

# Audience Incorporated (Inc.)

## Youth Cultural Production and the New Media

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It's [2006] a story about community and collaboration on a scale never seen before.... It's about the many wresting power from the few and helping one another for nothing and how that will not only change the world, but also change the way the world changes.... We're looking at an explosion of productivity and innovation, and it's just getting started, as millions of minds that would otherwise have drowned in obscurity get backhauled into the global intellectual economy.... And for seizing the reins of the global media, for founding and framing the new digital democracy, for working for nothing and beating the pros at their own game, *TIME's* Person of the Year for 2006 is you. (Grossman, 2006, pp. 14–15)

**A**S WE MOVE away from the old monolithic one-way flow mass media to the new “interactive” environment of Web 2.0 platforms such as social networking sites MySpace and YouTube and knowledge sharing sites such as Wikipedia, there has clearly been a shift in the conditions in which having a voice in the public sphere is even possible. Changes in access to technology have facilitated new conditions for young people to shoot, cut, and mix multimodal texts, and the emergence of the Internet as a convergent multimedia vehicle and a hang out for a global audience has enabled youth to communicate across borders and across the street. The phenomenal growth of this activity prompted *TIME* magazine to name us—or more specifically “you”—the Person of the Year in 2006.

Although there is a tendency to overstate the case and imagine that young people didn't do any writing or video production before the advent of blogging, podcasting, or vlogcasting, it is no doubt true that access to “the means of production” and, even more importantly, to control of distribution and the fracturing of the mass audience into niche markets has created an intense period of cultural production and communication by previously excluded and marginalised young people. While new digital divides are increasingly apparent, a great number of young people, middle and upper class kids with modems and those of lower economic status who get involved in youth media organizations or media education in school, have the capacity today to create sophisticated media and to share it. That is an extraordinary development which cannot be

minimized. Power is a scarce resource for young people and if we consider social, political, economic, and cultural arenas of power, then we must recognize the potential that laptop and camera toting young people have an extraordinary advantage over previous generations of a comparable demographic. While some corporations are making a fortune producing and selling the new relatively low-cost hardware and software for the new hyper media generation, the reality is that costs of production and distribution have dropped so low that millions of young people can join the new virtual studio, some becoming instant celebrities and many others just having the potentially feel-good moment of being a part of the hyper media world.

These new conditions have allowed for an outpouring of youth expression, a channelling of already latent youth voice, now redoubled with the potential of making a difference, changing someone's mind, making a mark on society. It is evident from the frenzy of activity in the Web 2.0 domains that a seismic shift in the means and modes of communication is taking place, but the pace of change is so quick that even recent statistics on participation may lag behind actual practice. The Young Canadians in A Wired World study (Media Awareness Network, 2005) reported that 30 percent of sixth and seventh graders had their own Web site and that 12 percent of them regularly wrote and posted a blog. The numbers of young people hosting a Web site in Grades 10-11 was down to 26 percent but the rate of blogging was up to 18 percent. This is a significant participation rate, and given that the study was conducted before the biggest gains in traffic to MySpace, YouTube, and Facebook had occurred, these numbers are quite high. The study claims that 94 percent of kids had Internet access and that by Grade 11, 51 percent of them had their own Internet connected computer, separate from the rest of the household. In the U.S., the numbers are similar, yet the findings distinct. For example, the Kaiser Family Foundation (2005) found that more than half of online teens in the U.S. had created content for the Internet (including creating a blog or personal web page or sharing artwork, photos, stories, or videos online). It was estimated that 87 percent of U.S. teens were using the Internet and half of those teens were online daily (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2005).

Young people are among the many who have begun to inhabit the Web and populate it with visual, audio, print, and multimodal texts. The problem, however, is that amidst the massive data flow online worldwide, apparently 1.5 billion gigabytes per year and 2.5 million megabytes per person on earth, much of what is said goes unheard. In effect, the pursuit of attention is more significant than the pursuit of communication (Lanham, 2006). We are still in relatively uncharted waters, multiple cartographers of the new medias and new literacies notwithstanding. For this reason, it warrants caution to not get caught up in the allure of new platforms and new contexts of cultural production but to look at how youth are articulating themselves in the liminal spaces between and around texts.

Here, the active audience helps to focus and distribute attention through folksonomy tools (Jenkins, 2006), rating, favoriting, and tagging<sup>1</sup> those items which deserve attention, for whatever reason. Lanham's *Economics of Attention* interests me for another reason as well, because it was precisely a sense of deficit in the attention economy that fueled the imaginary of youth anomie and the generative, albeit fictional space, recorded in the Generation X literature at the end of the last century (Hoechsmann, 1996). Youth anomie as imaginary construct feeds both ways; it is at once proof or evidence both of adult indifference and youth slackerdom. Outside of a real appreciation for youth cultural production, generations of adults misinterpret youth intentions and practices, and youth sense indifference and inattention to their needs and desires. It is a vicious circle, as real as the set of symbolic exchanges that occur in the circuits of consumption. In consumer research, the opposite happens. Adults, or more specifically

marketers, spend great resources and time trying to understand youth. While Lanham helps us to identify the new conditions of scarcity of attention, not information, it is precisely attention that youth have been clamoring for throughout the years, both at a biographical level as young people growing up and at a generational, sociological level as a social demographic.

Given the unprecedented flow of new cultural production, it is an opportune time to pay attention to youth cultural production. However, the vast torrent of material appearing online daily, which would exhaust even the most prolific reader or viewer, ensures that much will be left unread, unseen, unheard. The active audience plays a part in what would formerly have been the selection and distribution of content, by making small decisions while viewing content that combine with similar decisions made by others to make a difference in the circulation of a particular clip. Thus, the new folksonomy is determined by arbiters of taste who are viewers and readers who, with a click of the mouse, determine a v-log's popularity or a blog's selection and increasingly decide what will rise above the rest. While we should remain sceptical of Grossman's (2006) assertions of "the many wresting power from the few" and the grassroots "seizing the reins of the global media," there is an element of truth to them. Certainly we did not take over the profit making, corporate control side of show business. Nor did we make the big decisions about mass media content, far up the corporate ladder. But we did begin to make multiple, small decisions about content on a daily basis, both while producing and consuming it. These small decisions, multiplied by millions of users, began to add up to major influences on what content rose above the rest.

This article is about the production of content and its consumption. Today, the most popular web site, v-log, or blog is determined by the number of people who visit it, view it, write a comment, rate it, link to it, and follow it on their RSS feed (RSS feeds push Web content to readers/viewers through a subscription process). Marketing has not disappeared but has become a more inexact science, relying even on the very vagaries of viral communication used by people in everyday interactions. The audience has come into its own in the new environment.

Of course, audience incorporation—Audience Inc—is of necessity always a part of the circuit of communication. The Web 2.0 innovation is to incorporate readers also as writers, allowing readers to write/produce their own texts/shows. While an active audience in times past has been one that uses its imagination, critical faculties, and capacity for sharing with one another, the new Audience Inc. is also a generating audience, an audience of writers or producers. The inherited tradition of an active audience in an era of one way media flow was of taste cultures (Bourdieu, 1984). From the scientific audience capture of Nielson ratings to the soft science of water cooler buzz marketing, the audience of the past exercised its power by selecting from given choices and ever so subtly inflecting cultural change upon the media by letting its evolving attitudes and worldviews be known. The audience relation to media production in the new environments is far more intimate and the effect is much more immediate, increasingly embedded or incorporated into the message itself.

Much in the manner a flash mob assembles—a real world gathering of people who use instant messaging (IM) and cell phone technology to bring a large group of people together quickly—the new denizens of the Web 2.0 mobilize audiences to quirky new v-logs, blogs, and web pages. For example, when P. Diddy launched his YouTube channel in partnership with Burger King in October, 2006, he had 750,000 views within a week. A culture jammer called Lisa Nova produced a spoof of Diddy's v-log the next day that was seen by over 650,000 people in a six day period. Four months later, Nova's mockumentary had been seen by over one million people, but the biggest buzz occurred relatively spontaneously in that first week.

A great part of the success of v-logs such as Nova's lies in the active audience functions of social networking sites such as YouTube where audiences vote with their mouse clicks to pick the most popular v-logs and directors of the week or of all time. The empowered audience has emerged as the newest actor in the mediasphere, helping to determine and create content and seemingly balancing out the other major development in our mediascapes—increasing corporate control. Incorporated into all of the stages of consumption and reception, the audience appears to have unprecedented power to shape and determine media content. I argue that differing conceptions of audience—incorporated into the act of media creation—produce different outcomes and that there are strong residual communicational and cultural elements in contemporary “participatory” media production. Thus, as young people are drawn into new forms of media practice, they also draw substantially on a pre-existing repertoire of cultural meanings.

As we race to understand and respond to the new literacies required for the new media, privileged young people—middle class kids with modems—are involved in one of the most extraordinary peer to peer learning experiments in human history. This is a pedagogical environment involving millions of people with real time access to what one another are saying, an environment where the activity of learning to play and playing to learn is supplemented by the use of cheat sheets, queries to peers, and consulting resources offered by Web 2.0 sites as well as the Web at large. Rather than a predetermined, standardized curriculum, just in time pedagogy on the Web is learning on demand, user-centred, task-driven, and immediately applicable. Jim Gee (2003) describes the just in time principle as one of 36 learning principles he derived from the learning communities developed by video game players: “The learner is given explicit information both on-demand and just-in-time, when the learner needs it or just at the point where the information can best be understood or used in practice” (p. 211). Of course, every student who has ever raised an arm in class to get clarification or elaboration on a question has taken advantage of just in time pedagogy, but the point is that the online world treats teaching and learning as activities virtually always undertaken mid-task. Hence, just in time pedagogy is an operating principle. One does not read an entire user's manual before using an application or a technology. Rather one tends to boot up and follow intuition as far as possible before seeking out instruction.

Alongside this vast and spontaneous world of peer-to-peer learning, exist the innovatory sites of youth media organizations and projects, many situated in the youth-serving and non-profit sectors. Mobile, community situated, and unburdened by educational tradition, these organizations and projects are able to flexibly apply new measures and methods to the youth they serve. Many of these projects and organizations have been in place through the whole life cycle of the new media, others have come and gone given the vagaries of funding they face, and still others emerge with regularity today. The new media programs and projects in the non-profit sector tend to approach their work either as empowerment or training and sometimes a bit of both.

### The Pledge. You Will Learn Nothing Useful Here: Peer to Peer Youth Media

Web 2.0 harnesses the stupidity of crowds as well as its wisdom. (Grossman, 2006, p.15)

The pledge. You will learn nothing useful here. (Smosh.com, n.d.)

Enabling youth expression is a good thing, but it is wishful thinking to assume that an outpouring of unadulterated youth voice will yield copious samples of enlightened interventions against the stereotyping of youth or the multiple injustices some or all youth face. If anything, online cultural production by youth is profoundly ambivalent, dependent on audience and occasion. Youth voice is always inflected by some assumption of the expectations of the audience, whether an active peer audience of frivolous pranksters, a niche market of well-meaning adults, or some hybrid of the two. Take, for example, YouTube's #2 most viewed video of all time, the *Pokemon Theme Music Video*.<sup>2</sup> With over 20 million viewings in just over one year, this video has made its 19-year-old producers Anthony Padilla and Ian Hecox among the early success stories in the new world of grassroots media production (Smosh.com, n.d.). An earnest display of lip synching and amateur dance moves, this video is endearing and silly, perhaps a testament of yearning nostalgia for lost childhood, but more likely just a couple of guys hamming for the camera. Their notoriety has increased traffic to their website, a promotional and commercial vehicle for Smosh shirts and hoodies. Winners of a recent contest at Smosh received iconic t-shirts with the logo, "The Pledge. You will learn nothing useful here." Not to detract from the determined good fun of Smosh productions, its appeal is to an audience of leisure seekers, apparently the majority audience of Web 2.0 sites such as YouTube. But the youth audience is a hybrid one. Not only does the audience include a spectrum of difference, but individual viewers/participants can also draw on an array of video resources, some frivolous and some deeply serious. Indeed, it is an audience willing to learn, as long as learning can be made fun.

On a more reflective, serious note, there is *One World*, the most responded to video on YouTube. This video by MadV uses graffiti written on hands to spell out a message. According to YouTube tallies, a total of 2,179 video responses appeared on YouTube in just three months. Compared to the numbers that viewed the *Pokemon Theme*, this might appear a modest sum, but given that each response is a new video produced and posted in response to the first, it is a strong showing. This strong showing is the sign of an active, participating audience, incorporated right into the circuit of consumption and production. Typical responses are unspoken with music in background, positive slogans or words written on the palms of hands. Love and peace are the predominant themes. As examples of media production, the *One World* responses are simple and innocent web cam testimonials. They are impressive in their sum, in the collective energy of more than two thousand people having their say about a conflicted world. While even the *Pokemon Theme* video appears scripted and produced alongside these quick little testimonials, they are powerful in their brevity.

Reading youth writing in the new online habitat is thus a hit and miss affair. To approach this with the raised expectations of being exposed to the true feelings and deep insights of young people, is to court disappointment. Yet to dismiss playful, foolish, and even hurtful representations as somehow inauthentic is to miss the point. Young people will fool around, and expressing themselves among peers often means having a laugh—sometimes at the expense of others—and couching anything serious in light and frivolous tones. The quick cam moments of cell phone foolhardiness demonstrate some of the excesses of the new cultural production, as do the often unrehearsed, narcissistic, static shot webcam testimonials.

Cell phone cams have proven a mobile tool for the prankster and cyberbully, to the point where schools and school boards are beginning to have to contend with banning them outright from school premises. At *Ecole Secondaire Mont-Bleu* in western Quebec, a student deliberately provoked a teacher who then lashed out in anger. The exchange was videotaped on another



student's cell phone and was later uploaded to YouTube. The teacher took stress leave and the students were suspended from school (Sandoval, 2006). Cell phones allow cyberbullies to shoot video of students in compromising positions and circulate them rapidly to audiences of thousands. Some of the more notorious uses of quick cams are for capturing school yard fights or locker boxing, the latter an instance of hockey violence where teammates take each other on in the locker room wearing only gloves, helmets, and light clothing. Young people are not only filming these encounters but also quickly uploading them to the Internet. Schools are taking notice of the emerging and ongoing problem of quick cam abuse, and board members and school administrators in many jurisdictions are undertaking policy reviews with the intent of nipping this perceived problem in the bud, but they are limited to banning cell phones and blocking Web sites.

The nature of communication has changed, and schools are not the only institutions or organizations to have to contend with this change. With advances in interactive media and technology, first the Web 1.0 of the World Wide Web and e-mail and now the Web 2.0 of social networking and user-driven content generation, communication is becoming increasingly viral. The notion of viral communication derives from the concept of point to point contact, an actual one to one transmission that quickly multiplies exponentially as more people become involved in communicating a given message or idea. An originary message or idea is referred to as a meme, a viral knowledge node that seeks out other minds to propagate itself further (Lankshear & Knobel, 2003). This concept is a way of conceptualizing a type of face-to-face communication that has been around for millennia but that has now been given a technological delivery system and a high speed, worldwide distribution network. Whereas formerly memes could only pass to and from people in several degrees of separation from one another, now total strangers can learn directly from one another. Thus, ideas can proliferate across space and time at a speed and scale formerly unimaginable. And whereas in an era of mass media, a small number of powerful corporations controlled the air waves, in this interactive media environment, virtually anyone—the virtual every one—can at least try to transmit their ideas to a broad audience. As ideas come into contact with each other, new knowledge can form.

The knowledge sharing site Wikipedia demonstrates the great potential of collaboration on a mass scale, where millions of modest contributions combine to produce a collective document that is more substantial in breadth and depth than any broad compendium that came before it. Though Wikipedia is not a youth site per se, it is one of the best examples of “collective intelligence” and “participatory culture” (Jenkins, 2006), as it is a virtual community that leverages the combined expertise of its members. Henry Jenkins draws on Pierre Levy's work on knowledge culture and collective intelligence to describe the aggregate power of many minds working together to a common goal: “no one knows everything, everyone knows something” (pp. 26–27).

Peer to peer knowledge building emerges when people are driven to participate in a network, project, or campaign. Jenkins (2006) shows how “affective economics,” an equation of desire, connection, and commitment (p. 62), comes into play in motivating these contingent communities which are voluntary, temporary and tactical, forming and disbanding with relative flexibility either when they get “beyond the tasks that set them in motion” or “no longer meet their emotional or intellectual needs” (p. 57). “The new knowledge culture has arisen as our ties to older forms of social community” such as physical geography, nuclear family, and nation state are breaking down (p. 27), and “the skills we acquire through play may have implications for how we learn, work, participate in the political process, and connect with other people around the

world” (p. 23). This new knowledge culture is one where the affective economics of desire, connection, and commitment combine to produce a powerful motivating force, where things get done because the will is there and the knowledge and talent of the many are pooled into a task-driven project of knowledge production.

In this context of collaborative learning, social networking sites such as MySpace, YouTube, Facebook, and many other lesser-known sites have come of age. Regardless of its past in community activism, the term social networking has become the adopted and adapted term that describes Web sites where people typically post a personal profile with the goal of sharing it with others. MySpace and Facebook are virtual online scrapbooks, and YouTube is an online sharing site for streaming video of old and new clips that are produced at home or by the media. There is a tremendous range of other social networking sites, some of which mobilize affinity groups and some of which enable cultural practices. Affinity groups might take the form of specific demographics (African American people, wealthy people, etc.) or people with shared interests (fan sites). Cultural practices sites center around shared activities (hobby sites, activism sites, profession sites). A common denominator across social networking sites is a sense of connecting with others, sometimes with flirtatious intentions, but in a broad sense for increasing a virtual sense of community. The virtual relationship is very real to the participants despite the mediation of distance and technology. While there are privacy settings on v-log and blog sites that can limit who will be able to view or read a posting, this just means the poster is selecting to narrowcast to a limited audience. For the most part, the audience setting for a given post is limited only by the number of Internet users with broadband access worldwide. Youth are reading and writing to broad, often unknown audiences. Outside of one’s local community and affinity groupings, the potential audience for a given piece can be limitless, albeit arbitrary.

Many people can participate in these social networking sites, even those who are differently abled or without economic privilege. The learning curve involved for participation is modest. As learning economies, rather than structured learning environments, social networking sites function through emulation and peer-to-peer support. There are no manuals to read, nor classes to attend. Pedagogy is just-in-time and task oriented. Rather than the reciprocal relations of the real world, learning is networked, involving multiple learners with varying levels of expertise at multiple nodes, united by shared interests and goals.

In youth subcultures, early adopters are the trendsetters who initially experiment with ideas before they go mainstream. This has not changed in the Web 2.0 environment. What has changed is the multiple points of contact through which a meme can pass, the difference between taking a virus into a closet or into a crowd. Despite the efficiency of new technologies for viral communication, there is a certain randomness at play as to what will be most distributed, similar to how news or rumours spread in oral culture. Some messages will surpass expectation and spread like wildfire; others will not make it out of the gate. Sociologists might call this the role that the agency of the receivers plays in selecting certain messages from the massive flow of media artifacts in contemporary culture. However, there is some chance or luck involved in what makes it into the hands of the receivers and what remains on the cutting room floor. At minimum, there are no guarantees that a given message will survive the circuit of communication.

A look at the most viewed YouTube videos of all time demonstrates the haphazard nature of viral transmission and the idiosyncrasies of audience-driven content. YouTube features both cultural production by young people and mainstream media content recycled for viewers. Of the twelve videos that have more than 10 million viewings in early 2006, half are what could be

described as user-produced and the rest professionally produced. Three of the videos are low-tech web cam v-logs, all featuring a professional music soundtrack, two are lip-synching duos (*Pokemon Theme* and *Hey Clip*), and one is a real electric guitar playing over Pachelbel's Canon (*Guitar*). *Free Hugs* and *Urban Ninja* are mini-documentaries with a home made visual feel and a professional music soundtrack. *Evolution of Dance*, the most viewed video of all time with over 41 million screenings, is a decidedly low tech, if semi-professional clip of a man dancing to various songs. On the other side of the ledger, are television clips from America's Got Talent, Saturday Night Live, and a Nike ad featuring soccer player Ronaldinho. The other three most popular videos are two professionally produced comedy clips, *Real Life Simpsons* and *Shoes*, and a rock video by OK Go.

The fact that these videos stand above the rest is extraordinary and utterly unpredictable with the exception perhaps of number 12 which features the world famous Ronaldinho. The most remarkable of the 12 is the *Free Hugs Campaign*, a real life story of 24-year-old Juan Mann, whose video has had more than 10 million views in just over four months and whose new-found notoriety landed him an appearance on the Oprah Show. The *Real Life Simpsons* and *Shoes* are quirky and intelligent comedic productions that might have made some noise in the mass media, and the OK Go rock video is a polished, buzz marketers dream, gaining over 10 million views in just six months. In general, however, the feeling that one gets poring over the most viewed videos is that they are, at best, a rather mediocre sample of media in an era of torrential output and dizzying distribution potential. With a presence on both MySpace and YouTube, the *Free Hugs Campaign* is the only video that appears to perform the old style work of social networking. The video tells the story of alienation and anomie and has picked up quite a following of supporters around the world.

If anything, the top twelve most viewed videos on YouTube show that a revolutionary communications technology does not a revolution in content make. YouTube is a distribution means, a narrowcast or broadcast channel, depending on the viral flow of the content. But it does demonstrate a prototype form of amateur videography and does showcase some trends in youth authorship in the new digital environment. Amateur videography on YouTube does not depend on high production values. The webcam, the cellphone cam, or the videocam are the technologies most accessible, and the results are apparent. Video editing suites, typical to software packages on late model computers, help to polish up the rough edges on many of these amateur videos. In particular, replacing low sound production values with a pop song soundtrack is an effective and commonplace technique used by these aspiring videographers. While some productions on YouTube are more ambitious, the peer to peer learning environment teaches that communication of content is primary and the quality of form secondary. Content is, for the most part, frivolous and fleeting, true to the nature of the v-log as the new literacy equivalent of the print diary. It is somewhat stream of consciousness, somewhat disposable content, expressive of and in the moment, but redundant and senseless the next. Much of the content prepared for YouTube is produced for the dynamics at play in the moment of its expression. It is not intended to be enduring but rather is part of a circuit of communication that is contingent on time and context.

Webcams can turn any room into a low-tech television studio. Also widely used as sci-fi telephone appliances or surveillance cameras, webcams have come into their own in the era of streaming video as do it yourself media production cameras. The *Pokemon Theme Music Video* and *One World* are both webcam style productions, whether or not they were shot on webcams. (The style is essentially that of a static camera shot). Scroll through video responses to YouTube



videos and you will find that most videos are produced with the webcam shot. Typically, the webcam videos found on YouTube feature one or more people speaking to the camera, dancing to a pirated soundtrack, or performing a goofy act or trick. While there is plenty of low-grade content at YouTube that wouldn't make it in the old media world, there is also plenty of clever material, a veritable firestorm of cultural production that picks up momentum daily.

The webcam is most notorious for the case of *lonelygirl15*, whose YouTube channel was the most popular and most subscribed of all time. *Lonelygirl15* sat in her bedroom and spoke languorously about her everyday life, occasionally joined by her boyfriend Daniel. Her tone was monotonous but cute. She played up the role of a naïve but spirited teenage girl. Ironically, *lonelygirl15* was everything that the usual web cam user is not—she auditioned for the part, read from scripts, and was filmed and produced professionally with proper lighting, camera, and editing. It turned out that this girl was not lonely, but surrounded by a production team, and she was certainly not 17, as she claimed, but rather the 19-year-old actress Jessica Rose, who was hired to create a new online franchise. Despite or because of the notoriety of being outed by her audience, *lonelygirl15* was chosen as a spokesperson for the United Nations Millennium Campaign to fight global poverty and a v-log was posted to YouTube at a second *lonelygirl15* channel, *lg15standup*.

Standing up against global poverty might not have been the predicted outcome the *lonelygirl15* organizers had bargained for, but it suited their goals of creating and sustaining her brand identity. They counted on the “affective economics” of identification others would have for her. *Lonelygirl15* was, for a time, every girl or girl next door, someone working through her turmoil and problems online. When the jig was up, when it was revealed that *lonelygirl15* was a hoax, the backlash was immediate and massive in scale but modest in emotional force. The outing of *lonelygirl15*, that YouTube character that was ultimately too scripted and too neatly produced to be authentic, was international news. This event was published and debated more widely than the average flood or famine in the global South. But the backlash online receded quickly. The audience wasn't ready to lose *lonelygirl15*. The needs of this audience for an affective alliance with a reliable YouTube regular were greater than a rational response of anger or rejection. Beyond a certain smugness on the part of some of her online rivals, nobody really seemed to care, and it has not stopped *Loneygirl15* from continuing her YouTube presence.

YouTube is a media environment co-created by its audience, a vehicle for the distribution of videos, both good and bad, free of charge, and to a potential audience of millions. If there is a prevailing ethos at YouTube, it is one typical of the lightheartedness of the peer to peer communication of youth—have a laugh, don't take things too seriously. Fooling around is a residual element of youth culture taking place for a peer audience on a new media platform. It is nothing new; what is new is an audience of thousands and sometimes even millions, an audience that makes choices by viewing, rating, linking, or responding to videos. The assumed audience of YouTube is one of peers, among whom one does not appear too serious and sombre. For this audience, the way to make an impression is through competitive frivolousness. While viral communication will occasionally enable a more seriously-themed video to get rated and viewed by millions, the random nature of the peer and viral filter ensures that a representative sample of youth cultural production online is frivolous and fun. The audience would not have it any other way.

It is no longer possible for education systems around the world to continue to proceed without responding to the revolution in communication taking place in the culture at large. Reading and writing in the new literacies requires the capacities of decoding and encoding of

print, image, and audio, and composing involves a broader template of design (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000). But not only have the forms of communication changed, the relationship of author and reader has also been transformed. For better or worse, authorship is no longer the preserve of the educated elite or even of those who have something striking to say. Rather, authorship has become a democratic right for the world's privileged denizens, an effect of incorporation into a communication nexus of an empowered, incorporated audience. In this context, it is senseless to carry on with schooling practices as if nothing had changed. The young people in our classrooms are no longer positioned as passive receivers of an inherited tradition, a cultural past entrusted to them by its previous guardians, their teachers. Youth today have at least the potential to express themselves, to try to give voice to their inner thoughts, and to communicate and mobilise with others. They are at the vanguard of a new era of impertinence, of talking back, speaking out of turn, of reclaiming the right to narrate the future. While this is more of a challenge than most young people can adequately manage, it is nonetheless a condition of our times. While educational institutions—Ministries of Education, university faculties of education, school boards, and schools—scramble to make sense of the new literacies in these new times, youth are using the new tools at their disposal to produce media across modes and genres, not waiting for the educators to catch up. The new economies of attention and learning among young people break from tradition to make learning fun and pleasurable. This is a world of play, a world at play. It is time for us educators to take a cue from our living, learning, laughing students and learn to play to learn.

## NOTES

1. Rating and favoriting are forms of participation practiced at the click of a mouse. By rating a video (between 1 to 5 stars) or adding it to your favorites, you play a role as cultural arbiter of taste. The more a video is highly rated and favorited, the more it is distinguished as meriting further viewing. Tagging is the activity of adding reference words to photos, videos, or text. This practice too plays a role in determining the success of a video, image, or text—this time as a key word that can be picked up by an Internet search engine.
2. Postscript: This video has fallen victim to the copyright battles that are beginning to heat up over unlicensed YouTube content. In June 2007, the video was removed from YouTube after Shogakukan Production Co. Ltd. threatened YouTube with legal action over copyright infringement despite a parody fair use claim by the Smosh auteurs (The Utube Blog, 2007).

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