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Cybertarians of the World Unite: You Have Nothing to Lose but Your Tubes!

Irresistibly enchanted by a seeming grassroots cornucopia, struck by the digital sublime, many "first-world" cybertarian technophiles attribute magical properties to today's communications and cultural technologies—which are said to obliterate geography, sovereignty and hierarchy in an alchemy of truth and beauty. A deregulated, individuated media world supposedly makes consumers into producers, frees the disabled from confinement, encourages new subjectivities, rewards intellect and competitiveness, links people across cultures, and allows billions of flowers to bloom in a post-political Parthenon. In this Marxist/Godardian wet dream, people fish, film, fuck and finance from morning to midnight. The mass scale of the culture industries is overrun by consumer-led production, and wounds caused by the division of labor from the Industrial Age are bathed in the balm of Internet love. Cybertarianism has become holy writ, a celebrated orthodoxy that thinks "everyone is a publisher" thanks to the Internet and its emblematic incarnation in YouTube.¹ These fantasies are fueled and sometimes created by multinational marketers only too keen to stoke the fires of aesthetic and autotelic desire. *Time* exemplified this sovereignty of consumption in choosing "You" as its 2006 "Person of the Year"—"You control the Information Age. Welcome to your world."²

This apparent transformation is actually yet another moment in an oscillation we have experienced routinely over the past century. During that period, each media innovation has offered people more of what they never knew they needed commercially, at the same time as it has promised new possibilities democratically. When we consider *Time* magazine's new finding in 2006, if we dig a little deeper we find that, like YouTube's own rhetoric, it's very old: *Candid Camera* was on US TV

intermittently for fifty years, pioneering the notion of surveillance as a source of fun, information and narcissism. Host Allen Funt would hail his audience with "You are the star!"³ Today's touching cybertarian faith that individuals can control their destinies through the Internet, and folksy "prosumers" can overpower big media with their homegrown videos, is the latest version. While we expect coin-operated, corporate-oriented mainstream scholars to buy into such simplistic rhetorical flourishes as they patrol this gleaming new world in search of "new business opportunities,"⁴ we also find people with distinguished links to the scholarly left reiterating shopworn Schumpeterian claims about innovation, technology and entrepreneurialism. They disavow decades of research on corporate domination and labor exploitation, discounting such forms of evidence as the detritus of an outmoded era; the putatively revolutionary opportunities provided by YouTube and its brethren make such logics invalid.⁵ And their work is now being taken up in business journals.⁶ These assertions remind me of the neoliberal arguments I produced when I was a speechwriter for corporations and governments in the 1980s, which attacked progressives and organized labor for questioning the transformative beneficence of new technology.⁷ The shift is from an emphasis on workplace technology to domestic technology—otherwise, the same old lines are being trotted out.

Academic cybertarians maintain that the new media provide a populist apparatus that subverts patriarchy, capitalism and other forms of oppression. All this is supposedly evident to scholars and pundits from their perusal of social media, conventions, Web pages and discussion groups, or by watching their children in front of computers. Virginia Postrel wrote a *Wall Street Journal* op-ed in which she welcomed this Panglossian tendency within cultural and media studies as "deeply threatening to traditional leftist views of commerce [...] lending support to the corporate enemy and even training graduate students who wind up doing market research."⁸ At such moments, we can say that what Terry Eagleton sardonically named "The Reader's Liberation Movement" is in the house.⁹ It can hardly be a surprise, then, to find Robert McChesney lamenting that contemporary media studies is "regarded by the pooh-bahs in history, political science and sociology as having roughly the same intellectual merit as [...] driver education."¹⁰ Or that the *Village Voice* dubs us "the ultimate capitulation to the MTV mind."¹¹

Even Stuart Hall recently avowed that “I really cannot read another cultural studies analysis of Madonna or .”¹²

Cybertarianism dovetails with three utopias: the free-cable, free-video social movements of the 1960s and ’70s; the neoclassical, deregulatory intellectual and corporate movements of the 1970s and ’80s; and the post-Protestant, anti-accumulative hacker ethos of the 1990s and today. Porta-pak equipment, localism, a disinterested, non-corporate approach to newness, and unrestrained markets supposedly provide an alternative to the numbing nationwide commercialism of mainstream media. Social-movement visions saw this occurring overnight. Technocratic ones imagined it in the “long run.” Each claimed it in the name of diversity, and they even merged in the depoliticized “Californian ideology” of community media, which quickly embraced market forms.¹³

True believers in a technological liberation from corporate domination argue that the concept of the cultural industries is outmoded because post-industrial societies have seen an efflorescence of the creative sector via small businesses. But that’s inaccurate as a description of a shift in the center of gravity. The western world recognized in the 1980s that its economic future lay in finance capital and ideology rather than agriculture and manufacturing. Changes in the media and associated knowledge technologies since that time have been likened to a new “industrial revolution,” touted as routes to economic redevelopment. Between 1980 and 1998, annual world exchange of electronic culture grew from 95 billion to 388 billion dollars. In 2003, these areas accounted for 2.3 percent of gross domestic product across Europe, to the tune of 654 billion euros—more than real estate or food and drink, and equal to chemicals, plastics and rubber. The Intellectual Property Association estimates that copyright and patents are worth 360 billion dollars a year to the US, putting them ahead of aerospace, automobiles and agriculture in monetary value. Global information technology’s yearly revenue is 1.3 trillion dollars, and PriceWaterhouseCooper predicts 10 percent annual growth. The cultural and copyright sector employs 12 percent of the US workforce, up from five percent a century ago.¹⁴ This is the underlying reality behind the newer media—their placement in, and impact on, the core of the world economy.

And what about YouTube itself? The site code is kept secret; its viewers’ characteristics are only available to corporations; and claims made about “ordinary people’s use” of the service are principally derived from

personal and press impressions and marketers.¹⁵ Until large-scale questionnaire and ethnographic studies have been undertaken, we should remain cautious in our cybertarian assertions. The best quasi-independent evidence about YouTube comes from well-heeled corporate and business-school research. It suggests that, far from undermining the mainstream media, YouTube videos are the greatest boon imaginable to mainstream US television. Rather than substituting for TV programs, these excerpts and commentaries promote them, promising new business opportunities.¹⁶ While amateur content forms the majority of content on YouTube, it is barely watched by contrast with the vastly more-popular texts that come from the culture industries: fifteen of its top twenty search terms are for US TV programs.¹⁷ Right now, watching YouTube and online video in general appeals to a minority, and a small one, around the world—in the US, less than a fifth of the population.¹⁸ We also know that assertions about the YouTube utopia breaking down geography are overstated. Newly available crawlers disclose the parochial nature of video viewing—most people watch material from their own backyards.¹⁹ That’s no crime, but nor is it a triumph of boundary crossing. And we also know this: 87 percent of US YouTube visitors are white, and just 0.2 percent of visits involve posting videos. A tiny fraction of viewers post videos often. The vast majority of YouTube vloggers are men, and women who produce vlogs are sometimes subject to harassment by viewers. Is this new technology producing new social relations—or a rerun of old-style social relations with which we are all too familiar? In this article, I will focus on three aspects of YouTube: its corporate ties and desires; its role in US electoral politics; and its impact on labor. I find that in order to understand the service, we need a mixture of political economy and media and cultural studies to counter the febrile *converso* rhetoric of business boosters and lapsed leftists.

Corporatube

Since its beginning, YouTube has been implicated in corporate life, from almost destroying the servers of a homonym, utube.com, to breaking copyright law and selling advertisement. Meanwhile YouTube hides behind provisions of the Digital Millennium Copyright Act that seek to criminalize users rather than distributors in negotiating with big firms.

Needless to say, when gritty “community creators” complain about their work being purloined, YouTube dismisses them as an elephant might a gnat.²⁰ A year after Google bought YouTube, the site was valued at 4.9 billion dollars. But there is no real revenue stream yet; Google is still monetarizing the property.²¹ When it introduced advertising to begin fifteen seconds after each video started and cover a fifth of each screen, who lined up first to advertise? News Corporation, 20th Century Fox, New Line Cinema and Warner Music.²² During the 2008 Summer Olympics, YouTube/Google laid claim to beneficent corporate social responsibility in making highlights available on line, but hid the same images and sounds from US viewers. Why? The company’s main concern was getting on well with General Electric (the massive arms supplier and polluter that owns NBC-Universal), which held exclusive domestic TV rights to the event.²³ There is a sponsored video space, effectively a spot-bidding system for product placement in which advertisers look for materials they like, then YouTube nests their commercials.²⁴ But YouTube is unpopular with advertisers because the amateurish texts are so variable in quality and theme, and the professional ones are often illegally reproduced.²⁵

YouTube is nothing if not obedient to corporate direction. When Universal complained that a video of a toddler dancing to Prince’s “Let’s Go Crazy” infringed its rights, the people’s community, consumer-led movement that supposedly *is* YouTube quietly complied until it was safe to restore the video following a further, related suit. Similar business norms explain why the service fought bitterly to keep its source code a secret in legal struggles. Meanwhile, law enforcement is thrilled at YouTube’s surveillance possibilities, both directly observing “crimes” and urging YouTubers to report them.²⁶ This is part of a growing paradox for the site’s cybertarian credentials. Its neoliberal champions love its accessibility—which they actively undermine. The commitment of these advocates to open markets relies, of course, on drawing and policing property lines, because intellectual property is their ultimate deity. This is, paradoxically, especially true for those who fantasize about non-corporate models of capital. What makes YouTube successful is illegal; let’s make it legal!

This contradictory set of impulses has a corollary in the different corporate attitudes that flow from it. By early 2007, Viacom claimed that 160,000 illegal clips from its programming were on YouTube, with one

and half billion viewers. Within the ranks of capital, Viacom plays the tough cop, suing YouTube for infringement,²⁷ and other cultural corporations are the good cops buying advertising.²⁸ YouTube is a digital distributor, and as such may appear to undermine this crucial part of conventional media power. But it doesn’t do anything of the sort. For example, YouTubers receive letters from lawyers on behalf of copyright holders enjoining them to cease and desist from building websites about their favorite musicians—and also receive letters on behalf of advertising agencies representing those same copyright holders, urging them to continue what is seen as free viral marketing.

Steve Chen, YouTube’s co-founder, avows that the site represents an “engagement, not an interruption” for the corporate world.²⁹ That explains the thousands of contracts the firm has signed with mainstream media, and the introduction of Video Identification, a surveillance device for blocking copyrighted materials by tracking each uploaded frame. It spies on users and discloses their Internet protocols, aliases and tastes to corporations, permitting these companies to block or allow reuse depending on their marketing and surveillance needs of the moment. The software was developed with those great alternatives to mainstream-media dominance Disney and Time Warner. Hundreds of companies have signed up in its first year. Sales of Monty Python DVDs on Amazon.com increased by 1000 percent since they became part of the system.³⁰ This is a triumph of new media over old? This is not corporate capitalism? This is open technology? This is a cybertarian dream? No, this is YouTube becoming Hollywood’s valued ally, from tracking intellectual property to realizing the culture industries’ dream: permitting corporations to engage in product placement each time their own copyright is infringed on line, and learning more and more about their audiences.³¹ In any event, YouTube may soon crumble. It seems that most of what people watch on it comes from the cultural industries, and they are setting up their own, high-resolution video sites such as Hulu (Fox/NBC) and iPlayer (the BBC)—not to mention TVLand.com, a service that may become a fringe element despite its corporate desires and plans. Hulu, TV.com and Veoh are re-broadcasters of network drama on line. In just twelve months, Hulu became the sixth-most viewed video site in the US, and the legal online viewing of TV shows by adults in the US grew by 141 percent in 2008 (streaming is becoming more popular than downloading, as it is generally free, fast, simple and legal).

TV.com viewers grew by nearly 1.3 percent in January 2009 over the previous month. Of US Internet users aged 13 to 54, a fifth now use these services, and many do so to get back in touch with favored series prior to the appearance of new episodes on TV. Advertisers flock to Hulu even as they shun YouTube.³²

Politatube

“This year’s campaign [...] has been dubbed the ‘YouTube Election’”; “YouTube is to be congratulated on the groundbreaking contributions it has made to the political discourse—McCain-Palin Campaign”; “[The] War on Terror [...] is the first ‘YouTube War.’”³³ These three claims regarding YouTube as a utopia opening up access to politics and unlocking journalistic exclusivity as a gateway to the public sphere are illustrative of the site’s political potential. Politicians certainly like it. Howard Dean argued that YouTube “basically turned the US Senate over to the Democrats” in 2006, and Tony Blair called it a “shining example of innovation.”³⁴ Each US Presidential candidate in 2008 had a channel. By mid-September, John McCain’s had been watched 14.5 million times and Barack Obama’s 61.8 million times. In February 2008, will.i.am’s “Yes We Can” was launched. Within six months, nine million people had seen it. But far from transcending the asinine trivia of US electioneering, YouTube was encapsulating it. For instance, the McCain people released an advertisement that likened Obama to Britney Spears and Paris Hilton. His celebrity standing was equated with theirs; his depth and seriousness as well. Within two weeks, it had been viewed two million times. Hilton, however, issued a spirited riposte in which she sardonically greeted “the white-haired dude”; the Obama people produced a counter-text via the “Low Road Express” website; and other media had over-reported the controversy, even as they under-reported McCain’s business dealings, devotion to US imperialism and corporate capital, and disregard for his first wife. And during the election season, by far the most-watched video was an anti-Obama, militaristic rant by a soldier.³⁵

Is this somehow desirable as a means of furthering rational, progressive policy debate? It doesn’t look like a new age of politics to me. In the 2006 mid-term US elections, 15 percent of voters got their primary electoral information online, down from the 2004 campaign but twice the 2002 mid-terms, and just 25 percent used the Internet for



„Totally ready to lead“: Paris Hilton thanks the „white-haired dude“

political purposes. Those who did so generally visited not YouTube, but CNN.com and ABCNews.com, i.e. television news sites. For more than 70 percent of voters, television was their principal news source. It was the favored medium for all genres, but its lead was greatest for election programs. Thus, people who saw candidate materials created for YouTube generally watched them on television.³⁶ It is true that YouTube garnered major media attention in 2006 for screening racist abuse from Republican Senator George Allen to a Democrat staffer and showing Republican Senator Conrad Burns snoozing in Congress. But both instances were recorded and posted by Democratic staffers. Cheap exposure can lead to cheap exposé. Thanks to YouTube, there is less control over messages and their management by contrast with what is achievable with the press corps. But is the outcome “more natural, direct and honest”?³⁷ New technology is already generating the hyper-discipline of TV, with semi-public moments subject to scrutiny after the fact, and pernicious re-editing done without even quasi-professional journalistic filters. Meanwhile, YouTube is bowing again and again to reactionary forces in cutting off coverage of torture and video eroticism.³⁸ As YouTube succeeds, it is brought, sometimes noisily and sometimes quietly, within the usual policing norms of public life.

Workertube

The pride with which gullible “MIT-like/lite” subscribers to digital capitalism and the technological sublime welcome the do-it-yourself elements to YouTube is part of the managerialist, neoliberal discourse that requires consumers to undertake more and more tasks for free or at their own cost (like online gamers signing end-user license agreements, and paying to play, but losing all rights to their creativity). This shoves tasks away from corporate responsibility.³⁹ In YouTube, we have a company culture that relies on unpaid labor for its textuality, and seeks, at the core of its business model, to obfuscate distinctions in viewers’ minds between commercials and programs via participatory video ads.

The splenetic anti-amateur and fan of expertise Andrew Keen argues that the anything-goes *ethoi* of YouTube et al. generate a cacophony of loudness and stupidity rather than quality and knowledge, eclipsing “even the blogs in the inanity and absurdity of its content.”⁴⁰ It’s easy to mock Keen as an elitist who fails to appreciate the revolutionary qualities of new technology—but not so easy to prove him wrong. For instance, the mad opposition to infant immunization that has gathered pace among superstitious segments of the US population dominates YouTube videos and responses on the topic. This is just one of countless examples of perilous medical misinformation that circulates irresponsibly on the service.⁴¹ Similarly, as fewer and fewer media outlets become available to them, tobacco companies turn voraciously to the Internet. Medical researchers are concerned at evidence of product placement via “smoking fetish videos” on YouTube. Aimed at underage drug users under the soubriquet of “community engagement,” they draw massively positive reactions. Many old TV commercials for cigarettes are also archived there.⁴² The paper that won the oleagiously named “Best New Thinking Award at the 2003 Market Research Society Conference” let the hypocrisy of those involved in new-media product placement sing when it acknowledged that effective marketing does not adopt a “view of the consumer as an individual [but rather] part of the herd.”⁴³ Tim Kring, the creator of *Heroes* (2006-), refers to people who view his show on network TV rather than through streaming video as “saps and dipshits who can’t figure out how to watch it in a superior way.”⁴⁴ Behind closed doors, the mantra remains the same as it ever was.

Is there a different way of conceptualizing YouTubers? That ugly neologism, the prosumer, is linked to the discourse of casualization, of flexible labor amongst workers who have been segmented through deregulation and new technology. In Western Europe and Japan, this group is renaming itself to fight back. The movement embodies a new style, a new identity, formed from young, female, mobile, international workers within the culture industries, services and the knowledge sector, struggling for security against the impact of neoliberalism. The Euro-mayday Network organizes Precariat parades across European cities.⁴⁵ The Precariat alerts us to an insidious, complex connection between “social-movement slogans reappropriated for neoliberalism.” It recognizes that concepts like diversity, culture, access and sustainability create spectacles, manage workers, and enable gentrification. Perhaps cybertarians could look at these joyous but critical activists before they announce a “revolution” that breaks down the barriers between work and play.

Conclusion

I don’t hate YouTube. I enjoy it in the same way as I enjoy radio, TV, books and podcasts—YouTube is a pleasant way of spending time, with some informational benefits as well. So what should be the stance of progressive scholars who like YouTube, but beware its rapturous reception by credulous cybertarians? Fortunately, we have some good guides along the way. They can help us maintain post-naïve optimism.⁴⁶ It is often alleged that political economists of the media have not accounted for the creativity of audiences and consumers. But they are well aware of this capacity. In the 1950s, Dallas Smythe wrote that “audience members act on the program content. They take it and mold it in the image of their individual needs and values.”⁴⁷ He saw no necessary contradiction between this perspective and his other principal intellectual innovation, namely that audience attention—presumed or measured—was the commodity being sold in the commercial TV industry, by stations to advertisers. Similarly, in his classic 1960s text *Mass Communications and American Empire*, Herb Schiller stressed the need to build on the creativity of audiences by offering them entertaining and informative media.⁴⁸ And at the height of his 1970s policy interventions in revolutionary societies, from Latin America to Africa, Armand Mattelart rec-

ognized the relative autonomy of audiences and their capacity and desire to generate cultural meanings.⁴⁹ A sadness fills me each time I enter the YouTube scholarly world, because so much academic literature about it either stigmatizes or fails to pay heed to this work—even reinventing the idea of audience labor as something new. Fortunately, the innovations of Smythe, Schiller and Mattelart are constantly being reviewed and renewed by those who admire that tradition of engaged intellectuals.⁵⁰

Media texts and institutions such as YouTube are not just signs to be read; they are not just coefficients of political and economic power; and they are not just innovations. Rather, they are all these things. YouTube is a hybrid monster, coevally subject to text, power and science—all at once, but in contingent ways.⁵¹ I therefore propose a tripartite approach to analyzing it: a reconstruction of “the diversity of older readings from their sparse and multiple traces”; a focus on “the text itself, the object that conveys it, and the act that grasps it”; and an identification of “the strategies by which authors and publishers tried to impose an orthodoxy or a prescribed reading on the text.”⁵² This materialist history must be evaluated inside consideration of the wider political economy. As Jacques Attali explains, lengthy historical cycles see political-economic power shift between cores. A new “mercantile order forms wherever a creative class masters a key innovation from navigation to accounting or, in our own time, where services are most efficiently mass produced, thus generating enormous wealth.”⁵³ Manuel Castells has coined the term “mass self-communication” to capture this development, which sees affective investments by social movements and individuals matched by financial and policing investments by corporations and states.⁵⁴ YouTube is part of the West Coast US heritage of the “mass production of services that enhance the power and pleasure [of people via] nomadic objects.”⁵⁵ The next step is to consider the types of exploitation that are involved in such changes.

New eras in communication also index homologies and exchanges between militarism, colonialism and class control. The networked computing era has solidified a unipolar world of almost absolute US dominance, with a share taken by other parts of the world economic triad in Japan and Western Europe. None of that has changed or been even mildly imperiled by YouTube or anything else. China and India provide many leading software engineers, but they lack domestic venture capitalists, military underpinnings to computing innovation, and successful

histories of global textual power at the mainstream level as per Sony, the BBC, Hollywood, or the Pacific Northwest. When the Precariat declares a new “phenomenology of labor,” a “world horizon of production,” it is reoccupying and resignifying the space of corporate-driven divisions of labor in ways that cybertarians have simply ignored. Antonio Negri refers to this group as the cognitariat, people with high educational attainment and great facility with cultural and communications technologies and genres. They play key roles in the production and circulation of goods and services through creation and coordination, forming a new proletariat. No longer defined in terms of factories and manufacturers versus middle and ruling classes of force and ideology, this proletariat is formed from those whose forebears, with similar or lesser cultural capital, were the salariat. They operated within secure systems of health care and retirement income. The new group lacks both the organization of the traditional working class and the political entrée of the old middle class. Today’s “culturalisation of production” both enables these intellectuals, by placing them at the center of world economies, and *disables* them, by doing so under conditions of flexible production and ideologies of “freedom.”⁵⁶

We should focus on this group, the precarious cognitariat, in the new era of cultural re-industrialization and economic deregulation. Of course, peer-to-peer downloading has problematized private property in fascinating ways; of course, cybertarianism is right to valorize taking things out of the market; of course, sharing elements gratis is a wonderful counter-capitalist move; but these movements are rapidly being domesticated by processes that are “commodifying people’s free relations.”⁵⁷ In his incisive survey of cybertarianism, Vincent Mosco rightly argues that its “myths are important both for what they reveal (including a genuine desire for community and democracy) and for what they conceal (including the growing concentration of communication power in a handful of transnational media businesses).”⁵⁸ Our analysis of YouTube must be bold enough to encompass such wider questions, even as it must be modest and patient until large-scale scholarly surveys of networks and experiences become available. Meanwhile, let’s not join an unseemly cybertarian rush to a new day that will turn rapidly into an old night. Remember the faces in the crush of the crowd storming stores to buy Windows 95? Not a pretty sight; not pretty software. Let’s not replicate it.

Endnotes

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