

MEDIA LITERACY

“Cool” engagements with YouTube: Part 1

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In *Understanding Media*, McLuhan (1995) distinguished between what he theorized as “hot” and “cool” media: “Hot media are...low in participation, and cool media are high in participation” (p. 23). I recently recalled McLuhan’s descriptive terms while reading a survey of new media that appeared in *The Economist* (April 22, 2006) under the title “Among the Audience.” The thesis of the survey was that we are at “the beginning of a very gradual transition to a new era, which might be called the age of personal or participatory media,” meaning that “the boundaries between audiences and creators become blurred and often invisible” (p. 4). The survey included sections on weblogs (personal online journals), “citizen journalism” (in which “amateurs”—everyday citizens—contribute journalistic articles and videos to online newspapers and magazines), the “wiki principle” (“wiki” is Hawaiian for “quick” and means a webpage that can be accessed and altered by anyone, such as Wikipedia.com), satellite radio, and podcasting.

The Economist’s explanation of how podcasting works provided an example of the participatory, “cool” potential of these new media:

A podcaster records something—anything from music to philosophical ramblings, professional news or snorting noises—into a computer with the aid of a microphone, then posts this audio file onto the Internet. There, people can listen to it and, more importantly,

subscribe to a “feed” from the same podcaster, so that all new audio files from that source are automatically pulled down as soon as they are published. Whenever listeners dock their iPods or other music players for charging, the feeds that have newly arrived on the computers are transferred to the portable devices. People can then listen in their car, while jogging, or wherever and whenever they please. (p. 15)

The Economist added, “Podcasting is about ‘time shifting’ (listening offline to something at a time of one’s own choosing, as opposed to a broadcaster’s).” How has podcasting taken off since its advent in 2004? *The Economist* reported that “Apple’s iTunes, the software application and online music store that makes iPods work, currently lists 20,000 free podcasts and is adding them at a fast clip, all before podcasting’s second birthday.” In addition, “Podcasting is even expanding from audio to video, although this trend is as yet so new that several words (‘vodcasting,’ ‘vidcasting,’ ‘vlogging’) are still vying for the honour” (p. 16).

Though podcasting and the iPod have been creatively incorporated into the teaching and learning experiences of educators and students (see Duke University’s experiment using the iPod at http://cit.duke.edu/pdf/ipod_initiative_04_05.pdf or The Education Podcast Network <http://epnweb.org/index.php>), I also think the new trend of *vidcasting* (the term I think fits best)

holds great potential for involving both teachers and students in a variety of cool media engagements. In the rest of this column, I will explain how I used the vidcast website YouTube (www.youtube.com) as an important aspect of my current pedagogical practice. (YouTube is only one of many vidcast websites, but I develop this discussion around YouTube because it is the one that has the most videos, and it is currently the most popular such website, though Google Video is up and coming.)

Introducing YouTube and the “mosh-pit pedagogy”

Wikipedia (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Main_Page), itself a cool website, offered the following summary (as it appeared on September 15, 2006—perhaps it has been revised since then) of what YouTube is:

YouTube is a social website that allows users to upload, view, and share video clips. It was founded in February 2005 by 3 early employees of PayPal. YouTube now has 50 employees and is located in San Mateo, California, USA. YouTube uses Adobe Flash to serve its content, which includes clips from films and television programs, music videos, and homemade videos. Video feeds of YouTube videos can also be easily embedded on blogs and other websites. YouTube prohibits the posting of copyrighted video by anyone not permitted to do so; however, restriction of copyrighted material has proven difficult. (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/YouTube>)

In a well-researched discussion of YouTube, Wikipedia stated that “YouTube is currently one of the fastest-growing websites on the World Wide Web, and is ranked as the 15th most popular website on Alexa,” a subsidiary company of Amazon.com that collects and publishes information on Web traffic (www.alexa.com). Wikipedia also reported that 100 million video clips are viewed each day, that 65,000 new videos are uploaded each day, and that almost 20 million visitors view the website every month.

One of my pedagogical uses of YouTube occurred as part of a cultural studies graduate course that I taught. The course explored the central and pervasive role that media play in society, and one of the main texts was Klein’s (2002) book *No Logo*, which is a 450-page analysis and critique of the corporate practice of branding. To set the stage for a participatory seminar, I introduced students to what I call “mosh-pit pedagogy.” I explained that a mosh pit, associated with punk and grunge live music, is a space that typically forms close to the stage where a band plays and where people engage in a spontaneous, performative act (I can’t really call it dancing) that, looking at it from the margins, seems to be a whirl of seemingly chaotic yet spontaneously patterned movement in which people are basically moving into one another, brushing by one another, and sometimes slamming into one another. The movement happens in a sort of circling, crisscrossing, suddenly about-face fashion while the band plays a typically loud and fast song.

I explained to my students that in our class, the song was *No Logo* and other course readings, and the mosh pit was formed by our gathering in the classroom (a room with a number of technological resources, including a wireless Internet connection). Students’ spontaneous performative acts were best explained on the class syllabus:

Each week, on a voluntary basis, when the mood strikes you, when you have time, when you have things at hand, or when you feel inspired (e.g., when you want to get into the discursive mosh pit just a bit) you’ll bring in some text that articulates an aspect of the reading for that week. By text, I mean a video, a DVD, a music CD, a visual image, a website, a print text, or whatever else you might think of. The articulation that you see between the text you bring in (or call up via the Internet) and the text we’ve read (or viewed) for the week need not be some grand connection: Any level and degree of articulation is perfectly fine. The idea is to illuminate some particular (or general) aspect of a reading or series of readings.

As an example of what I was asking students to do, I had them look at an image found in *No*

Logo featuring two vertically juxtaposed images: the top half is an Orwellian Big-Brother image from an Apple commercial that first aired during the Super Bowl in (not coincidentally) 1984, and the bottom half is a photo of kids in a school library watching a television screen that shows the words “Channel One Network.” The image provocatively equates the practice of forcing kids to watch Channel One programming with the controlling measures depicted by Orwell in his novel *1984* (1983, Plume). At this point, to deepen the meaning of this photo, I got online, found YouTube, and searched the site with the phrase “Apple commercial 1984,” which resulted in many “hits” for the commercial. With a simple click, we saw the actual commercial play.

Of course, the commercial itself alludes to the film *1984* (Radford, 2003, MGM). In order to address that cinematic allusion, too, I searched YouTube again with a phrase that I thought would bring up any relevant videos (I used “1984 Richard Burton”), and in a moment many video “hits” appeared, one of which was titled “Who Controls the Past.” This particular video clip from the movie resonates perfectly with the Apple commercial. It features a large hall of totally indoctrinated “proles” listening to Big Brother who is visible on a massive screen. (It is worth mentioning that when a sought-after video is found, that video page includes the key terms used to identify the video by whoever uploaded it, so more search phrases become available, leading to more videos. That said, it is also important to note that not everything can be found on YouTube. Even though trying many different search phrases is a good idea, some searches simply won’t result in any relevant videos.)

Through my YouTube examples, the students acquired a better sense of what I meant by articulating a text with some form of media they have found with an element in the required readings. The students also got a glimpse of the powerful pedagogical potential of YouTube, particularly the ease with which it enables users to access videos relevant to their interests.

“Cool hunting” (and gathering) and “time shifting” through YouTube

In *No Logo*, Klein explained that corporations, in order to place and keep their fingers on the pulse of what is hip and cool with youth today, employ “cool hunters” who “search out pockets of cutting-edge lifestyles, capture them on video-tape,” delivering “hip young countercultures...at the rate of one per week” (pp. 71–72). What enables cool hunters to do this is that they are not only young but they are also products of the very scenes they are serving up to the corporations.

What interests me about the practice of cool hunting is its more general form: the search for what is cool. Applied to YouTube, I conceptualize the act of searching YouTube for videos that are relevant to pedagogical and learning purposes as a form of cool hunting. Put another way, the videos themselves are, strictly speaking, not cool in the sense that a lifestyle can be said to be cool. But I am retaining the idea of participation in the term *cool hunting* when applied to searching for videos because the search involves participating in a process of discovery rather than being involved in a more passive, spectatorial (or to use McLuhan’s term, “hot”) engagement. Defined in this way, the students and I can be described as having been involved in video cool hunting on a weekly basis while reading *No Logo*.

I can also extend this idea of cool hunting to cool hunting and gathering. The gathering aspect of the process took the form of a Blackboard “discussion board” webpage (<https://blackboard.unc.edu>) that I set up to link with videos from YouTube. The class gradually and collectively gathered together a storehouse of relevant videos that we hunted for to accompany *No Logo*. (Linking a video simply involves copying the URL address from the video’s webpage and pasting it into a Blackboard message post.)

Time shifting is another concept that can be related to this process of cool hunting and gather-

ing. It is generally defined as the capacity to engage with a text whenever the reader wishes rather than only when the text is broadcast or shown in some prescribed place and time (such as 7:00 p.m. at a theater or in a classroom during third period). The YouTube videos on the Blackboard webpage were time shifted because they were viewable at any time when there was an Internet connection. In contrast, the videos and DVDs that students brought to the seminar had to be played using the room's VCR and DVD players and were not easily available afterward.

Another concept that I call "space shifting" is closely related to time shifting. By space shifting, students were able to view YouTube videos in a variety of physical settings, such as in home or work offices; in a library; and, with a laptop, pretty much wherever they happened to be that had an Internet connection. (In the town where I live, that meant anywhere in the downtown area, which is completely wireless). So, there was a space-shifting aspect that was intertwined with time shifting.

"Culture Jamming" with YouTube

Though it is not possible to render in a description all the richness of the cool, participatory weekly mosh-pit seminars that took place, I would at least like to suggest some of it through a few selected videos that students (a) found through their cool hunting of YouTube, (b) showed and explained during class, and (c) posted on the Blackboard webpage. These examples are videos shown during a discussion of the *No Logo* chapter "Culture Jamming," which Wikipedia defines as "the act of transforming existing mass media to produce negative commentary about itself using the original medium's communication method" (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Culture_Jamming). Among the examples Klein gives of culture jamming is "the practice of parodying advertisements and hijacking billboards in order to drastically alter their mes-

sages" (p. 280). Each item in this series of examples begins with the title of the video and is followed by a short description of the video's contents and a quote from *No Logo* that relates to the video. Readers who have never engaged with YouTube might go to the website to find these videos (by searching with the title given) as an introductory experience. (If possible, the reader might also skim the relevant sections in *No Logo* that are parenthetically referenced.)

"An Ad Busters Intervention" is a short documentary about an act of "subvertisement" of a subway train in London, which involved covering up corporate ads with inspirational messages; "The most sophisticated culture jams are not stand-alone ad parodies but interceptions—counter messages" (Klein, p. 281). "Killing Us Softly 3" is a video (actually 1 of 4 parts) in which Jean Kilbourne presents a lecture that critiques a wide range of advertisements for their problematic representations of and messages about female identities; the video relates to Klein's belief that "many female culture jammers say they first became interested in the machinations of marketing via a 'Feminism 101' critique of the beauty industry" (p. 289). "Adbusters" is a short manifesto of sorts that encapsulates the very anticorporate message that Klein developed throughout *No Logo*; "The new ethos that culture jamming taps into is go-for-the-corporate-jugular" (p. 287). Rage Against the Machine's song "Testify" (*The Battle of Los Angeles*, 1999, Sony) was presented as a rare example of a popular musical group who radically "jammed" the now-common practice among both up-and-coming and already famous music artists and groups to "sell out" (i.e., sell their image or music despite the loss of street credibility) to the highest corporate bidder; Klein claimed that "not only did [Tommy] Hilfiger have a contract to clothe Mick Jagger, he also had the same arrangement with the Stones' opening act, Sheryl Crow—on stage, both modeled items from Tommy's newly launched 'Rock 'n' Roll Collection'" (p. 47). "McDonalds Billboard Alteration—Indecline Vol. 1" is a local news story reporting (and showing) McDonald's billboards

whose messages have been subverted through altering the print text of the advertisement, such as changing “Double Cheeseburger” to “Double Bypass”; “Streets are public spaces, adbusters argue, and since most residents can’t afford to counter corporate messages by purchasing their own ads, they should have the right to talk back to images they never asked to see” (p. 280).

Even from these few examples, the reader (if he or she views the videos) should derive a sense of the spirit and content that the YouTube-fueled mosh-pit pedagogy brought about during our weekly seminars.

Stay tuned

In this column, I wanted to introduce the new and rapidly expanding trend of vidcasting and describe how my students and I engaged with

YouTube as part of a mosh-pit pedagogy in a cultural studies graduate course. In the future, I would like to discover what kind of cool engagements, if any, can take place with YouTube and other vidcast websites as part of the everyday practices of middle and high school teachers and students. Can any cool engagements take place in classrooms that do not have the technological resources? I plan to answer these questions in the next Media Literacy column (April, 2007), so stay tuned for part 2. In the meantime, go discover what YouTube has to offer.

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