Chapter 9

YouTube as a Performative Arena: How Swedish Youth are Negotiating Space, Community Membership, and Gender Identities through the Art of Parkour

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ABSTRACT

The video sharing site YouTube is used by huge numbers of young people in the roles of consumers and producers of content and meaning. The site hosts more than 120,000,000 video clips, and its users represent a wide variety of nationalities, religions, ethnic backgrounds, identities and lifestyles. Due to the scale of YouTube it is hard to see how a tangible sense of actual community could be created within the site. Using on- and offline ethnographic data in the form of footage, interviews and patterns of community interaction (favoriting, subscribing, commenting, rating, and video replies), this chapter presents the results of a case study that aims to analyze how a specific interest group with a certain national anchoring (Swedish parkour youth) deal with the vastness and complexity of YouTube in creating a sense of identity and community in relation to their specialized interest.

NEGOTIATING “THE YOUTUBE SUBLIME”

Using the concept of “the YouTube sublime”, Grussin (2009) describes the immensity and complexity of the YouTube site. The number of videos in its online repository is so large that it is nearly impossible to comprehend, and it is definitely impossible for any single user to get a comprehensive overview of them all. Furthermore, the YouTube user base is massive, global, and mixed to the extent that is seems hard to conceive of any real sense of close community being created or experienced here. The aim of this chapter is to analyze the strategies employed by individual young YouTube users to negotiate and
the size and scope of YouTube. This will be done using the specific case example of youth engaged in the activity of parkour in Sweden.

Parkour involves free running and acrobatics in urban environments. Swedish youth participate in this alternative sport often film their parkour runs and upload them to YouTube, creating an arena in which they perform aspects of identity and membership, and connect with an international group of youth who share a common interest in parkour. By analyzing the creation, composition, consumption and cultural context of these video clips, one may gain an insight into the conditions and the potential for constructing community in the face of the reality of “the YouTube sublime”.

YouTube has become a platform where commercial and amateur videos share the same hybrid media space as artful productions and documentaries, video diaries and powerful physical performances (Benkler, 2007). As Jenkins (2007) puts it, the site is “a space where commercial, amateur, nonprofit, governmental, educational, and activist content co-exists and interacts in ever more complex ways”. YouTube users represent a wide demographic range, and an even broader range of purpose as the affordances of the platform lend itself to the convergence of different cultures in an increasingly complex way (Green & Jenkins 2009). For example, globally, every minute 13 hours of video material is uploaded by YouTube’s 3.75 million users, and 25% of these users are young people between the ages of 12 and 17 (Wesch, 2008). However, despite its large potential for providing an arena for networked participatory culture (Jenkins 2006, Rheingold 2003), the discourse surrounding YouTube in the Swedish mass media has centred on the platform’s “dark side” – not least when the participation has involved youth-generated videos. Examples of this debate in the Swedish media can be seen through the discussion of ‘warning films’ created by school shooters (Lindgren 2009), or in the considerable number of mediatised discussions surrounding cyber bullying and over-sexualized teen videos.

At every historical moment when a new medium enters the stage, debates occur that are strikingly similar to those about YouTube which revolve around issues of basic social and cultural norms (Drotner 1999). These discussions are always simplistic and tend to become very clearly polarized. While the new medium is demonized by some, it is at the same time celebrated and de-dramatized by others. Historically, and YouTube is no exception, it is often the negative side that has become the most visible in the news media (Springhall 1998). The debate tends to play out among “responsible” adults: Teachers, librarians, cultural critics, politicians and researchers – each and everyone with their own interests and stakes in the issue – produce various diagnoses and offer a range of solutions directed towards children and young people. The new medium under discussion becomes a fitting rhetorical device in discussions that are often about something completely different.

These “media panics” (Drotner 1999) tell us very little about the actual use of the discussed mediums, but more about social and cultural dilemmas – relating to issues of socio-cultural change, education, gender roles, parental control etc. – that are of a much wider character. The moralizing discourse on YouTube, for example, directs attention away from much of what is actually happening on this site in terms of creativity, participation and knowledge exchange. Because of this, we want to make a contribution by backgrounding these “effects” debates and instead bring the issues of young people’s actual YouTube use to the fore. Notwithstanding the negative picture in the Swedish media of youth on YouTube, Swedish youth are well represented on the site, and are creating and making accessible films that run the gamut between diary-like video diaries, to mash-ups, and to innovative, experimental films that blend both an awareness of the physical space, as well as the digital – a hybridization of online and offline space.