

# Making Selves/Making Citizens in the Age of YouTube

**Megan Fulwiler and Kim Middleton**  
**The College of Saint Rose**

Our paper intercedes in a set of familiar assumptions that characterize YouTube's amateur video content as merely personal, narcissistic, and shallow by exploring the theoretical and pedagogical implications of a set of student videos that are the result of our recent undergraduate course on the content, platform, and participation of YouTube. Because the presentation will feature student videos, we'll speak from the outline below to leave time to view and discuss the video(s). Our presentation challenges the trend in media studies that imagines the civic or political realm as one that must be located far from the personal. As an alternative, we posit a "YouTube self" that is performed, networked, and rhetorically savvy. Just as YouTube challenges traditional notions of aesthetics, audience, and participation, we see an opportunity to challenge and expand definitions of both "personal" and "civic." Informed by the work of YouTube scholars Patricia Lange, Jean Burgess and Joshua Green, among others, we examine how our students became engaged digital citizens who use participatory media to create, revise, and re-imagine the relationship between the self and the world in ways that matter to an audience.

## **I. The Problem: Assumptions about the Self on YouTube**

To date, the most visible example of a YouTube class has been Alexandra Juhasz's 2007 course, the results of which have been captured in the 2011 MIT Press book *Learning from YouTube* (<http://vectors.usc.edu/projects/learningfromyoutube/>). Juhasz organizes the book around a series of sixteen "texteos" that address her findings about the platform (content is either overly-dependent upon dominant media and corporate culture OR the simple expressed common knowledge, talents, or feelings of everyday people); it fails to incite meaningful conversation (anti-data, little depth or sustained attention to dialogue); and its architecture encourages self-censorship, and often popularizes the worst in dominant culture). Indeed, Juhasz's new online book ends up reinstating many of the binaries that we'd hoped digital media might work to dismantle or at least trouble including: public/private, education/entertainment, professional/amateur.

We are most interested in how Juhasz presents and analyzes the YouTube self, primarily in the book's "tour" of the public/private binary. Here, the chapter headings reveal a particular stance; one chapter in the tour is titled: "YouTube: A Library of the Inane and Private"

(<http://vectors.usc.edu/projects/learningfromyoutube/texteo.php?composite=155&tour=12&>). Another, titled "The Private Self: Lost and Lonely," features this description of the self as it appears on YouTube:

Isolated writing mirrors YouTube's raison d'être of "wasting time" and can often result in meaningless, silly, or narcissistic ruminations on self. Its

reverse is the humble stab at sincere communication, banking on NicheTube's guarantee that no one will actually find, see, or hear you in the uncharted and unruly sea of similarly unheard attempts at private communication and self-expression.

(<http://vectors.usc.edu/projects/learningfromyoutube/texteo.php?composite=149&tour=12>)

In short, Juhasz and her students learned from YouTube that the self is overly personal, narcissistic, amateur, private---opposed to, in other words, anything that might be considered a form of "civic engagement." And Juhasz is not alone in the view that the personal is at best disconnected from the civic, or at worst, its opposite. Indeed, many of the most generous readers of digital media culture remain skeptical about the content of YouTube videos and their distance from the crucial work of citizenship. Note Henry Jenkins's contention from a 2008 blog post:

Even where videos remain on the level of sophomoric "jackass" humor, there's no way of predicting when and how these filmmakers may apply skills learned in these trivial pursuits towards larger purposes. We may never know how many of the activists involved in the indie media movement learned their skills recording skateboard stunts or capturing their graffiti exploits.. And that's why there's something powerful about a world where all kinds of everyday people can take media in their own hands...the line between the political/aesthetic avant garde and more popular forms of production is blurry. Works in these programs might engage in quite sophisticated formal experiments or may deal with political issues at unexpected moments. ("From YouTube to WeTube")

Jenkins, one of the most diehard defenders of expression via popular media, joins other scholars who value the site's participatory functions and potential, but dismiss much of its content as juvenile (e.g., Tara McPherson 2009). Some have even begun to suggest that superior or serious content should move OFF YouTube (Aymar Jean Christian, "The Problem of YouTube").

We remain interested in the potential we see in YouTube—the opportunities for amateurs to make interesting and well-crafted videos about their personal interests, subcultures, and questions that address a larger audience in meaningful ways (for example, the "It Gets Better Project" sparked by Dan Savage's personal video). To that end, we designed a course focused on the study of YouTube as an archive, distribution channel, and a means of producing creative, critical and rhetorically informed videos that explore the range of latent possibilities for the personal.

## **II. YouTube Scholars: Disrupting binaries**

YouTube scholars such as Patricia Lange, Jean Burgess and Joshua Green, John Hartley, Kathrin Peters and Andrea Seier, and Eggo Muller have interrogated the series of binaries that have informed much of the conversation around YouTube, and suggest instead a series of continuous *spectrums* that address the particular culture and protocols of YouTube. These spectrums, we contend, allow for a more capacious conception of the

work that the personal can do: in particular, the relationships to other individuals and communities that solidify structures of cultural citizenship.

In their assessment of dance videos on YouTube, for instance, Peters & Seier remind us that media have always played a role in the presentation and understanding of the self:

By introducing a gap between self and world, media enable a distance required for any relation to the self. Various technological apparatuses—from the quill to the webcam—place the self at a distance and at the same time bridge that distance to the extent that they make it accessible and accessible for alteration. (187)

Peters and Seier suggest, therefore, a mediated self in the process of change with reference to genre-specific requirements of the medium itself (e.g., a dance video) and the community that makes and views them. In doing so, they question the notion of an authentic, unmediated self, and insert the YouTube self into a historical continuum of selves made with and through media.

Likewise, Patricia Lange examines the history of home movies and suggests that we need to reexamine how we categorize (and thus dismiss) them:

Videos of affinity attempt to maintain feelings of connection with potential others who identify or interpellate themselves as intended viewers of the video... Videos of affinity are, in short, useful objects of study because they inform explorations of how social networks are negotiated through video. (71)

In short, personal videos that may *appear* to have no meaning beyond the maker and her immediate family/friends—that seem solipsistic or shallow—may instead function, Lange contends, as part of a larger system that hold social networks of intended viewers together. Further, these videos can “hail” other viewers and integrate them into a community by way of genre conventions and affect.

Finally, Eggo Muller takes on the perception of YouTube’s debased content to argue for the YouTube-specific discourses that are actively forming around YouTube’s own aesthetic conventions and expectations. Here, he examines video-making tutorials made by both “professionals” and YouTubers in order to highlight how aspirational networks can provide the incentive for amateurs to make more sophisticated works in order to join an identified community via their own aesthetic standards. Muller argues that traditional 20<sup>th</sup>-century media binaries are not useful for studying YouTube and in their place he suggests a “diverse field of positions in the space of participation YouTube creates” (136). Further, he suggests that a romantic vision of a self in direct opposition to institutions, whether corporate or educational, may blind us to YouTube’s inherent and emerging protocols.

Taken together, these YouTube theorists open up an avenue for viewing personal YouTube videos as thoughtful, conscious, and rhetorical performances of networked subjects. Rather than being relegated to the “library of the inane and private,” many of

these videos identify and belong to particular communities via the enactment of the social and aesthetic protocols evident in the constellation of videos shared by makers/viewers. In short, a YouTube self is already, in many cases, an analytical, self-reflective subject engaged in the performance of its belonging. It registers a level of cultural citizenship that is complex, rhetorically savvy, and attentive to the expectations of its community and *actively contributes to the making and meaning of this community*. As Burgess and Green indicate, contemporary “cultural citizenship” concerns “the ways individuals participate in practices and collectivities that form around matters of shared interest, identity, and concern” (77). Such an expanded understanding of citizenship and the public sphere suggests an equally expanded notion of civic engagement –what it is and what it can look like. [According to Burgess and Green, “YouTube is generating public and civic value as an unintended and often unsupported consequence of the practices of its users” (76).] The personal everyday lives of participants thus connect to “more ‘public’ debates around social identities, ethics, and cultural politics” (80). As a result, we believe there’s tremendous potential for re-thinking our understanding of the “personal” on YouTube as a form of civic engagement precisely because participating within a specific community requires not only imagining a self in relation to others, but also deep knowledge of the genre conventions and aesthetics valued by particular communities of practice, and relies upon the enthusiasm and responsibility of citizens to engage in the negotiation of the communities values, interests, and boundaries.

### **III. Viewing of student videos, and excerpts from student post-production reflections.**

#### **IV. Conclusion**

We believe that it’s important to view the personal on YouTube with a capacious understanding of the role of the self as performed, networked, and rhetorically situated, and to link this to a broader notion of the meaning of cultural citizenship and civic participation. Scholars like Lange, Peter and Seiers, and Muller provide crucial theoretical interventions into the assumptions about YouTube’s current content, Sharing these interventions with students offers them a framework for developing the construction of a YouTube self and for negotiating its relationship to specific communities of practice, while also acknowledging and attending to the site-specific competencies, protocols, and aesthetics that inhere to YouTube.