



# YouTube: Examining a Revolution

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*The author examines the popular video sharing website and asks whether the phenomenon marks a change in the way cultural products are brought forth. The analysis draws upon a traditionally Marxist framework to define the production cycle and is focused on three aspects of YouTube: its navigational design, its use of content classification and, to a lesser extent, its business model. The review of the website took place during December 2006, shortly after the announcement of Google's intention to acquire the company. The author challenges the notion that the capitalist production cycle has been entirely bypassed, and argues that while YouTube has elements that are revolutionary, its overall design serves to promote a more efficient means of distributing cultural products within the same basic structure that preceded it.*

But look at 2006 through a different lens and you'll see another story, one that isn't about conflict or great men. It's a story about community and collaboration on a scale never seen before. It's about the cosmic compendium of knowledge Wikipedia and the million-channel people's network YouTube and the online metropolis MySpace. It's about the many wresting power from the few and helping one another for nothing and how this will not only change the world, but also change the way the world changes.

Lev Grossman, Time's Person of the Year: You  
Time Magazine, December 2006

**I**t is so declared: the revolution has begun. And it is led by technologies that encourage connections, enabling the masses to join in and raise our voices in an audible chorus of harmony.

Possibly—Or, is this simply another case of the old guard finding yet another way to harness the creative powers of the many to its own ends? Or worse, have The Borg have invaded the earth armed with a fantastic PR machine?

The hype, the promise, and the premise of YouTube are rooted in its potential to empower the individual to participate in the construction of cultural narratives (Fiske: 121)—to appropriate and make meanings as they please. It ostensibly does this by creating a cycle that allows for direct contact between producers and consumers, and by blurring the line between the two. However, the capitalist mode of production does not allow for this possibility. As Fredrick Jameson put it, “Attempts to go beyond Marxism typically end up by reinventing older pre-Marxist positions” (qtd. in Wayne: 4).

Furthermore, within this framework resides the expectation that the technology itself is built in a way supports the traditional production cycle.

Video-sharing is not the only social networking or peer-to-peer technology that has held the promise of change, but it is one whose very premise challenges the way in which dominant ideologies are imparted by cultural products. YouTube's focus on user-generated content sets it apart from earlier peer-to-peer technologies such as Napster. Therefore, the question is whether the emergence of YouTube and its adoption signal a change to the paradigm of production or simply redefine the *arena* in which the struggle between capital and workers is taking place (Wayne: 3).

Marxist theory would suggest that all technologies provide the means for two possible ends: control, or revolution. To decide which of the two YouTube better enables, the analysis here is focused on the way YouTube has been built. This is accomplished through a review of YouTube's beginnings and its community, a discussion of the site's architectural neutrality or bias as well as the degree to which it allows for semiotic freedom. The research that follows is based on content analysis conducted in December 2006. There were a number of other companies in the video-sharing arena in 2006, including MySpace and Google. However, MySpace was already acquired by News Corp. and Google Video had failed to gain market momentum. This made YouTube the ideal candidate for analysis as it had gained enough public awareness but was still an independent entity. For these reasons, the content analysis for the site is restricted to the last month of 2006, representing a time period of accelerated growth shortly after Google's announcement of their intention to acquire the company. While the acquisition announcement served to support one of the key assumptions of the theoretical framework used in this inquiry, we will find that there were many elements prior to the announcement that supported the traditional production cycle, as understood by a Marxist framework. Having said that, what we ultimately find is not clear-cut. In YouTube we discover a paradox that was designed to simultaneously support and tear down existing institutions.

### **A New World Cycle?**

Mike Wayne describes post-Napster peer-to-peer technologies like Gnutella as one of the first groups of technologies that hold true to the promise of bringing forth an "...alternative social rearrangement, namely mediation without either 'state'-like structures (central servers) or the market (exchange without value)" (58). These systems succeed by subverting the institutional efforts to contain, limit and define ways of accessing cultural products. They do so by creating environments that are one-to-one, one-to-many and many-to-one, and cross-linked in unexpected ways. The concept of YouTube is especially powerful in that it combines user-generated content and peer sharing with the basic community features of social networking sites.

What differentiates YouTube from the standard social networking site is that while it allowed for the packaging and branding of *self* for consumption by a group of friends or strangers, it went further by enabling and documenting the creation of an online community in a way that is *both* visual and interactive. The YouTube logo says it all: broadcast yourself. The tuber<sup>1</sup> is therefore empowered to package and brand not just the *self*, but *self-created* cultural products. Further, not only can the tuber repackage cultural commodities already in circulation; she can distribute them around the world at very little cost. Hence, from its inception, YouTube served as a means of production, distribution and consumption built outside the institutional framework. This is in some ways very similar to what is achieved by fan culture. Henry Jenkins, in his discussion of Fandom, points to how the fan community

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<sup>1</sup> Used as a short-hand for heavy users of YouTube who are both producers and consumers, differentiated from casual visitors.

creates an alternate cultural production cycle that allows for the re-appropriation of content. With YouTube, we find not only this alternate production cycle at work, but also *leaks* created in the production cycle, which threaten the establishment. Both YouTube and the fan community subvert the capitalist's efforts to maintain the closed circuit necessary for the creation of surplus value.

The above argument is based on an ideological debate with the built-in assumption that there are competing ideologies in society; some of them battling against the exploitation inherent in the capitalist framework. The superstructure-base model would reject the foregoing possibility, instead arguing that YouTube's potential is limited because its ideology—giving voice to the many—will ineluctably be subverted. Additionally, it would be expected for YouTube to eventually become nothing more than an ideological apparatus; a controlling tool used to prevent class-consciousness, or one that fosters it by transforming the ideology (Garnham: 27). Because Marx and Engels viewed most ideologists as servants of capital, the superstructure-base model questions the very viability of an ideology outside of what is already sanctioned. While later thinkers such as Nicholas Garnham may allow for the existence of “organic intellectuals,” created by the working class in opposition to capital, even he does not hold out much hope for their success. Ideological power is always weighted toward capital because workers do not possess the means to wage that battle on the same scale (33). In other words, “no matter YouTube does, it will end up serving the interests of the capital in the end because it is a means of labor.” Google's acquisition of the company would only reinforce the opinion of those subscribing to this point of view.

The lynchpin of this argument is capitalism's assumed, or more precisely, continued monopoly of the distribution portion of the cycle. One would expect that a virtually cost-free distribution system like the Internet would significantly undermine that monopoly. Mike Wayne makes the same argument in *Marxism and Media Studies*. Wayne points to the ease of distribution along with the proliferation of cheap production mechanisms as having led to an increase in “productive cultural capacity,” which undermines institutional controls and threatens the traditional industry players (57). Therefore, YouTube's potential impact is not limited to bypassing traditional distribution channels, as it also helps encourage the production of cultural products which in turn impact user/audience choice. This consequent agency of choice by consumers undermines the elite's ability to control taste, and by association, consumption. What traditional media seemingly have to fear is this loss of control. Before delving much deeper, it is worthwhile to step back and take a closer look at the community that made up YouTube at the end of 2006.

### **Who is YouTube?**

The legend of YouTube is different than that of most other start-ups: There were no college prodigies slaving away in their garage on a shoestring budget. YouTube's founders were former early employees of PayPal, who had profited from the company's 2002 sale to eBay and used some of that profit as seed money for their new venture. In addition, one of the founders of the company, Chad Hurley, is married to the daughter of Jim Clark, co-founder of companies such as Netscape and Shutterfly, the photo-sharing equivalent to YouTube. The founders came up with the idea of YouTube because they wanted an easy way to share videos of a dinner party. They had early investments from well-known venture firms in Silicon Valley and owe their early success to MySpace members using their technology as part of their overall MySpace experience.

One of the key differences between YouTube and a photo-sharing site like Shutterfly is that YouTube developed its own community within a short period of time after its launch. This community has a broad range; comprised of casual users, advertisers, partners and members, each with very

different goals and purposes. Some members are only interested in producing video content; others specialize in re-distribution of existing content (e.g., Britney crotch shots or TV episodes of *One Tree Hill*), while still others are solely consumers of already-uploaded material. Videos on YouTube tend to be either original productions or redistributed—and often copyrighted—material. Original productions can entail both scripted and unscripted productions that range from vlogs (video blogs) to sketch comedies, parodies and the quintessential Fan production.

YouTube generated its early buzz by handing over the power of production to those typically involved only in the consumption of cultural products. YouTube owes its initial popularity to this group of “Prosumers,” the hybrid category of consumers who also became avid producers of content, at the expense of the monopoly corporations’ or other traditional institutions’ hold in the production cycle. One effect of this institutional side-stepping was the visibility gained by the members of the cultural fringe. As the popularity of the site grew, it gave birth to a whole new class of celebrities, both on the Internet and in the real world. Not only did tubers have a voice, but they were challenging the pre-determined criteria of what is interesting and who gets to *play*.

A review of some of the most popular<sup>2</sup> content on the site in 2006 reveals empowerment for the elderly, teenagers and fan populations; normally outsiders to the process of market control; individuals whose image and opinions are usually contained within niches that do not have broad cultural visibility. The way that YouTube has exposed the *image* of these populations—not only through its user-driven format, but also by situating users as the *subjects* of its content—demonstrates the unique impact of YouTube’s medium and production cycle. One of the oldest and most unexpected of the celebrities is geriatric1927, a.k.a. Peter Oakley, a 79-year-old British man who has been entertaining the masses with stories from his life starting in August of 2006. His popularity alone signals that YouTube indeed managed to accomplish something new. Not only did it create a direct connection between the producer and the consumer, but it encouraged the individual to occupy both the role of the *worker* and the *capitalist*, which has the potential of collapsing the cycle and heralding a new model of production for cultural products.



Figure 1: Geriatric1927

By December 2006 it was clear that this new model was already morphing and that there was another side effect to the increasing popularity of the website: The utopian view of the YouTube phenomenon hinged on the assumed authenticity of the prosumer's attempt to create outside the boundaries of institutional control. Yet, of the top eight *Most Subscribed Directors of All Time* as ranked on December 19, 2006, half were either signed to a development deal or were collaborating on projects with outside funding.<sup>3</sup> Agents and directors increasingly looked to YouTube not as a competitor but as a platform for discovering new talent as well as a barometer of audience preferences (Martin). As self-expression became secondary to the possibility of discovery, this led to a cultural shift on the site. In turn, the nature of the product changed from a means of appropriation of dominant culture to yet another cultural commodity. The most publicized example of this cultural evolution was the “outing” of Lonelygirl15. In the winter of 2006, the *most subscribed to channel of all time* belonged to Lonelygirl15. Believing her to be a 15-year-old girl named Bree, members of the community followed her travails through her personal vlogs on the site. The revelation in September

<sup>2</sup> As determined by channel subscriptions.

<sup>3</sup> Based on cross reference of site with Internet search.

that Lonelygirl15 was really a character played by New Zealand actress Jessica Rose marked a turning point in how submissions were judged and viewed by the community. The case of Jessica Rose brought into question the authenticity of all submissions. Concurrently, more and more television



Figure 2: Bree, a.k.a. Lonelygirl15, a.k.a. Jessica Rose

shows found their way onto the site as YouTube proved to be an ideal promotional platform for a new crop of shows. The Jessica Rose incident, along with the heavy promotion of network television programming, revealed the role ambiguities and structural dichotomies of YouTube. However, it would be misleading to wholly attribute this shift to the actions of the users, since these challenges were inherent in YouTube's architecture from day one. Arguably, such an outcome was predestined by the site's design.

### Architecture and Culture

Both YouTube and MySpace fit the textbook definition of Web 2.0, that hypothetical next-generation Internet where people contribute as easily

as they consume. Even self-described late adopters like New York's Kurt Andersen recognize that that by letting everyone contribute, these sites have reached a critical mass where "a real network effect has kicked in."

But the focus on the collaborative nature of these sites has been nagging at me. Sites like Friendster and Blogger that promote sharing and friend-making have been around for years with nowhere near the mainstream success. I've got a different theory. YouTube and MySpace are runaway hits because they combine two attributes rarely found together in tech products. They're easy to use, and they don't tell you what to do.

Paul Boutin, Slate Magazine  
April 2006

Lawrence Lessig argues that online environments are necessarily bounded by codes, and mediate experience through their architecture. The Marxist argument would say that since codes are controlled by capital, their resulting architecture would be necessarily pitted against the *worker's* interest. Or, in the Althusserian tradition, it would be creating limits to workers' freedom in ways that go unnoticed.

There are two different ways in which environmental architecture can mediate experience and exert control. One is through the site navigation, and the other is through the way in which self-directed user action is empowered or limited. While YouTube may come across as a platform that allows its users an unmediated experience, free from ideological oversight at an institutional level, this appearance is far from accurate. The YouTube platform is in actuality a complex system with many levels of ideological interpellation present within its architecture. Furthermore, YouTube is an *entity* that has non-neutral means of control in place. What this complexity reveals is a push and pull between the structure and the agency of the community. For one, the navigational design directs traffic flow and classifies content, which in turn mediates the user's experience by presenting her with a *set of options*. Second, the site privileges users who choose to self-identify, removing the benefits of anonymity. Control is introduced into the relationship between the entity of YouTube and the user at the very beginning, when the user is asked to self-identify by logging-in. While this action is not required, it is rewarded by an architectural design that privileges those who do log in; providing them access to production tools, giving them individual channels, and the ability to rate other members'

work. Therefore, members can be *producers* and have *voice* as long as they are willing to live within the constraints of the system, which drives content type, behavior, format, and means of reproduction. Garnham credits Adorno and Horkheimer with foreshadowing this type of ideological evolution, and shares their insight:

Under the private culture monopoly it is a fact that ‘tyranny leaves the body free and directs its attack at the soul.’ The rule no longer says, ‘You must think as I do, or die.’ He says, ‘You are free not to think as I do, your life, your property, everything shall remain yours, but from this day on you are a stranger among us.’ Not to conform means to be rendered powerless, economically and therefore, spiritually – to be ‘self-employed’...(34)

Accordingly, only those who conform will be validated; only they have the right to be heard, to exist.

The design-base navigation of the site has two additional features that help set the *entity* apart from its *users*. One is the placement of content deemed interesting and/or important by the site itself – i.e., sanctioned content – in the center of the main page. This is an overt instance where *the site* appears as a separate entity from the *community*, since the other content is driven by member choice and is based on popularity. The second such feature is the display of advertisements on the right panel. Both said features distance the *site*, placing it in the role of *capital* (or at the very least the middle class), and placing the *participants* in the role of the *working class* within the class map (Wayne: 10). While this design-based navigation is the primary navigation of the site, there are alternatives. Nonetheless, these alternatives also reinforce existing structures since they borrow from the language of established institutions.

YouTube users have the option of navigating the site through the tabs visible above the *Feature Video* section. These tabs and the classifications are crucial means of navigation, since they use metrics-laden terminology, such as *most discussed*, *most viewed*, *top ratings*, *top favorites*, etc. Within these rankings, the user is presented with a navigational approach that is instantaneous, fluid and has the potential to bypass both the traditional distributor and the taste-maker. Once a user has selected one of the tabs labeled *Video*, *Category*, *Channel* or *Group*, the navigation becomes *communally driven*; the experience is no longer mediated by YouTube but by members of the community and their collective preferences.<sup>4</sup> YouTube’s ability to give voice to collective preferences is seen by some as one of its destabilizing factors,

assuming that the collective preference is unencumbered by the ideology of the elite. Under this assumption, one can see why this optional path may introduce tension between site structure and the agency of its members. In discussing the tension between the individual and the structure, Caroline Brettell refers to Anthony Giddens’ rejection of the *static notion* of structure and his struggle between micro and macro level analysis:

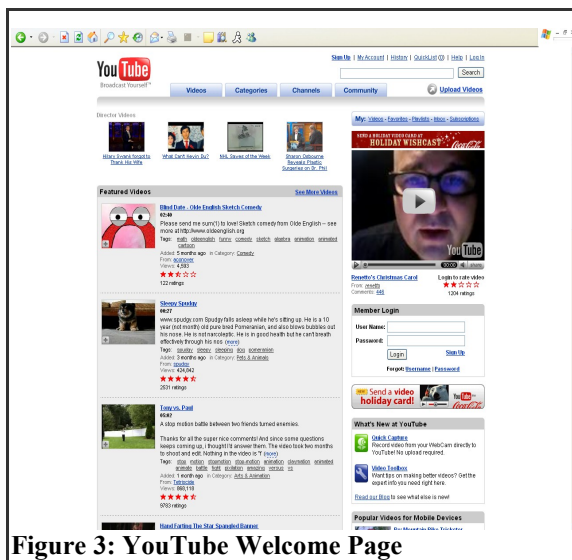


Figure 3: YouTube Welcome Page

<sup>4</sup> Discounting the effects of technologies that simulate usage or provide automated ratings.

Giddens attempted to reconcile the opposition between actor-oriented and structural approaches by emphasizing how social actors are involved in structuration and how they draw upon structure to formulate their actions. Giddens seemingly gives individuals the power to change the social system through purposive although not necessarily purposeful action (438).

It is true that the secondary navigation discussed above provides an alternative path, but the structure of the site nevertheless keeps the user on a directed path. While it may be tempting to think that collective preference-based navigation options lead to ideologically unencumbered agency, we are once again faced with an ideologically infused structure, on a different level: For one, the words chosen to categorize the metrics are borrowed from the parlance of television and popular culture, and are thus imbued with meaning that will direct action and undermine agency by introducing the same biases that exist in the traditional media. These terms adjust the frame of reference of those interacting with the site on multiple levels, even if they are used in different ways.

*Most viewed* is most similar in concept to Nielsen's *ratings*. Both measurements are reflective of *actions* undertaken by the users and both have their short-comings. While Nielsen's rating system is at times presented as objectively representative, it is highly biased in reality. Nielsen's ratings come from a pre-selected subset of viewers most likely to consume the products advertised on television. While it does not pre-select its community, YouTube counts every action related to a piece of content, regardless of intent or user membership. As a result, the ratings are not necessarily directly related to actual viewings. Also, in order to garner higher view counts, submission tags are misused, providing a false sense of what is and what is not viewed.<sup>5</sup> So while the Nielsen's ratings reflect a bias towards the desired demographics, the YouTube ratings reflect a bias towards those who are familiar with its architecture. Content is also judged on YouTube using the word "rating." The category of *Top Rated* is a more accurate representation of community taste than *Most Viewed*. It is not clear if the use of the phrase is meant to parody Nielsen's failure to capture taste or meant to mimic it so the rating system is better understood by the advertisers the site hopes to attract. YouTube's business model mandates that it create an architecture that allows for it to monetize its categories.

In the architecture of YouTube, we see tension between the structure and individual agency, but we also see ways in which the architecture mediates the experience in a way that gives YouTube greater control than its users. The above-cited biases are not as much a critique of YouTube as they are an acknowledgement of the degree to which our interactions with media are driven by existing establishments. In fairness, while being heard (participating) on YouTube is contingent upon membership, the site does provide lower barriers to entry than most other communities by empowering the individual to impact the structure in more ways than previously seen. But this further compounds the contradictions of the model. YouTube's attempts at circumventing traditional channels challenge the dominant class' ability to manage the cultural hierarchy (Jenkins: 16), simultaneously providing capital with an ideal way to recapture the "commodity audience."<sup>6</sup> Chances are high that both categories of *Top Rated* and *Most Viewed* garner higher advertising rates than other categories. The concern for the advertiser, betrayed by YouTube's site structure, points to YouTube's business model as a key driver to what the site can and will allow its users to do. This in turn begs the question of how YouTube can have a sustainable business model and challenge the system at the same time.

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<sup>5</sup> There were no guidelines found on the site that defined a minimum time threshold before a hit is counted as a view. Even if such controls are built in, most submissions are too short to place any burden on the viewer and require them to close the window.

<sup>6</sup> Term coined by Eileen Meehan (Jenkins : 30)

## The Power of Partnerships

While Google's acquisition of YouTube provides the most glaring example of how institutional control is reinserted into the framework, a look at a few examples prior to the acquisition demonstrates that many other factors were already in play when Google entered the picture. By December 2006, YouTube had already announced several partnerships with traditional media outlets that moved it away from a user-driven environment to one that used *programming* as a means of securing revenue. This move to use of network programming was partly due to the company's fear of lawsuits.

As the site's popularity grew, more and more copyrighted content began to be posted by members, and the media began covering the story of these clips that had gone "viral." Some traditional media outlets decided to leverage the site to promote their own programming, while others prepared to sue them in order to prevent them from showing bootlegged clips of popular shows with the hopes of creating a rival service on their own websites that could generate advertising revenue on the web.

NBC was one of the networks that initially asked YouTube to take down its content in accordance with the Digital Millennium Copyright Act. The request was submitted in February 2006, after a Saturday Night Live sketch was posted and subsequently viewed 5 million times on YouTube for free. NBC posted the sketch itself on Apple's iTunes at the cost of \$1.99 per download (Biggs). By June 2006, YouTube and NBC had announced a "strategic partnership" meant to feature exclusive NBC content.<sup>7</sup> By the fall of 2006, YouTube had announced partnerships with Warner Bros. Records, Weinstein Company, Fox Broadcasting Company, CBS, Sony BMG Music and Universal Music Group.<sup>8</sup> The September press release announcing the partnership with Warner Bros. Records stated that

YouTube, Inc., a consumer media company for people to watch and share original videos through a Web experience, and Warner Music Group Corp. (NYSE: WMG), one of the world's leading global music companies, today announced an agreement to distribute on YouTube the library of music videos from WMG's world-renowned roster of artists as well as behind-the-scenes footage, artist interviews, original programming and other special content. In a first-of-its-kind arrangement, YouTube users will be able to incorporate music from WMG's recorded music catalog into the videos they create and upload onto YouTube.<sup>9</sup>

Did this signal a triumph of dominant elite through injection of products into circulation or a triumph of the YouTube worker community by allowing them to use copyrighted material at no cost? To answer this question, we must examine the level of agency given to the individual. Is there really agency in being able to *select* from a *selection* or is this an example of how freedom is curtailed by limiting choice? Furthermore, the press release goes on to discuss the fact that this is a revenue partnership opportunity for the two companies using YouTube's "advanced content identification and royalty reporting system" that was to become available later that year. What this meant was that by the end of 2006, YouTube expected to be able to identify songs used in videos and a way for record companies to charge a fee for the use of the content within user videos.

These partnerships directly challenge the notion of individual or community agency, as structure is used here to reassert control over the cultural productions. This is not to say that the community did not attempt to maintain its creative freedom: In the winter of 2006, in an attempt at resistance, one regular YouTube contributor used his channel as a forum to critique and warn the community against YouTube's decision to introduce even more sanctioned *programs*. On December 12<sup>th</sup>, 2006, Greg Solomon challenged YouTube's decision to promote videos on the sign-up page. The

<sup>7</sup> [http://www.youtube.com/press\\_room\\_entry?entry=c0g5-NsDdJQ](http://www.youtube.com/press_room_entry?entry=c0g5-NsDdJQ)

<sup>8</sup> [http://www.youtube.com/press\\_room?morgue=yes](http://www.youtube.com/press_room?morgue=yes)

<sup>9</sup> [http://www.youtube.com/press\\_room\\_entry?entry=vCfgHo5\\_Fb4](http://www.youtube.com/press_room_entry?entry=vCfgHo5_Fb4)

selection of three videos that rotated every 48 hours was seen by Solomon as an attempt on the part of YouTube to steer content preferences and subvert rankings. Solomon's argument was that novice users not familiar with how the site is structured will unwittingly subscribe to the channels promoted up front, artificially raising the number of the subscriptions for the channels that are promoted. He and others like him championed the concept of "earning subscriptions." According to *honors*<sup>10</sup> listed on the submission page, this critique was ranked the #4 *Most Discussed* of the week and the #5 *Top Ranked* of the week for the week of December 11, 2006. Accordingly, one would expect the video to appear organically within the metrics categories for some time. However within one week of its posting, the video is impossible to find without prior knowledge or subscription to Greg's channel.

These are not the only examples in which code or design decisions are used to construct the environment as desired; one could also point to the use of Flash technology or the limitations on the total length of the submission (subverted by users through posting of serialized submissions).

This supports the view that YouTube is only a new way of making an old system work well; just another example of how technology is used as the tool of the capitalist (Wayne: 3). The very act of creating a framework that consists of a navigational path—a common feature of most sites—invites the viewer to enter into a pre-fabricated world; a world mediated through the signs and directions of the producer—in this case the site itself—with the purpose of consumption. Ironically, lack of navigational direction was one of the reasons why Google's welcome page garnered so much attention.

As YouTube evolved, its initial ability to circumvent the distribution channel morphed into the ability to create a very efficient distribution channel for the consumption of cultural products. One could also argue that from day one, constrained by its navigation and technology choices, YouTube had limited potential as an agent of change.

However, in his *Reading the Popular*, Fiske makes the case that the basic power of the dominant in capitalism may be economic, but this economic power is both underpinned and exceeded by semiotic power; that is, the power to make meanings (9). Therefore, in order to be able to draw a conclusion, we must inquire as to whether YouTube fulfills its promise by allowing for "semiotic resistance."

## Resistance

Michel Foucault describes the tendency toward classification in terms of 'the history of the order imposed on things... of that which for a given culture is both dispersed and related, therefore to be distinguished by kinds and to be collected together into identities' (qtd. Dowd : 22).

The use of language was discussed earlier in this analysis in the context of site structure and navigation. In YouTube's use of language we also see ways in which the impact of the site extends beyond the tangible production cycle to the circulation of meanings within a group that is intercultural as well as connected. There are many instances of language use that could be analyzed, but the discussion below is focused on YouTube and its community's use of content classification, or genre.

Genre can act as either a form of institutional control or means of resistance. In discussing videos of Madonna, Fisk states that "...parody can be an effective device for interrogating the dominant ideology. It takes the defining features of its object, exaggerates and mocks them, and thus mocks those who 'fall' for its ideological effect." For Fisk, Madonna's empowerment as an artist comes from her ability to *self-create*: "She represents herself as one who is in control of her own image and the process of making it. This, at the reading end of the semiotic process, allows the reader similar

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<sup>10</sup> A listing of all the top metrics garnered by any given submission at any time.

control over her own meanings” (105). Henry Jenkins makes similar observations on fanzines, drawings and fan videos. For him, the fans appropriate the text and re-interpreted it as they want (33).

YouTube provides a meaning-production environment that is more permanent and accessible than typical fanzines. Furthermore, it allows for collective interpretation and re-interpretation of the text, as its meaning grows with each subsequent reading as represented by member postings. This is powerful, but there is an even more powerful way in which YouTube, as a *site or an identity unto itself*, provides means for resistance. René Wellek and Austin Warren express in concise terms a key concern in genre theory from Aristotle through to contemporary interventions: “The subject of genre,” they write, raises “philosophical questions concerning the relation of the class and the individual composing it, the one and the many, the nature of universals” (qtd. Dowd : 13).

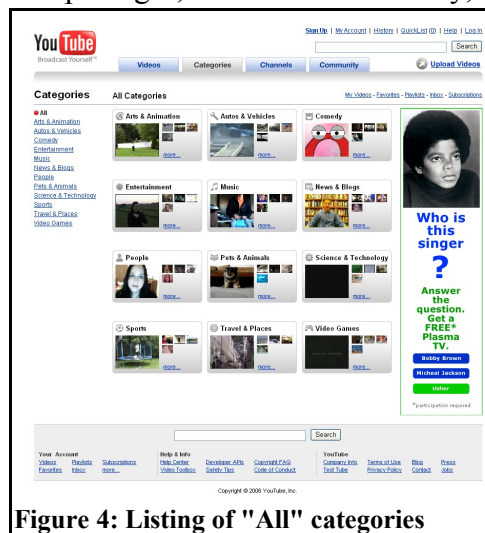


Figure 4: Listing of "All" categories

At first glance, YouTube’s content classification system is deceptively straightforward. It takes a few visits to fully enjoy the rabbit hole of an experience that is the YouTube classification system. The visitor encounters a system that is fluid: Genre is completely appropriated by the users, as well as the site itself, yielding an environment that challenges both its own structure and the dominant ideology. YouTube allows tubers to classify submissions’ genre, as well as add tags and keywords without any external mediation. Along with the way that categories are labeled and organized, this provides the key to locating resistance in the YouTube infrastructure.

If we assume that most users’ interaction pattern with YouTube is similar to other websites, then we would expect most visitors to find content either by using the keyword search function or by browsing through submissions listed

within each category. This is why the ability to control tags and keywords becomes an effective means of impacting experience. While tags and keywords give the impression of adherence to sanctioned criteria; the impression is wrong and the illusion quickly dissipates as one digs deeper into the content.

Let’s look at *Lost*, the television show. Using the search function, the keyword *Lost* returned 49,090 hits which can be navigated by relevance, date added, top ratings and total views. Each of these filters creates a different experience and presents the viewer with a different set of choices. Filtered by *date added*, only three of the results are related to the television show. Filtered by *view counts* or *top ratings*, only one result is related to the television show. Filtered by *relevance*, a majority of the top results returned are fan videos, sweeping odes that privilege secondary characters and relationships.

It is this ability to capture relevance and accommodate different readings by different communities that holds the promise of YouTube. This ambiguity is structural and allows for a cross-pollination of genre and topic not normally experienced in traditional media. It creates a new and unanticipated experience during each and every visit, independent of intention. If genre is an expectation rather than a definite set of textual features (Strong: 41), then YouTube’s structure is dialectical because while it strives to classify at every turn, it also confounds it by allowing individuated expression, as well as experience, of it. The sign-posts in this world are not based on a universal definition and are disconnected from the expectations of both history and culture.

## Conclusion

The question posed at the beginning was whether YouTube is reshaping the mode of production and challenging existing frameworks. Where does YouTube stand in the struggle between capital and the workers? Is it fighting *against* or *for* the dominant cultural forces? Or, is it a neutral digital bystander; merely the arena where the struggle is taking place?

The answer is that YouTube is in a struggle within itself. It allows for individual construction of narrative, but also bounds that narrative through its architecture; and as time passes, it is looking more and more like cultural mediums that have come before it. It remains to be seen to what degree YouTube can balance this tension and at what point which structure collapses onto which. What is certain is that capital does not stay still for long. Google's decision to acquire YouTube is just one example of that. Since its acquisition, YouTube has become increasingly focused on creating partnerships with traditional players such as Coca Cola, EMI, CNN, CBS and APPLE, just to name a few. How can the semiotic resistance continue in face of all this advertising revenue?

It would be edifying to declare that a revolution began a year ago; but what we see today, at most, is erosion. While there are many companies in the space, most are either a division of a larger corporation like MySpace or, if independent, like Revver, they have entered into partnerships with the larger corporations. What is certain is that as we come to the end of 2007, the hype, the promise, and the premise of YouTube continues. In 2006, Rishad Tobaccowala, CEO of Denuo, a new media consultancy said in an interview with Wired magazine, "If you aren't posting, you don't exist... People say, 'I post, therefore I am.'"<sup>11</sup> It is now late 2007, and one still wonders whether that is an oppressed, or an emancipated, "I am."

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<sup>11</sup> Wired Magazine

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