).[6] Though published about seven years apart, it is remarkable that the qualities Dawkins posits as necessary for meme survival – "copying-fidelity," "longevity," and "fecundity" (208) – match well with Shamberg's modes of media function – "record," "storage," and "playback" respectively. Thus, both analogies are drawn along similar lines, characterizing culture as a kind of collective mental ecosystem in which the material and symbolic content of cultural productions (or one might say, with respect to Dawkins, "complex collections of memes") battle for survival.

However, much more is at stake here than simply the survival of memes. If Castells is correct in assuming that culture impacts consciousness and behavior by providing "the raw material out of which our brain works" (365) then Shamberg is equally correct when he worries that "Technologies which are not biologically sound threaten our survival as a species. Information technologies, because they condition the way we receive and respond to stimulus,

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[6] Though I mention him here to connect meme theory and Shamberg's media-ecology, I have some problems with Dawkins's formation of the analogy that are related, though tangential, to this discussion. Put quickly, the context and construction of Dawkins's analogy quietly downplays or removes completely the active role that biological organisms play in the evolutionary cycle – the *intentionality* at play in evolutionary development. This is contentious territory that I want to avoid having to navigate in this study. I mention it only because biological "intentionality" in this context is analogous to my own usage of individual "autonomy" throughout this paper, and the existence and real power of cultural subjects' ability to directly affect culture is crucial to my understanding of cultural theory as a continually negotiated relationship between individuals and macroscopic forces. For a more thorough exploration of this nuance with respect to Charles Darwin and "intentionality" as an important yet overlooked link between social and biological theory, see Alan Costall. "The 'Meme' Meme." *Cultural Dynamics* 4.3 (1991): 321-35. Print.

are particularly crucial. You can't expect a culture to function with ecological sanity unless its information structures reflect that bias" ("Part I: Meta-Manual" 32). Thus it behooves human beings as a species to consider the cultural productions and media distribution in such a way since man's psychological and social fitness are directly related to the well-being and stability of his cultural system.

Shamberg outlines seven characteristics of healthy systems:

1. they support a high variety of forms, or diversity rather than uniformity;

2. they are complex, not simple;

3. they minimize redundancy and are thus negentropic [tending to increase order];

4. they are symbiotic rather than competitive;

5. they trend toward decentralization and heterogeneity; and

6. they are stable as a result of the above ("Part I: Meta-Manual" 32)

The argument here follows the same logic that supports biodiversity. As environments inevitably change, biological diversity enhances the survival and adaptability of ecosystems and their inhabitants. Similarly, within a system in which media can be created, consumed, and by rearticulation passed along into the pool of available cultural information, a greater diversity of cultural offerings ensures sustainability not only for particular media forms but also for particular media consumers. Just as biological life depends on the consumption and recombination of diverse and heterogeneous organic material, so does cultural fitness depend on the consumption and rearticulation of diverse and heterogeneous cultural productions.

Television, by this paradigm and in Shamberg's estimation, is an extremely unhealthy, unbalanced, and unstable medium. He dubs it "beast television," criticizing the "low variety of forms or viewpoints" and "highly simplistic and extremely redundant" content across networks.

He uses the hypothetical example of three news shows providing identical and overlapping coverage of the same live event to illustrate how such redundancy is bolstered by the system's inherent bias towards "overly-competitive" behavior. Desperate for market share in viewership, networks are forced to appeal to the widest possible demographic with all programming. This in turn creates the need to make content as widely and intensely alluring as possible, driving up production costs.[7] Such costs can then only be underwritten by advertisers (who will similarly demand content that will garner the largest audience possible) or charitable organizations (which will only support content that conforms to said organizations' particular biases, ideological or otherwise). Thus, the need to appeal to a lowest common denominator discourages variety and experimentation while simultaneously reducing audiences into like-minded, passive viewers. As Shamberg states, "[a] standard of success that demands thirty to fifty million people can only trend toward homogenization. Yet homogeneity is entropic. Information survival demands a diversity of options, and they're just not possible within the broadcast technology or context" ("Part I: Meta-Manual" 32).

This entropic decay is more than an effect of marketing concerns or by extension, capitalism. For Shamberg, television *as a medium* is "structurally unsound" – its bias towards homogenized content inherent to its characteristics *as a technology*, regardless of external forces. In fact, Shamberg posits that television's essential technological attributes "create the political and economic environment which determines the nature of programming, not vice-versa" ("Part I: Meta-Manual" 32). Chief among these essential characteristics which tend to minimize diversity in broadcast television programming is the medium's inability to handle any audience

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[7] A related effect of this process is to help perpetuate the growing trend over the last few decades toward increasingly bigger, more dazzling, more eye-catching, more imitable – in a word, more *spectacular* – forms of media and cultural production. For an extended analysis of this phenomenon, see Douglas Kellner. *Media Spectacle*. London: Routledge, 2003. Print.

feedback. Television sets are literally and figuratively "receivers." As it re-presents reality to its viewers, television programming leaves them unable to respond in a public, observable, or meaningful way. In other words, Shamberg speculated that television's tendency to condition passivity in its viewers conflicted with their psychological need to respond and interact with their own world as represented on the screen. Feedback, in this respect, allows for a cultural subject to maintain "psychological balance" by verifying their autonomy as a signifying agent via the technology of media dissemination. Television's complete lack of feedback capability thus creates "cultural tension," which Shamberg believed led to frequent bouts of "mass media therapy" in the 1960's – spontaneous attempts at feedback where disenfranchised groups of viewers created events noticeable enough to receive TV media coverage and thus verify their experience by that coverage. Such behavior might be initially satisfying, but is "at best an ad hoc remedy for social problems because it demands abnormal behavior which cannot be integrated into normal living patterns." Furthermore, such behavior only applies to those sufficiently disenfranchised. For others, the choice seems to be between a docile acceptance or a neurotic denial of their perceived cultural impotency ("Part I: Meta-Manual" 12).

Against "beast" television, Shamberg proposed that media production might occur at the level of individually produced content enabled by portable video systems and distributed by cable broadcasting and videocassettes ("Part I: Meta-Manual" 2). Such a decentered system would contain a much larger variety of content and provide for a much healthier and stable media ecology. Shamberg was not the only person to posit the possibility and viability of such a system; Marc Davis predicted in 1997 "a merging of independent video producers and home video makers into a broad and active market sector … When the tools and infrastructure are in place to enable cheap and effective home use of video annotation, retrieval and repurposing tools

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… [t]he conditions of production and use will have changed such that a large group of amateurs and home users will be regularly making video that can compete in the information marketplace of networked computers" (48).

Not a decade later, YouTube's launch and growth fulfilled these predictions. What YouTube enables is not only widespread distribution of amateur content, but also the ability to feedback with one's own content either by creating a new channel, commenting in text-based forums below videos, or rating videos by "liking" or "disliking" them. YouTube is the latest iteration of participatory culture – "a culture with relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing one's creations, and some type of informal mentorship … one in which members believe their contributions matter and feel some degree of social connection with one another…" (Jenkins, Henry, Ravi Purushotma, Katherine Clinton, Margaret Wiegel, Alice J. Robinson 3). Such is the kind of healthy media system Shamberg envisioned: an "alternate network" which could "allow us to access each other's experiencing" (Shamberg, "Part I: Meta-Manual," 37).[8]

This cultural movement blooms out of a greater shift enabled by the increasing availability, ease of use, and affordability of digital technology in general. Falling costs across the board in terms of both production and distribution (in the case of YouTube, both potentially free for even amateur creators with access to a phone and computer) remove substantial barriers that historically have limited amateur creativity. At the same time, the rise of digital technology catalyzed a major cultural transformation at the end of the 20th century that shifted the media

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[8] YouTube is certainly not the first medium to enable this kind of interactivity. Henry Jenkins points out that YouTube is only the latest iteration of "do it yourself" or "garage" cultural practices, forming the latest in a series of media which includes underground newspapers and comics, punk rock, Riot Grrrl feminism, and the "zine" culture of the 1970's, 80's and 90's and extends as far back as the amateur press association of the late 19th century. See Henry Jenkins. "What Happened Before YouTube." *YouTube: Online Video and Participatory Culture*. By Jean Burgess and Joshua Green. Malden: Polity, 2009. 109-25. Print.

landscape from a material world of "things" to an informational world of ideas (Castells 28). The

Internet and digital information technology provide a means by which ideas in the form of text,

audio, video, image, and program can be easily spread without decreasing the density or scarcity

of the resource at any given point (Lessig 116). Culture in the form of digital material is

somewhat indestructible, endlessly consumable, and infinitely customizable, mutable, mixable,

and open to interpretation and manipulation by single signifying agents that need only access to a

terminal. Traditionally, cultural production has been limited both artistically and commercially

by physical and economic restrictions, but the fundamentally different architecture of the Internet

allows for more people to innovate and create with much more material in a wider variety of

capacities. With respect to Shamberg, YouTube and the Internet offer an actualization of a much

healthier media ecology which in turn creates more active, engaged, and self-actualized cultural

subjects.

Just as television's problems as a medium could be traced to flaws suggested by its

technological structure, so too can the positive aspects of YouTube be traced to how productions

are allowed to function on this platform as an effect of its structure. While it is true that videos

with high view-counts are more likely to be seen by more viewers, YouTube as a system does

not function on the consumptive model as did television. Henry Jenkins describes this old model

as "sticky," wherein "the goal of pull media was to attract consumers to your site and hold them

there as long as possible" ("Slash Me, Mash Me, Spread Me…"). In the new system YouTube

provides, value is based on "spreadability" as the relevance, resonance, and reproduction of

media are tied instead to how easily they can be remixed, recontextualized, and adapted into new

forms in which original form can still be recognized. Videos on YouTube are not only passively

consumed as they might have been via television, but by virtue of the medium can be

"propagated by being taken up and used in new works, in new ways, and therefore are transformed on each iteration. …[This is] a 'copy the instructions', rather than 'copy the product' model of replication and variation" (Burgess 108).

That being said, not all video thus propagated is unarguably progressive, beneficial, unique, or enriching. While Shamberg is joined by a number of critics who laud the empowering potential of this system,[9] some are not so positive about the artistic or intellectual merit of the media that is frequently spread via YouTube. Andrew Keen offers a particularly vitriolic take in his *The Cult of the Amateur* – a polemic set against the Web 2.0 digital revolution – calling YouTube an "infinite gallery of amateur movies showing poor fools" (5) broadcasting themselves "with all the shameless self-admiration of the mythical Narcissus" (7). Keen is joined by Lee Siegle, who argues in *Against the Machine* that the Internet does not do away with, but actually reinforces the popularity bias of broadcast media – the tendency for that which is most viewed to be viewed more. These points are echoed by other critics of participatory culture like Jaron Lanier and Nicholas G. Carr.[10] In fact, I agree with a number of these criticisms, some of which I hope to address below. I reference them briefly here because while these arguments may indeed be valid, Shamberg's point still remains: while it may be true that to a given viewer, a particular YouTube video may seem banal and useless, to the creator of that video, the ability to self-actualize via a popular media distribution system is intrinsically healthy to that creator.

Furthermore, YouTubers have not become one-dimensional consumers of whatever is posted on the site, but active critics who revolt at the sign of homogeneity of product or opinion.

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[9] See, for example: Yochai Benkler. 2006. *The Wealth of Networks: How Social Production Transforms Markets and Freedom*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.; Gillmor, Dan. 2006. *We the Media: Grassroots Journalism for the People, by the People*. Sebastopol, CA: O'Reilly Media.; Charles Leadbeater. 2008. *We-Think: The Power of Mass Creativity*. London: Profile.; Shirky, Clay. 2008. *Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organizing without Organization*. London: Allen Lane.; and Michael Strangelove. *Watching Youtube: Extraordinary Videos by Ordinary People*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010. Print.

[10] In Jaron Lanier. *You Are Not a Gadget: A Manifesto*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010. Print. and Nicholas G. Carr. *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2010. Print. respectively.

Betsy Rymes, an Educational Linguistics professor at the University of Pennsylvania, demonstrates in her work how fans are not drawn to certain videos by abstract notions of "quality," but through "recognition of the creative recombinations of repertoire elements that appeal to their local sensibilities" (220). Repetitive or uninspired works are "disliked" and, lacking spreadability, fail to flourish in the media ecosystem.

This feedback process of recognition, remix, and rearticulation also helps to cultivate digital literacy and active cultural participation in this new cultural space. This proficiency is integral for active and engaged participation in 21st century life. As Virginia Kuhn argues, given the relative ubiquity of video in the current cultural climate, one must know how to produce moving images to be digitally literate. To better understand the complex world of video that surrounds us and the "complex visual and aural syntax" it uses, especially given how much editing itself can drive the course of a story or narrative, competency as a consumer of video "necessitates immersion in its production" (6). Like Shamberg, Kuhn believes that video has the potential for empowerment. As we relate not only to the immediate world, but to pictures of the world contextualized by that mediation, so then video production at an amateur level has the potential to allow for self-expression, self-control, and self-verification (Merrin 104) – to "assert your own value as information" (Shamberg, "Part II: Manual" 45). A space like YouTube allows users through the practice of watching and posting video to become "better 'readers' of their own culture and more self-reflective and critical of the culture they occupy, thereby enabling them to become more self-reflective participants in conversations within that culture" (Benkler 15).

Still, the Internet itself, which supports YouTube entirely as a medium, is not an innately free, open, and public space; barriers for entry and proficiency such as access, speed, technology, time, and technical knowledge persist. At the same time, YouTube as a medium places particular

constraints on its content – basic constraints on length and format, and policies that disallow certain elements (e.g., that which is determined by YouTube to constitute hate speech, harassment, and certain sexual, violent, or dangerous content). A particularly contentious area at the moment (and by all accounts will continue to be contentious in the future) is piracy accusations on YouTube whereby copyrighted material or images may be "flagged as inappropriate" by users or by external authorities. While the defensibility of YouTube's policies that police and remove certain types of content can be debated, it is YouTube, not the end user, that maintains final control over what may or may not be expressed via this medium (Merrin 114).

To wit, YouTube has recently allowed "bots" to run constantly through the site – software that can quickly scan the millions of videos added each day and automatically identify material that may or may not constitute copyrighted content. Unfortunately, because this process is automated, these bots will often flag content that is actually protected under fair use law. Virginia Kuhn addresses this in depth in her paper "The YouTube Gaze: Permission to Create?" arguing that the rampant and often uncontestable flagging of content as suspect of copyright infringement, coupled with YouTube's overly authoritative and at times incorrect verbiage designed to help users avoid copyright infringement, leads to a "seemingly arbitrary application of copyright infringement claims, one that bears little resemblance to the intent of copyright protection…" Guilty or not, users "burned by its draconian content identification and dispute processes" begin to internalize this surveillance and police themselves out of fear of prosecution, leading to creative stifling and self-censorship of expression (1).

This is emblematic of a larger problem with the Internet and the digital as a foundation for media distribution in general. Lawrence Lessig worried that given behavior like that

described of YouTube above, the Internet might be moving away from a possible future of increased individual freedom actualized by greater control over the institutions that regulate our lives. He posits that we may be witnessing "the rebirth of technologies of control" (vii), and that "as activity that would be permitted in real space (either because the law protects it or because the costs of tracking it are too high) moves to cyberspace, control over that activity has increased" (183).

At the same time, the ability of users to feed back to media in digital spaces, while lauded by Shamberg as essential to psychologically balanced cultural subjects, has itself become a commodity. Sites like YouTube, FaceBook, and Twitter are free to use not because of some moral obligation to provide essentially life-affirming processes to as many users as possible, but instead because the user himself becomes the product for sale. Feedback may empower the user by giving him some sense of purpose and agency within a media system, but the user can now be recognized by that agency. Uniqueness and taste become codifiable in new media spaces, allowing users to be increasingly "seen" by corporate or otherwise macro-level forces. In this new landscape, cultural subjects are much more easily categorized if not manipulated and controlled.

This is a user-centered cost-benefit analysis of data collection. On the one hand, targeted machine-driven marketing and the ability to direct users to relevant content based on their preferences free users from the old tyranny of the corporate marketer and the disc jockey deciding what they *should* want. Data collection of user preferences thus lowers the cost of promotion and distribution, potentially allowing for smaller producers to reach more interested users with content they might enjoy. In such a system, more media get more chances to be

consumed and rearticulated; diversity and decentralization increase, and the media ecosystem flourishes.

On the other hand, because these automatic data crunchers function on the same need that traditional marketers had to categorize users into identifiable groups related by shared interests in content, the results of any search must be intrinsically biased towards content that connects the largest number of users as they are correlated together by shared interests. That is, while a cabal of marketing executives no longer determines what a user should want, the determination is now crowd-sourced. Mob rules, if they didn't apply already, certainly apply now.

Case in point, users on YouTube are not given a blank search bar or a randomly assembled collection of videos to browse. In fact, truly random browsing is impossible on the site. Instead, outside of the specific demands of a user, YouTube presents spotlighted material as a mixture of what is popular, what "everyone else" is viewing, and content related to previously viewed videos as per a user's profile. It seems, as Geert Lovink notes, that "The essential fact of postmodernity – namely that we seek difference, not similarity – has not yet got through to the Web 2.0 entrepreneurial class. ... The coded maxim here is: I want to see what you see. What are my friends watching? What are their favourite videos?" (11).

Thomas Elsaesser refers to this as the first paradox of YouTube: that the site, while populated with user-generated content, still maintains a "certain *structured* contingency… strongly informed and shaped by mathematics, via its programming architecture and design, as well as its search and sort algorithms" (30, emphasis mine). In effect, video "browsing" directed entirely by the user is obsolete. On YouTube, it is impossible to browse videos randomly, though perhaps deservedly so: the variety and plentitude of videos are far too large and the quality far too variable to actually facilitate enjoyable discovery of new media. It is true that I can search for

any content I can imagine, no matter how obscure, and usually find results. A quick YouTube search for "Wookiefoot" (a relatively obscure Minnesota-based jam band I can barely remember being mentioned two decades ago) yields over 7,000 results. Still, it's extremely unlikely that a user unfamiliar with Wookiefoot's music would ever view one of these videos.

Thus, the search bar acts as a guardian for content and guides users to what YouTube deems relevant. While this does help users navigate through vast seas of potentially irrelevant content, it simultaneously curtails discovery of minority productions. YouTube's search parameters work along the same lines as corporate interests, filtering content to only that which is most visible, homogenizing user experiences generally. As Maria Popova noted in a recent interview, "The Web by and large is really well designed to help people find more of what they already know they're looking for, and really poorly designed to help us discover that which we don't yet know will interest us and hopefully even change the way we understand the world" (Popova).

Individuals generating content on YouTube are usually aware of this popularity metric, as there is no way to remove the view counter on any particular video. Thus, intrinsic to the structure of the medium is a built-in metric for success based on popularity and mob rule. "The implicit rules one needs to master to succeed [on YouTube] (performing expressions of subjectivity in ways that garner the most attention), have a role in structuring what is produced there. Video-sharing on YouTube is, thus, never value-free" (Saul, 471). This is unfortunate, as the viewcount is an easily breakable metric, allowing savvy users to manipulate and "game" the system unfairly.

At the same time, Patricia G. Lange astutely observes that gaming the popularity metric might not be entirely malicious and that "Seeing the metric as defined only in one way

potentially misses important social relationships that are indexed by its 'manipulation.'" Lange here references the practice of watching a particular user's videos several times in support of his or her content, showing friendship in the form of the user's enhanced visibility on the site. This redefines viewership in a more meaningful and social way. Lange speculates, "A more nuanced notion of viewership could be refashioned to be less concerned with statistics and more interested in promoting respectful social and feedback linkages between video makers and viewers, whose roles as viewers and creators are constantly in flux" (98). I agree that such a metric might indeed be possible, but in the six years since her article was published, there has been no indication that YouTube will move in this direction. Detailed viewcount statistics remain, as does the popularity bias, creating the potential for, in Lange's words, "a kind of obsessiveness that turns people into numbers-driven media makers who constantly reflect on view counts in a way that is potentially antithetical to the do-it-yourself video making spirit … [and] important social relationships between video makers and viewer/participants who are encouraged to comment" (98).

Concern over subscription rates and viewcount numbers may also be driving amateur producers on YouTube to conform their content to that which is produced by the culture industry as this system has a demonstrably good track record at drawing in massive viewership numbers. Lev Manovich wonders, "Given that the significant percentage of user-generated content either follows the templates and conventions set up by professional entertainment industry, or directly re-uses professionally produced content … does this mean that people's identities and imagination are now even more firmly colonized by commercial media than in the twentieth century?" (36). Indeed, while amateur producers on YouTube may be decentering the power once held by large media conglomerates, this does not necessarily mean that these large-scale

industries have lost power. In fact, as more and more users open up new channels and record new videos that comment upon, critique, and remix their favorite elements of popular culture, more and more discourse is generated about each mass-produced media production and the distribution network expands exponentially. As they say, "Any press is good press."

This is not to say that all productions on YouTube directly conform to the structure and design of mass-marketed media; far from it. Yet the falling costs in technology and access that enable so many users to participate in the new media system do not guarantee that all users will experience similar access, or be similarly proficient. At the same time, the ability of any user to actually sift through this massive collage of amateur content takes a certain degree of finesse. Bill Ivey and Steven J. Tepper explain this situation well in a co-authored article featured in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*:

> Increasingly, those who have the education, skills, financial resources, and time required to navigate the sea of cultural choice will gain access to new cultural opportunities. … They will be the pro-ams [professional amateurs] who network with other serious amateurs and find audiences for their work. They will discover new forms of cultural expression that engage their passions and help them forge their own identities, and will be the curators of their own expressive lives and the mavens who enrich the lives of others. … At the same time, those citizens who have fewer resources – less time, less money, and less knowledge about how to navigate the cultural system – will increasingly rely on the cultural fare offered to them by consolidated media and entertainment conglomerates … Finding it increasingly difficult to take advantage of the pro-am revolution, such citizens will be trapped on the wrong side of the cultural divide. So technology and

economic change are conspiring to create a new cultural elite–and a new cultural underclass. (B6)

Thus while YouTube may indeed enable the flow of new currents of media from a larger and more diverse pool of amateur creative talent, this flow may not be able to reach a large number of users who instead will be subsumed into the same mass media system YouTube supposedly threatens or decentralizes.

Furthermore, even for those members of the possible "new cultural elite," mere access to resources and the proficiency to use them do not guarantee new, progressive, ground-breaking content. Independent filmmaker Alex Juhasz, for example, worries that "the counter-cultural, anti-normative, critical, or political impulses behind the term [DIY (Do It Yourself)] … drop out of the picture–just as they do in most DIY YouTube video–when access to technology occurs outside other liberating forces." That is, Shamberg's insistence that media bias toward a specific type of content can be inferred from the technological structure of the media alone might be a bit myopic. Access to a camera does not make one a good photographer, just as access to a pen and paper does not carry with it something noteworthy for a writer to say. According to Juhasz, for users to experience transformative engagements with media, these engagements need "a critique, a goal, a community, and a context" – elements which YouTube sorely lacks (quoted in Jenkins, "Learning From YouTube: An Interview with Alex Juhasz (Part One)").

Thus, YouTube as a medium offers new opportunities for more consumers to experience a wider diversity of cultural content than has ever been possible with television, but it does so at a price and is not exempt from the same issues that surround television. At the same time, YouTube users are forging new identities not only as consumers but as creators who have the potential to self-actualize through this media system. YouTube does potentially increase the

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diversity and strengthen the health of the larger, multi-media system of which it forms a part. Yet its potential for user interactivity is complicated as users' identities become bound up not only with the consumption but also the creation of cultural texts. As this takes place on YouTube, users run the risk of becoming miniature cultural industries themselves, navigating (usually subconsciously) the tension between the desires to create, to assert autonomy and individuality, and to be heard and expand the reach of their messages. As such a process is itself not without its own unique opportunities and problems, looking more closely at particular users who have achieved a level of success within this medium will help to articulate these positive and negative effects in a tangible way.

IV. Sxephil – The Philip DeFranco Show

"Me personally, I like current events, sexual humor, celebrities, and just making
fun of people. Boom: The Philip DeFranco Show."

-Philip DeFranco ("How to Get a Popular Show/Series/Vlog")

i. Background

Philip DeFranco (YouTube username "sxephil," real name Philip Franchini, hereafter
referred to as "DeFranco") started his main account on YouTube in September of 2006. As he
describes, "I started the account so I could comment, rate, and subscribe to lonelygirl15 videos.
… I was leaving comments, and doing that user, that video-consumer thing" ("Growing Up On
Youtube - Vidcon Panel 2011"). Thus DeFranco entered the world of YouTube first as a mere
consumer, and we can see that at least at the time of his speaking (about 5 years after the fact)
DeFranco is able to differentiate between different kinds of users on YouTube; there are those
who browse and watch videos, perhaps commenting on them and thus interacting with the
community in small form, but there were also those who were contributing content to the site.

However, viewing and commenting were not enough for him. Though unable to identify
his exact motivations for doing so, DeFranco soon used his account to create a video response to
another post by then popular YouTube user "Renatto." As he describes it, "it was weird and
awkward, but it was kind of cool because he left a comment back on my video and a few of his
fans left comments, and my eyes were opened" ("Growing Up On Youtube - Vidcon Panel
2011"). He isn't clear here what he implies by his eyes "being opened," but one could surmise
that DeFranco had discovered the early inklings of what was to become his primary motivation
(at least ostensibly) for providing content on YouTube: interaction and response. By only leaving
a comment on the page, DeFranco was contained within the realm of "mere commenters" or as

he describes it "doing that user, that video-consumer thing." But by posting a response video, even though its content was not original per se, he became the center of discussion. Rather than a consumer, he could be a producer; rather than a consumer, he could be consumed. In this was some kind of thrill or hidden actualization.

Despite this, DeFranco's second video did not seek to exploit this ability to divert focus or garner attention. Instead, his next video addressed William Sledd. "[He was] one of the first openly gay YouTube users. He had a fashion blog. And then one day he broke down and he was crying on camera talking about how hard it was growing up with that lifestyle. And … I made a video response and I hugged the video camera..." ("Growing Up On Youtube - Vidcon Panel 2011"). DeFranco's demeanor during this speech suggests that he now views this attempt with some embarrassment in its awkwardness, but it illustrates a number of interesting points. First, it shows how his early YouTube content was crafted not with the intent of developing original content or garnering attention, but rather to allow DeFranco to function as a member of the online video community in a larger capacity than a mere video consumer. He illustrates the tacit belief among YouTube content creators that those who only view and comment are not on equal terms with content creators; commentators are outsiders. At the same time, these outsiders still make up a unique dynamic of this world, as it is primarily their views that provide the metric for relevancy and quality of this content. Thus the process of posting a video, even if done so with community building as an implicit goal, becomes inextricably bound up with a public "outsider" watching the performance of that community building.

Still, DeFranco's early desire for membership in this community is obvious. His awkward attempt to hug the video camera and the embarrassed smiles this story elicits from DeFranco and his audience illustrate the limitations and possibilities of this medium. On the one hand, because

all interaction is "virtual," there is no real physical intimacy possible here, or, at the very least, real displays of emotional connection are difficult to convey. At the same time, even lacking this necessary physical proximity, YouTube allowed William Sledd's public outpouring of grief and DeFranco's reaction to happen in view of thousands of other users. In this way, while the physical intimacy of interaction is reduced, the heightened possibility of real connection regardless of the physical and with the potential to draw in new community members seems to be a welcome trade-off.

However, these early forays into video production are far cries from the majority of DeFranco's early content: his first handful of videos is a collection of hyperbolic, snarky rants about pop culture, top-10 lists, and tongue-in-cheek celebrity gossip wrapped in sophomoric, sexist, racist, or otherwise controversy-mongering humor. He describes this time as an awkward phase for his work, and has since hidden many of these early videos from public viewing. Not until late 2007 did his content start to stabilize and form what would make up his regular "Philip DeFranco Show" years later. Still, the "here's my opinion, fuck you" attitude that marks his early creative attempts has persisted in his work even to this date and despite DeFranco's stated desire to move away from it.

What formed the basis for the modus operandi – the composition, content, and delivery – of the current DeFranco Show was a series of experiments and chance events. First, a ribbing in bad taste of Michael J. Fox on Rush Limbaugh's radio program prompted DeFranco to create a YouTube video in angry response.[11] At this point, DeFranco had amassed somewhere around 1000 subscribers to his channel, some of whom he attributes to his video responses to other content creators on the site. After posting the response to Limbaugh, he was surprised to find that his view count had jumped to over 10 times his subscriber base. This event provided DeFranco

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[11] DeFranco, for reasons unstated, has since hidden this video from public view.

with an introductory course in Search Engine Optimization strategy as he realized that it was his tactical "tagging" of video keywords that had pulled viewers into his channel ("Growing Up On Youtube - Vidcon Panel 2011").

Secondly, DeFranco experimented, as did many early YouTube users, with a now outmoded feature that automatically generated thumbnail images for posted videos. In the site's early days, upload algorithms would select a frame of video at the exact center of a video and use that image as a preview thumbnail to suggest to potential viewers that video's content. Savvy users, DeFranco included, began to manipulate this feature, putting attention-grabbing or provocative images deliberately at the mid-point of their videos. DeFranco's experimentation in this territory is either poorly hidden or unabashed; some of his early videos have long periods of black silence at their ends, an obvious attempt to increase the length of the video so that an image he had used would be positioned at the video's exact center. DeFranco's chief experiment in this process was a video entitled "Big Boobs and You," which I will address specifically below.

Finally, DeFranco had been inspired by the content already circulating on YouTube, specifically, the actions of the vlogbrothers, ZeFrank, and a community of sports-car racers. DeFranco describes this early period:

> It was this amazing community, and it showed me how awesome authenticity and how awesome communities could be. Because [the principal vlogger of the community] did this thing called 'the show' where he talked about news, pop culture, events, kind of like a vlog format, but he only did it for a year... Eventually, it ended. And I had this void in my life. It sounds a little melodramatic but I was really sad because it was something I would do every day.

It was my hobby, my habit. For the next two weeks I completely ripped off his

show on YouTube. ("Growing Up On Youtube - Vidcon Panel 2011")

This early version of "The Philip DeFranco Show" probably coincided with his

September 3, 2007 video, in which he begins, "Good morning sports racers, it's Monday

September 3, 2007, and I'm completely ripping off ZeFrank. Call me the vlogbrothers. This is

the Philip DeFranco show" ("Angelina Jolie and the World"). Here, he acknowledges his piracy

but continues to remix these sources while trying to find his own groove for content. This would

set the precedent for his videos over the next 7 years up to the present moment, with such

reoccurring tropes as his addressing of his audience as "the nation," covering current news

stories favoring those about attractive women (complete with requisite image making a brief

appearance in the center of the video), and finishing with the statements "that's all that really

mattered" and "I'm Philip DeFranco." His trademark tagline "… and you've just been Philed-in"

would follow 9 days later ("Vanessa Hudgens will cause the Apocalypse!!").

DeFranco currently maintains two main channels: his "official" or "main" channel that

houses "The Philip DeFranco Show" and a second channel unofficially titled "the vloggity." The

vloggity is distinguished from his other show as a place where he can discuss his life directly and

personally – something of a "behind the scenes" in a way. Content on this channel is notably

different from his "sxephil" account; there is a discernable lack of hyper-editing that

characterizes his usual DeFranco Show videos, and content on the vloggity appears rougher and

unscripted. The channel is still graced with "official" markings such as (at one time) a theme

song and outro to each episode. The theme song itself is noteworthy as DeFranco uses it in a

conscious and concerted effort to distinguish between the two shows: He sings, "So many people

confuse this with my main show, but it's not; it's the vloggity!"

DeFranco has since crafted his YouTube account into something of a media empire. He was one of the early participants in YouTube's revenue sharing Partnership Program back when it was first implemented in 2007, and he also formed a relationship with the new Google/YouTube entity after they announced the YouTube Original Channel Initiative, receiving funding for a new channel. As DeFranco describes it, "Google and YouTube threw a giant sack of money at me and said, 'Create a channel.'" He identifies this as a positive move. He notes that at the time, he was bursting with ideas, but the lack of funding to implement them "took the enthusiasm out of the situation." The YouTube initiative provided "that spark that got me excited again" (Shaw). The funding allowed him to hire a production team, and served as the creation of his Defranco Creative portfolio, which would eventually include his new channel "SourceFED," his main "sxephil" channel, which contains The Philip DeFranco Show, and his personal "vloggity" channel. Six years later, DeFranco would sell this portfolio to internet television network Revision3, the online video arm of The Discovery Channel's parent company Discovery Communications, Inc. The deal included Phil's promotion to Senior Vice President of a new branch: Phil DeFranco Networks and Merchandise. Later that year, he would host the 25th anniversary special of The Discovery Channel's Shark Week (Gutelle).

Each new episode of The Philip DeFranco show currently receives more than a half million views each. He has amassed over 3 million subscribers with over a billion total views channel wide. However, even with this large fanbase, he still does not rank in the top hundred most subscribed channels on YouTube ("YouTube Top 100 Most Subscribed Channels List - Top by Subscribers"); despite his success, DeFranco is technically on the "low end" of YouTube popularity.

ii. Analysis

DeFranco muses in a "vloggity" video titled "Random Thoughts of DeFranco #1," "I am in debt to [YouTube] because without this platform I'd be a schmuck who had no soapbox. But I'm a schmuck with one, so that's special... I don't know what I'm talking about..." With his use of the pejorative "schmuck," he criticizes himself as common, incompetent, or obnoxious and observes that YouTube has not changed this aspect of his personality, but may have in fact amplified it. Here, DeFranco reveals a kind of deep insecurity: that much of the bravado in his videos might be masking his doubts about the qualitative merit of his content and the implicit connection drawn between it and his own identity. In this way, DeFranco understands – consciously or not – that his viewers are not only coming to see his content, but are coming to see him deliver that content. In this way, DeFranco himself *is* the content. On the one hand, the fact that he covers subjects that might seem to some as banal or hopelessly pandering (e.g., attractive women and celebrity gossip) does not mean that DeFranco himself is banal and superficial. But because the show is expressly *his* show, he is the one who is selecting this content and providing his take on that content. The banality and superficiality bleed over into his psyche. Indeed, there is evidence that DeFranco has wanted to move away from this kind of material.[12] In this way, the content does form a part of his identity as it is what he consumes by virtue of his discussion of it and its inclusion in his show. Indeed, he qualifies every episode in the opening tagline as "what mattered to me today" and thus whatever he chooses to cover becomes, consciously or unconsciously, something that matters to him. Celebrity gossip, obvious pandering to adolescent male libidos, and sensational news *are* what matter to him, whether he likes it or not.

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[12] See, for example, the sxephil video "F*CK PANCAKES!" and vloggity video "GIRLS IN PIGTAILS and WHAT DO YOU WANT TO SEE IN 2011?"

The content of his show, however, is decidedly *not* merely at his own whim. Rather, DeFranco has consistently shown a care and understanding of his audience that dictates the content he covers in his episodes. There is absolutely no indication in his early postings that he would display and discuss pictures of attractive *men*, for example, but more recent videos bolstered by a much larger fan base will occasionally feature content "for all you man-lovers out there."

DeFranco has demonstrated his understanding of how YouTube "works" in terms of audience and viewer interaction. His advice to aspiring vloggers includes, "Do something that at least makes you seem interesting or at least stand out a little bit. Otherwise you're just another brick in the wall; there's no reason to subscribe to you. Just act like you're cool. It doesn't matter if you actually are. There's no such thing as reality on the internet. There's only people's perceptions of what's real. … Do something really stupid or wacky..." ("How to Get a Popular Show/Series/Vlog"). The message here is clear: never be yourself, because being yourself means being just like everyone else. You must be more than yourself – an enhanced or intensified version of your own personality.

The line between performer and real personality continues to be blurred in this digital space. For example, DeFranco himself uploaded a video to his vloggity channel entitled "The Real Me?" where he comments, "I realize that when people watch videos they get a skewed view of who you are because it's either based on a character, an extreme exaggeration of personality traits, extreme ups, extreme downs, weird, odd, random, and you don't really get to know a person based on those videos." This observation seems to run contrary to his advice quoted above for content creators to be more or other than themselves. To increase viewership is to distance oneself from an authentic or "real" presentation of the self. Expression of identity

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becomes a conscious performance made more successful by decentering that performance from what the performer would identify as natural, real, and unaffected. Thus, while YouTube might provide users with the opportunity for self-actualization via a popularly recognized media distribution system, the "psychological balance" that Shamberg hoped such an opportunity would provide might be compromised.

There is evidence, for example, that the experience of being a successful YouTube personality has significantly altered DeFranco's view of himself. From a video in early 2008, titled "Where will I be in 5 years?" DeFranco opines, "… the fact is, I'm not an entertainer. I'm just a guy that says stuff that's sometimes funny. And I think if anything through this experience... I want to go into marketing and advertising…" Two years later in January of 2010, he maintains his position, commenting "This is not it for me. I mean, if this is it for me, then kill me in two years. I still don't know what I want to do with my life. I don't. I really don't. I think this is a stepping off point. Or something to grow" ("Bridge Burning and You (1.29.10)"). However, not eight months later in August of that same year, he comments in another video:

> What I really like is what I do. I love what I do. Now if the Philip DeFranco show continues for 10 years, that is an amazing run. I will most likely die year eight, but I'd love that. I love talking about the news. I love getting your reactions from it. And, no offence to anyone else, I'm awesome at it and one of the best online. If you can't say that about what you do and if you don't think that what you do is awesome or it's good, then why are you doing it? There's no point. ("Blast from the Past (Day 28)")

This dramatic shift from denial ("I'm not an entertainer") to acceptance ("this is a stepping off point") to pride ("I love what I do. … I'm awesome at it … one of the best online") shows how

quickly this medium can reorient one's self-identity, given the relative success or failure of that

identity's performance in the media system.

      Interactivity is a crucial element of this interaction. Even having passed the 100,000

subscriber mark, DeFranco asked fans in a vloggity video, "Let me know you're out there,

because otherwise I'm just a dude in a room talking to myself. And that's kind of sad, when you

think about it" ("I r not Dead....GAWWWWD"). This highlights one of the strange factors of

YouTube communication – its asynchronicity. Talking to hundreds of thousands of people,

DeFranco's actual experience is that of staring into a camera in a quiet room. The only sign of

interaction is contained within the comment threads or video responses. Even at this, DeFranco

becomes a passive consumer of these comments while anonymity and lack of physical contact

restrict him from making any real connection with these interacting detractors and fans. Despite

this, the interaction of fans and strangers in the comment section has a unique and profound

impact on DeFranco's identity and self-worth as evidenced in this monologue from a video in

early 2010:

> Our days, our emotions, are swayed by 12-year-old, 14-year-old boys leaving
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> mean comments on YouTube which, on a bad day, I'll be honest, on a bad day, it
>
> can... because I legit look through the comments so if I post a bad video, and it's
>
> just like 'Fuck you, I hate this guy! He sucks dick' and blabbitty blah blah blah,
>
> I'm like okay, whatever. But if it's almost like... they know me, like 'I bet he has
>
> issues with this thing and that' and I'm like 'How did he know?' … And as
>
> people that put themselves out there, I can get 90% great comments... and I love
>
> those e-mails, and I love those comments, but then you see someone that just gets

under your skin, and fuck, 'why do I do this?' and then you realize, oh, because

the other 90%. ("Bridge Burning and You")

The stream-of-consciousness approach to these personal video blogs allows

contradictions like this to pass through. On the one hand, DeFranco admits that negative

comments on his videos do affect him, even the ones that lose some of their sting through

hyperbole and especially those that manage to touch upon DeFranco's deeper psychological

struggles. However, at the same time, he indicates that the overwhelming majority of positive

comments help to balance out this small stream of negativity. In either event, DeFranco's self-

worth hangs upon the mostly anonymous commenters on his videos. Likes, dislikes, and views

provide the metric by which he can measure the acceptance or rejection of his views and in turn,

the acceptance or rejection of himself as an individual. As he says, he is "putting himself out

there." Again, while dislikes or low viewcounts can be attributed to the content itself, at the very

least, the barrier between presenter and content has broken down. DeFranco does not just deliver

content, which is then evaluated and accepted or rejected. *He* is the content put up for evaluation.

As mentioned above, DeFranco has hidden from public viewing around 70 of his early

videos. By his own admission, "I'm embarrassed by them or … there's no reason why anyone

should ever see this again." He makes this comment introducing "Philip DeFranco vs. Douchey

Past Philip DeFranco," a video posted in September of 2010 that contains one of these removed

videos. Though he is "ashamed" of this content, he decides to make it public because his fans

have asked him to. In the video description, he distances himself from the "Douchey Past Philip

DeFranco" by putting himself in a collective "we" with his fans: "WHY NOT POST [one of

these hidden videos] AGAIN so we can all laugh at me?!?!" In the video, a younger DeFranco

delivers a monologue he dubs "YouTube 101, part 2":

One of the main things that you want to make sure is that you have a very misleading title. No matter what your video is about ... just make sure that in the title you have something about big boobs, blondes, dancing, slutty girls, or something pertaining to a vaginal nature. Now, once you have that in, make sure that you have a nice center picture. … if you want to seal the deal, get a hot girl dancing just for no reason. Just pop it in like this. … See? Didn't make sense. But you liked it, and this is the end of the video, and I got you to watch the entire time. ("Philip DeFranco vs. Douchey Past Philip DeFranco")

This is a treasure trove of complex relationships between DeFranco's past self, his current identity, his content, his viewers both old and new, and YouTube as a medium. On the one hand, DeFranco seems to be making a sarcastic commentary on this kind of bait-and-switch practice. Calling the monologue "YouTube 101" seems to imply that such practices are basic knowledge one should have to cultivate a successful channel on YouTube. The implication seems to be that the practice is widespread enough to be common and expected, yet deplorable enough to still be ridiculed. Yet at the same time, DeFranco implements the very same practices he criticizes. A scantily-clad model appears in the exact center of the video, and he inserts the "hot girl dancing just for no reason" on command. In this respect, DeFranco does not condemn the tactic, but rather seems to be laughing directly at his audience for falling for the trick in the first place. It's not that he believes this practice is wrong, but rather believes it just "is" and is thus hilarious.

It is telling, then, that he would remove this video, but call it up later in a relatively safe space so that he and his fans could "laugh at it." He critiques the video in the description saying that, "I had not found my schtick at this moment, so my pacing, my voice, everything in general

about these videos sucked. I was trying to be something I wasn't and I came off as a complete tool." Again, DeFranco is attempting to navigate the disparity between what is and is not an "authentic" performed self. The objection, the thing worth laughing at, does not seem to be the mechanics of the video which exploit the viewer, but rather, the old DeFranco's ridiculing of his audience. The message seems to be that audience manipulation is par for the course and expected (though not to be ridiculed when it works), but identity manipulation is out of the question.

While DeFranco offers up this video to be mocked, this past "Douchey Philip DeFranco" outlines a comprehensive blueprint that the Philip DeFranco show would follow for most of its 5 year duration. As a matter of fact, it was as early as August of 2007 that DeFranco would start a small collaboration with then YouTube sex symbol Marina Orlova, featuring her in some of his videos as an obvious pandering move. His video "Britney Spears Wants You To…" has him admitting, "Some of my new viewers say that I leech views off of sexy center-shot pictures from people that are more talented than me. But that's not true… is it, a random model named Marina dressed like a schoolgirl…" whereupon he cuts to Orlova dressed for the part and then addresses his viewers with a knowing "you're welcome." The move is made even more painfully obvious as the video ends at the 2:18 mark but continues in dark silence for an additional 19 seconds, presumably to put Orlova in the direct center of the video and manipulate the thumbnail image.

DeFranco later responded unapologetically in "Re: Youtube Boobs" saying that his manipulation of the thumbnail preview in the indicated video was not misleading because the discussion in the video was in fact "big boobs." He obviously and knowingly skirts the issue. He says with a smile, "You act like we're in the Olympics and I'm taking steroids, when all it is, is I'm using something that's been given to me. That's something I can do. But there's people up in

arms because I'm getting these crazy views. And I've switched my content over to celebrity stuff because, yeah, it gets me more views."

Here we see DeFranco deliberately pandering to an audience, deliberately switching his content and employing misleading tactics so as to increase his viewcount. But even DeFranco cannot help but later compromise this devil-may-care "fratboy" attitude. Not a month after the previous video was posted, in a quick love-letter to his fans, DeFranco describes how he "never would have imagined that there would be so many people out there with an open mind, that could debate, whether they agree with me, whether they don't, and not have to be disrespectful about it and realize that what I say... it's for entertainment, it's a joke" ("Thanks for ze Good Times"). DeFranco attempts to simultaneously give a sense of authenticity to his work and distance himself from it as merely entertainment, or a joke. His perspective on his own content is similarly two-faced: at first it is an easily disregarded joke but later an authentic viewpoint or opinion to be seriously debated.

Only a couple months after these posts, one of the YouTube editors at the time (DeFranco identifies him as Steve) promoted DeFranco's content to the front page – a practice then known as "spotlighting." In the wake of this promotion, DeFranco commented:

> … it is cool, that YouTube is going ahead and promoting discussion about
> politics, about real things, and it's not just about Britney Spears's vagina.
> Granted, I've been guilty of that. But I am kind of taking the show toward more of
> a news and politics rather than entertainment. Because doing an all celeb show, is
> kinda like, I dunno, it just feels like I'm hitting a football over a tennis court net
> with a baseball bat. It doesn't feel right. (F*CK PANCAKES!)

Since this post, DeFranco has indeed expanded his content to include news and politics, but he has not dropped the celebrity news and obvious pandering, evidenced by a not unordinary video posted just last month titled "DYLAN SPROUSE LEAKED NUDES & TILA TEQUILA'S NEW SEXTAPE."

This video in particular is interesting as DeFranco leads into the story with this contradictory juxtaposition: "Sup nation! … My name, of course, is Philip Defranco and this where I talk about newsy-type-stuff and things that mattered to me today. … Let's get started. Let's talk about celeb sex tapes and news. Yaaaay! It doesn't matter but people talk about it anyway." DeFranco opens this and every show by establishing that the content he's about to deliver matters to him. But here, he presents this story reluctantly, including it in his show not because he cares about it, but merely because people are talking about it. Clearly, DeFranco's content is generated by audience appeal, and not necessarily his own preferences.

That being said, DeFranco could be making a subtle rhetorical move. That is, this story may indeed matter to him, but by linking the inclusion of it to an acknowledgement of his audience's expectations, he establishes his ethos *above* the story. In fact, this is a frequent move for DeFranco as his commentary on news stories often centers on his opinion that they should be buried or are not worth public discussion. In this way, DeFranco gets to have his cake and eat it too while satisfying what he perceives to be his audience's expectations. This is an iteration of the move established above in his "Re: Youtube Boobs" video, where he simultaneously ridicules and attempts to satisfy his fans. The double voicing here indicates perhaps a deeper psychological struggle in DeFranco himself. On the one hand, he looks to mature and grow outside of the pandering gossip that established him as a voice on YouTube. But on the other hand, as this content made him, he has something of an obligation to continue to present it now

that he has the interests of his fans to worry about. As established earlier, DeFranco is not separate from his content, but rather intricately woven into his content to the point where he *is* his own content, and this tension illustrates how his identity has been decentered and reestablished within the fandom that surrounds him. His very identity as he performs it online has become inextricably bound to a need to satisfy as wide of a swath of his audience as possible.

iii. Conclusion

One the one hand, DeFranco's channel offers a new outlet for media consumption online. Consumers still get the news, the celebrity gossip, upcoming films, new technology, spectacular news items, and lascivious titillation one might expect from traditional broadcast networks, but this content is now filtered through and interpreted by DeFranco as an intermediary. Thus, DeFranco functions as a medium himself for others' media consumption and in this transformation, he is consumed along with the media. DeFranco becomes his own content.

His success would seem to indicate that audiences, at least those large enough to attract big corporate marketing interests, respond favorably to this kind of content. Furthermore, despite his later partnerships with large corporate enterprises, DeFranco has (ostensibly) been very cautious about "selling out" in terms of his voice being controlled by his corporate overlords. He prefers to sign contracts with companies that provide only the necessary capital for him to get his projects off the ground but not have the content of those projects compromised (Shaw).

However, one should not presume that the relationship is as mutually exclusive as DeFranco claims it is. After all, he has firmly established a reputation for providing material that he is not particularly interested in but rather material and practices (via thumbnails, titles, and

promotions) that grant him the widest possible audience and the widest possible market share. In this way, the line between authenticity and artificiality has eroded on DeFranco's channel. His show is at once a middle ground between trying to please others and staying true to himself. In a sense, being true to himself now *is* the attempt to reach as wide of a fanbase as possible. In this way, DeFranco's sense of self is contingent on his fandom and estranged by the fact that the authenticity of this fandom is itself compromised by the anonymity inherent to YouTube's comment system.

In late 2010, DeFranco uploaded a video to his "vloggity" channel titled "UnCut Philip DeFranco Show (Viewer Request)." The video takes unedited footage from the previous day's Philip DeFranco Show but removes all of the audio, replacing it instead with a haunting rendition of Radiohead's "Creep" performed by the Belgian all-women choir Scala & Kolacny Brothers. DeFranco makes concessions for the music in the video's description, saying that it "completely explains the self important self indulgent [sic] life most of us tubers have. PLUS this song makes everything dramatic haha."

His choice to mute his own audio and replace it with "Creep" is telling. The lyrics speak of someone with low self-esteem who envies someone he finds special and worthwhile. By characterizing YouTube creators in general (and by extension and obvious reference, himself) as self-indulgent and self-important, he seems to be equating these terms with self-deprecation, and an unstable sense of self. Self-importance seems the opposite of self-deprecation, but the fact that DeFranco equates or conflates the two is revealing. It shows how at one and the same time, there is a kind of self-aggrandizement going on here on YouTube. On the one hand, being a "star" does grant a degree of self-importance – an acceptance and confirmation of the self as performed within this medium. DeFranco implies that being a creator on YouTube intrinsically involves a

kind of desperation for recognition – to be noticed, to be special, to be different, to be someone. In this way, creative output of this nature on YouTube is always a kind of self-actualization, and recognition and approval of creative content on YouTube help establish positive self-esteem. On the other hand, it fails to destroy and in fact may intensify a user's reliance on YouTube and the connection to the faceless tens, hundreds, or in DeFranco's case, millions, who watch these videos and provide this self-worth and meaning.

At the same time, the feeling of being normal and worthless inside is not replaced. In fact, it may be intensified or strengthened. "UnCut Philip DeFranco Show (Viewer Request)" shows how constructed DeFranco's show actually is. One can see the long pauses that are edited out in his final product. DeFranco is not nearly as quick, witty, or impulsive as he usually appears. Instead he is pensive and relatively quiet. One can see him building up for his next line, can see energy flowing into his face, then passing out again as he reconsiders. One can see the false starts, the stops, the pauses. One can see him preparing facial expressions in the odd twitches of his eyebrows or lips, weighing his options, imagining hypothetical audience member reactions and readjusting.

In this video, with his voice silenced, DeFranco reveals his ordinariness. He comments elsewhere, "I am in debt to them [YouTube] because without this platform I'd be a schmuck who had no soapbox. But I'm a schmuck with one, so that's special... I don't know what I'm talking about..." (Random Thoughts of DeFranco #1"). Despite his success on the platform, DeFranco still cannot seem to shake the lingering doubts as to his own authenticity, and this video may help to explain why. The Philip DeFranco most of his viewers can see is clearly a particular version of Philip DeFranco – hyper-edited with all of the flaws, the starts, the stops, and the sad thoughtfulness removed. DeFranco has become successful largely because of the image of

himself he has constructed. But by doing so, he is increasingly divided between the self and the

image of the self as he performs on camera for his audience, and doubtful of the authenticity of

either. This is made all the more complicated because he attributes the success of his constructed

image largely to its authenticity – for indeed *not* playing a part or role. In short, YouTube has

allowed for a unique and empowering way for Philip DeFranco to actualize his identity and

perform creatively via an integrated media system. However, in so doing, that identity has been

inevitably compromised as the line between the self and the performed self is increasingly

blurred as an intrinsic effect of being a creator on YouTube.

I prefer to think of the kitchen as a metaphor for life. You see, it's really a show about effort and acceptance; giving it your all and then super messing up but then kinda being proud of yourself in the end anyway. At least you tried.

-Hannah Hart, "HARTOSEXUAL?"

Okay everybody in the cooking world: listen up. People who don't know how to cook, this guy, need instructions that aren't like secret codes. ... You don't need to worry about the instructions and their words. Let's just fuckin' put all this shit in a bowl and then fucking cook it! Whoops! I guess that's that. Pretentious ass recipe.

-Hannah Hart, "My Drunk Kitchen Ep. 4: Not Easy, Bake Oven"

i. Background

From the beginning, Hannah Hart's show has been all about connectivity. In late 2010, bored, hungry, and missing her former roommate having just moved from San Francisco to New York City, Hart decided to get drunk and record herself fumbling about her sister's kitchen for her friend's amusement. Deciding the video was too funny not to be made public, Hart's friend convinced her to post it on YouTube (Suddath). Since then, Hart's comedy cooking videos – episodes in her ongoing series "My Drunk Kitchen" – have collectively amassed 84 million views and a subscriber base over a million followers strong.

The relative popularity of her show is derived in part from her natural charm but also from the way her cooking show is decidedly *not* a cooking show, or at the very least is set in opposition to the standard format of traditional cooking programming. In contrast to the normal sparkling workstations, pre-measured bowls of exotic ingredients, and camera-ready dishes pre-made in a waiting second oven, Hart purposefully subverts the etiquette of good cooking shows, looking up recipes and then largely ignoring them, acting on each capricious whim, tossing scavenged ingredients irreverently into makeshift mixing bowls, forgetting to set timers, and

laughing at her own (disguisedly clever) stream of puns and silly jokes. The results of this process look (and often taste) absolutely terrible. Still, there is something genuinely human about Hart's endeavors, which makes her show endearing.

ii. Analysis

In contrast to Philip DeFranco's obvious push toward entrepreneurship, Hannah Hart's show has maintained a focus on connection rather than expansion. Where DeFranco's channel began with attempts to connect to other YouTube content creators and in so doing draw attention to his own channel, the impetus for Hart's channel was personal and did not consider a larger audience. Her first "My Drunk Kitchen" video was not initially public but created rather to maintain connection with an old friend. Even the creation of the "MyHarto" channel itself was not intended to connect to random interested viewers, but rather to provide Hart with the ability to send her younger sister "a pick-me-up photo montage" that Hart had edited together (O'Neill).

Even after the viewership for "My Drunk Kitchen" began to soar, Hart maintained her perspective on the digital as primarily a means of connection. When the "Stop Online Piracy Act" began to gain ground at the end of 2011, Hart deviated from her show to upload a special video to add her voice to the mounting opposition to the bill. In the post, she defends the Internet as "a way of reaching out to each other. It's like a phone. It's like a big, big phone with pictures that we can just talk to each other and share our ideas and share our feelings…" ("Captain's Vlog: SOPA Soapbox").

This was followed a few months later by Hart's first foray into music – a video for her original song "Oh, Internet." The threat of SOPA still on her mind, Hart crafted "Oh, Internet" as something of a love song for digital connection. She croons, "When I walk down the street only

strangers I meet, but I can shake loneliness in just a tweet. … Oh, internet, keep me on your feed. Oh, internet, I sync to you pretty much constantly. … I can't get by unless there is wifi. Is this a drug that I need? There is no other way. I am at home all day so that my torrents can seed" ("'Oh, Internet' - A love song."). Hart expresses her desire to be subsumed by the Internet, to be broadcast on its "feed," to be "synced" to by other users, all in the spirit of connection. Even to "seed a torrent" is to allow your computer to sit and upload data packets to other users, functioning as a node to facilitate file transfers. Serving as a "seed" gives one a feeling of contributing, in whatever small way, to a larger community of downloaders (though that packet distribution is the full extent of the relationship). Similarly, the act of tweeting sends a small packet of meaningful data out for consumption by other users. This act carries with it an increased capacity for real connection, but even here, it is limited.

Indeed, there seems to be a desperate loneliness that motivates much of Hart's visible activity online. Occasionally, one can catch glimpses, especially through her alternate channels of connection that lie in a subordinate relationship to her YouTube channel, such as her Tumblr account. For example, a series of pictures posted on a "To Done" list include the following entries:

> woke up
>
> felt defeated (for no reason)
>
> laid in bed
>
> felt bad about feeling bad
>
> got up
>
> read news / email / wrote
>
> set water to boil

went back to bed

thought too much

heard kettle / off

got dressed

saw humans

wrote / edited / worked

felt good

. . . . . .

updated To-Done list

read tweets

loved fans / Hartosexuals / Life

Took Pick for Pinterest / Tumblr

. . . . . .

See how easy I make stalking me?

Send me yours! Let's all motivate each other. :D (*Follow Your Harto*)

In the list, we can see how Hart's mood improves as she pursues connection first by reading e-mail online, then seeing people in physical space, then crafting the Tumblr post, and culminating in reading tweets from her fans and asking for their own lists – another attempt at interaction.

It is this subtle yet noticeable idiosyncrasy which leans toward self-deprecation and doubt that inscribes a kind of authenticity to Hart's creative endeavors online. As Taylor Hatmaker remarked in a recent interview with Hart, "I feel like in your particular flavor of what you have going on is very much based on you as a person. [sic] People buy into you, who you are on a

personal level…" The interviewer here recognizes that Hart's fan base centers not just on Hart's particular brand of comedy (which Hart describes in the same interview as "honest, sincere, non-snarky, [and] non-negative"), but on the authentic display of self that delivers that comedy. Just as with Philip DeFranco, Hart has become inextricably bound up with and *as* the content of her program.

Hart maintains a secondary channel (YourHarto) in addition to the main channel which houses "My Drunk Kitchen" (MyHarto). Like DeFranco, Hart uses this auxiliary channel to post behind-the-scenes footage from her main show in addition to more personal offerings like responses to specific fans, updates on her travels, Q&A sessions, and unedited vlogs about life, relationships, and sexuality. There is occasional cross-promotion for this channel, but Hart is careful to downplay its significance. At the end of a video directed to her fans and posted on her main channel, she says, "So if you want to know more about me personally, go ahead and click on any of these [YourHarto] videos. In this one, I'm coming out, being like, blah, blah, blah, feelings parade. In this one, I'm talking about how to be a better version yourself and more productive. And in this [MyHarto video], I'm getting really, really drunk cooking in my kitchen" ("HARTOSEXUAL?"). While the YourHarto videos she mentions are poignant offerings done in sincerity and candor, her discomfort at their intersection with the more lighthearted "My Drunk Kitchen" series that drew fans in initially is readily apparent.

Hart keeps many of the videos posted to this secondary channel uncut, and while the topics she addresses with them take some amount of courage to post publically, these videos are colored with an underlying tone of insecurity. Sober, unedited, and speaking directly about personal matters, Hart becomes uncharacteristically awkward. In "Captain's Vlog: 'This is why I'm not a Vlogger'" Hart's simple announcement about an upcoming event and a double episode

planned for "My Drunk Kitchen" is punctuated by starts and stops as she checks and rechecks her tone of voice, a grimace between showing her dissatisfaction at how affected it sounds. A third "Captain's Vlog" two months later begins:

> I know it's been a really long time since I've done this. Uh, for those of you just tuning in, this is a sentimental journey, uh, with me, wherein I check up, in, directly with everybody. I'm, a, try to keep this one under a minute because, you know, who's really got time for this? Probably not you guys. Oh man, I'm screwing up. Okay, so, here we go…" ("Captain's Vlog: A Sentimental Journey: Part 3")

Still, this embarrassment and awkwardness help to build a sense of authenticity into these videos that is much stronger than in her "My Drunk Kitchen" offerings. The awkward pauses, starts, stops, and the lack of her usual clever witticisms present a more flawed and in that way "human" picture of Hart. While such personal outpourings are observably more difficult emotionally for Hart to create and post, it is the emotional connection between this authentic self and her fans that she cites as the best aspect of her YouTube success. "I think one of the things that I like most about this whole experience is the sincerity and the fan response that I get, the authentic kind of connection that I'm trying to build and maintain. … I love the intimacy. That's like, my favorite part of this whole thing" (Hatmaker).

The unique element of Hart's relative fame is the way that she consciously decenters the focus of her fandom away from her literal person and instead toward the moral or aesthetic philosophy that she embodies as a person. To illustrate, Hart's fans self-identify as "hartosexuals." In a video ostensibly directed at concerned parents who may have overheard that their child was a "hartosexual" Hart elaborates about what this term actually means:

There's so much more to being a hartosexual than enjoying "My Drunk Kitchen."

Being hartosexual means embracing productivity even though your disposition is

not necessarily that of the most disciplined person. … A third element of being a

hartosexual is giving a damn about the world around you - understanding that this

life we are given is not just made up of your own personal self-centered universe,

but rather about how this universe interacts with the multiple universes around

you. By "universe" I mean "other people." … And lastly the final element of

being a hartosexual … is personal acceptance, patience, and love. … Being

hartosexual has very little to do with sexuality in general. It's more a philosophy:

a philosophy of love!" ("HARTOSEXUAL?")

What Hart playfully leaves unacknowledged here is the wordplay that links

"hartosexuals" with sexuality in general. While Hart leaves no mystery about her own sexuality

(videos on both her MyHarto and YourHarto channels have contained numerous explicit and

implicit references to the fact that she is a lesbian) the designation "hartosexual" simultaneously

connects Hart and her fans to her sexuality while elevating them above an emphasis on sexuality

itself. Indeed, one of the t-shirts Hart has made available for purchase features a checklist (like

one that might be found on a census form) with unmarked boxes designating "hetero" and

"homo" and a marked box for "harto." Again, it is not that Hart's fans center on *her* sexuality,

but rather a larger perspective on sexuality that Hart performs on YouTube – a desire to interact

and connect with people regardless of sexuality. To the question, "Do you love women or men?"

a hartosexual might respond, "I love *people*."

Still, while fans are consuming Hart as the content of "My Drunk Kitchen," Hart is

continually navigating the dynamic and negotiating the overlap between performing an

ostensibly authentic self and performing a self that she thinks her fans will enjoy. She comments, "I genuinely care what my fans think. I genuinely care about producing new content for them. I genuinely try and remain active … and it's frustrating because the more and more busy I get — being like entirely a one woman production, you know, like every aspect of the "business" is me — all I want to do is perform and respond to fans" (Hatmaker). As the number of fans has increased and the scope of her show has broadened, Hart has expressed her anxiety about expanding creatively. After posting her "Oh, internet" music video, Hart comments in a vlog, "I really appreciate all the support with the music video. To be honest I was really nervous about posting something that wasn't "My Drunk Kitchen"-related at all." ("Captain's Vlog: A Sentimental Journey: Part 3.").

iii. Conclusion

The interaction of fandom and creative expression enabled by that fandom forms a complex relationship here with Hart. On the one hand, the success enables Hart to connect with other YouTube creators and draw meaningful connections to new people which has dramatically enhanced her life. On the other hand, success also curtails what type of creative expression will be accepted or rejected on YouTube. While Hart seeks to remain authentic and establish authentic relationships with her viewers, the expectations of those viewers continue to shape her content. She comments, "It's kind of hard too, because I'm experimenting in comedy and entertainment, and part of the reason I moved to New York is to have anonymity in that. And now that the internet thing kind of took off, it's like I lost that freedom to fail without people knowing. I feel a lot of pressure that the next thing I do better be good or they'll be like 'Oh it was just that one joke. She's not actually worth anything. Only that one joke was funny'"

(Hatmaker). On the other hand, while dealing with these pressures, Hart is still able to branch out creatively and acknowledges her desire to expand the scope and reach of these creative endeavors.

Success on YouTube has given Hart a new sense of self that allows for more opportunities for actualization and connection yet also inevitably binds her to YouTube itself. At the same time, because of her desire for connection and authenticity, Hart's identity becomes inextricably bound with the performance of that identity as it becomes fragmented, divided, structured, and negotiated in the digital space.

VI. Closing Remarks

In this study, I've attempted first to situate YouTube within a larger context of cultural criticism that sees meaning as socially negotiated by consumers as active participants with cultural productions. Given the assumption that a more varied and diverse collection of available material will yield a healthier media ecology and thus healthier cultural subjects, YouTube is a positive intensification of television because it allows more viewers to participate in and, more importantly, feed back to this media system. However, as the examples of Philip DeFranco and Hannah Hart illustrate, this process is not without its own problems and idiosyncrasies.

Both DeFranco and Hart have used YouTube not only to experiment and flourish creatively with their own programming but also to reach a large audience with their productions that before YouTube would have been impossible to amass. Both users indicate through their videos that this process of media production has enhanced their lives, allowing them to connect with more people and enrich their engagement with the media they love. However, success on YouTube complicates this exchange. As their respective fanbases grow, their ability to connect with individual users has decreased. At the same time, a large audience also engenders the need to develop content that will retain and grow this audience. This puts restrictions on (or at the very least, attaches reservations and anxieties to) any creative experimentation.

More importantly, because these single users are feeding back to the media system, their identities become increasingly intertwined with the performance of that identity online. Of course, it may be argued that identity is always performative whether the stage is a Facebook profile, a YouTube video, or a face-to-face encounter at a coffee shop. Yet the performance of identity through YouTube becomes inevitably bound up with concerns that echo those of the culture industry which the critics mentioned above rallied against – namely, the need to garner

and maintain viewership. While these creators are ostensibly putting out content, it is themselves – the idiosyncrasies and personality, in short, the *identity* – that makes up this content. In this way, the sense of self gets decentered into the desires and needs of the viewer rather than the creator. At the same time, macroscopic forces, whether they be corporate, political, or otherwise, still maintain control over these identity-entwined productions. To enable their own visibility online, YouTube users codify their content and thus themselves, lining up in digital spaces to be sorted, ranked, and in general "seen" by the algorithms that determine who gets to appear in search result lists. Thus, the ease and relative freedom that YouTube users enjoy in this new digital space are not free. It is a misnomer to think of YouTube as a business that provides a service to its users. Rather, YouTube is a business that sells its users. YouTube's on-again, off-again slogan has been "broadcast yourself" and, for better or worse, this is exactly what the site allows its users to do.

In the digital information age, cultural subjects will continue to search for meaning and identity as corporate or state interests continue to exert their influence over the process of cultural production. As YouTube and related online sites seem to indicate, the system shows signs of expanding access to and diversity of cultural material which may indeed lead to healthier media systems. Yet this process will continue to be complicated by the specter of the media system that came before it. At the very least, YouTube will continue to provide rich and vast amounts of cultural data as a new system of cultural participation that shifts cultural identity from who you are as what you *consume* to what you *produce*.

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