

7 things you should know about...

YouTube

Scenario

For her term project in ecology, Maria decides to focus on the effects of logging near her hometown of Bellingham, Washington. Maria thinks that a documentary is the perfect way to demonstrate her knowledge of ecosystems while showing something she believes many of her classmates—at a state university in the southwest—know little about. From her parents, she collects hours of video taken near her home, spanning the two decades since she was born. When she goes home during fall break, she takes more video of the same areas.

Maria pieces together a video outline of her project, lacing together narrative, data charts, and footage of areas that have been logged. She posts the outline on YouTube, with access limited to the class. Her professor reviews the outline and provides feedback, as do several students. On a whim, she makes the outline public and is surprised by the number of people who watch her video and offer comments. One viewer suggests that she discuss different logging techniques and include information about proposed state legislation. Another viewer gives her tips about using video software to better match the sound and picture channels.

Over the semester, Maria enhances her video and fine-tunes it, posting updated versions as it evolves. Several YouTube users subscribe to her video and are notified each time Maria posts a new version, and she finds them to be a valuable resource in improving her project. One of them even includes her video on his blog about environmental issues. Because of the size of the video files and the bandwidth necessary to stream them, IT staff discourage Maria from using departmental servers for her project. With YouTube, Maria can keep all versions of her video available, allowing her professor to watch them sequentially at the end of the semester to see how it grew from a rough sketch to its final, polished form.

What is it?

YouTube is a video-sharing service that lets users upload files to YouTube servers, where they are available online. With the exception of content that is offensive or illegal, videos can be animations, footage of public events, personal recordings of friends—virtually anything a user wants to post. Videos can be informational, entertaining, persuasive, or purely personal. One of an emerging class of social applications, YouTube allows users to post and tag videos, watch those posted by others, post comments in a threaded-discussion format, search for content by keyword or category, and create and participate in topical groups. YouTube ties into several blogging applications, giving users a quick way to blog about a particular video and include a link to it. Users can view profiles of individuals who have posted or commented on videos, see their favorite videos, and contact them.

Who is doing it?

Since its debut in 2005, YouTube has become extremely popular, streaming more than 100 million videos per day, ranging from clips of just a few seconds to 10 minutes or more. Although many videos on YouTube are simply for fun, some people use the site to explore video production as aspiring professionals or hobbyists. People who dream of being producers, directors, or journalists share their videos on YouTube and gauge responses from the community. A budding reporter posting video and narration from the site of a natural disaster, an aspiring director of music videos, an amateur documentary film maker hoping to sell his work to a distributor—these and others find in YouTube an outlet for their creativity and a resource to get feedback from and interact with users who seek out content that interests them. Others use video to distribute content that is not necessarily tied to the medium, such as a video artifact demonstrating mastery of a physical skill (such as archery), or a video study of a sculpture.

How does it work?

YouTube is free, though people who want to post videos or comments must register with the site, creating a profile. Videos—which include tags, a category, and a brief description—can be public or restricted to members of specified contact lists. Several tools allow viewers to sort through videos to locate those of interest. Links allow a user to share a movie through

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e-mail, add it to a list of favorites, post a text-based or video comment about it, and read (or watch) the comments others have posted. A user can subscribe to all of another user's postings or to content that is tagged with particular terms. Each of these actions becomes a part of the user's profile. When others look at a user's profile, they see his favorites, comments, and videos he has posted. As a result, profiles are constantly updated to reflect each user's history and tastes. YouTube also allows videos hosted on its site to be embedded in other Web pages, such as blogs or personal Web sites.

Because of the size of movie files and the number of formats, sharing video has not always been simple. YouTube has made sharing video easy by addressing the storage and server questions, as well as the issue of file format. The Flash player is the only player required, and it works consistently on various platforms. In addition, videos on YouTube generally stream smoothly, without lags or slowdowns.

Why is it significant?

The ease of watching and sharing videos, combined with the fact that the site is free, opens the experience of online video to a wide range of users. YouTube offers opportunities for expression through video—a new spin on the notion self-publishing, making content available for anyone interested in consuming it. The social-networking tools further engage users, drawing them in to an environment that encourages them to meet new people, read and share opinions, and be part of a community. The interactive features allow members of communities to earn the respect of peers and increase their stature in the group.

What are the downsides?

As with other applications that disseminate electronic content, YouTube raises questions of copyright. Despite a statement warning users against improperly using copyrighted material, users are free to upload any content they have. A major record label has alleged that YouTube is responsible for copyright violations committed by its users. On the other hand, another record label announced a deal to make its content available through YouTube in exchange for a portion of the site's ad revenue. Legal questions also surround footage that depicts illegal behavior or that was taken of someone without the person's knowledge or consent.

Users who embed YouTube videos on other pages, such as in an e-portfolio or on a course Web site, rely on YouTube to continue to make that content available. If YouTube went out of business or changed how it functions, links from other Web resources could become nonfunctional.

Like other social software, YouTube also raises questions of privacy, appropriate use, and trust. For several months, a YouTube user under the moniker "lonelygirl15" posted regular videos of herself, creating an online diary of sorts. After attracting many thousands of fans who followed lonelygirl15's posts, the scheme was exposed as a fabrication. In other cases, YouTube users have been harassed by individuals who stalked them using information found in their profiles.

Where is it going?

The way YouTube is used for music videos is one indicator of possible directions for the site. Fans have posted their own versions of music videos for some bands' songs, prompting others to modify those videos or create new ones, resulting in an active community of users with a common interest. Some record companies have seized on this concept, sponsoring contests for amateurs to make official videos for selected artists. These kinds of activities give rise to very narrowly focused interest groups, which are often capable of developing compelling new material. These groups are also extremely valuable for marketers, who increasingly rely on "narrowcasting" to reach a targeted, self-identified population. In addition, because it works well with other applications, YouTube has the potential to provide distribution for content that is displayed elsewhere, such as e-learning tools. While YouTube has similarities with other self-expression tools, such as blogs, the medium may grow in popularity because of how it differs from them.

What are the implications for teaching and learning?

YouTube draws users into the experience of viewing videos and engaging with the content as commentators and creators, activities that heighten students' visual literacy—an important skill in today's electronic culture. Even if most of the content on YouTube lacks an educational goal, the application encourages experimentation with new media. Many educators believe that the act of creating content—in virtually any form—is a valuable learning exercise, helping develop a deeper understanding of the subject matter and the tools used to create that content. To the extent that YouTube facilitates such creation, it has the potential to expose students to new insights and skills, as well as link them to various online communities. As a social-software application, YouTube is part of a trend among Net Generation students to replace passive learning with active participation, where everyone has a voice, anyone can contribute, and the value lies less in the content itself than in the networks of learners that form around content and support one another in learning goals.

