

Chapter 3

Medium Theory, Cultural Studies, and Other Ways of Seeing YouTube

ABSTRACT

This chapter presents several theoretical perspectives through which YouTube, social networks (platforms), and social media can be examined. One particularly influential form of analysis, especially useful in describing how various forms of power and surveillance work in television and other forms of media, is Cultural Studies. Cultural Studies makes assumptions about how media and power coexist, as well as how specific power structures strengthen traditional ideas of who should have power and how power is used by individuals, groups, and organizations. Cultural Studies also examines the differences between cultural, or constructed knowledge, and knowledge that might be assumed to be more objective in nature. Medium Theory is connected with Cultural Studies but is concerned specifically with cultural and human activity in and around television, film, and the Internet. This chapter introduces several medium theorists, such as McLuhan, Postman, Meyrowitz, and Carey, as well as cultural studies scholars such as Stuart Hall. A brief analysis of Post-modernism and Uses and Gratifications frames the YouTube discussion and introduces the theoretical approach to the original YouTube studies in this book. There are many types of SNSs and social media worthy of examination, but YouTube is the most culturally influential SNS, due in large part to its technological connection with Google. YouTube is an enormous, free, easily searchable database available to the whole of humanity with a simple mouse click.

INTRODUCTION

Chapters 1 and 2 focused primarily on YouTube's technology and the concrete ways in which YouTube functions and integrates into our lives. With that foundational and essential understanding, examining YouTube from *theoretical perspectives* strengthens and shapes what we know about YouTube. As mentioned earlier, the theories and theorists described in this book represent key media scholars and are not meant to exclude other important viewpoints. Obviously, the following arguments aren't the only

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perspectives available when intellectually exploring YouTube's digital sphere. In fact, other perspectives, such as Feminist Studies, Queer Studies, and Film Studies, applied by expert writers in those fields, would enlighten and energize the YouTube analysis.

However, in this chapter, Cultural Studies, Medium Theory, Audience Studies, and John Fiske's notions of television as *text* set forth theories that are often applied to traditional mediums such as television, radio, and film and fit logically when theorizing YouTube. These ideas have been used for decades as valuable tools when writing about mass media. When mapped onto YouTube, Cultural Studies and Medium Theory identify the specific concepts of power, surveillance, and the subject (YouTuber) in the SNS platform. The primary objective of this chapter is to outline the most salient details of the theories mentioned above to understand YouTube, using key medium and Cultural Studies theorists and their ideas.

A Cultural Studies perspective magnifies complex and influential practices and outcomes in YouTube and helps to conceptualize solutions to problems, such as who controls the media that we consume and why we should be concerned about the motivations of those individuals and companies. Related to Cultural Studies is *media ecology*. According to Christine Nystrom (Media Ecology Association [MEA], 2014) media ecology is concerned with the intersection of humans and media technology. As argued in later chapters, the quantitative measurement of the specific relationships and activities between people and *social* media technology—YouTube in this case—is critical in developing a complete picture of our technological world. Media ecology scholar Casey Lum, in his chapter "Media Ecology: Contexts, Concepts and Currents," contextualized communication technologies as the result of a "technique" that is an agenda specifically designed to fulfill and create outcomes and is therefore an embodiment of "human ideas" (Lum, 2014).

In *Culture and Technology: A Primer* Jennifer Daryl Slack and J. Macgregor Wise describe the Internet as a place that has no "discreet and isolatable" nature (Slack & Wise, 2005). Tiziana Terranova, as cited by Jean Baudrillard, stated, "The proliferation of information spells the drowning of meaningful experiences in a sea of random noise" (Slack & Wise, 2005, p. 34). In *Convergence Culture* Henry Jenkins wrote about how sites such as YouTube allow people to participate across lines of race, gender and socioeconomic status to connect along shared interests. Mark Andrejevic wrote, "In keeping with the commercial version of interactivity, much of this participation comes in the form of self-disclosure . . . participants are willing to submit to self-monitoring" (as cited in Jenkins, 2006, p. 33).

Along technological and cultural lines, this book assumes that (a) technology is culturally embedded, and (b) technology is also, at some level, a system of domination and control. However, while these assumptions have been part of discussions about traditional media such as radio and television for decades, the Internet and websites such as YouTube are a bit different and are designed, used, and integrated into our daily lives in special ways that television, film, and books are not.

As Paul Haridakis and Gary Hanson pointed out in their article on YouTube's social networking characteristics, "While people watch videos on YouTube for some of the same reasons identified in studies of television viewing, there is a distinctly social aspect to YouTube use that reflects its social networking characteristics" (Haridakis & Hanson, 2009, p. 317). Also, the Internet, unlike television and radio, is a moving target, fixed in neither space nor time, nor completely co-opted by corporate power and capitalism. Thus, it holds the possibility for delivering significant social and political influence. In *YouTube: Online Video and Participatory Culture* Jean Burgess and Joshua Green (2013) stated, "YouTube is a dynamic feedback loop—public concern is produced and reflected on YouTube" (p. 15). This sort of feedback loop is obvious when looking at the 2011 crisis in Lybia. In the "News and Politics" section on

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