

Video Addiction

A confession by Seth Keen

"I don't use YouTube much..."

Video Vortex happened for me as a researcher and collaborator through my PhD research into online video practice that I started at RMIT University in Melbourne at the beginning of 2006. I was interested in being part of a project that generated a current critical perspective on what is occurring around video on the Internet. In terms of my own research, which is project-based the Video Vortex Amsterdam conference, the Argos forum in Brussels and the Montevideo exhibition program provided a platform to examine online video practice from a number of perspectives. The participants across all these events include not only theoreticians but also hands-on practitioners including artists, activists, hacktivists, media producers and web developers.

Hooked on video, I have a history of contact with video practice from early pioneering single-handed write, shoot, direct and edit TV documentaries shot on the Hi8 format, through to previous MA research that focused on the influences of the Internet on audiovisual narrative structures. Examining online video directly was a natural progression from these earlier experiences. Focusing on alternative and independent platforms is influenced by my interest in documentaries, the democratisation of access to production and autonomous methods of distribution made possible by the Internet. With the Internet, there is the potential for a diversity of content that is not centralised like mass media. I have always remained critical of populist genres, favouring instead avant-garde approaches that consider both form and content in their realisation. My passion is exploring new audiovisual territories as way to critique the status quo. I think it is important to continually question the way media is articulated and digested.

Craving a new direction, I made the decision as a practising TV documentary maker to either consolidate my practice or put myself in a position that enabled me to examine change and developments in audiovisual practice. Teaching and researching provided a fantastic space to pursue a position of reflection and critique. I currently teach in a very progressive media department that has been prepared to face up to the enormous changes occurring in media, as part of negotiating the influences of the Internet and new digital technologies. An integral part of the program focuses on the nexus between practice and theory. I teach courses that engage directly with the production and distribution of online video content. Exposure to both the hands-on technical aspects and theoretical context of this teaching feeds directly into my research and this topic.

There is a strong emphasis in the department and broader School of Applied Communication I teach in towards project-based research. A mode of research influenced by developments in this area within the School of Architecture and Design. I have been encouraged to think about the way that practice can be used to generate research. This can be research through practice, research on practice and research about practice. The Video Vortex events provide platforms to examine and critique existing online video practice. Alongside this event the collective videofunct project that I am working on utilises an iterative approach to generate new types of practice. Each prototype is used to inform the next experiment. These hybrid vlogs critique

online video practice by examining the adaptation of video for Internet publication and storytelling within this environment.

The research behind this conference spans almost two years through a significant period of growth in online video practice. The topic itself covers an enormous amount of developments at a pace that only occurs on the Internet. A pace that can really only be managed through a collective flexible process of inquiry. This is research that relies on a network of people working together towards a specific focus. Social software tools like social bookmarking and mail lists play an integral role in this type of approach, where the sharing and transparency of information is paramount.

It is hard to ignore the pivotal role YouTube has played in making video the medium of the moment on the Internet. Economic success stories like YouTube generate a flurry of copycat activity and reappropriation as developers look for the next latest thing that will get users flocking to their address. At the same time a website like YouTube raises all sorts of other questions around things like ethics, copyright and aesthetics to name a few. YouTube represents a significant shift in how people are beginning to understand the potential of the Internet. But, unfortunately due to the speed of these developments and the hype, there are very few critical points of view. It is the unnoticed small-scale alternative developments that often provide a contradictory viewpoint. With the conference interested in both the success and failure of YouTube, the research has revealed many projects that respond to YouTube from a questioning critical position. It is the close analysis of these projects that provides crucial insights into this topic.

I don't use YouTube much unlike some of my students who are 24-7 addicts or even a colleague who has given up TV and uses editorial services like videosift to do long chill-out sessions after work. I tend to work across all of the video archive websites and the Internet in search of online video content that I think provides useful context in my teaching and research, these I bookmark on delicious. I think online video provides great opportunities to distribute presentations and interviews as part of the open knowledge mandate. These opportunities I think are still yet to be fully realised in terms of archiving and the metadata tagging of the video timeline as part of accessing information in smaller non-linear units rather than in the larger traditional linear form.

What I do notice with teaching in this area is some of the issues that students encounter with YouTube. There is very little consciousness of the terms and conditions that YouTube imposes and other social media websites like MySpace and Facebook. In most cases it takes students awhile to realise that just because a website is fashionable and seen as being successful due to popularity, that this does not necessarily make it bona fide. Over time there is this realisation that there are other services that may offer more for the user in terms of respecting their rights and aesthetic needs. These other options are often located by tuning into online discussions that critique and lay out the pros and cons.

Somehow there is also a blindness to the aesthetic restrictions that a website like YouTube places on producers of online video content. YouTube has frame size, file type and compression quality control over the video uploads which leaves no room for individual aesthetic input from the producer. I see this as setting publishing standards, a referral to old media like TV broadcasting. Also, it seems too early in the development of online video to grasp the concept that online video could move beyond the YouTube regurgitated TV-cinema model of single-

channel linear clips. Ironically, to demonstrate this point, I heard recently that there was TV program that was broadcasting YouTube videos in the funniest home video style. Beyond this direct translation, I believe there are types of online video that can be more responsive to the materialities of the Internet, exploring linking, networked structures and other multi-channel forms of presentation.

Understanding the friction around copyright on YouTube and more broadly the Internet is another significant hurdle. Discussions on copyright has produced some of the most vocal input from students, it is a topic that attracts a lot of interest and passionate debate. Initially, the laissez faire attitude of YouTube towards copyright is really attractive and offers a lot of freedom. Often the most important requirement seems to be having the option to grab a copy and get it onto your own website or blog. Exposure to the varying approaches towards copyright from copyleft, creative commons through to conglomerates like Hollywood aiming for total control, raises all sorts of questions for students who are aiming to become media professionals. YouTube does not offer the user a choice when it comes to being able to choose some of these alternatives, like applying creative commons licenses for example.

A more hidden aspect is questioning the way YouTube as a commercial enterprise utilises creative labour for economic gain. The huge financial success of YouTube and other websites like MySpace for example have brought more attention onto this issue. But, from what I can tell, for the moment, this is restricted to a minority of theorists rather than becoming a significant public debate. It is intriguing that all the creative activities from making, uploading to favourite lists and beyond are all taking place under one roof, like a factory plant. A minority of owners at one centralised address have the power to remove users and their content. But, these websites offer free storage space, along with the prospect of public exposure and possible celebrity status. These attractive qualities for users often overshadow the economic inquiry.