

DESIGNING MEDIA

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The MIT Press
Cambridge, Massachusetts
London, England

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This book was set in Trade Gothic and Minion Pro by Katie Clark.
Printed and bound in the United States of America.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Moggridge, Bill.

Designing media / Bill Moggridge.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-262-01485-4 (hardcover : alk. paper)

1. Multimedia systems—Interviews.

2. Digital media—Design—Interviews. I. Title.

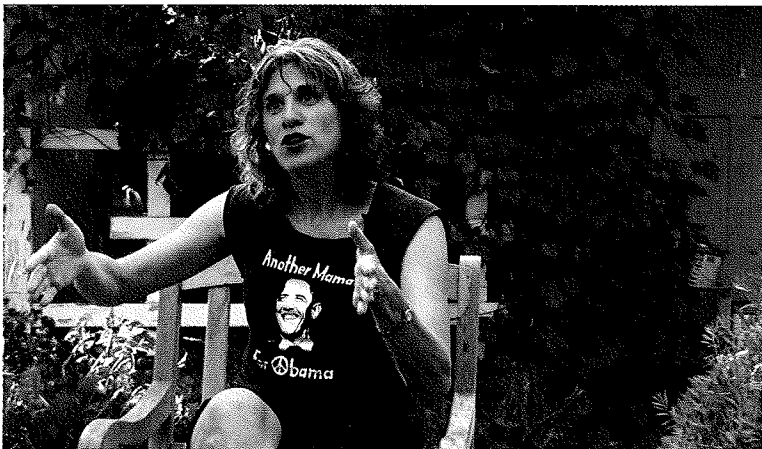
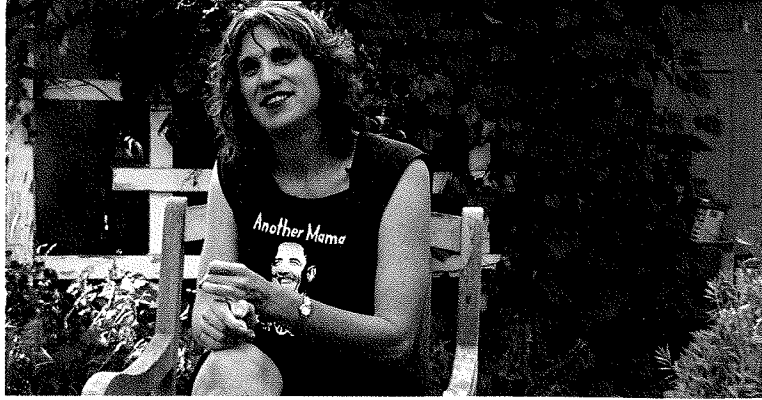
QA76.575.M645 2010

006.7—dc22

2010014419

ALEXANDRA JUHASZ

Interviewed October 28, 2008



ALEXANDRA JUHASZ

Alexandra is a professor of media studies at Pitzer College in California, where she teaches video production and film and video theory. She is interested in the political and artistic uses of media and in theories as well as the production of media in relationship to political or personal issues. In the mid-1980s she was producing AIDS activist videos in New York and then writing about the processes for her PhD in cinema studies from New York University. Since then, the themes have changed, but her commitment to projects that involve both creating material and theorizing about its rationale has been consistent throughout her work. She has taught courses at many universities on women and film, feminist film, and women's documentary. Her current work is on and about YouTube and other more radical uses of digital media. Her "video-book," *Learning from YouTube*, about her course and YouTube's failings more generally, will be published by the MIT Press in Fall 2010. She also recently produced the micro-budget feature film, *The Owls* (Cheryl Dunye, 2010), which premiered at the Berlin Film Festival.

← Alexandra Juhasz
photos by author

Alexandra lives in a tree-lined residential neighborhood of Pasadena. I flew down from San Francisco with my video gear a week before the November 2008 election and found her wearing a T-shirt printed with Obama's face and the words "Another Mama for Obama" with the *O* of Obama modified as the peace symbol. It was a beautiful day, so we sat in the garden, with the shade of the trees occasionally changing to dappled sunlight. As we talked, we were interrupted every now and again by a low-flying plane overhead or one of her dogs barking.

The image is a screenshot of a YouTube channel page for 'MediaPraxisme'. The browser's address bar shows the URL: <http://www.youtube.com/user/MediaPraxisme#p/a/806E9F01CDF6BAD8/1/D7KoZl>. The page features the YouTube logo, a search bar, and navigation links for 'Browse', 'Upload', 'Create Account', and 'Sign In'. The channel header includes the name 'MediaPraxisme's Channel', a 'Subscribe' button, and tabs for 'All', 'Uploads', 'Favorites', and 'Playlists'. The main content area displays a video player for 'Class Statement 2' with a duration of 0:28 / 1:50. Below the player are links for 'Info', 'Comments', 'Favorite', 'Share', 'Playlists', and 'Flag'. A description for 'Class Statement 2' is provided, along with a 'View comments, related videos, and more' link. To the right, a sidebar lists several videos, including 'Re: LFYT midterm' (103 views), 'TOUR #2: Entertainment or B...' (11 videos), 'TOUR #2, Entertainment, Intro: The Quick n Easy' (497 views), 'TOUR #2, Entertainment, Re Class Statement 2' (88 views), 'TOUR #3: POPULARITY! (15)', 'TOUR #3: POPULARITY! Who doesn't want to be' (884 views), 'Learning from YouTube on TV' (4,780 views), and 'YouTube Comments' (271 views). At the bottom, there is a 'MediaPraxisme' profile section with a 'Subscribe' button and options to 'Add as Friend', 'Block User', or 'Send Message'. A 'Recent Activity' section shows that 'MediaPraxisme' favorited a video 2 days ago, with a snippet of the video description: 'Prototypical Hapa Narrative a project for my Visual Research Method class with another student commenting on digital stories (personal narratives) that attempt to address mixe... more'.

WHAT'S WRONG WITH YOUTUBE

Alexandra has given a lot of thought to the social impact of YouTube. She teaches a class both about and on YouTube, studying it with her students to try to understand the cultural implications of the new level of connectivity for video. During the run-up to the 2009 election, she was looking at how the broad circulation of people-produced media was affecting the outcome, feeling optimistic about the positive impact for the Obama campaign. She is more critical about other aspects of the emergence of YouTube, disappointed that the potential for democratization is not fulfilled.

I study YouTube, and I think YouTube fails to deliver the promises of these new technologies, namely, the ways in which they really could enhance our ability to communicate, open up channels of discourse, and allow people to build things together. When I tried to do something serious there, teaching a college course, we all found that that the communal building of knowledge simply can't happen on YouTube, and I am interested in studying why not. For instance, my students and I learned that the idea that YouTube is "democratic," which is one of the ways it sells itself, is simply untrue. Instead, as is true for many of these social-networking applications, the structure of popularity is how YouTube is organized. The more something is voted for, the more visible it becomes, and it dominates the terrain.

Everything that is not popular, what I call "NicheTube," is almost invisible; it's very hard to find. And so you get a kind of democracy of the loudest voices, and not even just the loudest voices. The videos that tend to rise in popularity on YouTube

← Alexandra's YouTube channel
screen capture

express very hegemonic understandings of our world in a loud and clear fashion. These are things that already make us feel comfortable, usually jokes, parodies of things we're already familiar with, or reiterations of popular culture. In a democracy, you don't want to only hear things in the public sphere that you already know, that you're already comfortable with, that you've already seen. That's not the democracy I want to live in.

The invisibility of the underlayer on YouTube is of great concern to me. Because the search function is so poor and the site always pushes the most popular into your face, you probably will only rarely see the people who are expressing alternative viewpoints. It's not exactly a flattening of culture. It's like there's two layers, really. And they don't ever speak to each other.

With her background in political activism, Alexandra thinks a lot about counterculture and what it feels like to view mainstream society from the outside. Her work has been committed to people who are critical of society and who occupy that analytical or oppositional space comfortably. She finds the idea of popularity extremely troubling because in her eyes it only offers a limited and juvenile way to organize life. She came to YouTube as a scholar and maker of activist media, wondering why she felt instinctively repelled by the YouTube experience.

People kept sending me clips through email saying, "Oh, go watch this video on YouTube." And I'd go and it was always just some ridiculous piece of fluff; some thirty-second joke about popular culture which I'm not particularly invested in anyway ... and half the time I didn't get the joke, and if I did get the joke, it was at somebody's expense. It was this really low form of media production and for a while I just ignored it. I said, "You know, I don't understand what's going on here. I don't really care. This isn't what I meant when I said there was going to be a revolution."

And after maybe six or nine months, I thought, "It's ridiculous that I'm not paying attention to this," so I devised this innovative course, "Learning from YouTube," where I

thought my media-savvy students and I could work together to study, analyze, and name in real time components of a cultural change that was radically altering our society and its media landscape.

Alexandra recorded all the class sessions on video and only allowed the students to present their work on YouTube, so that they were continuously experiencing the medium as they developed their research. She asked them to consider why, with the opportunity for people to make and share video, the resulting material is so uninspiring and insipid.

She realizes that, although we've been raised in a culture surrounded by images, most of us are not fluent makers of images. We are better equipped as writers of words because of the literate nature of our education, so the sudden access to the tools to make video has not been paired with access to education about media production. You don't have a rich vocabulary to express yourself in sophisticated ways with the new tools just because you have access to a camera and an editing system.

Typical YouTube videos, the bad ones made by ordinary people, are uncut, without concern for framing, lighting, or the quality of the cameras. We've never seen such bad video, really. What would those video blogs be like if we could imagine a small amount of visual sophistication?

The other question for me is one of content and not just of form. What kind of education do regular users need to express things profound, or things personal, or things critical? You hope that people will gain the ability to think about formal complexity and to learn from what's around them, but at the same time, that has to come with the belief that they have something valuable to say themselves. (I do, of course, believe everyone does!) Most of what you see on YouTube is mainstream culture, either repeated or parodied, and gives us no insight into the daily thinking of regular people, outside their fascinations with media.

There really are two YouTubes. If you think about book publishing, or film, or other previous forms of mass media, it wasn't so strongly just one or the other: people-made (badly

YouTube - Summary of Learning from YouTube at the midterm 2

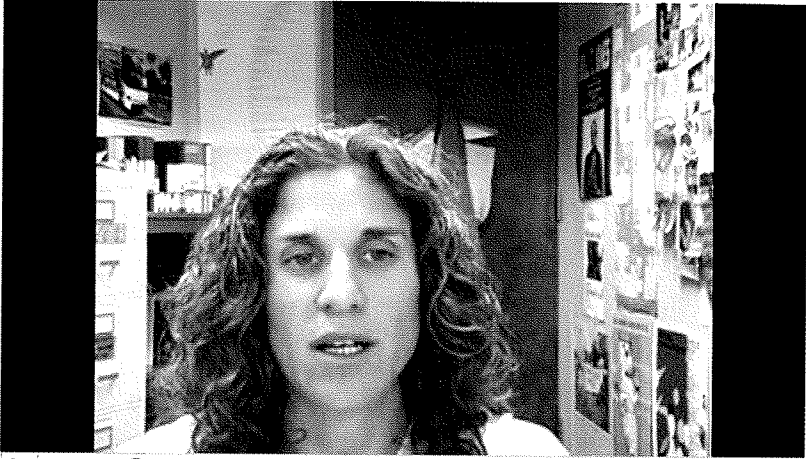
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uIK9XZwGqDc

YouTube - Summary of Learning f... +

YouTube Search Browse Upload Create Account Sign In

Summary of Learning from YouTube at the midterm 2

MediaPraxisme 86 videos Subscribe



0:25 / 2:34 360p

MediaPraxisme — November 01, 2007 — I summarize 12 points we've learned from the class about YouTube. **2,216** views

Like Save to Share <Embed>

Post a comment

Uploader Comments (MediaPraxisme)

MediaPraxisme CONTROL WRITING works against the chaotic, undisciplined culture of YouTube and attempts to force structure, and the possibility for building complexity into its pages. The significance of

- Juhasz Final Video 2,563 views MediaPraxisme 10:15
- How to Write an Executive Summary for a Business... 10,143 views growthink 4:09
- Re: tour on black people in youtube 166 views MediaPraxisme 0:31
- CNN "American Morning" Features "Learning from ... 356 views PrizerCollege 3:50
- Writing Tips & Teaching Strategies : How to Wri... 3,576 views eHow 1:49
- Powerful Executive Summary- 1,623 views ediscoverytechwriter 1:13
- lol how to write a summary 1,664 views GreenTeaProduction 0:47
- Intro to Learning from Youtube 13,017 views MediaPraxisme 8:06
- Learning from YouTube on TV 4,737 views MediaPraxisme 1:03
- KNX Interview about Writer's

Alexandra's MediaPaxisme, YouTube
screen capture

made) and corporate (well-made). There was all of this finessed space in between a Hollywood blockbuster and a micro-budget avant-garde art film where very sophisticated work occurred, for example, indie films.

The research completed for the "Learning from YouTube" class up to the end of 2008 concluded that at least half the content was professionally produced, making corporate produced media predominant in an environment that is thought to be democratic. The vast majority of videos are made to sell things, often music, and people often repurpose this corporate media for their own production. Fans can make

inventive and self-expressive material by hacking, reformatting, or repurposing mainstream content, but Alexandra is more interested in productive and critical expressions that step away from the production of some corporation and provide a personal vision of the world. She is exploring what else is needed, besides access to the tools, which simply facilitate recutting professionally produced corporate video, to grow ideas, abilities, and possibilities that will make our society better. She believes that teachers are needed to provide structure and give the leadership to organize the discourse.

You need people to say, “For today I’m going to ‘discipline’ this space.” I use this word with quotes because it’s been very hard for me to realize that I want someone coming into this anarchic space to discipline it. If you’re hoping to reach goals at the end, there is some taming, defining, and purposing that needs to occur. Wikipedia is probably the most successful model of these user-generated learning communities, and YouTube is not, because it’s at once completely anarchic but then actually controlled very fiercely by the corporation that owns it. There’s only the artifice of user control. We might want to imagine a real community where users are producing everything.

It’s the imperative of corporations to make money. I see that particularly on YouTube. The result of my analysis of the site is simple: what they want you to do is move as quickly and unpredictably as possible from one thing to another, because that is how they are going to get your eyeballs to ads. It’s a perfectly viable model for making money, but it’s not a viable model for moving expression and art through a culture. You can see in YouTube the profound constraints that are written into the system because it is organized first to make money, not democracy, culture, community—and certainly not revolution.

NEW CONNECTIONS FOR VIDEO

Google purchased YouTube in 2006 for \$1.65 billion. That in itself was a powerful vote of confidence that Chad Hurley had led the company to a position of dominance and that YouTube would withstand competition to stay in a lead position. By 2009 the services had been improved with effective search and the introduction of high definition, eroding the validity of many of the criticisms about YouTube being designed for the lowest common denominator and showing that Chad's philosophy of trying to encourage independent video producers had some legs. Google and YouTube are dominant financially, making them seem like big bad business to many radicals, but there is an element of idealism in their philosophy that separates them from previous generations of dominant businesses, and the services that they offer for free are irresistible to almost everyone. *(See the interview with Larry Page and Sergey Brin in chapter 7 of my book Designing Interactions.)*

Online video is emerging in a hockey stick joyride curve of expansion *(see the interview with Paul Saffo in chapter 1)*, fueled by inexpensive video cameras and desktop editing, combined with the arrival of adequate bandwidth for viewing on personal computers and handhelds. This means that video content of all types is becoming available online as well as in traditional media, so the door is open for new connections. Entrepreneurial offerings are springing up for a host of specialist applications that complement the dominant YouTube.

One of the more elegantly designed Web sites for delivering TV shows and movies is Hulu.com, offering both short clips and full-length videos for free. The site is ad-driven, with integrated video ads and banners played during the streaming of content. Hulu was founded in 2007 as a joint project of NBC Universal and News Corp., partnered with several consumer portals, including AOL, Comcast's Fancast.com, MSN, MySpace, and Yahoo! Consumers can enjoy lots of popular TV shows and movies from content providers, leveraging the material owned by NBC Universal and News Corp. Vimeo is another cleanly designed video sharing Web site that allows people to publish their videos for public consumption or just for friends and family. Hulu and

Vimeo may not be a competitive threat to YouTube or iTunes, but they offer attractive choices for consumers to gain more access to video content. Apple is educating consumers on the benefits of watching video through iTunes Movie Rentals on iPhones, iPods, and Apple TV devices, and companies like Netflix have pioneered the movement from physical DVD rentals to downloading streamed versions on demand.

THERE ARE ALSO OPPORTUNITIES for subscription services, offering business-to-business solutions for integrating video onto Web sites. An early innovator in this space is Brightcove, founded by Jeremy Allaire and Bob Mason. In the next interview, Bob and Jeremy Merle, who led the user interface design team, explain their approach.