

You Too! The Rise of Internet Video

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Introduction

The day after I give my yearly lecture here, I get nervous. Will I find a topic for next year? Will something bubble up from all that incessant activity and innovation, something irresistible, captivating – something *inevitable* as the next year's topic? The best I can do is to hold my finger up to the wind and wait. Sometimes I wait several months, getting a bit more nervous each month. Sometimes it happens quickly. Once it didn't happen at all and I reluctantly decided to skip that year's lecture. But that was the exception, and usually, sooner or later, the moment arrives in which I think, "Aha, that's what I'll talk about this time."

This year, the "Aha" moment arrived in August. I was relieved, as always, to have a topic. I was also rather proud of myself for finding such a fine, visually compelling lecture topic that was just beginning to emerge and I had caught before the rest of the world knew about it.

I could have done without my self-congratulations, as it turned out. As the year progressed it became evident that I had no more "discovered" the phenomenon of Internet video than any of the other millions of people caught up as it swept over the online community like a tsunami.

On the contrary, the real surprise would have been if I had been so blind as *not* to have come upon the Rise of Internet Video as the topic for this year's lecture. That is how inevitable it was this time around. And in the grand tradition of Silicon Valley, it all started in a garage with a couple of smart young men who just wanted to make something new. And that "something" was YouTube.

The founding of YouTube

Actually, it was *three* smart young men – Chad Hurley, Steve Chen, and Jawed Karim. As I noted in last year's talk, social networks had already been on the rise on the Internet for a couple of years, and the idea of sharing with others over the Net was well established. The three young men were all employees of PayPal– the company that accepts online payments – and one evening decided to throw a party for fellow employees. David Greising of the *Chicago Tribune* tells the story of what happened:

In February 2005, Chen hosted the dinner party that would change his life and also make Internet history. Chen and his friends spent much of the party shooting videos and digital photos of each other. They easily uploaded the photos to the Web. But the videos? Not a chance.

Chen, Hurley and Karim had stumbled across a crying need. And between them, they had the means to address it. Chen and Karim were exceptional code writers, and Hurley's gift for design could

give a new Web site a compelling look.

Hurley, who had left PayPal, turned over his Menlo Park garage to Chen and Karim, who worked there during breaks from their PayPal jobs. By May, they had solved a vexing problem: How to let computer users view videos from their Web browsers without downloading special software.

In the first YouTube video, an 18-second clip posted April 23, 2005, Karim stood before elephants at a zoo. 'The cool thing about these guys is that they have really, really, really long trunks,' Karim says. 'And that's cool. And that's pretty much all.'

With that breakthrough, YouTube was born.

By November of 2005, they were ready to present the site to the world. The rate of growth after that was nothing less than phenomenal. Just over half a year later, on 16 July 2006 (when I was busy searching for a topic for this lecture), a survey was published that claimed that one hundred *million* videos were being viewed every day on YouTube, with 65 thousand new videos being introduced to the site by users every day. No wonder I was swept along with everybody else.

In the second half of last year, the surge continued so that even mainstream media had to sit up and take notice. In December of last year, TIME Magazine gave its prestigious "Man of the Year" to ... *you*. That's right: You, Everyman, the User (the front cover of the Man of the Year issue is a mirror, so that when you look at it, you see yourself). And they gave YouTube most of the credit for making You their Person of the Year.

Why did it happen with YouTube?

The real question is not what happened, but *why* did it happen? That is, why did it happen with YouTube, and not with the other kinds of social networks? Certainly the other social networks had had their share of success – I spoke at length about it last year – but there is no comparison to the explosive success of YouTube. So what made it happen with YouTube?

For one point of view, here is what TIME Magazine said on November 5, 2006 as it named YouTube the Year's Best Invention:

YouTube's creators had stumbled onto the intersection of **three revolutions**. **First**, the revolution in video production made possible by cheap camcorders and easy-to-use video software. **Second**, the social revolution that pundits and analysts have dubbed Web 2.0. It's exemplified by sites like MySpace, Wikipedia, Flickr and Digg, hybrids that are useful Web tools but also thriving communities where people create and share information together. The **third** revolution is a cultural one. Consumers are impatient with the mainstream media. The idea of a top-down culture, in which talking heads spoon-feed passive spectators ideas about what's happening in the world, is over. People want unfiltered video from Iraq, Lebanon and Darfur, not from journalists who visit there but from soldiers who fight there and people who live and die there.

Certainly TIME has a point with this opinion. Home-made video has never been easier and cheaper. I bought my first digital video camera in the year 2000, for well over 1000 Euros. An equivalent – or even more powerful – camera now costs around 200 Euros. A normal personal computer running Microsoft Windows is delivered with video software bundled in (Windows Movie Maker). Taken together, the camera and the PC with editing software give you the kind of possibilities that were available a few decades ago only in studios, and for literally hundreds of thousands or even millions of dollars. And there are many computer-savvy users out there now, including not a few fourteen-year-olds who can make professional quality videos complete with titles, transitions, music,

lighting and multicam sequence editing. As for the third revolution – I’ll come back to that later in this talk.

But I think the answer is even simpler than what TIME writes. It is nothing more or less than the triumph of the visual over the non-visual. You can find it everywhere in recent history. The Golden Age of Radio, when was that? The Thirties and Forties? As golden as that era was, it was gone with the wind when television arrived, never to return to its former place of prominence.

Many forget that the World Wide Web itself existed for several years before the mid-Nineties when it suddenly exploded onto the scene. Why only then? Because it was not until 1994 that the first visual (graphical) browser was invented – the browser called Mosaic, which led to the founding of Netscape. Before then, people worked on the World Wide Web with *text*. People used it, but it wasn’t the same experience – it wasn’t *visual*, and visual is compelling.

Purists will still say that “visual” isn’t the same as “quality,” and that text (like books and the printed press) and sound (like radio) are still the highest-quality media. I won’t argue with that – I’m just saying that for sheer popular appeal, there is no contest: visual will always dominate. It must be in our DNA.

Who is putting videos on YouTube?

So who are all these people who have been putting up videos on YouTube? Pretty much anybody you can imagine, ranging from show business wannabes to normal folks who seem to have no other reason than to want to share something about themselves with the world.

One typical example is a fellow named Peter Oakley, who calls himself *geriatric1927* on YouTube. He posted his first video to YouTube last year, at the age of 79. It was a poorly made video, technically speaking, and included some blues music played on a lousy record player. The video only lasted a minute or so, and consisted of not much more than saying “I’m addicted to YouTube and I thought I’d start in myself, telling you what I think about anything and everything, and I’d be happy to hear your responses.” And respond they did. Many of the responses were laced with ridicule, especially from young posters (a typical response: “He’s probably already dead!”). But at least one young (22 year old) viewer posted a strong defense. Within a week, *geriatric1927* had caused such a sensation on YouTube that he was featured on a BBC news broadcast.

Another typical example comes right from my own (extended) family. I received an e-mail message from my brother in Seattle, who was in turn forwarding a message from his wife’s sister. This message contained a link to a YouTube video posted by their 14 year old daughter, which consisted almost entirely of her mimicking the words to a hit pop song – while the rest of the family went about its business in the background, getting milk out of the refrigerator, etc. No particular explanation is given for why she decided to do this.

Probably the most celebrated case is that of *lonelygirl15*. This was (and is ... you can still see her on YouTube) a young girl, who posted her first video at age 15. The video consisted mostly of her talking right into the camera, sitting in her bedroom, on the kinds of subjects that interest your average teenage girl. She acquired a following rather quickly, which grew even more rapidly when the things she talked about began

to get more and more bizarre. She started talking about her family's involvement in weird occult practices and about how her parents suddenly vanished after she told them she wouldn't participate in these occult practices. By the end of last summer, she had a huge following – and she also had a hugely *suspicious* following. It was all seeming too good – or perhaps just too strange – to be true.

And indeed it was. Last September the press broke the story after some investigating: it was all a hoax; she was actually an actress (Jessica Lee Rose), and the whole thing was planned from the start, complete with professional production and scriptwriting.

The amazing thing is that it didn't seem to matter at all. She still has many fans who continue to follow her "series," even knowing that it's all fictional. Furthermore, she has done quite well by it: last October she was chosen by the United Nations to help promote their anti-poverty initiatives. She has also signed some professional television contracts.

lonelygirl15 is not the only personality to achieve professional success through YouTube exposure. But there is still a large segment of YouTube made by amateurs with no higher ambitions. As I mentioned earlier, most are young people, and much of what they do is "local": they put up the videos mostly just for their own friends and classmates, rather than for the rest of the world.

As a "bad" example, there is the case of students filming shenanigans in the classroom and then putting the videos up on the web. Some of these shenanigans include students beating up and bullying each other, or students standing up on the desks and doing a striptease (just such a video was posted by students right here in Pisa, Italy last month).

As a "good" example (although I admit the classification can be debated) there is the category of student videos one might call "pranksters." Students have always liked to play college pranks, and video has given them the opportunity to conserve their pranks for the ages. Some of these pranks are elaborate indeed. For example, while one of their classmates was on a skiing vacation, a group of students took the time to bolt every single object in his room to the ceiling. They literally turned his room upside down. They filmed both the preparations and his reaction upon returning, and up it went on YouTube. As another example, one group of pranksters at Columbia wrote a musical number along the lines of a Broadway musical, and interrupted a class to present the number. Of course, all of the action was choreographed, and care was taken to capture the surprised expression on the face of the professor, and titles and credits were all supplied. Student-made videos like that have become a cottage industry on YouTube.

The digital self-portrait

This is a lecture about online *video*, and so it may seem out of place that I am going to say something about traditional, *still* photography now. But as we will see, even traditional photography is being affected by the Internet video phenomenon.

The causes and motives are similar: even earlier than with digital video, digital photography caused a revolution in how photographs are made. I can personally testify to this: when our daughter was born in the year 2000, I decided to make the switch to digital photography. Those were the early days of digital photography, and I organized myself with a printer, flashcard memory, and so forth. I took photos and printed them out on glossy paper for friends and relatives.

Then, slowly but surely, my habits began to evolve. Printing my pictures was slow and the printing was expensive and sending them out by post was expensive, and I gradually stopped printing altogether. For relatives, I just started producing “slide shows” on a CD-ROM, and eventually I didn’t even do that – I just put them on a web site or sent them by electronic mail.

The overall result? The total cost of making photos became exactly zero. Now my habits have changed again: when I take photos, I don’t just take a few. I take many – even *hundreds*. Why not? It’s free, after all. Then I throw away the ones I don’t want, just like the professionals in the old days with their “contact sheets.”

This phenomenon of literally cost-free digital photography, coupled with the knowledge of computers and the Internet that is commonplace today, has changed the way artists view photography. You can experience this in an exhibition that is going on in Lausanne, Switzerland right now, until May 30, 2007. Its name is, appropriately, “We’re All Photographers Now.” One of the most interesting things about that exhibition is that it shows how even digital photographers are now turning their photos into videos.

Ahree Lee of San Francisco was apparently the first to exploit the zero cost of digital photography to make a so-called *digital video portrait*. She used her digital camera to take a self-portrait once a day over a period lasting from November 2001 through November 2004 – over a thousand days. Then, she used her computer knowledge to line up her eyes in each photo (so that they were always in the same location) and made the video by arranging the photos one after the other. Then she put the video online on YouTube on August 8, 2006 (that’s right, the anniversary of Hiroshima – her operation is called Atom Films). The result: over three million viewers. The cost to her: only her labor.

Her feat prompted others to follow suit. Another popular digital video portrait is by Noah Kalina, who took the self-portraits he had shot every single day from 11 January 2000 to 31 July 2006 and turned them into a video called “Everyday.” It took him only four hours to make the video from the pictures. He posted it to YouTube at the end of August 2006 and now over 5 million people have seen it.

So is it art?

The *New York Times* ran an article discussing the phenomenon on 18 March 2007. They asked William A. Ewing (director of the Musée de l’Elysée where the “We’re All Photographers Now” exhibition is currently running and Noah Kalina’s digital video portrait is on display) what he thought. He said, “Noah’s video represents a phenomenal amplification not just in what he produced and how he did it, but how many people the piece touched in such a short period of time. There is nothing comparable in the history of photography. It’s a remarkable piece. That’s why we ask in our show: Is this a revolution or just an evolution? The answer is it’s a revolution.”

However, the *Times* got a second, contrasting opinion when they talked with Richard Benson, a professor of photography at Yale. As far as he is concerned, these digital video portraits are “...a complete waste of time. They are people who don’t know what they are doing and who celebrate themselves. I find it completely boring.”

Use in political campaigns today

This is an appropriate time to talk about another use of Internet video – we are at the beginning of the 2008 U.S. Presidential election campaign, and Internet video is already being used as a weapon by the candidates. The *San Francisco Chronicle* reported on March 18 that

It may be the most stunning and creative attack ad yet for a 2008 presidential candidate – one experts say could represent a watershed moment in 21st century media and political advertising. Yet the groundbreaking 74-second pitch for Democratic Illinois Sen. Barack Obama, which remixes the classic "1984" ad that introduced Apple computers to the world, is not on cable or network TV, but on the Internet.

So what was that about? A famous commercial by Apple computers back in 1984 (the year in which the Macintosh was introduced) took advantage of 1984 being the “Orwellian” year to depict the Macintosh as a revolutionary computer that was out of step with the rest of the world (a fair enough assessment, as it turns out).

Somebody took that ad and substituted U.S. presidential candidate Barack Obama for the Macintosh and put it up on YouTube, complete with the imposing face of adversary Hillary Clinton on a large screen as a kind of Big Sister.

The identity of that “somebody” was unknown for quite a while (they eventually figured it out), but the important fact is that it could be “disowned” by the Obama campaign because it didn’t originate with them – yet, at the same time, the Obama campaign could benefit from its effects. As the *Chronicle* wrote,

It also dramatizes that today, political activists with the Internet as their ammunition have gone from being "just donors to the cause," he said, "to being partners in the fight. And they don't have to wait for permission."

This grass-roots character of sites like YouTube means that politics will be carried out not only by the official political campaigners, but also by everybody who has something to say, in a much more powerful way than was previously possible.

Of course, this doesn’t mean that the official campaigns aren’t making use of the new technology possibilities: Obama has at least one video on YouTube right now where he calmly explains his vision to the prospective voter.

This is not only happening in America. In Italy, Member of Parliament Antonio di Pietro instituted his own form of “fireside chat” in January of this year, where he periodically explains to YouTube viewers, from his (badly lit) chambers, the current happenings in the Italian Parliament.

Why are they doing it?

I’ve spent some time now talking about *who* is putting up videos on YouTube, now I’d like to get back to the question of *why* they are doing it. A lot of people have been thinking about what this is all about, and the consensus seems to be that the audience has hijacked the show, so to speak – that third revolution that *TIME* was talking about.

Brian Williams is anchor and managing editor of the *NBC Nightly News*. Last December, he wrote in *TIME* magazine:

While the mainstream media were having lunch, members of the audience made other plans. They scattered and are still on the move, part of a massive migration. The dynamic driving it? It's all

about you. Me. And all the various forms of the First Person Singular. Americans have decided the most important person in their lives is ... them, and our culture is now built upon that idea. It's the User-Generated Generation.

In the end, it is turning out that Andy Warhol wasn't so far off when he predicted that in the future, everybody would be famous for fifteen minutes. YouTube is giving us the technology to make that possible.

But is it a good idea? Williams has an important insight in that regard:

It is now possible — even common — to go about your day in America and consume only what you wish to see and hear. There are television networks that already agree with your views, iPods that play only music you already know you like, Internet programs ready to filter out all but the news you want to hear. The problem is that there's a lot of information out there that citizens in an informed democracy *need* to know in our complicated world with U.S. troops on the ground along two major fronts.

More and more, we are acquiring the possibility to surround ourselves with only what we want to hear about. If you use the Internet, you're probably aware that many sites now make it possible for you to "personalize" them for you: "My This", "My That." And if you still don't like what you hear, you can just turn it off and generate your own entertainment. After all, you and I are pretty interesting all by ourselves, aren't we?

Or maybe we're not. Genius is very rare, and it's hard enough to find as it is. The traditional media does a lot of filtering before it allows any content to be presented. And even though there's still plenty of junk on television and in the print, the overall quality is still a lot higher than you would like to admit — let's face it, they're professionals. And above all, you are not just getting things you want to see or hear, you're also getting what you *should* be hearing. As Williams notes:

The danger just might be that we miss the next great book or the next great idea, or that we fail to meet the next great challenge ... because we are too busy celebrating ourselves and listening to the same tune we already know by heart.

Or maybe not again. Maybe it's the opposite: maybe traditional media does *not* let you see and hear the things you should be seeing and hearing, and maybe Internet video *does*. Some of you may recall the legendary journalist Alistair Cooke, who broadcast his *Letter from America* to a British audience for 58 years (the longest running speech broadcast ever). I acquired a few of them on tape many years ago, and remember one in particular in which he talked about the media and war. During the great world wars of the 20th century, he observed — and particularly during World War I — the government, through collaboration with the media, was able to severely restrict the amount of first-hand news that the public had from the front. This was extremely important to keeping morale high — can you imagine the public's reaction if they had known about the killing fields of trench warfare?

Even in World War II, albeit to a lesser extent, the horror was largely kept out of view of the public, Cooke noted. (Just this winter, a friend of mine named Anthony Weller, an author and musician in his own right, published a book called *First Into Nagasaki*, a collection of dispatches written by his father, the Pulitzer prize winning journalist George Weller. They are the original reports he wrote as the first Western journalist to enter Nagasaki after the atomic bombing in 1945. They have never been seen before — they were censored before they made it into print.)

The particular *Letter From America* I'm talking about was broadcast by Cooke during the Vietnam War. After noting the cases of the world wars, as I outlined above, he went on to remark how different it was in the case of Vietnam. This time, he said, the images of Vietnam were coming straight into the living rooms of the American public. The public was seeing, *as they happened*, the horrors of war – the napalm bombings, the ambushes, the wounded, the dead. And it was directly contributing to the growth of the anti-war movement in the United States. (One of the great Vietnam journalists, David Halberstam, died just four days ago in an automobile accident in California.)

“And this,” he concluded his broadcast, “is indeed something new under the sun.”

Fast-forward to the first Gulf War, in 1990-1991. This time around, the government had to contend with Cable News Network, also known as CNN. The government had learned the lessons from Vietnam, and a Pentagon document called *Annex Foxtrot* outlined their strategy for restricting television coverage. To a great degree, they were also successful, despite the heroics of star CNN reporters like Peter Arnett.

Fast-forward one more time, to the second Gulf War. This time around, the government has to contend with ... YouTube. Sure, the traditional media has been there, too, with their “embedded reporters” (like my old college roommate Ron Claiborne), and there has been the usual tug-of-war between the government and the media about how much actual combat to show on television.

But this time something quite new under the sun has happened again: *individuals* have started posting videos of American troops under attack on YouTube. These are videos that are often made *by the soldiers themselves*. Soon after this started, a huge controversy developed. Was it right to allow this? Was it unpatriotic? Or, on the contrary, was it patriotic? Here is typical letter from a reader to the *New York Times* on the subject last October:

While the videos posted may be distasteful to some, alarming to others, and painful for still others, they are depicting war as it is in real life... something that is not being disclosed to the general population by the news outlets.... scratch that, the AMERICAN news outlets... the rest of the world sees what our government doesn't want us to see.

So maybe those posting videos of American troops under attack in the Iraq war are doing their patriotic duty of informing the public about things that the government is trying to suppress.

Or maybe not. Maybe those videos are just the mirror image of what the government is trying to do – a propaganda weapon in the hands of those who have their own political agenda.

Or maybe we don't know: maybe we just don't know yet what the implications of this unparalleled instrument for information dissemination we have in YouTube will be. Maybe, as I've had to say so many times before in these lectures, only time will tell.

The Lawsuit against YouTube

Those of you who heard my lecture a few years ago on the online music boom will recall that the music exchange service called Napster got into big trouble for copyright infringement, because its users were swapping copyrighted music.

So, if it could happen with audio, could the same happen with video?

It sure could, and it has. Just last month, the media giant Viacom sued Google for allowing copyrighted material to be put up on the site. As the General Counsel for Viacom, Michael Fricklas, wrote in the *Washington Post* on March 24,

Viacom initiated litigation against YouTube and Google this month for their long-standing infringement of Viacom's copyrights. Our action has stirred discussion about the Digital Millennium Copyright Act (DMCA) and quite a lot of confusion.

Does YouTube have "knowledge" of copyrighted material on its site? Does it have the "right and ability to control" the content? Yes and yes. If the public knows what's there, then YouTube's management surely does. Without knowledge and control, how could YouTube create "channels" and "featured videos" sections on its site? YouTube has even offered to find infringing content for copyright owners -- but only if they do a licensing deal first.

So what was going on? It turned out that users were putting all kinds of copyrighted entertainment up on the site, such as their favorite TV shows. I looked around last month and found, for example, my favorite *I Love Lucy* show episode where she went to work with Ethel Mertz in a chocolate factory wrapping chocolates and they ended up eating more chocolate than they managed to wrap.

The traditional media knows that the online video phenomenon won't go away, and this time they don't want to wait as long as they did to address the online music problem (although that's not exactly a solved problem either today). As Fricklas pointed out, there is an enormous issue of intellectual property involved.

Will forcing Google and YouTube to obey the law stifle innovation? Quite the opposite. Intellectual property is worth \$650 billion a year to the U.S. economy. Not only does intellectual property drive our exports, it's a key part of what distinguishes developed economies from developing ones. Protecting intellectual property spurs investment and thereby the creation of new technologies and creative entertainment. This creates jobs and benefits consumers. Google and YouTube wouldn't be here if not for investment in software and technologies spurred by patent and copyright laws. It's time they respected them.

This is just the beginning

Another facet of the lawsuit facing Google and YouTube is the fact that big media does not just want to stop YouTube from infringing copyright, but it wants to get its own share of the pie. This is happening in the form of an alliance between News Corporation and NBC Universal, who have just announced that they're teaming up to form the world's largest network for distributing Internet video. They won't just distribute clips and home videos, either. They plan to distribute feature-length movies and TV shows, and all this from two movie studios and at least twelve TV networks.

Basically, they're going to bring the "normal" network onto the Internet, in a kind of "if you can't beat them, join them." It allows them to control their programming instead of leaving it up to whoever puts it up on YouTube, and they can better control copyright issues and attract their own advertising.

Does this new deal spell the end of YouTube? I doubt it very much, because Internet video and especially YouTube isn't just about being able to watch the Simpsons. It's about watching *lonelygirl15*, or *geriatric1927*, or *lazydork*, and any other crazy or not-so-crazy person who wants to share something about his or her life, whether it's real, imagined, or virtual. It's about all of them, and it's about you, too!