

Chapter 7.1

A Critical Cultural Reading of “YouTube”

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ABSTRACT

This chapter looks into YouTube as one of the most popular Social Software platforms, challenging the dominant discourse with its focus on community formation and user empowerment. On the basis of an analysis of the steering mechanisms embodied in the infrastructure as well as empirical observations of YouTube’s content fluctuations during a period of time, insight is provided into the embedded cultural values and practices and into the nature of the ongoing negotiation of power and control between the YouTube controllers (owners, designers, editors) and the “prosumers”. This exploratory study is theoretically inspired by Michel de Certeau’s ideas of utilization as a

productive activity involving strategic and tactical behaviour. Methodologically the model for ‘hybrid media analysis’ (Pauwels 2005) is taken as a point of departure for analysing various aspects of the Website’s platform (including structure, design, hyperlinks, imagery, topics and issues). This model is geared towards decoding the multimodal structure of Websites and their social and cultural significance.

Questioning Dominant Discourses on Web 2.0, SNS and YouTube

In the dominant discourse about Web 2.0 and ‘Social Software’ in particular, it is often suggested that this major next step in Web related development - as complacently claimed by the number 2.0 - represents a truly revolutionary development

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in the on-line world. The most distinctive features in this regard are the so-called ‘social’ aspects attributed to the set up of the 2.0 applications and to its resulting user practices.

Marked differences with ‘Web 1.0’ applications are the clear shift from desktop to the Web with the effect that everything created is already on line and can be shared immediately (Rhie 2000); the fact that the programming code is often released¹, thus allowing anyone to refine, rethink and add functionality; and finally the fact that applications are in general easy to use and available for free, and as such within the reach of many.

Also with respect to the ‘content’ and the related practices of use, there is a strong ‘social’ focus. Interacting with peers is a key part of many Web 2.0 applications and of social networking sites in particular. Social Networking Sites (SNS) can be described as ‘Websites that allow individuals to construct a public or semi-public profile within the system and formally articulate their relationship to other users in a way that is visible to anyone who can access their profile’ (Boyd & Ellison 2007). Next to the personal information and connections displayed in the on-line profiles, many a SNS also contains other types of content uploaded by users, e.g. on *Bebo.com*, self-written stories, poems and books are available, on *MySpace.com* one can listen to free music and through YouTube, people share short videos. This form of Do-It-Yourself content production and sharing is considered by some the very essence of Web 2.0. The growing popularity of this practice is considered to have far reaching consequences (Gillmor 2006, p.XV):

Grassroots journalism is part of the wider phenomenon of citizen generated media production of a global conversation that is growing in strength, complexity and power. When people can express themselves they will. When they can do so with powerful yet inexpensive tools, they take to the new media realm quickly. When they can reach a potentially global audience, they literally can change the world.

While there is hardly anything new about on-line content being generated by non-professional users (cf. the fairly common practice of setting up homepages or family Websites using prefabricated templates, Pauwels 2008) or Web-users communicating/interacting with each other, Web 2.0 offers a platform to the average individual through which a vast number of people can be reached in a very interactive way and requiring few technical skills or financial resources.

Examples like Wikipedia are readily used to illustrate a newly acquired autonomy for users in creating self-organizing collaborates which arise bottom-up, liberated from control (Leadbeater 2007):

The power of mass creativity is about what the rise of the likes of Wikipedia and YouTube, Linux and Craigslist means for the way we organize ourselves, not just in digital businesses but in schools and hospitals, cities and mainstream corporations. My argument is that these new forms of mass, creative collaboration announce the arrival of a society in which participation will be the key organizing idea rather than consumption and work. People want to be players not just spectators, part of the action, not on the sidelines.

In this quite up-beat discourse about Web 2.0, the focus is clearly on the ‘citizen’ users: their control over content and development of technology and the way users interact on line with their peers. This ‘user-centeredness’ also dominates current research on YouTube. (i.e. Fonio et. al. 2007, Harp & Tremayne 2007, Lange 2007, Webb 2007).

At odds with this general idea of user-empowerment and autonomy is the fact that the Web 2.0 user-practices reside in a relatively small number of Websites controlled by powerful gatekeepers. Of all Web 2.0 applications, particularly the popularity of SNSs stands out. Over the last two to three years a more or less stable top ten has emerged. Figures indicate that these top SNS’s reach up to 45 percent of today’s active Web users.²

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