

• *Book Reviews* •

YouTube: Online Video and Participatory Culture. By Jean Burgess and Joshua Green. [Digital Media and Society Series.] (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2009. xi and 172 pp. Includes essays by Henry Jenkins and by John Hartley).

The ever-shifting and evolving landscape of cyberspace makes inquiry into its forms, functions, and uses particularly tricky. Phenomena pop up, gain popularity, and then fade as newer, sleeker options take their place. Users adopt and adapt technologies to meet their own demands and desires. New technologies come into conflict with or comingle with more traditional forms of mass media. Pinning down the slippery online experience in a way that makes it accessible for study is an enormous undertaking. In their book, *YouTube: Online Video and Participatory Culture*, Jean Burgess and Joshua Green manage to freeze frame the moments of YouTube's emergence into cultural significance and its growth into the most popular internet site for user-generated video. Burgess and Green effectively peel away the layers of rhetoric that alternately portray YouTube as a bastion of self-expression that allows users to beat the system dominated by the mass media or as the height of narcissistic self-indulgence that threatens the moral fiber of society. Instead, they capture the frenetic energy present in the discussions surrounding the purposes and uses of YouTube and channel that energy into an understanding of YouTube not as a mere platform for video-sharing, but as a *cultural system*. In so doing, Burgess and Green utilize YouTube as an access point into a wider discussion of questions surrounding participatory culture.

Beginning with an analysis of YouTube's origins, and a wider exploration of the media coverage surrounding the site, Burgess and Green uncover the constantly shifting narrative that envelops and seeks to define YouTube—what it is, and what it is for. What they reveal is that YouTube's purpose has never been clearly defined and is instead continuously being renegotiated based on the ways in which its creators, competitors, contributors, and critics shape the discourse that takes place not only about the site, but within its boundaries as well. For Burgess and Green, a fully developed understanding of YouTube cannot be grounded in ideas of traditional media production, distribution, and consumption. Instead YouTube must be seen as what Burgess and Green describe as a continuum of cultural participation.

Yet even as a wide variety of users converge on YouTube with their own motivations and purposes for engaging with the site, there emerges what Burgess and Green identify as a "coherent cultural logic" or the "YouTubeness of Youtube." In order to capture this "YouTubeness of YouTube," Burgess and Green engage in a systematic study that uses features of the site to describe the popularity of videos in different ways. By capturing ratings of popularity, Burgess and Green develop a snapshot of what the users themselves value about the site. The study focuses on the areas of "Most Viewed," "Most Favorited," "Most Responded," and "Most Discussed." By analyzing the types and origins of videos that appeared on each of these lists, Burgess and Green uncover interesting insights into the value that users

place on different types of materials uploaded to YouTube. While much has been written on the value of YouTube as a site for user-generated content, Burgess and Green emphasize that YouTube is also an arena for social interaction in which users work together to create discursive cultural meaning. Their approach to examining YouTube as a cultural system allows Burgess and Green to raise questions related to online participatory culture including issues of digital literacy, access to an online “voice,” the role of passive audience consumption as a significant form of participation, and the idea of YouTube as a cultural archive.

The book ends with two additional essays. In his essay, “What Happened Before YouTube,” Henry Jenkins places YouTube in a continuum of other do-it-yourself media productions, from garage cinema to fanzines, and argues that this broader history helps provide a better understanding of the possibilities—and problems—that YouTube faces, and offers clues to what might be its ultimate destiny in the arena of participatory culture. John Hartley’s essay “Uses of YouTube: Digital Literacy and the Growth of Knowledge,” examines YouTube in relation to the wider realm of storytelling and the power of literacy, and opens up possibilities for using YouTube not only to reflect culture, but to create knowledge and social change. These two essays help to frame YouTube within broader discussions of participatory culture, meaning-making, and power.

Taken together, the works of Burgess and Green, Jenkins, and Hartley help to contextualize YouTube and open up areas for future study. While the authors provide an effective framework for studying YouTube, perhaps the most significant

contribution of their work is to point to the variety of existing attempts to define the site that are never quite able to fully capture YouTube is and what it does. In so doing, the authors underscore the idea that YouTube, and the realities of participatory culture, are constantly being redefined—by site owners, users, critics, and others—and that academics, like themselves, also play a role in that effort. Scholars who take up the questions surrounding participatory culture should remember that they too are participants and keep in mind the question with which Burgess and Green conclude their book: “How do we want to interfere?”

JENNIFER DUTCH
Pennsylvania State University, Harrisburg