

Television 2.0: YouTube and the Emergence of Homecasting.

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Abstract:

The creation and distribution of user-generated content via video-sharing sites such as YouTube and GoogleVideo both expands and alters our rapport with the medium of television. This article proposes to introduce the concept of “homecasting” (as distinct from broadcasting and narrowcasting) as a step towards designing a meaningful framework for understanding the current mediascape and the technological, social, and cultural forces shaping it. Rather than rendering conventional television programming obsolete, the emerging institutional practice of homecasting is dependent upon the customary practices of broadcasting and narrowcasting. But how do new sites for homecasting help “institutionalize” this new cultural phenomenon? And what are the different proprietary and cultural strategies involved in shaping new social practices and cultural forms? For media scholars, the challenge is to make sense of an up-and-coming institutional practice in a field of forces still dominated by established media institutions, systems, and forms.

Key words:

User generated content, YouTube, broadcast institution, distributed networks, convergence culture.

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Introduction

The end of 2006 was marked by two events both flagging the remarkable rise of a novel form of media production and consumption. In October, Google acquired the popular video-sharing website YouTube—a site that had yet to celebrate its first anniversary and welcome its first profit—for the preposterous amount of 1.65 billion dollar. The buy-out was part of a trend: eight months earlier, Murdoch Inc. purchased videosite MySpace for an equally impressive sum. Obviously, Google’s acquirement was not about bringing innovative technology to the house, as its own GoogleVideo was already running on superior software; it was about bringing in communities of users. Sites such as YouTube, GoogleVideo, MySpace and DailyMotion boast millions of daily users willing to download and upload self-made videos, short TV-clips, and movie trailers. In December 2006, *Time Magazine*, nominated “You” as its person-of-the-year—an unknown web-soldier symbolizing the aggregate production prowess of millions of web users around the world. The “YouWeb”, also known as “Web 2.0” (O’Reilly 2005), refers to the second generation of web-based technologies that foregrounds user-controlled platforms, inviting productive engagement and enticing bloggers, music uploaders, reviewers, writers of entries, private traders, video sharers, and others to interact with and contribute content to the virtual universe.

In light of these events, what significance does the explosion of video-sharing sites such as YouTube actually represent? Are they merely the latest silicon bubble or are they indicative of an emerging cultural phenomenon warranting serious reconsideration of the institutional scheme of broadcasting, television, and viewers? This essay argues in favour of the latter option. The “tube” in YouTube consciously positions the user in dialogue with the “device formerly known as television”: a broadcasting system historically cemented in centralized production, simultaneous programming, and mass reception (Uricchio, 2004). Characteristics of broadcasting as an institutional system were never written in stone, but they have been in flux ever since television’s inception. Technological, social, and cultural changes have forced adjustments upon television’s institutional structure as well as upon its practices

and programmed content. The medium's shift from broadcasting to narrowcasting via a variety of alternate carriers (cable, satellite, Internet) has resulted in a substantial alteration of interfaces between viewers and programs (TiVo, WebTV, video-on-demand systems). The emergence of video-sharing websites adds yet another dimension to personalized program packages selected by viewers: we can now produce our own audiovisual contents and distribute them from our homes to a potentially worldwide audience. The "you" in YouTube signifies a new type of collaborative co-producer of media content whom we have come to refer to as a "user" of audiovisual content. Rather than simply offering a new technological environment for video-sharing, YouTube and similar sites are well underway to engender a new social practice that is distinct from the conventional agencies of viewers, audiences, or consumers.

The growth of self-produced audiovisual content in a contemporary culture that is still dominated by broadcasting and narrowcasting, prompts media scholars to assess trends across new production platforms and define new frameworks for understanding the current mediascape and the institutional, technological, social, and cultural forces shaping it (Croteau 2006: 343). In this article, I will first introduce and specify the concept of "homecasting" and its emerging institutional structure in relation to "broadcasting." Rather than rendering conventional television programming obsolete, homecasting sites such as YouTube and GoogleVideo both expand and alter our rapport with the medium of television. Second, I will explore the new social practice generated by homecasting. Users are active creators and adaptive agents in addition to still being viewers and consumers of televised content. Accepting users' agency as part of an indivisible spectrum of production and consumption appears to be problematic in a conventional broadcast model where recipients are "programmed" as receivers. Finally, I will turn to the new "cultural form" promoted by video-sharing sites. Programs and formats, the exclusive end products owned and distributed by the broadcasting industry, are now challenged by homecasters which stimulate a new cultural form that subverts the legal and economic model imposed by broadcasting. Reassessing institutional structures, social practices and cultural forms I will argue why it is so important to provide a cultural framework for understanding a field of forces that is entirely dominated by established media institutions, legal systems, and economic schemes.

Institutional structure: From Broadcasting to Homecasting

Ever since the popularization of the Internet, in the mid-1990s, technology gurus have prophesied the decline and eventual demise of broadcasting (Gilder 1994; Miller and Allen, 1995). The trendy expression “postbroadcasting” has come to signify the idea that television, after its convergence with the Internet and other digital technologies, will gradually disappear as a distinct institutional structure. Projections of a “postbroadcasting age” are generally warranted by a deterministic logic: they tend to reduce “broadcasting” to a technological system that is bound to *affect* social use. The phrase symbolizes the danger of subscribing to a simple replacement theory of consecutive media constellations. When discussing transformations in the mediascape, we need to account for its complexities rather than trumpet its revolutions.¹ Broadcasting never disappeared when narrowcasting and webcasting via the Internet gained popularity. Quite contrarily, Jostein Gripsrud (2004: 220-22) convincingly demonstrates the continued importance of broadcasting in its function to serve regional and national communities, even in a five-hundred-channel environment. The distribution of user-generated content via sites as YouTube and GoogleVideo, in my view, will not expedite television’s obsolescence. However, they are already challenging the broadcast industry’s institutional structure and its technological and economic infrastructure.

When Raymond Williams defined broadcasting in 1974, he referred to a technological system as well as to its manifestation as a social institution which acquires meaning in relation to its social use and preferred cultural forms. Williams insisted that the adoption of new technological systems is not enough to establish a new institutional practice, since technology, social use, and cultural form always evolve in conjunction. It is important to preserve this kind of complexity when introducing the concept of homecasting: we not only need to ask what it means and why we need this new concept, but we also need to define its position in relation to already existing institutional practices such as broadcasting and narrowcasting. I will first define the technical specifics of homecasting in relation to conventional broadcasting before turning to its institutional and economic structure.

Homecasting is the use of video-sharing websites to download and upload prerecorded, rerecorded, tinkered, and self-produced audiovisual content via personal computers *from the home* and *to anybody’s home* (that is, homes with a networked PC). The term homecasting betrays its kinship to broadcasting on the one hand and to “home video” on the other. Like “webcasting”, the term indicates the technological convergence of TV and PC in the homes of individual users (Ledoux Book and Barnett, 2006), but “home” has more social and cultural connotations than “web”—an issue I will return to in the next section. Couched in the rhetoric of technology, homecasting means two-way communication via the

Internet—a form of transmission in which both parties involved transmit information—as opposed to the one-way distribution of audiovisual content involved in broadcasting. Broadcasting provides a centralized point from which information and entertainment is efficiently distributed to citizens or consumers—a function crucial to the construction of communal (national, regional) identities. In recent decades, the “centralized point” of programming power has been complemented by the decentralized distribution of audiovisual content by production companies targeting specific niche audiences. Narrowcasting, as this phenomenon is commonly named, was made possible by the proliferation of hundreds of cable outlets engendering a fragmentation of audiences and leading to socially splintered mediascapes (Smith-Shomade, 2004). The explosion of digital channels in the early years of the new millennium added the possibility of personal viewing schedules and content targeted at specific consumer profiles of preferred lifestyles and cultural tastes. Lisa Parks (2004: 135) introduced the term “flexible microcasting” to refer to a “set of industrial and technological practices that work to isolate the individual cultural tastes of viewers/consumers in order to refine direct marketing in television—that is, the process of delivering specific audiences to advertisers.” But even the term “microcasting” refers to the one-way direction of media messages, so it does not cover the contribution of self-produced content via web-based video-sharing sites.

It may be important to note that technological conditions never prohibited two-way traffic via the airwaves; economic and cultural forces historically defined the one-way communication vector in traditional broadcast systems like radio and television—a system that also instituted the social fissure between professional broadcasters and amateur producers and distributors. The current availability of (cheap) digital technologies may contribute to the transformation of an institutional practice, but technological conditions are never sufficient to explain an institutional shift towards the implementation of two-way audiovisual systems.² Indeed, users of homecasting channels such as YouTube have an array of affordable digital equipment at their disposal to produce and distribute audiovisual content from their homes, such as computer editing software and broadband connections. And yet, we also need to look at the organization of homecast structures vis-à-vis broadcast structures to explain the growing popular affection for two-way audiovisual communication.

For one thing, homecasting never set out to pre-empt the traditional broadcasting industry, nor will it ever replace television; on the contrary, the ultimate convergence of PC and TV aims at a technological fluidity of systems that lets audiovisual content flow across multiple channels, resulting in “ever more complex relations between top-down corporate

media and bottom-up participatory culture” (Jenkins, 2006: 243). Established broadcast organizations are currently renegotiating their relationship with the new kids on the block, such as rapidly growing media-mogul Google, not because they like this development per se, but because it is crystal clear that user-generated content is a high value-added product that will attract the interest of advertisers. Whereas broadcasters fashion channels to attract specific audiences, homecasters enable groups of voluntary, active users to form their own “target groups”—users with like-minded tastes and lifestyles—a commercial asset which value has not escaped the attention of advertising agencies. If NBC, ABC, CBS and PBS can be considered the construction companies of the media world, YouTube and GoogleVideo are likely to become the Home Depots of the television industry. They cater to the do-it-yourself segment of the content industry, offering raw feedstock of video and delivering the software tools for home assembly, the way Home Depot sells lumber and hardware, paint and jackhammers. In recent years, there has been a sharp rise in the sales of digital video cameras, camera phones with video capabilities and photoshop software. Rather than delivering end-products to the consumers’ home, the new intermediaries offer semi-manufactured goods and tools to be appropriated by individual users.

But within the “technological fluidity of systems” there are substantial differences between broadcasting and narrowcasting on the one hand and homecasting on the other. Whereas broadcast-activity is confined to a centralized space and a central agency that controls the supply and deliverance of signals, the Internet connotes a space for purposeful activity where reception and production of signals occurs from numerous individual nodes in the network. Feeds of this two-way traffic are neither provided for nor controlled by a central production/distribution agency. The absence of a centralized sender and the potential for two-way signalling constitutes the most profound difference with conventional broadcast or narrowcast organizations. It may be somewhat premature to predict a bright future for independent content producers, but one of the key aspects of homecast technology is its capability to remove the (central) distributor entirely from the process (Ha, Dick, and Ryu 2003). Families, political activists, and garage bands are equally capable of streaming their messages across the Internet, be it person-to-person or worldwide. However, the distributed nature of homecast networks does not imply *absence* of control. As Galloway (2004: 7) states, control in distributed systems is defined by protocol—“a technique for achieving voluntary regulation within a contingent environment.” Unlike broadcast networks, homecast-organizations such as YouTube or GoogleVideo do not decide what viewers get to see at what time, since they have no control over content. And yet, they set the regulations for trafficking,

they define the technological conditions for uploading and downloading, and they require each user to agree with their “terms of use,” even if compliance with these rules is again in the hands of anonymous users working from their homes.³ Protocols are thus at the same time technologically, institutionally and socially controlling mechanisms.

Homecasters also propose a profoundly different relationship to conventional television, a relationship that, at first sight, seems to bear more resemblance to the making of homevideos than to watching TV-programs. For decades, people have spent their leisure time filming family life and showing off the results to neighbours or relatives. But upon closer analysis, we can see that distribution via video-websites reaches circles far beyond those of families and friends: most uploading activity either caters to specific audience groups of anonymous individuals who have expressed common interests (equalling the intentions of “narrow-”casting) or is geared toward the widest possible audience (equalling the intentions of “broad”-casting). Many interfaces’ default modes betray users’ inclination to open up their personal lives to the virtual universe, and to commit individual expressions to anonymous audiences. Broadcasting conventionally signifies the central institution located within the public sphere, whose task is to make essential information, knowledge and cultural experiences available to all members of society. Homecasting accommodates the individual in the private sphere who feels the urge to make his or her opinions, insights and experiences available to everyone out there. To bend a familiar cliché: if broadcasting opens a window onto the world, homecasting deploys the same looking-glass to have the world stare right back into the living room.

Whereas broadcasting is conventionally associated with the formation of national and regional identities, and narrowcasting engenders viewers’ identification with ethnic, lifestyle or special interest communities, homecasting capitalizes on personal expression and identity building by means of posting one’s own creative content on the web. Nevertheless, the social activities attributed to the three types of “casting” are closely interconnected and mutually inclusive. Identity building and individual expression do not take place outside the sphere of broadcast media: in fact, there is no space outside the world of media, but that mediated world is an integral part of everyday life, inundating the minds of people with numerous modes of identification. One of the most striking ambitions of YouTube users is to become part of the professional media world of stars and fame, a desire expressed most acutely by music-video sites such as SellaBand and GarageBand, where users are carved up into “artists” and “believers”: believers buy “shares” in aspiring artists’ creative endeavours who can thus collect enough funds to record a CD in a professional studio. Taped performances of VJs,

comedians, and rappers abound on MySpace, where some young posters announce their modest goals to “cut mega-deals with big entertainment companies”, to “be on the cover of *Cosmopolitan*” or to “sign a fat contract with MTV.” The explicit or implied goal of many homecasters to be broadcast on television illustrates how the mediascape provides a seamless space for “upward mobility” in terms of recognition by, successively, few, many and mass audiences. On all levels, homecasting is tightly interwoven with broadcasting. This double-bind of mediated dependency is part of a more general trend toward the public mediation of private life—a trend to which John Thompson (1995: 215) alerted us ten years *before* the emergence of the YouWeb:

The self becomes increasingly organized as a reflexive project through which the individual constructs... a sense of self-identity. At the same time, however, individuals are increasingly dependent on a range of social institutions and systems which provide them the means—both material and symbolic—for the construction of their life-projects.

Not coincidentally, YouTube’s website logo is “broadcast yourself”, connoting the close interconnection between the platforms of private and public expression, between self and world. Those platforms are becoming increasingly complex and interlocked, and consequently, their entanglement needs even more intensified scrutiny (Thompson, 2005).

The social practice of homecasting: Viewers and consumers, users and You-sers

In the early years of television, up until the 1970s, academic studies of audiovisual content for the most part addressed the viewer as an agent of meaning construction (Mores, 1990). Scholars from the humanities either emphasized the intrinsic engagement of the viewer with the medium (McLuhan, 1964), they stressed the “multi-accentuality of the sign” (Volosinov, 1973) or noted the role of subject positions in the text’s ideological effect (Brunsdon and Morley, 1978). It was not until the 1980s that television viewers began to be theorized and understood more expressly in the context of institutional production and consumer routines. The notion of spectatorship which had, up to then, been rooted in a primarily textual basis gave way to a notion of reception that prioritized the material practice of watching television in everyday life; household routines and viewing behaviour caught the interest of cultural theorists and sociologists (Morley, 1986; Radway, 1987; Modleski, 1984). The object of study

changed from a relatively static concept of “mass audience” to a more dynamic concept covering the range of activities people perform with and around TV (Radway, 1988). Not coincidentally, this shift in the conceptualization of spectatorship from “viewer” to “consumer” concurred with technological changes that helped increase viewers’ control over unilateral programming.⁴ The invention and wide implementation of VCRs, remote control devices, and cable television not only expanded the range of options for viewers, but also empowered them to interrupt the flow of set programming by means of zapping and timeshifting. Television consumers’ behaviour included active engagement with the entire spectrum of the tube’s technological apparatus—a spectrum adequately accounted for by media theorists shifting their attention to both viewers and consumers (Ang, 1991; Hobson, 1982).

Since the early 1990s, the terms “viewer” and “consumer” no longer sufficiently accounted for the growing participation of ordinary viewers in television programs, as the boundaries between producers and consumers of television content started to blur. Watchers became voluntary participants in the production of reality television, quiz shows, dating programs, talk shows, and makeover programs (Teurlings, 2005). And what started off as an occasional program featuring home videos (America’s Funniest Home Videos) resulted in a still growing number of viewers submitting their videos or photographs to news or entertainment programs, sometimes providing broadcasting companies with crucial visual evidence or unique audiovisual material. Since the onset of the new millennium, the consumer has gradually entered a new domain of audiovisual production and distribution—a domain previously inaccessible to amateurs, due to prohibitive costs of equipment and dissemination via analogue television channels. The emergence of cheap, high-quality digital equipment and computer editing software, combined with easy internet access, increasing bandwidth, and user-friendly video sites such as YouTube and GoogleVideo have facilitated the massive generation of amateur-produced content.⁵ Heretofore adequate concepts such as consumer and “prosumer”, despite their emphasis on active engagement with media, seem to be lacking when trying to apply them to the recent proliferation of postings on video-sharing websites.⁶ “Prosumers” and consumers, even if denoting active contributors to television programs, are still caught in the binary economic vocabulary of the television industry and they are thus denied a constitutive, *creative* agency.

The term “user” has become widely accepted as the new denomination for active contributors to the YouWeb in general, and for video sharers via Internet platforms in particular. “User”, in contrast to “viewer and “consumer” connotes active contribution rather

than passive reception. And yet, television viewers and consumers were never merely passive recipients of pre-packaged content via television or PC, as above theorists have convincingly argued; they were often participants and contributors to television shows. Mutatis mutandis, “users” of video-sharing sites are not always active contributors of videos—the makers and uploaders of YouTube’s content. In fact, the term “user” fails to cover the intricate intertwining of viewing and consuming behaviour with activities involving the generation and exchange of content. Perhaps the term “you-ser” better covers the three distinctive activities that inevitably merge in the evolving social practice of videosharing via Internet platforms such as YouTube. So what exactly is a you-ser?

First of all, every you-ser is a *viewer* and, by extension, a *browser* and *evaluator* of audiovisual content. Viewing is a far more popular activity than producing when it comes to video-sharing sites: the “100 million users worldwide” boasted by YouTube are not all generators of content, on the contrary. Most of them are downloaders, and a much smaller number are (more or less frequent) uploaders.⁷ Not surprisingly, the heavy price tag for YouTube and similar sites is largely determined by their daily numbers of viewers—a fact well known to production companies and commercial distributors who can no longer afford *not* to post videoclips and film trailers on these sites to serve as teasers. But even if most you-sers of videosites “passively” view a selection of clippings, their download *activity* automatically contributes to the site’s navigability and usability. Every download counts towards the popularity of specific postings, even if this happens unwittingly via software filters. Labels and tags, indicating subject genres, are another mode to help the browser navigate through stacks of contents—an organizing principle reminiscent of both library indexes and television program guides. Beyond being viewers and browsers, a number of users are active evaluators, posting comments and ranking their favourite videos deploying the five-star system. The technological settings of sites like YouTube are such that the activities of viewing, browsing, and evaluating integrally add to the site’s operability.

Secondly, you-sers have all the characteristics of *consumers*, but in addition they are *sharers* and *community builders*. There’s nothing new about social participation per se: even in the good old days of TV programming, consumers exchanged their enthusiasm for specific series via fan clubs and what we have come to call “taste communities” (Jenkins, 1992). But as Jenkins (2006: 26-7) observes, the new generation of convergence media gives rise to an intensified mode of participation that stimulate communal rather than individualist modes of reception. Due to the recentness of the video-sharing phenomenon, few academic efforts have yet been undertaken to study you-sers’ habitual individual and communal routines

empirically. But by carefully scrutinizing these sites' interfaces, we may sketch the rough contours of an emerging social practice. For instance, every single download explicitly offers buttons for sharing, spreading or "flagging" a specific clip. The default mode of these sites is sharing, as evidenced for instance by DailyMotion which harbours groupings around videos themed "Greek Music", "Manga", "Cine Club" or "BuffyVerse". A substantial percentage of videos posted on these sites show fragments of broadcast television content, such as funny episodes from favourite series. The custom of exchanging verbal accounts of a favourite scene watched on television seems to yield to sharing the actual clipping via a website, so users can test their tastes and sense of humour against those of others. Peer groups may consist of members who meet in real life or members who have never met beyond the virtual platform. The size of groups varies from a handful to hundreds or even thousands of likeminded you-sers. Jenkins (2006: 20) aptly describes the ideal consumer as "active, emotionally engaged, and socially networked ... the audience is inside the brand community."

A third and decisive characteristic of you-sers is indeed their ability and eagerness to *create* and *upload* audiovisual content to their favourite sites—a creativity that comes in various flavours. The plainest category of self-produced content consists of amateur home videos, featuring everything from family situations to street accidents to angry politicians caught off guard by bystanders' camera phones. Clearly, the genre is a descendant of *America's Funniest Home Videos* and it is not uncommon to find uploads on GoogleVideo that have also been showcased on *AFHV*—a fact that may enhance the clip's popularity. Another class of creative users deploys recorded TV-fragments to manipulate their content with the intention to criticize or poke fun. A famed example was a clip on YouTube featuring a dexterously manipulated Donald Trump in *The Apprentice* who barks the ominous oneliner "You're fired!" at a stammering George W. Bush after one of his political blunders. Yet another group of users uploads short movies or music videos, carefully shot and edited by aspiring moviemakers or musicians. And needless to say, users turn the webcam onto themselves to film monologues, dances, songs, or any performance the upload of which may attract the attention of viewers. As some critics have noticed, video-sharing sites are extending the *Idols*-format from television to the internet, thus opening a window onto individuals' "anxieties of YouTube fame."⁸

In short, you-sers of audiovisual websites both coincide with, and differ from, television viewers and consumers. The "you" in YouTube relates to videos as symbolic content to be viewed, browsed, and evaluated; as consumers of content, you-sers engage in the habitual activities of content sharing and community building; and the technological

conditions of video-sharing sites stimulate the creation and distribution of self-produced content in various forms. Indisputably, downloading, browsing and uploading are activities distinctly related to a web-based medium, but perhaps more noteworthy than these websites' idiosyncratic features is their entrenchment in the old-fashioned medium of television. The dialogue between self-produced content and televised content is more than arbitrary: it is actually at the heart of YouTube's and GoogleVideo's technological and cultural constitution. You-sers are still viewers and consumers of television; the tube is part and parcel of a web-mediated interaction that urges the user to respond in kind—that is, in the same audiovisual language and through the same medium that was previously monopolized by broadcast and production companies. This is not to say that differences between amateurs and professionals are entirely cancelled out; and neither does the YouWeb completely erase the distinction between producers and consumers. The most defining feature of video-websites is that they accommodate *both* amateurs *and* (aspiring) professionals; they offer space to *both* downloaders *and* uploaders to interact with and relate to each other. The concept of you-ser, far from being a replacement of familiar categories such as viewer and consumer, underscores their interdependency.

Homecasting as Cultural Form

We can see a similar intertwining at the level of cultural form, the third aspect of this emerging phenomenon, besides institutional-technological conditions and social use. Broadcasting's unique product—the fruit of the creative audiovisual culture industry—are *programs*. Television programs have always been tradable and consumable goods that were produced for specific markets and were preferably also sold to other (national, regional) markets. Cultural forms, including TV-programs, were considered end products and were accordingly protected by laws regulating ownership and copyrights. Since the early 1990s, we have witnessed the emergence of *formats* as a new profitable unit of production and marketing in addition to programs. Formats are half-products instead of end products, leaving room for local specification and production, thus rendering them attractive to local stations all over the globe. Formats lend themselves extremely well to incorporating local “ordinary” consumers to star in formula-driven reality shows tested in international markets (Waisbord, 2004). Despite the trends toward globalization and internationalization, TV-audiences still preferably identify with national or regional productions (Freedman, 2003). And more importantly, formats are commercially rewarding cultural forms, even if they are not entirely

“copyright-proof”.⁹ The fact that formats have become widely accepted in the broadcast-entertainment industry, attests to the industry’s ability to respond to new economical demands.

The new types of content produced and distributed by homecasters will be inevitably defined in terms of (or in contrast to) programs and formats—cultural forms appropriated by broadcasting organizations. As O’Brien and Fitzgerald (2006) assert, video-sharing sites harbour three general categories of content: original creations, transformative derivatives, and copied or “ripped” content. From the articulation of these categories it occurs that one form of content is preying on another while obeying a succinct hierarchy: users can only “rip” and “derive” from television programs, but television programs can never be derivatives of “original content” created by individual users. And yet, in the past, television programs have also been “derivatives” of users’ creations—think, for instance, of programs like the hugely successful *America’s Funniest Home Videos* which is entirely made of self-produced content. However natural it may be to use existing cultural forms as a point of reference, I think it is important to name and specify the type of content produced by homecasters in its own right, as a means to carefully catalogue the *cultural* dynamics by which user agency is encouraged or inhibited. As legal scholar Rosemary Coombe (1998: 250) has convincingly argued, many of the most accessible and widely known cultural forms around which meanings are forged “are not shared in a singular collectivity, but are the private properties of corporations with economic interest in preserving their exclusivity.” Coombe and other legal scholars (Lessig, 2002) promote the politics of recoding cultural forms, or coding new forms before they get cemented in juridical concepts that ground legal categories, as a significant critical strategy.

So what would be an appropriate term to label the preferred cultural form of homecasting? “Fragment” and “clip” are inadequate words to describe the kind of content contributed to YouTube or GoogleVideo. Evidently, we can find many examples of clips and fragments posted on these websites, but “videoclips” refers to ready-made cultural forms (usually music-videos) and “fragments” suggests that the all uploads are cut from pre-existing content. Perhaps the word “snippet” best characterizes the new cultural form promoted by homecasting channels. In contrast to customary programs, snippets are of limited length, potentially ranging from several seconds to several hours, but the bulk of postings averages between three and six minutes. “Snippet” also covers the fragmentary nature of most uploads, even if they imitate the begin-middle-end form of a polished audiovisual production. Although most snippets are one-time contributions, they may be accessed serially, for instance, when the same uploader posts a line of thematically connected videos.¹⁰ But

arguably the most crucial feature of snippets is their status as *resource* rather than product; they are meant for recycling in addition to storing, collecting, and sharing. Snippets, by common agreement, are posted by homecasters to be reused, reproduced, commented upon, or tinkered with.

Bringing home Coombe's point that cultural forms are forced to fit the judicial straightjacket dictated by corporations, it is no surprise to find how YouTube and other video-sites define homecast content primarily in legal terms. But if we read YouTube's terms of use, we can witness the clash of two profoundly different sets of premises:

You hereby grant YouTube a worldwide, non-exclusive, royalty-free, sublicenseable and transferable license to use, reproduce, distribute, prepare derivative works of, display, and perform the User Submissions in connection with the YouTube Website and YouTube's (and its successor's) business, including without limitation for promoting and redistributing part or all of the YouTube Website (and derivative works thereof) in any media formats and through any media channels. You also hereby *grant each user of the YouTube Website* a non-exclusive license to access your User Submissions through the Website, and to use, reproduce, distribute, *prepare derivative works* of, display and perform such User Submissions as permitted through the functionality of the Website and under these Terms of Service.

(<http://www.youtube.com/t/terms>, emphases added, JvD).

This content licensing agreement adopted by YouTube, and automatically signed by its users, leans towards a creative commons status of audiovisual content. No one can claim ownership of posted snippets within the realm of the site, but the same agreement contains explicit warnings against the illegal copying of broadcast content, or, for that matter, any audiovisual material that is protected by copyright. Paradoxically, YouTube sets the standards for a new type of cultural form—the snippet—while also inevitably inducing the incorporation of content produced under an almost adversative regulatory regime. Even if the terms of use say “Don't copy protected content,” the new cultural form explicitly encourages you-sers to regard *all* feeds as potential input—recyclable resources in the life cycles of creative culture. The right to “own” seems squarely at odds with the “right to appropriate” audiovisual content, but the struggle over the right to define (legal) ownership over audiovisual content is also a cultural issue.

As said, naming and defining a distinctive cultural form as part of the institutional practice of homecasting is a deliberate strategy to assign users agency, as opposed to consumer agency. Although snippets are not the same as programs and will never replace the need for programs or formats, it is imperative to regard this cultural form in its own right. Extending the comparison between YouTube and Home Depot, it is equally preposterous to imagine an organization of broadcasters to legally frustrate or thwart the activities of homecasters than it is to conceive of a lobby of construction companies trying to prohibit home owners from remodelling, renovating or even completely demolishing and rebuilding the house they once bought from these companies. And yet, consumers who take a short clip from recorded television content or from the DVD they already paid for, and use it as a resource in their own creative product, are liable to be prosecuted as a result of copyright laws that increasingly deny users the right to cite or rephrase parts of intellectual end products such as programs, clips, or films (Lessig, 2004). Communication theorist Tarleton Gillespie (2006: 664) makes a strong case for the user's right to tinker with technology and content, as he argues against software and hardware being legally protected from user's interference by Digital Rights Management and other flagging systems: "The maker must be able to experience culture not as something to be consumed but as raw material for more production and to experience themselves as having agency with that material." Sites such as YouTube and GoogleVideo, which are currently in the process of defining their legal and economic position as homecasting institutions, have to strike a delicate balance between the claims of users as rightful creators and tinkerers of content, and the proprietary claims of broadcasters as legal owners of some of the content that is tinkered with. Therefore, it is crucial to not define the current debate on video-sharing sites exclusively in terms of market economics or legal ownership, but to phrase the discussion in culturally relevant terms that emphasize the coevolution of technological systems, social institutions, and cultural forms.

Television 2.0: The Next Generation

Just as media and cultural theorists responded to technical and social changes in the 1980s and 1990s by adjusting their conceptual framework to account for active television consumers and narrowcast practices, they should now assume responsibility to theorize these concepts in the wake of social and technological transformations pertaining to web-based video-sharing practices. The debate on user-generated video content has only just begun, and if we take the legal dispute over illegal downloading in the audio-sector (Napster, KaZaa) as an indication

of what might happen to the audiovisual segment of the mediascape, the signals are not very promising. Therefore, media scholars should design relevant theoretical frameworks, thus naming and procuring spaces for cultural interaction and creation, before those spaces are entirely defined by industrial players who set the rules. After all, when confronted with the need for extra living space, we should evaluate the building's structure by inspecting its very foundations before adding on new rooms.

According to Yale law professor Yochai Benkler (2006: 2), the transformation of our media ecology has reached a critical moment, as we are witnessing a growing stand-off between the “cooperative non-market production of information and culture” versus the “incumbents of the industrial information economy.” Legislative and judicial forces have formed a so-called enclosure movement to advance proprietary models of information production at the expense of burdening non-market, non-proprietary production. Urgent issues to be settled over the next few years are both open ended and predictable: will broadcast producers leave enough space for the socio-cultural practices of Web-based audiovisual content production? What are the options, liabilities, and opportunities facing the new owners (and users) of homecast channels? And how will conventional broadcast companies adjust to the inevitable growth of the do-it-yourself branch of the television industry? Will “Television 2.0” become a seamless web of broadcast, narrowcast, and homecast channels in which broadcast-producers insist on the demarcation between old regimes of privileged production while users choose to ignore them? Or will the various cultural forms peacefully coexist once a consensus is reached over traffic regulation? It is too early to tell which direction this transformation will take us, but this does not discharge academics from the responsibility to sketch the stakes involved in this (ideological) struggle.

In order to explore the possible minefield, let us return once more to the two events that in part prompted this essay: the acquisition of YouTube by Google and the nomination of “you” as *Time Magazine*'s person of the year. Google obviously has strong confidence in the communities flocking around YouTube, as evidenced by its willingness to pay a hefty sum per user in October 2006.¹¹ By buying up YouTube, Google knowingly assumed the risks of substantial lawsuits from big players in the content business, so the company's lawyers immediately started to strike deals, settle claims, and solve disputes before they reach the court room. At this moment, Hollywood producers hesitate whether to see YouTube-Google as friend or foe: either they go after them and use their historic prowess in electronic media distribution to impose their rules on this newcomer, or they side with them in creating new business and marketing models that help homecasting channels to create buzz for

conventional television products.¹² Whichever turn the face-off will take, it should be clear that both broadcasters and new media companies such as Google are after the same bounty: attention from advertisers and users (Caldwell, 2004). And where elephants fight, it's the grass(roots) that suffers. One way or another, regular you-sers of YouTube should be aware of how innovative advertising strategies are infiltrating "their" homecast-environment that used to be virtually freed from commercial exploitation. For original YouTube adepts, the purchase by Google may turn out to be a choice between Scylla and Charybdis. Google's strategies may be manifestly different from those of the media moguls dominating the television branch, their preferred model of homecasting also distinctly diverges from YouTube's.

Since its takeover by Google, YouTube's terms of use are increasingly incorporating more advertiser-friendly and owner-friendly conditions. As said before, YouTube's "terms of use" regulated the modification and re-distribution of user-generated content by means of a license that comes close to a creative commons agreement. GoogleVideo, while adopting the principle of free sharing and recycling of content, includes in its license the provision that uploaders make their fruits of creative labour and metadata available to Google's servers and third parties:

You are directing and authorizing Google to, and granting Google a royalty-free, non-exclusive right and license to, host, cache, route, transmit, store, copy, modify, distribute, perform, display, reformat, excerpt, facilitate the sale or rental of copies of, analyze, and create algorithms based on the Authorized Content in order to (i) host the Authorized Content on Google's servers, (ii) *index the* Authorized Content; (iii) display, perform and distribute the *Authorized Content*, in whole or in part, in the territory(ies) designated in the Metadata Form, *in connection with Google products and services now existing or hereafter developed, including without limitation for syndication on third party sites.* (https://upload.video.google.com/video_terms.html , emphases added JvD)

By signing the agreement, users of GoogleVideo subscribe to a substantially different system of homecasting than YouTube regulars. Googlevideo subtly opens up user-generated content to information marketers, (commercial) search engines, and advertisers. Another difference with YouTube's videosharing site is that GoogleVideo offers uploaders the possibility to showcase content for a fee, thus generating revenue that is subsequently shared by Google and the "owners" of intellectual property.¹³ While such arrangement does not principally

counteract the system of free use and exchange of content, it is one step away from a license that advocates the use of content as creative resource. In other words, if YouTube's definition of homecasting comes close indeed to what Benkler described as a "cooperative nonmarket production," GoogleVideo's organizational model positions itself in between conventional broadcast models and creative commons models.

This is not to say that GoogleVideo will impose its conditions for use onto YouTube—in a statement to the press, the new owners vowed to respect YouTube's "distinct brand identity"—but it would be naïve to think that YouTube's policies will remain unaffected by "googlization" (van Dijck, 2007). A clear sign towards the accommodation of advertisers interests and intellectual property rights came in January of 2007, when YouTube's Chad Hurley announced the introduction of short commercial clips and advertisements on the site, as well as the introduction of a "paid revenue" system for popular uploads. It is clear that Google needs time to figure out its preferred strategy, a strategy that involves the risk to lose its largest asset: some of the most prolific voluntary you-ser communities in the new branch of homecasting. And this is where the crucial position of *Time Magazine's* heroic "you" comes in. The agency of you-sers, over the past few years, has gained enormous clout and has led to a worldwide emancipation of consumers and viewers. But their agency is still fragile and ill-defined, as they are deliberately anarchistic in asserting their rights, needs, liberties, and duties. There are no unions for you-sers, but neither is there a friendly corporate climate that warmly welcomes these new "unpaid" labourers to the media market, unless they dedicate this labour magnanimously and unconditionally to the commercial interests of established companies (Terranova, 2000). Part of the strategy to enhance user's agency and conscious awareness, is to analyze the various available institutional models of homecasting; it is crucial that users are aware of increasingly sophisticated technological, economic, and legal strategies deployed by media companies to channel virtual spaces of seemingly spontaneous, uninhibited audiovisual creativity. Baring these mechanisms and exploring the stakes in the battle between old and new forces in the mediascape is a first step towards the emancipation of users.

My deliberate introduction of "homecasting", "you-sers" and "snippets" as potentially fruitful concepts is not an attempt to coin a few neologisms that render exotic phenomena intelligible to non-academics. An important task of media scholars is to cast the debate over user-generated audiovisual content in terms of *culture*. Viewers, consumers, and users are distinct cultural categories with different types of agency. Broadcasting, narrowcasting, and homecasting embody dissimilar institutional practices, fulfilling complementing social and

cultural roles in the continuum of media space. Viewers, consumers and you-sers are integrated actors in the social practice of homecasting, even if they combine eclectic and sometimes antithetical activities. And programs, formats, and snippets deserve to be inspected as cultural forms, each signifying a succinct product of creativity. Only if we understand the intricacies of interdependent yet centrifugal forces in our culture, can we make conscious decisions in how to act as cultural agents. Creating a theoretical framework for understanding new media space in the light of existing relations requires a concerted effort by scholars from various academic disciplines, including technology, design, economics, law, social science, psychology, and the humanities. My modest contribution from cultural theory, far from being an end product, is no more than a “snippet”: it is meant to invite colleagues to build and add upon a new, fortified foundation for understanding television in the wake of contemporary changes in the mediascape and, more importantly, to help define its future shape. Historically, academia and science have proven to be the greatest beneficiaries of a “2.0” mentality, where good and bad ideas always yield to better.

NOTES

¹ I concur with Thorburn and Jenkins (2003) who argue to understand media convergence as a process instead of a static termination so we can recognize “such convergences occur regularly in the history of communications and that they are especially likely to occur when an emerging technology has temporarily destabilized the relations among existing media” (3).

² Susan Douglas (1999) lucidly describes how radio “hams” or amateur operators, ever since the early years of radio in America, were not simply a group of idiosyncratic tinkerers with technology, but how they always formed a strong society of users “with its own language, mores, rituals, and ethos... they are a distinct collectivity whose history and anthropological characteristics have inflected the broadcast culture, and certainly the evolution of radio, in profound ways” (330). The television industry, from its early inception, channelled its technological innovativeness and prowess to fit the institutional model of broadcasting that was meanwhile adopted in most countries. As Brian Winston (1998) says: “Television then follows the path beaten by radio to the home” (112).

³ YouTube’s terms of use state: “YouTube has no control over, and assumes no responsibility for, the content, privacy policies, or practices of any third party websites. In addition, YouTube will not and cannot censor or edit the content of any third-party site. By using the Website, you expressly relieve YouTube from any and all liability arising from your use of any third-party website.” <http://www.youtube.com/t/terms>

⁴ For the remainder of this article, the term “consumer” refers not to “buyer” or “customer” of television content, but to the “recipient situated in the domestic context of TV consumption.”

⁵ The emergence of a new type of user of audio-visual content is neither the cause nor the result of technological changes; changes in the social position and role of the recipient and our understanding thereof have always been intricately interwoven with the techno-cultural matrix from which they arise. When relating the emergence of digitized technologies to the *user* of audiovisual content, this link should not be interpreted as a teleological vector befitting a deterministic logic. On the contrary, the relocation of viewing activities from the television

screen to the computer screen and the mediation of audiovisual content by digital filtering systems and distribution software can never by itself account for the profound changes in user dynamics.

⁶ In the past, there have been various attempts at capturing the new consumer conceptually, for instance by labelling him or her as “prosumer”—a hybrid term welding “*professional producer*” onto “*consumer*” (Toffler, 1980). Even if the term recognizes the blurring boundaries between amateur and professional and between producer and consumer—an issue definitely at stake in this paradigm shift—the term “prosumer” inadvertently asserts the very possibility and desirability of this distinction. The more viewers are actively staged as contributors of television, the more interest broadcasters have in drawing tight boundaries around those who make programs and those who consume them

⁷ The numbers of YouTube’s respective downloads and uploads are contradictory, depending on which source you check. Damien O’Brien and Brian Fitzgerald (2006) estimate the daily number of viewings (downloads) at 100 million, while a more conservative estimate is given by the *New York Times* at 50 million. O’Brien and Fitzgerald state the number of daily uploads to be 65000; their numbers are based on Alexa traffic rankings October 2006.

⁸ Ben McGrath (2006), in his hilarious essay “It Should Happen to You” in *The New Yorker* (13 October 2006) paints a painstaking portrait of the anxieties of teenagers who use the Internet (and particularly sites such as YouTube) to launch future careers as models, singers or actresses. In an equally sharp piece titled “Mirror, Mirror on the Web” in *The Nation* (14 January 2007), Lakshmi Chaudry argues that YouTube’s greatest successes have “capitalized on our need to feel significant and admired and, above all, to be seen.”

⁹ As Freedman (2003: 34) observes, format license fees are not the same as outright control of programs: “Financial reward comes less from owning the format than from making or distributing the programme in particular markets.” Local implementations of general formats are regulated by contracts, which commonly contain detailed specifications of how a format, for instance a game show, should be executed with local players. Not surprisingly, the legal ownership of formats is more difficult to protect from piracy than programs.

¹⁰ For instance, a popular series of taped experiments featured on GoogleVideo is produced by a duo called EepyBirds; their acts with mentos-mints in Diet Coke bottles to trigger large fountains attracted widespread attention due to their hilarious style and deadpan performance.

¹¹ The *New York Times* accounted the figure of 32 dollars per user, dividing the estimated total number of real users (about 50 million) by the sum paid by Google. See Andre Ross Sorkin and Peter Edmonston, “Google is Said to Set Sights on YouTube”, *The New York Times*, 7 October 2006 (digital edition, technology section.)

¹² In March of 2007, big players such as NBC Universal and News Corporations launched a new company to pool all their video content and like other players in the field (Viacom, Warner Brothers) they have filed law suits to stop Google from allowing “illegal postings” on YouTube and GoogleVideo. See: Laura M. Holson, “Hollywood asks YouTube: Friend or Foe?” in: *The New York Times*, 15 January 2007, digital edition, business section. And Richard Siklos, “Push comes to Shove for Control of Web Video” in: *New York Times* 1 April, 2007, business section (online edition).

¹³ As articulated in GoogleVideo’s “terms of use”: “You may designate a purchase and/or rental price in the Metadata Form that end users must pay in order to download Your Authorized Content. If you do not designate a price for Your Authorized Content, the price will automatically be set at zero. Except as otherwise set forth herein, in the event of any download of Your Authorized Content, by end users, We will pay to You seventy percent (70%) of the gross revenues, if any, recognized by Google and attributable to such video playback of Your Authorized Content based upon the price you designate.”

(https://upload.video.google.com/video_terms.html)

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