

# Betting on YouTube Futures (for New Media Writing and Publishing)

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Alexandra Juhasz

## ABSTRACT

The work of media scholar, artist, and activist Alexandra Juhasz directly addresses many of the concerns that Lovink and Rossiter raise in the previous two chapters. In this chapter, Juhasz repurposes blog posts about her undergraduate media studies course and “video-book” *Learning from YouTube* to consider the future of new media scholarship: how academics might write and publish about and in new media. By moving her writing from screen to page, the chapter itself enacts the concerns of circulation, vernacular, standards, and publication at the heart of new media studies projects and the work of writing about them. Juhasz demonstrates and discusses how academic styles, methods, and audiences can adapt in ways that are productive and dynamic. The changing roles that control, knowledge, and reflexivity play for YouTube, Juhasz’s course, and digital culture more generally are central frames for the chapter, as Juhasz thinks through what her own experience teaching with and writing about YouTube suggests for the future of digital humanities.

## Introduction

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*This “essay” links seven blog posts from 2007 to 2010 by using brief asides and introductions. The topic is my undergraduate media studies course, titled Learning from YouTube (held*

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on and about the site in 2007, 2008, and 2010), and its related bodies of writing. I also consider new media's future scholarship: how academics might write and publish about and in new media. I choose to repurpose these short, time-stamped ruminations because they reflect my feelings, process, analysis, and output – as written for the intelligent and curious but not necessarily academic audience of my Media Praxis blog ([www.aljean.wordpress.com](http://www.aljean.wordpress.com)) – while also mapping the arc of a project in new media teaching, production, and writing from inception to publication. Presenting these relatively unmodified excerpts of online, amateur writing within the fully vetted scholarly space of this edited anthology – where audience, form, and use are more standardized and professionalized than is true of the place the writing considers or where it was first presented – is itself a bit of a self-reflexive shell game. By moving writing from screen to page, I enact the concerns of circulation, vernacular, standards, and publication that will prove to be at the heart of this and many other new media studies projects and the writing about them.

The essay is situated within the (very brief) past, present, and future of YouTube studies and (on- and offline) digital humanities scholarship and publishing. My writings about the course – first in these selected blogs (and a great many unselected others residing online) and YouTube videos,<sup>1</sup> then in their translation into scholarly essays (online and on-paper), talks, my 2011 online video-book,<sup>2</sup> and then shifted to paper here – were created in (digital) dialogue with new media scholars rethinking new media writing (Liz Losh, Michael Strangelove, Chuck Tyron, Michael Wesch). I met and learned from these scholars online, through their blogs, as well as in the real world of new media studies. For example, I have learned from my local colleagues, Kathleen Fitzpatrick (who is completing a book on the obsolescence of the academic book, written first online and then, once peer- and copy-edited there, to be published to paper by New York University Press), and the team at University of Southern California's Institute for Multimedia Literacy and their online journal, *Vectors* (who helped me conceive and architect the video-book). My community raises the following writing and publishing gauntlet, to which I have responded:

We need to think less about completed products and more about texts-in-process; we need to think less about individual authorship and more about collaboration; we need to think less about originality and more about remix; we need to think less about ownership and more about sharing. None of this is to say that the former structures will disappear, but rather that they'll be complicated by the modes of communication that network technologies privilege. (Fitzpatrick, 2011)

*New media scholars have benefited from the communication that “network technologies privilege,” not only in their writing, but also by creating online communities, conversations, and opportunities. In my YouTube project, I attempted to build my students into this dialogue. When I commenced the course in 2007, there was almost no scholarly writing about YouTube. Discussion about the site tended to be found within journalism and the blogosphere or on the YouTube site itself. This was one of the reasons I required my students to do all of their research entirely within YouTube: what does (the future of) media studies look like when the topic of inquiry is also its library or when the authors of analysis are its everyday users or*

owners? Given the paucity of “serious” scholarship at that time, my undergraduates engaged in the rare and exciting activity of original and groundbreaking research. (YouTube scholar Michael Wesch was also engaging in a similar project with his undergraduate anthropology students who were producing YouTube ethnographies.)

By the time I taught the course for the third time, in the fall of 2010, there were five scholarly books published on the subject (including my own *Learning from YouTube*, which I taught in beta) that became the course’s new, more traditional backbone.<sup>3</sup> All authors writing about YouTube were quick to note its chameleon-like nature:

Because there is not yet a shared understanding of YouTube’s common culture, each scholarly approach to understanding how YouTube works must make choices among these interpretations, in effect recreating it as a different object each time – at this early stage of research, each study of YouTube gives us a different understanding of what YouTube actually is. (Burgess & Green, 2009, pp. 6–7)

In the 2010 class, we enjoyed Burgess and Green’s political-economic and communications-based analysis of YouTube as a platform holding established media in dialogue with participatory culture, Strangelove’s (2010) participant ethnography and more cultural studies-like approach to the “extraordinary videos of ordinary people,” and the eclectic and provocative anthologies of Vonderau and Snickars (2009) and the Institute of Network Cultures that look to YouTube’s structuring metaphors – platform, archive, laboratory, medium – to define its meanings, value, and research methods.

This range of approaches to YouTube studies, and the many YouTube’s it produces, proved an excellent preliminary education in meta-field and meta-method awareness for my students, who learned that how they study affects what the field might be and what they might know. However, the quick consolidation of authoritative or expert analysis on the subject (including my own) greatly altered the 2010 students’ sense of their own role in the creation of knowledge, thereby shifting away from how the first offering of the course was able to mirror the structure of YouTube (which pretends user control and celebrates amateur knowledge). The (changing) roles that control, knowledge, and reflexivity play for YouTube, the course, digital culture, and this and other writing about it remains the central (if ever-deconstructing) frame of this project, including how to write and publish about it. What this might mean for the future of digital humanities will be the subject of this essay.

## **Introduction to Blogs 1 and 2 on Teaching the Class**

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I decided to teach a course about, and also on, YouTube, hoping to make visible the site’s architecture, ownership, and grossly limited functionality (as well as, through counterdistinction, how those functions define the space of a more typical brick-and-mortar college classroom). Given these operating assumptions, I knew in advance that I could not write a scholarly analysis of this endeavor relying solely on YouTube’s platform and its paltry functions and

undifferentiated audiences. Thus, I blogged about the course as it was happening, and after it was over, and used these reflections both to enrich the course and as exercises toward more traditional scholarly output. My blog voice tends to be informal, short, and experience-based rather than research-based. I publish it here, virtually unedited, for reasons similar to how I structured the course: conventions of form, audience, intent, and method are NOT the same between written and online expression, even as they increasingly converge. Put the wrong object in a built-to-form box and suddenly the shape of the container becomes visible.

Note: I have created a typographic signpost for this paper version of my blog writing to mark the blog's many (missing) links and videos: <for an absent link>, [for an impossible-to-embed video]. This typographic mess indicates some of what is lost as we begin to move, willy-nilly, from screen to page, amateur to expert, private to public, popular to arcane. Such failures are productive, allowing us to see the shape of what is missing.

## **BLOG 1: Learning from YouTube, 09-07-2007<sup>4</sup>**

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I am teaching an experimental class <class page<sup>5</sup>> on/about YouTube this semester. [**“Learning From YouTube, Sept 4 2007 Pt. 1,” mperry08<sup>6</sup>]**

After two class sessions I realize this course is going to be really fun and super hard, challenging me as a professor in ways that I am unaccustomed to. Let's start with the press, the numbers, and the public nature of the course (all related). After the first course, I was interviewed for an article about the course for <“YouTube Studies”<sup>7</sup>> *Inside Higher Ed*. The article came out before the second class, and suddenly there were two journalists and a photographer in attendance. This media attention, added to the fact that we tape and put on to YouTube each class session, and that I had learned that people actually *were* watching these classes, led me to be self-conscious to a degree I am usually not when I teach. Typically, over an hour of teaching you hit some high notes, make a few blunders, and otherwise get through. You're human, and undergraduates are your sole witness. During our second class, the issues got serious and complex quickly, primarily concerning the ubiquitous representations of race and racism on YouTube and in our class (and this is good) but I was self-conscious about how my colleagues would view the way I didn't hit gold in the live processing of these complex ideas. Now the class is about, among other things, issues of privacy as well as access in higher education. And while I'm committed to what it means to open access to my class, it now seems clear to me that it limits my teaching (and perhaps my students' learning, in that they are equally self-conscious).

Numbers (hits to the page keep doubling) also add a weird and unwieldy stress to my teaching, and the course. Yes, they are informative about the logic of YouTube, but ultimately invasive. As is simply managing the outside communication this brings (emails, letters, requests) that expand the demands on me from those of my thirty enrolled students to anyone who is interested and has access to a computer. It was

exciting to see that in the second class, and with only the most superficial of assignments, the students were already touching on many of the BIG IDEAS about YouTube and digital culture: its postmodern reliance on humor, celebrity, and self-referentiality to mainstream culture; its democratic function as soap box for the talent/opinions/expression of regular people; its mind-numbing, time-wasting superficiality; the raucous and unruly nature of the conversation it produces. My challenge will be to work with the class to hone, focus, and systematize such conversations given that we cannot refer to other scholarly works (one of my imposed limits is that we cannot leave YouTube), and given that I have ceded a certain amount of real control to them by teaching the class as a communal, user-generated endeavor. How will I guide the conversation in ways scholarly and rigorous given that our frame and guide is not?

Frankly, I'm not certain that we're doing it, that there's enough to do or know about YouTube (given YouTube as the tight structure for gaining such knowledge) to sustain a course. While I've succeeded in developing a structure that models the content I seek, I am not certain we need fifteen weeks to figure this out.

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## **BLOG 2: Learning from Learning from YouTube mid-way, 10-29-07<sup>8</sup>**

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Mid-way through the semester, and I'm pleased to report how much we've actually learned, albeit experientially, through doing (and not doing) while stuck in all that is powerful and inane on YouTube. Every failure has been a learning experience, although organized by frustration and lived within contained chaos. Of course, I set out to run this class so that such failures would help make clear the costs (and benefits) of our rapid, giddy acceptance of new digital environments without a concurrent set of criticisms and demands about best practices for making use of this, the most democratic distributor, platform, and archive of moving images.

[**"Summary of Learning from YouTube at the midterm 2," mediapraxisme<sup>9</sup>**]

And now, just six weeks in, my students' criticisms are being well made: about public scrutiny and the ridicule of the mainstream media (leading to analysis of the role of fame and celebrity in YouTube culture); the disruptive additions of hundreds of non-class videos and comments on our class's group-page (leading to analysis about the making-public of the once-private on YouTube); our inability to interact in real-time and in a central space when we are on YouTube (the groups' pages are even harder to navigate and make use of than are the user pages); the site's weaknesses around finding and linking material (leading to analysis about what is intentionally not-well-made on a site that functions best for the relay of entertainment); and a more keen awareness of how censorship and corporations are well-served on the site while community and art are not. We've also deduced that there are two YouTubes: the mainstream one made and maintained by Google and millions of users out to waste some time, and the innumerable experiments in form, content,

behavior, and community that fall outside the logic of entertainment, advertisements, popular culture, hits, numbers, and favorites (what I call NicheTube). See one YouTube and the other becomes obscured; ask a question of the other and learn little of use to better understand the first. Our class falls into NicheTube: unseen by most, unattended to by the site's architecture, poorly supported, thus barely getting by but learning nevertheless.

All this has contributed to the class's clarity about YouTube's ineffectual structure for higher learning even as it does other things well. In an attempt to mirror the architecture of YouTube, this "student-led" course, open to user-created flexibility and innovation, is still organized by my friendly but controlling vision and parameters. And from this controlled chaos, the strengths and limitations of contemporary learning occurring digitally, publicly, visually, and in corporate-owned environments are being lived and then theorized through this doing. The students have posted their first research projects as well as mid-terms about what they've learned: they are systematically naming the structures, methods, limits and strengths of YouTube just as they are beginning to master its language, which is to say, we're beginning to see a variety of strategies towards the illustrated lecture. Pressing the students to express critical content through short videos that use YouTube's vernacular has proven to be one of the real successes of the experiment, as it is clear that over the next few years they will inhabit a culture where rich and necessary communication will occur visually, not just through the written word. They're taking preliminary steps towards complex uses of this communication device. Although the students had a variety of production skills going into the class (as is true for YouTubers as a whole), half way through the class they have hacked the YouTube video to express complicated analyses of YouTube itself.

And from their work I have learned, too. About teaching, primarily. I have found that seven oppositional binaries are being disturbed during this pedagogic experiment, leading to unsettling and mostly unproductive alterations in the ways we have typically taught and learned in higher education by keeping distinctions pure: public/private; amateur/expert; democratic/corporate; structured/anarchic; community/individual; entertainment/occupation; flow/depth. I hope to discuss the difficulties for teaching inspired by these flattened binaries in later posts.

But for now, I need to attend to the more urgent fact that I am uncertain where we are going to go and what we are going to do. This is a scary time for me, as the professor, in and out of control, with students who want and yet disdain discipline (in pursuit, they say, of "fun," yet still ever fearful of grades), and with failure as our guide: to interact, build ideas, feel safe, be heard or respected, or locate compelling analyses. The second half of the class is intentionally and completely unscripted. I expect we will choose to go off YouTube, to do some traditional research and learning, bring in specialists, read some postmodern and new media theory, turn it into a more regular class where "real" or, let's say, more traditional learning can occur. But some of the students have begged us to stick out the experiment, to consider and propose better practices for what learning in and through corporate-controlled entertainment might look like.

## Conclusions for Blogs 1 and 2

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*The seven collapsing binary oppositions that I identified in the fall of 2007 – while undergoing a number of permutations over the years and eventually becoming the ten “YouTours” that shape my video-book – have proven to be one conceptual structure that I rely upon to discipline and format my thinking and writing in the face of YouTube’s structuring chaos. You will see them reemerge across this essay (in blog 4, on YouTube Writing, for instance, where they take on a slightly different nomenclature but serve a similar disciplining function), and I use them as easily here.*

*For instance, the Learning from YouTube course, and its later written forms, trouble a public/private binary that usually serves to stabilize our work, authority, and purpose as teachers and scholars. The operating, structuring anxieties of any particular person, or professor, are typically hidden from the view of colleagues and students to allow for a performance of authority and constancy that seems necessary for a streamlined or efficient production of knowledge. By the middle of the semester, it was already crystal clear that my students did not like the loss of control produced by my giving them control. Their discomfort proved a productive obstacle to their education. By naming their desire for discipline, we suddenly saw with some clarity the shape of more traditional, comfortable, and yielding forms of teaching/learning. Even so, was there enough to learn from YouTube to fill a semester? Yes and no. Yes, when YouTube became a metaphor for other systems that control the flow of ideas, community, and authority. No, when we deduced how paltry YouTube’s resources were for detailed, rigorous, auto-research. Yes, when we realized that this, itself, taught us about the limits and strengths of online learning.*

## Introduction to Blogs 3 and 4 on Organizing Course Output and Conclusions

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*After the course ended in Fall 2007, I used my Spring 2008 sabbatical to categorize, theorize, and publish work about the enormous amount of video output and ideas created on and about YouTube over the previous semester. Then in Fall 2008, I taught the course again, albeit differently (with both more structure and traditional reading assignments), and went on the road giving talks that attempted to stay situated within the vernaculars, forms, architecture, and machines of the networked digital. Interestingly, I found myself most moved to talk and think about meta-issues of pedagogy, field, writing, and publishing over sharing my “findings” about YouTube. Perhaps this is because that work had already been done – with great panache and some totality – by my students within their hundreds of course videos, and then also because YouTube itself, alone, was not quite giving or changing enough to secure my ongoing attention and output of scholarly work. (Of course, many others have gone on to ask of it innumerable questions from a variety of fields with productive results.)*

*The blog posts that I have selected from this period reflect two areas of early thinking: (1) my “tour” project – where I tried to organize and systematize the huge output of videos made for the class, given that they swam, uncontrolled and unusable, on YouTube, and (2) my initial thinking about “YouTube writing” – where I tried to create a terminology to catalogue the writing practices exhibited in my students’ work. These two posts also demonstrate some of the practices and preoccupations that haunt this body of work: (1) “little lists” (seven binaries, nine tours, five differences between scholarly and YouTube writing, eight writing styles) and (2) feminist, self-reflexive interrogations of the forms I use and the values I hold.*

### **BLOG 3: YouTube Tour #1: Education, 02-06-08**<sup>10</sup>

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Today, I posted my first “tour” of the work and lessons learned by the Learning from YouTube class. I will try to post one per week, with accompanying blogs, for the next eight weeks, resulting in nine tours on: education, entertainment, popularity, the vernacular, the visual, users, owners, community and the archive. It took me a while to decide how I’d like to present the many things I think we learned during that hectic semester, and I was pleased when I remembered the “tour” method: one we had devised during the semester to try to work YouTube against itself by creating a linked, sharable, and repeatable path, with associated comments, through its chaos. It seemed right to “publish” my results on YouTube, continuing to hack and use its forms to hold our analytical content and designs; to continue to use it to speak to and about itself. Attempting to present my analysis of the site on its pages, rather than, say, in those of an academic venue, demanded profound changes in the nature of my work, as a media scholar and educator, that, as ever, prove telling about the workings of YouTube.

The key differences were a matter of: time and brevity, vernacular, audience, professional standards, and language. In brief, time is of the essence on YouTube. As I made the video for this tour, and then the tour itself, I was hyper-aware to keep cutting, condensing, summarizing, and simplifying to speak effectively on YouTube (to keep the attention of its distractible, easily bored, viewers), which, of course, is also a major part of its vernacular: there is a premium put on ease and efficiency, condensation and simplification. Whereas my students are forced to hear me speak, or at least pretend to, the YouTube viewer must *want* to stay there because of my media skills and compellingly expressed information, because I entertain her. A language of bullets: quick, exciting, and mobile. And here I would add the necessity for using non-specialist language so as to be heard effectively, which gets me to audience, for I assume a general and diverse audience on YouTube, one I do not imagine on this blog, and one that has no relation to who reads me in academic journals. I can count on no shared references or lingo, other than that of popular culture, which diminishes the complexity of my thoughts even as it expands their reach. Unlike a classroom, where one speaks to undergraduates equally unschooled in scholarly



discourse but where you can school them and together grow a shared language, the scattered, random nature of YouTube's viewership demands that one always stays at the most rudimentary level, never giving the audience an opportunity to grow its vocabulary.

On a different note, the systems of proof and authority are diametrically different on YouTube from those of academia. My "proof" on YouTube is always another video, any video. Its existence, and mine, on YouTube's pages grants us as much and no more authority than any other user, that is, of course, unless we have the power of numbers – glorious hits – on our side. Academic writing, on the other hand, also relies upon the affirmation of outside voices; however, what differentiates these voices is that they are accredited (through institutionally sanctioned systems of vetting via publishing and other forms, like tenure) and their arguments build relationally, slowly, and in dialogue with a tradition. This is diametrically opposed to the piecemeal character of both the rant and private confession definitive of discourse on YouTube.

Clearly, these reflections make me sound a snob, and not the proponent I have always been of a democratization of access to and discourses about the media. However, I have learned that expanded access cannot itself be a stand-alone goal. Access to media production, and dissemination, needs to be accompanied with the gaining of other tools that allow for the growing complexity of discourse: and these are, quite simply, the capacities to work together and to learn from what has been done before. I speak about these ideas in greater length, and through scholarly discourse, as a "real academic talk" forced on to YouTube here:

[**"Queer Realism on YouTube, Juhasz conference talk, 1/2," mediapraxisme<sup>11</sup>**]

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## **BLOG 4: On Video Writing, 11-04-08<sup>12</sup>**

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[**"Intro to Video Writing Conference Talk," mediapraxisme<sup>13</sup>**]

These words are actually the transcript of a "talk" I will present at the Future of Writing Conference at UC Irvine. It begins with the video above (you need to watch it, just one minute, to begin), and links to many more YouTube videos across its duration. You can also watch the talk through my Playlist <"Video Writing: Talk for UCI Conference, 11/08"<sup>14</sup>> on YouTube.

My [**"Video Writing Talk, Part 2," by mediapraxisme<sup>15</sup>**] gimmick was to teach the course both about and also on YouTube. This allowed for a brief [**"Learning from YouTube on TV," by mediapraxisme<sup>16</sup>**] viral moment last Fall, itself a great [**"YouTube Comments," by dallen11<sup>17</sup>**] lesson in the workings of popularity, simplicity, and humor within online social networking and its media convergences.

Needless to say our aims for the course have always been [**"Video Writing Talk, Part 3," by mediapraxisme<sup>18</sup>**] serious. In Learning from YouTube, I am interested in participating with my students in [**"What Can YouTube Teach Us?" by**

**baxterici**<sup>19</sup>] primary research about the forms and functions of this poster-child for Web 2.0. By together engaging the site against YouTube's primary aims of entertainment, we learn about the limits of its corporate architecture and our own needs as new media makers and learners.

For the class, students are required to do all their coursework as either YouTube videos or comments. In the process, they are remaking academic writing for the digital classroom. In my ["**Video Writing Talk, Part 4,**" by **mediapraxisme**<sup>20</sup>] talk today, I will introduce eight new forms of academic video writing: Public Writing, Isolated Writing, Reflexive Writing, Visual, Amateur and Control Writing, and Convergence and Censored Writing. While each of these stylistics are also used within traditional written expression, they are significantly modified, hybridized, and amplified in online academic video writing in ways that serve to demonstrate the current state of writing (and teaching) within Web 2.0.

I will begin by naming some common forms and approaches that appear across the eight academic video writing forms that will be the focus of this talk. I have found there are three common structures for video writing: the first is **word-reliant** (reading or writing a traditional paper on to video. Notably, this form allows for the most complex meanings and the least interesting videos). Next, probably most common, and arguably most successful for our purposes, is the **illustrated summary**, composed through the bullet pointing of more detailed ideas that are cut to images of YouTube as evidence. Finally, perhaps my favorite, and certainly the most creative, is the YouTube **hack**, where academic content is wedged into a popular YouTube vernacular form. Besides these common formats I hope you will observe the ubiquitous use of two, often understood as "postmodern" devices of tone and structure – humor (most often being cynical, sarcastic, or parodic in form) and self-reflexivity. Finally, sometimes my students will pull the power play of **sincerity**, which, in ways YouTube, creates productive tension with the site's expected cynicism and humor. As you may have already deduced from my academic video writing here, detailed rhetorical analysis, the bellwether of productive scholarly expression, is not the most powerful of tactics for this venue. Thus, I would characterize my own production as word-reliant, amateurish, public, reflexive, and also an example of control and convergence video writing. I hope that by talk's end, my own terms, tactics, and practices will be clarified.

1 ["**The Future of Writing,**" by **wtto2005**<sup>21</sup>] Public Writing: The classroom ideally depends upon an intimate and "safe" gathering of carefully selected students to create a communal pedagogy. They write for the professor, and sometimes for each other, but the general public is neither their audience nor critic. Privacy and mutuality encourage the development of voice. In a YouTube classroom, where anyone and everyone can see and participate, such tried and true pedagogic structures shift. While access grows, the disciplining structures in place in a closed classroom or private paper cannot be relied upon.

2 ["**PlayRadioPlay-Decipher Reflections from Reality,**" by **Raspefly**<sup>22</sup>] Isolated Writing: YouTube writing, academic or not, while publicly presented, is often

produced in and about isolation and in the hopes of finding community. This form of writing mirrors YouTube's *raison d'être* – wasting time – and often results in meaningless, silly, or narcissistic ruminations on self. However, its reverse is the humble stab at sincere communication, banking upon “NicheTube’s” guarantee that no one will actually find, see, or hear you in the uncharted and unruly sea of similarly unheard attempts at communication and self-expression.

3 Reflexive Writing makes YouTube its content and form, creating a dizzying hall of media mirrors where “the Real” dissolves, a necessary but unmissed casualty to a more rich, and endlessly self-referential and self-fulfilling life online. [**“Britney Spears Uncensored Dancing and Eating,”** by **jweitzel**<sup>23</sup>]

4 Written expression is closed down on YouTube. Its 500-character limit, and sandlot culture, produces a dumbing-down for the word nearly impossible to remedy. So, [**“Everything People Love About YouTube,”** by **edauenhauer**<sup>24</sup>] visual writing reigns. In this highly entertaining form, meaning is lost to feeling that is buttressed by the sound of music and cut to the speed of final cut pro. Both spectacle and humor reliant, this is also the terrain of the expert (dependent upon corporate or popular media even if modified by “amateurs”). It is hard to use for academic video writing, but students try, usually through opposition.

5 [**“MS 130 Want some high school Musical 3? Watch till the end!”** by **ziliemd**<sup>25</sup>] Amateur Writing is word reliant. It is either the stuff of real people talking into their low-end cameras about their private pleasure or pain, or regular people demonstrating their exceptional or laughable skills. It can be popular if it seems sincere, or if a spectacle of humiliation or extreme talent is at its core.

6 [**“Summary of Learning from YouTube at the Midterm 2,”** by **mediapraxisme**<sup>26</sup>] Control Writing works against the chaotic, undisciplined culture of YouTube and attempts to force structure, and the possibility for building complexity, onto its pages. The significance of discipline for academic work proves the rule. Without it, ideas stay vague and dispersed, there is no system for evaluation, and you can't find things or build upon them. On YouTube it comes across as somewhat School Marmish, yes?

7 [**“Blacks on YouTube Final,”** by **VannaBlack4you**<sup>27</sup>] Censored Writing is definitive of YouTube (heralded as a “democratic” platform) where users routinely flag content, servicing the corporation, whenever it strays from the comfortable confines of the hegemonic. To see to this video, “Blacks on YouTube Final,” you need to be of right age, as it has been flagged for inappropriate (critical?) content. Please note: The video that secured the most hits in our video writing contest, “Nailin’ Palin” (the ripped first minute of a Hustler hit), an example of Copyright Writing, cannot be included in this tour because it was taken down.

8 [**“YouTube in Context,”** by **kimballzen**<sup>28</sup>] Convergence Writing: As Henry Jenkins points out, new media allows for writing that gains its impact by moving across platforms and building upon the power of ready-made media already encrusted with meaning (and ownership). So easy, even [**“Small Paul (Frank) Soulja Boy Dance,”** by **mediapraxisme**<sup>29</sup>] (my) children can join the fun.

## Introduction to Blogs 5–7: On Publishing in the Digital Humanities

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*In the Summer of 2009, I took my nearly 200 examples of YouTube writing (these and other blogs, published essays online and on paper, videos, interviews) to the Vectors National Endowment for the Humanities Summer Seminar with the hopes of turning them into a proper, big, formidable publication: a “book.” These next selected blog posts mark the process of conceptualizing this work within both my career’s arc and the emerging field of digital humanities, making some sense of the demands of this new, new media writing, and then negotiating the actual contract for this strange form. In all three blog posts I evidence a push against professional constraints – of academic fields, writing forms, and publishing – themselves bound to practices and norms of vetting, promotion, and disciplines. Here we see how the unruly nature of the subjects of new media studies creates the necessary dismantling of another oppositional binary: control/chaos. My work on and about YouTube at once necessitates attempts to systematize and contain (evidenced in Blogs 1–4) and to challenge and expand limits (Blogs 5–7). Given the staid structures of our profession, and the unruly inventions of this and similar efforts, another contradictory frame then comes into sight: it is, counterproductively, that full professors, rather than young scholars, are the most readily enabled (through the institution’s slowly accrued freedoms and powers) to test boundaries.*

### **BLOG 5: Digital Humanities, 7-17-09<sup>30</sup>**

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I am spending a month at USC’s NEH Vector’s<sup>31</sup> Institute, <“Broadening the Digital Humanities.”> Eleven scholars are given the opportunity to develop digital projects through the generous technical and intellectual support of the <Institute for Multi-Media Literacy.><sup>32</sup> At the first session, Tara McPherson<sup>33</sup> asked of us our relation to the term “digital humanities,” and I said that I had always thought of myself as a “media scholar, artist, and activist” but would be pleased to also take on this newer title. However, after spending a few days amongst digital humanists of various home disciplinary stripes, I believe that this interdisciplinary field holds much in common with earlier practices of more radical scholars who have pressed at the intersections of academia and art and/or activism.

In an unpublished draft essay by Institute fellow <Katherine Hayles>,<sup>34</sup> “How We Think: The Transforming Power of Digital Technologies,” Hayles engages in dialogue with eighteen Digital Humanists to better understand the current shape of the field, in her opinion, in its 2nd phase (having gone from text to multimodality). She proposes how Digital Humanities move traditional Humanities from “text-based study . . . to time-based art forms such as film, music, and animation, visual traditions such as graphics and design, spatial practices such as architecture and geography, and curatorial practices associated with museums, galleries, and the like.”

I would want to say the same thing, just differently. Listening to my ten <Kairos><sup>35</sup> colleagues <Hemispheric Institute><sup>36</sup> describe <Digital Durham><sup>37</sup> their <Virtual Politik><sup>38</sup> exciting <version.org><sup>39</sup> digital projects, I see a turn in traditional scholarship toward accounting for and embracing the demands of **art** and **activism**. Namely, digital humanists need to **collaborate** (a well-developed set of practices refined by those in film or theater, for instance, and theorized by feminists and other activist-scholars who work within communities while being committed to rethinking power relations). Similarly, digital humanists engage **affect** and **aesthetics**, must make sense of their relation to **machines**, take account of **audiences**, as they no longer necessarily speak only to a small and rarified readership of their peers, and must think seriously about **time** and **space**, which to my mind, demands an **ethics** about how one's "intellectual" practices affect the lived world and its inhabitants. Thus, I'd suggest that the "digital" part, only the newest technology of the day, is perhaps what was needed to push more scholars to engage with the personal and political implications<sup>40</sup> of their work. [**"A Gram O Pussy by Duran Ruiz and Scarlot Harlot," by mediapraxisme**<sup>41</sup>] See also Sharon Daniel's Vector's project <Public Secrets> on women and prison.<sup>42</sup>

## BLOG 6: On Publishing My YouTube "Book" Online, 09-24-09<sup>43</sup>

Tomorrow I will be visiting Tara McPherson's graduate course on something like "theories and practices of new media," and she has asked me to present, quickly, some of the difficult considerations that define my current efforts (with the assistance of the <Vector's><sup>44</sup> team) to "publish" my various YouTube findings, practices, musings, papers, videos, blogs, tours, and internet publications into a digital "book." [Author's note (May 24, 2010): since this was written, the on-line "video-book" has been accepted for publication with MIT Press as part of a Mellon grant on rethinking humanities publishing via the digital, and will be hosted on their website, for free, I think, once all these difficult decisions are finalized.]

By way of introduction, and as a method to display the many contradictions and conundrums in the very format that is the problem, I will briefly list on the blog ten themes that define my (attempts to) move my "book" entirely online:

- 1 Audience. When you go online your readers (can) include non-academics.
- 2 Commitment. Harder to command amidst all the distractions.
- 3 Design. Matters more; means.
- 4 Finitude. The page(s) need never close.
- 5 Interactivity. Should your readers, who may or may not be experts, author too?
- 6 Linearity. Goes out the window, unless you force it.

- 7 Multi-modal. Much can be expressed outside the confines of the word.
- 8 Network. How things link is within or outside the author's control.
- 9 Single author. Why hold out the rest of the Internet?
- 10 Temporality. People read faster online. Watching video can be slow. A book is long.

Here's the shape of my current project, in development: my video-book will speak to an audience of scholars, committed intellectuals, and media activists through a simple, legible, but perky interface that refers, visually, to that which it critiques, while on a deep-level (via programming) performing that which it says YouTube precludes. It will stay open, as I continue to learn, but there will be only limited avenues for interaction. I will produce several arguments that the reader can choose to follow or depart from at their whim and a second structure that gives the user more opportunities to l(th)ink for themselves. A good deal of the ideas of this text will be expressed through video which will sit in a highly designed and interactive relation to written words with which it is associated. I will try to "time" these arguments, a kind of montage really, to command my readers' interest and commitment.

## **BLOG 7: Contractual Mayhem: On the Absurdities of Moving from Paper to Digital in Academic Publishing, 06-11-10<sup>45</sup>**

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I am currently negotiating my contract with MIT Press<sup>46</sup> to "publish" my "video-book" about YouTube in Fall 2010. The enlightening, confusing, crazy, friendly, and productive conversations I am having with my editor, Doug Sery, and my production team at USC's <Vectors><sup>47</sup> and <Institute for Media Literacy><sup>48</sup> are a telling indication of how far academic publishing (and writing) has to go to match the technological possibilities for writing, research, and public intellectualism afforded by new media. My project will be the first publication supported (in part) by a Mellon Initiative, "The Alliance for Networking Visual Culture," which set out to rethink academic publishing (in conversation with <UC><sup>49</sup>, <MIT>, and <Duke><sup>50</sup> University Presses) in light of media archives (including the USC <Shoah Foundation><sup>51</sup>, <The Hemispheric Institute of Performance and Politics><sup>52</sup>, <Critical Commons><sup>53</sup> and the <Internet Archive><sup>54</sup>) and Digital Humanities. With Doug's kind permission, I will be presenting some of our conversation on my blog as a way to network these sorts of negotiations, and the questions they raise for digital humanists, new media scholars, and academic presses.

Doug:

Thanks for making a first pass on the contract. I am thrilled to be working with MIT, and realize "The Work" (what I am currently calling a "video-book" until a better name is found) is the first of its kind, and we're making this happen as we go. Towards this end, here are the notes I promised about the concepts in the first draft of the contract

that don't align well with my understanding of this born-digital publication. I think the conceptual issues for us to tackle are:

- 1) **Delivery** of the Work: what form is acceptable given that the Work lives only online (in a data-base) and not in "word-processing files," as you request.
- 2) **Author's Warranty**
  - a) I am wondering about URLs and YouTube videos that constitute a large portion of the Work. Of course, the writing is all mine.
  - b) Also, regarding **credit**: It is not clear to me, contractually, how to credit the design team who built the Work which holds my words and points to others' videos.
  - c) As for **Previous Publication**: a significant amount of the Work has been "published" already on my blog, although reformatted and designed for the Work.
- 3) **Size** of the Work: Do you actually want a **word count** for the Work? This will not account for the videos, which take up a significant portion of its content. Should there be a video count, or a time count, too?  
 ["KNX Radio interview re YouTube at 5 years," by mediapraxisme<sup>55</sup>]
- 4) **Royalties**: There is currently language about royalties that gives me 0% of all books sales, which makes no sense, as there is no book. The language in the separate portions called Electronic Rights and Royalties from Other Sources (i.e. "if the Work is sold electronically") both seem to be written for a paper book (i.e. "we might make the Work as a whole available via the World Wide Web)" and seem to be in some contradiction or in unnecessary parallel with each other. Given that online, electronic distribution would be its primary (only?) possible revenue stream, if there is to be a revenue stream at all, since it is my current understanding that the Work will be free on the MIT site (although this is not stipulated in the contract), I'd like this all to be clarified and probably rewritten.
- 5) **Materials Created by Other Persons**: To be clear, I do not have permissions for most of the YouTube videos that the work points to, which sit on YouTube and not on the Work.
- 6) **Upkeep**, repairs, hosting of the infrastructure, database and Work: Who is responsible for this? Where does it sit? Where does it go after three years? How is it preserved?
- 7) **Editing**, Proofing: Unclear how this will be done given the unique quality of the material in the Work: i.e. design, words, videos. I certainly want it to be edited and proofed but how and by whom?
- 8) **Author's Alterations**: We need to decide whether the Work will be adapted, in that it is live, and easily updatable, added to, commented upon etc. or if it stays still once delivered (more like a paper book).
- 9) **Promotion**: given the unique nature of the Work, its economic model, and its final shape and home, I am interested in thinking through where and how the Press will promote it and otherwise let its audience know about its presence and availability.
- 10) **Index**: The Work has a search function and thus I will not need to make an index.

I look forward to working all this through. I understand that most of these concepts are new for the Press (and me) and am open to hashing them out in ways that make

the best sense for all concerned. Meanwhile, I am busy revising the Work as we speak. All the best, Alex

PS: I would like to ask your permission to “publish” some version of this (and other emails) concerning our ongoing discussions about publishing the Work, first on my blog, and then perhaps in the Work itself. As you know, the self-referential quality of the Work – discussing its own status as an object of writing, pedagogy, social-networked scholarship, activist intellectualism, and digital humanities publishing – would be well-served by including this final stage of its production, process, and conceptualization within itself.

## Conclusions Regarding the Shape of What is Missing

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*The future of new media writing and publishing will be made online by young scholars and students who write lively, multi-modal missives using communication and digital technologies to network their analysis and experiences of their lived media environments. It is my hope that by creating and holding this unstable space of writing and publishing, I lay claim to its legitimacy for the less institutionally entrenched, who follow me, and also lead me, into new media's future. I hope that the stable and unstable deconstructing frame of this essay – the (changing) roles played by control, knowledge, form, and reflexivity in new media studies' future – allows us to see that academic styles, methods, and audiences adapt in ways that are productive and dynamic. I also hope that the shape of what is missing is how far academic publishing and writing, on paper, can go so as to match the technological possibilities for writing, research, and public intellectualism afforded by new media.*

## NOTES

- 1 [www.youtube.com/mediapraxisme](http://www.youtube.com/mediapraxisme)
- 2 You can find the online book at <http://mitpress.mit.edu/catalog/item/default.asp?tttype=2&tid=12596>
- 3 Books published on YouTube by fall of 2010 included Burgess and Green (2009), Lovink and Niederer (2008), Juhasz (2011), Strangelove (2010), Vonderau and Snickars (2009).
- 4 <http://aljean.wordpress.com/2007/09/07/learning-from-youtube>
- 5 <http://www.youtube.com/mediapraxisme>
- 6 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8CDrYwXVOn4>. “The first ‘Learning from YouTube’ class at Pitzer College, held on September 4, 2007. Part 1 of 4.”
- 7 <http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2007/09/06/youtube>
- 8 <http://aljean.wordpress.com/2007/10/29/learning-from-learning-from-youtube-mid-way>
- 9 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uIK9XZwGqDc>. “I summarize 12 points we’ve learned from the class about YouTube.”



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- 10 <http://aljean.wordpress.com/2008/02/06/reflections-on-building-tour-1/>
  - 11 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A7pkN1VziYg>. "I perform 'Queer Realism on YouTube,' for MS135: a talk I presented in May at the International Communications Association meetings."
  - 12 <http://aljean.wordpress.com/2008/11/04/on-video-writing>
  - 13 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pGsi5na0JZI>. "This is the opening of the 'talk' I will give at the 'Future of Writing' conference, taking place at the University of CA, Irvine, in November, 2008. To watch the talk in its entirety, go to my playlists: Video Writing. It is also available on my blog: aljean dot wordpress dot com."
  - 14 [http://www.youtube.com/view\\_playlist?p=D5B38D7C2C9E0488](http://www.youtube.com/view_playlist?p=D5B38D7C2C9E0488). "This is my talk about Learning from YouTube which will be presented, via this playlist, for the UCI Conference, 'Video Writing.'"
  - 15 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uXA6qw0Bf6I>. "My self-reflexive structure, also a pretty sexy gimmick, to teach the course both about and also on YouTube allowed for a brief viral moment last Fall, itself a great lesson in the workings of popularity, simplicity, and humor within on-line social networking and its many media convergences. See my blog, too: [www.aljean.wordpress.com](http://www.aljean.wordpress.com)."
  - 16 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JR4g342sEyI>. "Learning from YouTube on TV, and after Regis and Kathy Lee! September 14, 2007."
  - 17 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IHYow1X0g7E>. "What is the real joke – the class or people's inability to accept YouTube as a valid text for study?"
  - 18 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ikWiBsCKZ3c>. "This is the 3rd video for my talk for the Future of Writing Conference. Find the whole 'talk' through my playlists. Needless to say our aims for the course have always been serious. In Learning from YouTube, I am interested in participating with my students in primary research about the forms and functions of this particular poster-child for web 2.0. By together engaging the site against YouTubes primary aims of entertainment, we learn about the limits of its corporate architecture, and our own needs as new media makers and learners. Also, see this on my blog: [www.aljean.wordpress.com](http://www.aljean.wordpress.com)."
  - 19 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9UFRHgp71us>. "My answer to the title question. Sorry the video quality is bad – I'm experimenting with some different techniques. See [www.youtube.com/mediapraxisme](http://www.youtube.com/mediapraxisme)."
  - 20 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Au2BOTxvL4s>. "This is the 4th part of my talk for the Future of Writing Conference, you can find the whole thing via my playlists on on my blog: [www.aljean.wordpress.com](http://www.aljean.wordpress.com)."
  - 21 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8Ini-3rs-ig>. "LFYT. Internet writing is evil."
  - 22 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y-Rvt6aNdSk>. "I love PlayRadioPlay . . . and drawing so I decided to combine the two."
  - 23 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AuZpKTab3ZQ>
  - 24 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a2eUPc3F08A>. "There was never a group consensus to tell this to the class, but I couldn't keep quiet. We cheated. There is an addon in Firefox that will refresh the page on a regular interval, so we each gave the video about 1000 hits and then called it good. We knew we couldn't beat 30,000, so we gave up eventually."
  - 25 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lxPwe6FjTjk>. "Youtube: A molding machine which homogenizes the forms of future video blogging. The products of this machine have no true identity. They either imitate other popular YouTube gurus, or fall into the category of cliches. Yet, they are pleasing sources for entertainment."

- 26 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uIK9XZwGqDc>. "I summarize 12 points we've learned from the class about YouTube."
- 27 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y6rd5MscyPI>. "Blacks On Youtube."
- 28 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EYe6mOYUOWk>. "LFYT Response Tour #4 The more I think about actual learning on YouTube the more discouraged I become. Just like this video shows, its difficult to build knowledge because of YouTubes limits, it disconnect ideas, and create information totally out of context. Maybe the strength of YouTube is that it can be integrated into other media. While I was doing some digging for your family vacation, I found that Google now has user created content on its Google Maps mainly of photos and YouTube videos. This organization seems like a better place to link YouTube videos with outside information, and create some real learning. The videos that appear on Google Maps are all from YouTube, so it might be easier to organize information this way. These videos are still subject to all the same rules as YouTube: some videos are bad or obviously not professional and some commercial. Yet, like Youtube, you still might have a hard time connecting content, and creating coherent thoughts or learning that actually builds on itself, especially since you can post videos on maps that dont seem to have anything to do with the place itself."
- 29 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OOGdSixlsOs>. "My children and I watch the YouTube how-to video, try the dance on our own and with our Small Paul dolls, and discuss things YouTube including My Spoon is Too Big, talent, ratings, and juvenile humor."
- 30 <http://aljean.wordpress.com/2009/07/17/digital-humanities>
- 31 <http://www.vectorsjournal.org>
- 32 <http://cinema.usc.edu/programs/institute-for-multimedia-literacy>
- 33 <http://cinema.usc.edu/directories/profile.cfm?id=6590>
- 34 <http://fds.duke.edu/db/aas/Literature/faculty/n.hayles>
- 35 <http://english.ttu.edu/Kairos>
- 36 <http://hemisphericinstitute.org/cuaderno/yoeme/content.html>
- 37 <http://digitaldurham.duke.edu>
- 38 <http://www.virtualpolitik.blogspot.com>
- 39 <http://version.org>
- 40 [http://cameraobscura.dukejournals.org/cgi/pdf\\_extract/18/3\\_54/71](http://cameraobscura.dukejournals.org/cgi/pdf_extract/18/3_54/71)
- 41 [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_hP6SN0oy8Y](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_hP6SN0oy8Y). "5/5 videos from 'RELEASED: 5 Short Videos about Women and Prison,' a collaborative political media project produced by Alexandra Juhasz."
- 42 <http://www.vectorsjournal.org/projects/index.php?project=57>
- 43 <http://aljean.wordpress.com/2009/09/24/on-publishing-my-youtube-book-on-line>
- 44 <http://www.vectorsjournal.org>
- 45 <http://aljean.wordpress.com/2010/06/11/contractual-mayhem-on-the-absurdities-of-moving-from-paper-to-digital-in-academic-publishing>
- 46 <http://mitpress.mit.edu/main/home/default.asp>
- 47 <http://www.vectorsjournal.org>
- 48 <http://iml.usc.edu>
- 49 <http://www.ucpress.edu>
- 50 [www.dukeupress.edu](http://www.dukeupress.edu)
- 51 <http://college.usc.edu/vhi>
- 52 <http://hemisphericinstitute.org/hemi>

- 53 <http://www.criticalcommons.org>  
54 <http://www.archive.org>  
55 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=utbm942SMts>. “We discuss copyright and making money on YouTube.”

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