
Circuitry in Motion: Rhetoric(al) Moves in YouTube's Archive

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Arguments over the relative value of participatory cultures have tracked the explosion in digital cultures in the past decade or so, and a common target of such arguments is the video hosting site, *YouTube*. *YouTube*'s popularity and reach have grown exponentially since its founding in 2005, and serious concerns have been raised about participatory culture as exemplified by *YouTube* and its connections to everything from [violence](#), [copyright violation](#), and [insipid narcissism](#) to [government](#), [business](#), and [education](#). According to Pelle Snickars and Patrick Vonderau, editors of the *YouTube Reader*, "YouTube has become the very epitome of digital culture not only by promising endless opportunities for viral marketing or format development, but also by allowing 'you' to post a video which might incidentally change the course of history" (11). *YouTube* seems to exemplify for critics the best and the worst possibilities for participatory culture: either as "a reservoir of true enlightenment" with the potential for sparking self-realization and social-transformation (Kellner and Kim 34; see also Jenkins et. al), or as a sinister diversion, "[t]he very formal properties and architecture of [which] resist sustained and substantive engagement, leading instead to distraction, digression, and random combination" (Willis 107; see also Bauerlein 158).

It is unlikely that *YouTube* is either a beacon of cultural salvation or a sign of the apocalypse but rather is complexly embedded in mainstream U.S. culture in ways that cannot be accounted for by either extreme view. In spite of complaints that *YouTube* is "an infinite gallery of amateur movies" that "eclipses even the blogs in the inanity and absurdity of its content" (Keen 5), *YouTube* is no longer just a site for advertising minor achievements or cataloguing millions of mundane acts, if it ever was. Corporate, political, educational, government, traditional media, and other entities have taken to *YouTube* as a means to introduce and substantiate claims and concepts in public discourse, as illustrated entertainingly in a [recent video created by Yale University students and alumni](#) extolling the virtues of the school. In addition, Snickars and Vonderau point out, "Countless blogs link to YouTube the archival database in order to substantiate an idea or to pass something newly found to others" (13)—blogs like *The Huffington Post* and *Drudge Report*, which have millions of visitors every month. *YouTube* videos are used both as evidence to support a point of view, [as in the 9/11 Truth movement](#), and as a means for arguing a point, as in video blogs like [those made by hip-hop DJ Jay Smooth](#). Whatever else *YouTube* may be, there is no question that *YouTube* videos have become an influential source of argumentation, suggesting that they often serve a highly rhetorical function.

The rhetorical effects of *YouTube* may be usefully demonstrated by looking briefly at the effects of *YouTube* in the 2008 U.S. presidential campaign. As the primary and general election campaigns were waged, *YouTube* videos served central roles in the messages of several candidates (e.g., Frank; McKinney and Rill). For example, during the Democratic primaries, several [videos of the Reverend Jeremiah Wright](#) were posted to *YouTube*. The videos show Wright, Barack Obama's former pastor, delivering polemical anti-white, anti-American sermons to a cheering crowd. While Obama was not actually in any of these videos, his prior membership at Wright's church invited speculation that Obama shared Wright's views about white racism, and consequently Obama was cast by some political opponents as a black extremist. Similarly, during the general election, [YouTube videos were filmed at McCain/Palin rallies](#) and were held up as evidence of 1) fundamental racist and violent tendencies of the Republican base, and 2) unscrupulous exploitation of racist and violent themes by the candidates. In addition to the role of *YouTube* videos in candidates' messages, other interested parties, including celebrities like musician Will.I.Am, used *YouTube* to [broadcast support for a particular candidate](#). The effects of these videos on voters are hard to calculate, but there is no doubt that they became evidentiary cornerstones in the arguments of American politicians and pundits, necessitating responses like Barack Obama's "[A More Perfect Union](#)" speech. Whether *YouTube* videos invigorated campaigns or [damned them](#), it is clear from the 2008 campaign that *YouTube* videos

have come to play a significant role in authorizing arguments in American culture.

YouTube's Archive

YouTube might reasonably be understood in terms of the relative merit of individual videos that feature political attacks, or laughing babies, or guitar virtuosos, especially as individual videos generate millions of views and potential rewards for their stars. However, *YouTube's* role cannot be reduced to the influence of a single video, or even several videos. As Snickars and Vonderau note, "YouTube is often spoken about as if it were a library, an archive, a laboratory or a medium like television, with the respective metaphor inviting hypothetical exploration of what YouTube's possible, probable and preferred futures might be" (13). The power of *YouTube*, then, is not reducible to the videos it hosts—which is to say, the influence of individual videos cannot account for the authorizing effects of *YouTube*. In the 2008 U.S. presidential campaign, for example, *YouTube* was considered such an influential means of communicating with American voters that it partnered with CNN to host a series of [YouTube presidential debates](#). In the *YouTube* debates, presidential candidates responded to questions submitted to them through *YouTube* videos. The debates were aired on CNN, moderated by MSNBC anchor Chris Matthews, and later posted in their entirety on *YouTube*. Whereas *YouTube* has generally been recognized as a site for hosting videos, in this instance, *YouTube* fundamentally altered the format of the video that was eventually posted online. The conditions under which *YouTube* was determined sufficiently influential to warrant a role in presidential debates simply cannot be accounted for by considering the impact of individual videos. Rather, the impact of individual videos must be considered in light of the accumulative effect of collecting millions of user-generated videos together—*YouTube's* archive.

With the rise of digital environments in which billions of people around the world participate, archives have taken an increasingly important role in peoples' lives. Scores of traditional libraries and archives have begun to supplement their physical holdings with [digital collections](#); other archives, such as ["The September 11 Digital Archive."](#) are exclusively digital; and Archive.org (["The Internet Archive Wayback Machine"](#)) even archives older versions of websites that have changed or disappeared. Online archives have become ubiquitous, even cropping up as premium additions to other products and services, such as email accounts. *YouTube* videos have become similarly ubiquitous in recent years, even to the extent that *YouTube* has become synonymous with online video, much in the same way that Kleenex is synonymous with tissues. One reason for this is that *YouTube's* archive is the largest repository of online video content in the world, hosting more than ten times more videos than their next largest competitor (Snickars and Vonderau 11). Although the exact number of videos maintained by *YouTube* is unknown because of its perpetual expansion, considering that "every minute, 20 hours of video is uploaded to YouTube" ([YouTube Fact Sheet](#)), a reasonable estimate is that *YouTube* videos number over 300 million. [1](#)

In some ways, *YouTube's* archive replicates traditional features of archives, including finding aids (e.g., *Google* search), organizational strategies (e.g., organization by category, channel, and user-profile), and permissions. As Snickars points out, "the digital archive is by nature a database, that is, a structured collection of data stored in a computer system" (304). *YouTube* collects and stores videos to be accessed by users as necessary in much the same way traditional archives collect and store materials for future use. *YouTube* even retains, to some degree, the individual nature of digging in the archive, "invit[ing] individual participation, rather than collaborative activity" (Burgess and Green 65). In other ways, however, *YouTube's* archive represents a revolution in the role of archives. For example, *YouTube's* archive is generated and predominantly adjudicated by the community of users, including major media conglomerates, rather than by authorized overseers. Whereas archives have traditionally been limited to materials deemed useful and valuable by archivists, *YouTube's* archive accepts any content that does not specifically violate the company's policies (regarding violence or copyright infringement, for example). In addition, the entire community is afforded the responsibility of judging *YouTube's* holding for quality. As Snickars writes in "The Archival Cloud," "In traditional media archives, perhaps ten percent of what has been collected is actually used, but the ease of watching and using videos on, for example, YouTube has meant that almost all uploaded material has been viewed by at least one or two users" (294). Users are invited to rate,

share, and mark as “Favorite” videos that they find compelling or interesting, and these marks of community approval, among others, raise the visibility of videos. Videos not deemed “valuable” by the community are not removed to create room for new videos, but are maintained in the same structure as the most popular ones.

The storage and recovery model used by *YouTube* seems to guarantee accessibility and subsequent user interest in ways that have long confounded traditional archives. *YouTube* clearly cannot be understood simply as a traditional archive that stores digital materials, some of which are use[d] for argumentative purposes, but the accumulative effect of *YouTube*'s archive cannot be ignored.² In order to understand *YouTube*'s complex role in American culture, it is necessary to consider the meaning of its video archive, an understanding that can be aided by developments in archive theory over the past decade and a half.

Archive 2.0

While scholarship on *YouTube* is minimal as yet, some scholars have started to consider the implications of *YouTube*'s archive, particularly scholars in *The YouTube Reader*. By and large, however, scholars who have examined *YouTube* specifically as an archive have expressed a barely disguised aversion to it.³ Rick Prelinger begins his chapter by stating outright, “Maybe we can begin by stating that YouTube is not itself an archive” (268). Although he finds himself forced to concede that it is necessary to talk about *YouTube* as an archive because of the public conception of it as such, for Prelinger, *YouTube* is not really an archive because it is not interested in preservation. “This put established media archives into a paradoxical situation,” he writes. “[A]s they insist on the importance of classical archival missions, they will appear to be less useful, less accommodating, less relevant, and ultimately less important than YouTube, the pretender” (272). Likewise, Frank Kessler and Mirko Tobias Schäfer question whether *YouTube* qualifies as an archive or whether it might rather be considered a “new media practice,” a term that they claim is less tied to the “relatively strictly codified lines of conduct” comprised by the word “archive” (277). “[W]hat this discussion shows is that whatever analogy is drawn to existing institutions or functions [...] will fall short on one level or another” (277). Once separated from the archival nomenclature, Kessler and Schäfer are certainly interested in *YouTube* as a new media practice, encompassing multifunctional interfaces that constitute it as a fundamentally heterogeneous and hybrid (287). Jens Schröter is less generous. Building on Jacques Lacan and others, Schröter pronounces *YouTube*'s archive a structure for maintaining hegemonic, disciplining, scopophilic, and invocatory culture—driven by capitalist logic, and hence, anti-democratic. He writes, “In my view, YouTube is as participatory as market research, and as democratic as public opinion polls” (342). *YouTube*'s archive, in Schröter's view, is a vast database that serves to conceal the commodifying function played out in video makers' competition for attention. In short, *YouTube*'s archive has been conceived by most scholars as either not an archive or as a very bad one.⁴

There are, no doubt, good reasons for resisting the application of traditional theories of archives to *YouTube*'s “repository,” some of which have been explicated by Prelinger, Kessler, Schäfer, and Schröter. Recently, however, new theories of archives have begun to emerge that grapple with the growing presence of archives like *YouTube*'s. Archival theorists interested in the changing nature of archives as a result of the digital/virtual revolution have developed a theory of archives known as “Archive 2.0” (e.g., Palmer; Ridolfo). According to Joy Palmer, “Archive 2.0” is “less about the integration of Web 2.0 technologies into online finding aids, and more related to a fundamental shift in perspective, to a philosophy that privileges the user and promotes an ethos of sharing, collaboration, and openness.” She continues, “In ‘Archive 2.0’ the archive is potentially less a physical space than an online platform that supports participation. In this potentially radical vision, users can contribute to the archive, engage with it, and play a central role in defining its meaning.”

According to Archive 2.0 theorists, rather than undermining the legitimacy of archives, this type of community involvement is a key to broadening the relevance of archives. Isto Huvila argues that reconceiving archives in terms of “decentralised curation, radical user orientation, and contextualization of both records and the entire

archival process”—the basic tenets of Archive 2.0—results in “transparency through participation and not its opposite.” She continues, “Inclusion and greater participation are supposed to reveal a diversity of motivations, viewpoints, arguments and counterarguments, which become transparent when a critical mass is attained” (25). Rather than attempting to validate what should or should not be available in archives or what roles archives and archivists should or should not perform, Archive 2.0 theorists see community participation in the archive as a way of acting ethically to represent the multiple subject positions of users and to make use of the wealth of metadata that the community of users holds (Ridolfo).

YouTube is archetypal of the archive described by Archive 2.0 theorists in that users certainly contribute to the archive, engage with it, and play a central role in defining its meaning. As the 2008 U.S. presidential campaign made clear, *YouTube* users upload videos across political, social, and cultural spectra to support the situated perspectives they hold. And as Henry Jenkins avers in his blog post, “Nine Propositions Towards a Cultural Theory of *YouTube*,” the interplay of individual positions and community values results in “a form of cultural collaboration.” All views are accepted and weighed, but certain views come to represent the democratized view of the whole and are dispersed through the web of connections that allow individual videos to serve as evidence of a particular position or action. That is, the vastness of *YouTube*'s community serves as a sort of ethos builder in that the proliferation of a particular position or meme has the weight of millions of judges, representing a wealth of diverse views. As Archive 2.0 suggests, *YouTube*'s archive is not simply disciplining, hegemonic or market-driven. Rather, it solicits a broad spectrum of participation that enhances the credibility of its holdings in a community.

Derrida's Archive

Debates about *YouTube*'s archive, whether cultural or scholarly, essentially revolve around the question of validity: does a radical reinvention of archives, as epitomized by *YouTube*, undermine the archive's validity (and therefore delegitimize *YouTube* as an archive) or does it reimagine the values and assumptions of archives in a way that reflects our postmodern, digitized world? Certainly there is no easy answer, but there is, in fact, a third possibility, for which I turn to Jacques Derrida. In 1995, Derrida published *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, in which he ruminates on the nature and consequence of archives. In *Archive Fever*, he develops a theory of archives that reconsiders the prevailing assumption at the time that archives store evidence of past events. According to Derrida:

[T]he archive [...] is not only a place for stocking and for conserving an archivable content of *the past* which would exist in any case, such as, without the archive, one still believes it was or will have been. [...] The archivization produces as much as it records the event. (16-17)⁵

For Derrida, archives do not constitute nor explain what has already happened. Rather, they serve to authorize certain ways of conceiving the past. He explains that the word “archive” preserves two competing meanings that characterize archives generally: one of commencement and one of commandment (1). On the one hand, he writes, archives are places of origination, “physical, historical, or ontological” places—“*there* where things *commence*” (1). They represent the beginnings of things, of historical events and actions. On the other hand, “archive” retains the impression of authority, of interpretation, law, and institutionalization—“*there* where men and gods *command*, *there* where authority, social order are exercised, *in this place* from which *order* is given” (1). Rather than containing evidence, then, archives serve as sites of authorization.

In so defining the competing meanings encompassed by the word “archive,” Derrida announces his rejection of

archives as sites of evidentiary validity. Like Michel Foucault in *Archaeology of Knowledge*, Derrida attributes to archives a systematic power that shapes how knowledge is made and valued. He refutes the notion that archives hold the proof of events passed, arguing instead that archives are always exterior and mediating—imposed from outside by interested persons to store carefully chosen and curated traces of events. The always-present, but oft-disguised, function of archives is to confer and preserve authority. Whosoever controls the archive controls what the contents will be, and therefore, determines what can be understood from the archives. As Joan Schwartz and Terry Cook point out, it is “manifestly clear that archives—as institutions—wield power over the administrative, legal, and fiscal accountability of governments, corporations, and individuals. [...] Archives—as records—wield power over the shape and direction of historical scholarship, collective memory, and national identity, over how we know ourselves as individuals, groups, and societies” (2). As such, archives are incomplete, by design and by necessity, and are therefore unsuited to the task of authenticating historical events. In essence, Derrida argues that archives allow and enable ways of remembering the past that have profound implications for how people conceive of the future—but which have nothing to do with what ‘actually’ happened.

Although Derrida rejects the notion that archives contain material traces of past events and actions, he nevertheless affirms that archives collect and conserve materials that determine how we subsequently make sense of the world. In other words, archives gather together materials that, in Barbara Biesecker’s words, cannot authenticate absolutely but can be made to authorize nonetheless (130). Even by the most conservative definition, archives are incomplete traces of past events, and many archival historians cite this incompleteness as a barrier to a comprehensive view of the events the archives are meant to represent (e.g., Sharer). In Derrida’s theory of archives, however, this incompleteness is not a barrier, but an imperative of archives that invites users to invent the narratives that make the traces seem whole. Building on Derrida’s *Archive Fever*, Biesecker argues in “Of Historicity, Rhetoric: The Archive as Scene of Invention” that “the deconstruction of ‘fact’ or of referential plentitude does not reduce the contents of the archive to ‘mere’ literature or fiction (this is the most common and silliest of mistakes) but delivers that content over to us as the elements of rhetoric” (130). The archives may determine what can be wrought from them, but the fundamental incompleteness of materials leaves spaces for users to invent connections that make the archives salient and comprehensible. The reciprocating functions of archivization, curation, creation, and de(con)struction that constitute Derrida’s archive also constitute the endless possibility of rhetoric in, and from, the archive.

YouTube Videos in Derrida’s Archive

While Derrida’s theory of archives has drawn less than favorable responses from some archivists and historians, (see Brothman) it also contains a view of archives that is useful for thinking about *YouTube’s* archive as a rhetorical site. In addition to viewing individual videos as evidence for a particular point of view or as artifacts of events that have already occurred, Derrida’s theory of archives invites us to consider *YouTube* videos in terms of their rhetorical effects.

A striking example of the rhetorical nature of *YouTube’s* archive is Chris Crocker’s 2007 video, “[Leave Britney Alone](#).” In the two minute and twelve second video, a hysterical Crocker unleashes an expletive-filled rant in which he begs unnamed tabloid journalists to leave Britney Spears alone. Crocker’s pleas for Spears’s privacy are punctuated with frenzied sobs and violent screams about the public and private ordeals faced by the singer that justified some of her more bizarre, public moments; he demands that the paparazzi allow her to put her troubled life back in order by refusing to fuel the rapacious public’s chronic gaze. In spite of apparently having never met Spears, Crocker gets increasingly emotional throughout the video, even yelling into the camera toward the end, “Anyone who has a problem with her, you deal with me.” While the video is not exceptionally funny or well-made, or even particularly novel, it quickly became an internet sensation. In the 3 years since Crocker posted the video, it has generated more than 31 million views, more than half a million comments, and lots of publicity for Crocker, including an invitation to appear on Jimmy Kimmel’s late night talk show and a contract for a reality television show (which has since been withdrawn).

The huge numbers of views generated by “Leave Britney Alone” are just a small indication of its impact in the larger culture. Like the 2008 election videos, the video reached millions of viewers, was drawn into [traditional media](#) and [scholarly discussions](#), and fed into the international debate about *YouTube*. Crocker’s video has been widely referred to in major media outlets, for example, to support a broad range of views on everything from [participatory culture](#) to [media bias](#). Bloggers have argued at length about whether Crocker’s histrionics were authentic or contrived; Crocker himself has even been the subject of extended public deliberations about gender and sexuality, celebrity, and violence. As with the presidential campaign videos, in these discussions “Leave Britney Alone” has been used as proof for multiple perspectives in any number of arguments.

In addition to evidentiary value of the video, however, it also inspired a wave of [responses](#), [remixes](#), and [replications](#) from other *YouTube* users, including songs, cartoons, and parodies. As of January 2010, a search of “Chris Crocker Britney” on *YouTube* returned “about 17,200” results. Millions of people watched Crocker’s video and hundreds of thousands offered commentary, but thousands of those viewers also used “Leave Britney Alone” rhetorically, as a heuristic to invent their own content. That is, “Leave Britney Alone” served a source of entertainment for many viewers, but it also became a source of invention for many of the people who watched it, motivating them to participate in a variety of public discussions and debates. Some of the videos inspired by Crocker’s comment directly on “Leave Britney Alone,” other videos borrow it as a visual model for arranging and delivering completely unrelated arguments, and still others build on Crocker’s explicit and implicit arguments to extend aspects of the discussion about celebrity culture. Crocker’s video even inspired a “Leave (insert name here) Alone” genre, in which hundreds of thousands of videos have been created exhorting viewers to leave [Sarah Palin](#), [Tiger Woods](#), or [Dora the Explorer](#) alone. Similar effects can be seen the proliferation of cat videos (200,000 results come up in a search of “cats funny”) and “How to Make a Viral Video” videos (13,000 results). The evidentiary value of Crocker’s video notwithstanding, it has had remarkable effects in the invention, arrangement, style, memory,⁶ and delivery of arguments that extend well beyond it and well beyond the confines of *YouTube*’s archive.

The Structure of *YouTube*’s Archive

In the case of “Leave Britney Alone,” the content seems to be the primary cause of rhetorical moves that derive from it, but as I noted earlier, individual videos alone cannot account for *YouTube*’s rhetorical effects. Again, Derrida’s theory of archives is useful, in this case for considering *YouTube*’s archive as a platform. As Derrida notes, “[T]he technical structure of the archiving archive also determines the structure of the archivable content even in its very coming into existence and in its relationship to the future” (17). In other words, the structure of the archive (literally, the technology of production, maintenance, and access) determines what can be archived, and therefore the rhetorical uses to which the contents may be put. *YouTube*’s technical structure includes limitations on maximum video length; standards for acceptable content; commenting capabilities; systems for sharing, linking, and rating videos; and the option to subscribe to other users’ channels.

According to Burgess and Green, *YouTube*’s technological structure—particularly perceived limitations—have enabled developments in the *YouTube* community that might not otherwise have arisen. An example they give is that *YouTube* has no method for capturing parts of one *YouTube* video to incorporate it into another video for comment or critique. “Nevertheless,” they write, “collaborative and remixed vlog [video-blog] entries [are] a very noticeable feature of the most popular content” (65). Users have invented ways to embed links, annotate videos, or comment on other users’ videos in spite of the lack of technology provided by *YouTube* to do so.

These technological “fixes” have spread widely among *YouTube* users in ways that affect the subsequent technical and technological structure of the archive, which in turn affect the content of *YouTube* postings. For

instance, since *YouTube* does not have many of the same communicative capabilities of other social networks, (e.g., chat features) users have adapted content to increase the communicative aspects of *YouTube*. Burgess and Green point out that “shout out” videos have arisen as a way for *YouTube* users to exploit the social networking aspect of *YouTube*. “Shout out” videos are “purely phatic—[they announce] the social presence of the vlogger and [call] into being an audience of peers who share the knowledge and experience of YouTube as a social space” (68). These videos “[construct] a YouTube that functions as a communicative space and a community (rather than an inert distribution platform for content produced in different contexts like television, for example)” (69). The content of shout out videos is brought into being by the technological structure of YouTube—the limitations in YouTube’s communicative apparatus invited users to reconceive of ways to connect with each other as opposed to broadcasting at one another.

The structure of *YouTube*’s archive—the technical and technological functions of *YouTube*—dictates what can and cannot be done, which inevitably structures users’ rhetorical opportunities. One of the key technical capacities of *YouTube* is the ability of users to link videos across the web, beyond the confines of *YouTube*’s sites. According to Henry Jenkins,

YouTube’s value depends heavily upon its deployment via other social networking sites—with content gaining much greater visibility and circulation when promoted via blogs, Live Journal, MySpace, and the like. [...] In that regard, YouTube represents a shift away from an era of stickiness (where the goal was to attract and hold spectators on your site, like a roach motel) and towards an era where the highest value is in [spreadability](#).

On one hand, this spreadability means a much larger audience for *YouTube* videos than would exist if viewers were bound to trafficking *YouTube*’s site. On the other hand, spreadability dictates that videos must be designed to grab viewers’ attention quickly if videos are to merit linking to other sites. Burgess and Green, citing Jenkins, compare *YouTube* videos to vaudeville, in that videos rely on emotional appeals to create memorable and spectacular content (53). Vlogs, particularly, emphasize “liveness, immediacy, and conversation” to create connections to audiences. “Not only is the vlog technically easy to produce,” they write, “generally requiring little more than a webcam and basic editing skills, it is a form whose persistent direct address to the viewer inherently invites feedback” (54). The successful spread of videos is tied to their ability to garner a response from viewers. According to Kessler and Schäfer, “[M]aking video clips available to others is not sufficient for YouTube to operate. The material has to be described, indexed and categorized in various ways in order to be storable, identifiable, retrievable and thus viewable or, in literal sense, to become *visible*” (287). As such, *YouTube* videos, especially those that are accessed by large audiences and adopted into the larger culture like “Leave Britney Alone,” are designed (whether intentionally or not) to exploit viewers’ willingness to comment, link, and spread the video.

The rhetorical effects of *YouTube*’s archival technologies are well demonstrated in a series of videos posted on YouTube in 2009 by conservative activist James O’Keefe. These videos, called “[ACORN Baltimore Prostitution Investigation Part I](#)” and “[ACORN Baltimore Prostitution Investigation Part II](#),” purportedly show unethical behavior by staff members from ACORN, a community activist organization which supported Barack Obama’s bid for the presidency by registering thousands of voters in areas largely expected to support Obama. In the videos, O’Keefe and his partner, Hannah Giles, posed as a pimp and a prostitute, respectively. The couple then approached staff members at ACORN to solicit advice about laundering money they expected to earn through illegal prostitution. ACORN staffers were then secretly videotaped giving O’Keefe suggestions and recommendations. The ACORN videos were posted on YouTube on September 9, 2009, and by the next day, they were circulating widely on conservative blogs like those maintained by conservative activist, Andrew Breitbart.⁷ The ACORN videos were quickly picked up by mainstream media figures, including Sean Hannity and Glenn Beck, and within days, they were cornerstones in conservative arguments about veracity of 2008 election

results, the liberal leanings of Congress, and the fundamental corruption of voter registration drives. The videos were shortly brought to the attention of Congress, which voted to revoke federal funding for ACORN; ACORN announced that they would undertake sweeping reform to address the ethical violations recorded by O’Keefe.

As with Crocker’s video, the ACORN videos have attracted hundreds of thousands of viewers, thousands of responses, and extensive commentary from video makers and cultural commentators alike. Likewise, they have been adopted by video makers for similar rhetorical moves to those inspired by “Leave Britney Alone.” However, the rhetorical effects of the ACORN videos cannot be separated from the technical structures that enabled their creation and distribution. It is precisely because of the technical capabilities of *YouTube’s* archive, especially the ability to upload and share *YouTube* videos widely, that the ACORN videos have played a significant role in politics and culture well beyond the confines of *YouTube*. The technical structure of *YouTube’s* archive that enabled the sharing and storing of the ACORN videos has also played a significant role in the subsequent public discussions that have played about ACORN, ethics, and political campaigns. *YouTube’s* archive made the videos accessible, linkable, and discussable in a way that motivated further rhetorical activity and that transcended *YouTube’s* structure even as it reinforced it.⁸ Nevertheless, without the technical structure of YouTube, or a similar archiving structure, there is a good chance that O’Keefe’s videos would not have made the immediate impact they made in the media and Congress, and they may not have made any impact at all. In effect, a different technical structure of the archive would change what could be posted, how it is distributed, how it is accessed, and therefore, what rhetorical effects would or could result.

Conclusion

Casting judgment on the relative goodness or badness of participatory culture in general, and *YouTube* in particular, may well be the 21st Century version of the “[Why Johnny Can’t Write](#)” battles. Nevertheless, *YouTube*—like television sets in previous generations and radios before that—is ubiquitous. It has a global reach; records millions of visitors every day; is not specific to any age, gender, race, or other demographic; and has come to play an important role in mainstream and counter cultures in ways that merit serious consideration. People will no doubt continue to debate the merit of *YouTube* videos or the effects of *YouTube* on the development or deterioration of culture (often, and sometimes ironically, by using YouTube videos as evidence), but it seems apparent that *YouTube*, and the role of participatory culture it epitomizes, will continue to play a key role in the construction and maintenance of culture. In less than 5 years, *YouTube* has become not just a major hub of participatory culture, but also a model of interaction for participating in culture that is active, engaged, complex, and generative—in other words, deeply rhetorical. In light of the ever increasing role of *YouTube* in mass culture, it is worth considering the rhetorical effects of the videos as well as the structures that inspire, collect, conserve, and distribute materials that subsequently enable and constrain what can be said, how it can be said, and how it will inevitably continue to influence public discourse.

Notes

¹ Jean Burgess and Joshua Green put the number of videos at 85 million as of August of 2008 (2), and Snickars and Vonderau estimate the number is closer to 200 million (14). However, at the rate of 20 hours of video per minute, more than 63 million videos would be uploaded each year if they were each the maximum ten minute length. Assuming a constant rate of uploads since *YouTube* was founded in February 2005, 63 million videos per year would make the number of *YouTube* videos approximately 315 million as of January 2010. The rate has obviously not been constant since *YouTube’s* founding, but neither are most videos the maximum length. My estimate is based on the assumption that the rate of uploads and the number of videos uploaded to make 20

hours per minute essentially offset each other.

[2](#) In “The Appearance of Archives,” Rick Prelinger works from the same assertion, but he’s much less sanguine about the notion of *YouTube* as an archive.

[3](#) In his recent book, *Lingua Fracta*, Collin Brooke offers an interesting look at online repositories in terms of rhetorical models of memory. Although Brooke does not discuss YouTube specifically or virtual archives generally in terms of archive theories, his discussion is useful for considering some of the rhetorical effects of the growing presence of digital databases (143-167).

[4](#) An exception to negative views of YouTube in *The YouTube Reader* is offered by Snickars, who conceives of YouTube in the logic of cloud computing.

[5](#) Unless otherwise noted, all emphases are in the original texts.

[6](#) The role of a video like Crocker’s in memory may not be as intuitive as the other canons. However, in Chapter 6 of his book, Brooke offers a model of rhetorical memory that might be applied to YouTube’s archive.

[7](#) Breitbart runs several widely-read and influential conservative blogs, including Big Hollywood and Big Government. Significantly, O’Keefe was Breitbart’s former employee, which explains to some extent the speed with which O’Keefe’s videos spread through the conservative blogosphere.

[8](#) As well, each addition (and subtraction) to the archive reshapes the archive and therefore, reshapes what the archive might be made to authorize.

Works Cited

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