Living in ‘YouTubia’: Bordering on Civility

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ABSTRACT Despite more than a decade of research showing contrary patterns, many scholars still characterize the Internet as a “frontier” that is lawless and separate from other forms of sociality such as in-person interaction. Researchers and pundits have used the frontier metaphor descriptively to characterize perceived patterns of interaction, as well as prescriptively to argue for how Internet interaction should be conducted. Yet many people do not necessarily orient themselves or their behavior to the notion that the Internet is or should be a frontier. Further, the frontier metaphor obfuscates certain negotiated social realities in contemporary computer-mediated milieu. Invoking the metaphor prior to investigation risks missing other place-based metaphors of sociality that help orient online participants. Two such metaphors used on YouTube include: (1) tourism versus residency on the site; and (2) the “state” of “Youhtubia.” This paper explores the concepts and mechanisms that some YouTube participants use to characterize the site and to create boundaries and limits on interaction. These mechanisms include using features that are technically integrated into YouTube’s interface as well as generating and distributing social commentary and advice in videos and discourse. The paper argues that despite the vision of boundlessness and frontierism, YouTube interactions are “architected” just as interactions in physical spaces are. It will show how such online “places” influence the perception of YouTube and its uses among participants. [Keywords: YouTube, online community, frontier metaphor]

Introduction

The spatial philosopher Lefebvre (1991 [1974]:196) argues that a human being has “neither meaning nor existence when considered in isolation from its extensions, from the space that it reaches and produces.” Perhaps it is not surprising then, that many scholars use place-based metaphors to describe Internet dynamics (Adams 1997). Metaphors are concepts of everyday experience that are taken from one domain to understand another domain (Lakoff and Johnson 2003 [1980]). Metaphors have a profound effect on our thinking about and understanding of the world (Lakoff and Johnson 2003). Although it is often assumed that literal similarities exist between the source and target domains of a metaphor, in many instances metaphors have no literal similarities (such as in the metaphor “love is a journey”) (Lakoff and Johnson 1999:126). In fact, many Internet-based metaphors are actually quite obfuscating (Jones 2004; Lange 2008; Miller 2001). If metaphors inevitably conceptualize basic human thought, it is helpful to explore how certain metaphors are being used politically and by whom.

The “frontier” metaphor continues to be a pervasive, orienting conceptualization of online interaction (Castranova 2005; Hendricks 2003; Kapor and Barlow 1990; Ludlow 1996; Milne 2000; Rheingold 1993; Whittle 1997). The frontier metaphor has been used both descriptively and prescriptively. Some people have used the metaphor to describe what social conditions they saw online (Hafner and Markhoff 1995; Kapor and Barlow 1990; Rheingold 1993). Referencing the frontier metaphor, some scholars have critiqued some of these social conditions (Herring 1996; Krolukke 2003a,b; Lessig 1999). Yet, even when frontier-like dynamics are criticized, the metaphor retains an orienting, or at least evocative role in how the debate or criticism is framed. In its descriptive form, the frontier metaphor suggests that the Internet is like a frontier in which social mores and laws are uncertain, in flux, and difficult to enforce. Different groups stake out online “territories” of sociality and fend for themselves without the protection of governments and systems of local rules. Danet (2002) quotes Barlow as saying that:

Cyberspace, in its present condition, has a lot in common with the 19th century West. It is vast, unmapped, culturally and legally ambiguous, verbally terse...hard to get around in, and up for grabs. Large institutions already claim to own the place, but most of the actual natives are solitary and independent, sometimes to the point of sociopathy. It is, of course, a perfect breeding ground for both outlaws and new ideas about liberty. [Danet 2002:9-10]

In its prescriptive form, the frontier metaphor argues that the Internet should eschew elected governance and establishment of rules (Barlow 1996). This view was a reaction to understandable concerns about how large-scale corporate and government entities might use legislation to outlaw certain forms of expression (such as profanity) that conform to narrow moral standards (Barlow 1996). The metaphor prescriptively argues that online relationships, rather than elected officials or codi-
fied rules, should determine how interactions unfold.

Some scholars state that metaphors can “be captured” by any one of society’s interest groups and used to further its particular goals” (Adams 1997:156). For example, a “frontier” may suit some people who are concerned about top-down restrictions on online speech. Yet, the trampling of rights that is also characteristic of the frontier metaphor does not serve as an ideal interaction parameter for everyone. The frontier metaphor is associated with freedom and renewal, but also contains unfortunate histories (Robbins 1991) that are “marked by unusual perils: The weak, unlucky, and unwary are left by the wayside” (Adams 1997:161). A frontier-like atmosphere free from governance may elide problems that emerge if some people expect unlimited “freedoms” while others require “civility,” both of which are socially relative, negotiable concepts.

As a theoretically descriptive construct, the frontier metaphor is problematic in several ways. For example, scholars assert that it does not travel well globally. The metaphor is a particularly U.S.-centric vision of how the Internet is or should be (Caimotto 2001; Nelce 2002). In addition, the frontier metaphor ahistoricizes certain online groups by not including them in the trajectory of what is normally considered part of a masculinist frontier dynamic (Adam 2003). Other scholars argue that the metaphor implies a falsely inevitable sense of female victimization and commensurate patriarchal defense, neither of which map to experiences of certain online female participation (Krolokke 2003b; Miller 2001). Another objection is that even in the early 1990s it was no longer realistic to talk about the Internet as an untamed and sparsely populated “frontier.” Many social groups were using it and establishing their own local norms and participatory limits (Danet 2002). According to Danet:

Already in the late 1990s one could take issue with the frontier metaphor. There was much evidence of growing social organization in cyberspace. Usenet newsgroups and listserv lists were rapidly developing their own subcultures, including rules to govern interaction and sanctions for offenders. [Danet 2002:10]

The frontier metaphor is inherently unstable. It implies continual transition as it contains within it both the “absence” of boundaries as well as the inevitable “creation of boundaries” (Adams 1997:163). One important question is, to what extent do online participants continue to orient around the frontier metaphor? An investigation of video bloggers’ on YouTube reveals that different participants invoke a variety of other spatialized metaphors that do not presume nor advocate Western-frontierism. These participants use different metaphors to negotiate desirable forms of self-expression and interaction such as exchanging feedback.

Many people on YouTube seek feedback to improve their work and connect socially with others. These connections are made via “networked publics” which are defined as the “lateral, peer-to-peer and many-to-many networks of people, media and communication” that are “highly differentiated and socially activated” (Ito in press; Russell et al. in press). These geographically dispersed “niche publics are built around specialized interests and local practices, and are aggregated and articulated within a global network of media and communications” (Ito in press).

However, although many YouTubers wish to connect with others, tensions emerge when expectations about what constitutes acceptable behavior and feedback on the site collide. These contestations offer important loci for study. They help address questions such as: How do certain video blogging participants of YouTube that wish to connect with unknown networked publics negotiate acceptable behavior? How do they weigh the costs and benefits of connecting with dispersed others? To what extent do online participants architect social interaction in their online spaces of self-expression and social interaction? The following discussion will address these questions through an ethnographic examination of a group of video bloggers on YouTube.

The analysis is based on a 2-year ethnographic study of YouTube that was conducted as part of a large-scale, multi-sited ethnography of children and youth in the United States. Funded by the MacArthur Foundation, the Digital Youth and Informal Learning study analyzed how children and youth learn by using media and participating in online cultures to express themselves and connect with other people. The data that I collected for the YouTube study included over 100 interviews of YouTube participants. The interviews focused on children and youth, but also included interviews of parents, teachers, and relevant media professionals. I also observed interactions on the site, followed discourse threads of videos and comments, analyzed numerous videos in terms of their content and structure, and established my own video channel page on which I posted one video per week for over a year. In addition, I attended in-person meet-ups in New York, Georgia, Los Angeles, San Francisco, San Diego, and Minneapolis.

The ethnographic investigation revealed processes whereby participants negotiated the boundaries of acceptable interaction on YouTube and the orienting place-based metaphors they used to frame these negotiations. What constituted appropriate behavior varied. Some people were concerned about so-called “haters,” who are defined as people who leave mean-spirited or hurtful comments, often using stereotypical phrases that
reveal racism, homophobia, sexism, and images of violence or death. Although many people were hurt by “haters” or by comments left on their video pages, little agreement existed on how haters should be dealt with. Some participants argued for using YouTube’s technical features to prevent unwanted commentary from appearing on their YouTube pages. Others, including some children and youth, were not bothered by “haters.” Some considered them a source of amusement or usefulness as they helped boost comment tallies and thus the video maker’s general YouTube visibility (Lange 2007).

A number of children and youth also stated that despite the pain that such comments caused them, they left these comments (within certain limits, such as comments that did not contain racism) on their pages as a way to express their support for “free speech” (Lange 2007). For instance, one 19-year-old woman said she appreciated that YouTube offered an environment in which people could state their opinions boldly and be controversial. She said that while U.S. society limits expression, YouTube enables people to find others who share similar opinions in controversial areas such as religion or politics. YouTube provides a space to connect with others and talk about “things [Americans] don’t like to talk about because it will ‘offend someone.’” These findings, which show some teen-aged girls leaving even hurtful comments on their YouTube pages to demonstrate their support of free speech, contrast to Herring’s observation that, “Men...assign greater value to freedom from censorship” (Herring 1996:150).

Opinions differed about how to deal with controversial or unwanted commentary. While some people wanted to create social spaces in which they had tight control, others advocated enabling wider participation, even if the comments were hurtful. In crafting responses to different social expectations about interaction, participants on YouTube often invoked spatial metaphors to describe or architect features and social commentary. Two interesting, spatially-orienting metaphors were: (1) tourists versus residents; and (2) symbols of states. Participants used these metaphors to understand the environment in which they participated and to suggest ways to improve the quality of interaction and sociality on the site.

Instead of implying that the Internet is a vast, borderless realm, these metaphors give rise to a visualization of the Internet and sites within it as exhibiting certain demarcated divisions and diversity that resemble urbanism more than frontierism (Kroloppke 2003b). At the risk of introducing another historically laden metaphor with its own contestable cultural baggage, such islands of division create a kind of online “balkanization” (Van Alstyne and Brynjolfsson 1997; Lessig 2004). A large site such as YouTube contains smaller units of sociality that propose particular boundaries and rules of interaction. These groups architect sociality in individual ways to facilitate participation and maintain useful social connections. Rather than approach the study of YouTube as if it must be a U.S.-centric frontier, it is perhaps more useful to analyze other available spatial concepts that participants use to describe and negotiate YouTube interaction. For many video bloggers, it is mutual vulnerability and sharing, rather than staking out isolated claims, that most profoundly influence their YouTube participation.

Residents and Tourists

A YouTube participant by the name of Blunty3000 released a video called “Are you a YouTube Tourist, or Resident?” on September 19, 2007. As of April 8, 2008, the video had a view count of 15,310 views and 870 text comments, 26 video responses, and 3 honors (such as the #9 ranked most discussed (all time) video in the category of Travel & Events in Australia). Blunty3000’s channel page lists him as joining on March 12, 2006 and he has over 30,000 subscribers and over 1.5 million views of his channel page. Many of his videos are direct addresses to the camera, and contain observations, rants, and critiques of subjects such as YouTube, technology, and politics. Blunty3000 is also a YouTube partner, which means that he has agreed to have advertisements placed on his videos for a share of the ad revenue.

In his video, Blunty3000, who self-identifies as being from Australia, asks viewers if they are “residents” or “tourists” of YouTube. He makes this spatial distinction on the basis of particular behaviors he has observed on the site. He records his thoughts as he himself visits the Cataract Gorge in Australia. He walks through the Gorge and alternates between filming shots of what he sees and shots of himself directly addressing the camera. He describes the behaviors that he equates with residency versus tourism on YouTube. He says:

YouTube also has its own share of tourists and residents. And I want to know which you classify yourself as. Maybe some sort of couch potato tourist that only comes here when someone sends you a link...Or are you the type of tourist who comes to YouTube on a regular basis, because you find it a pretty nice place to hang out. But you wouldn’t want to live here...Or maybe like me you consider yourself a resident. You’ve got a home here. You’ve got people, friends and family, neighbors, that you interact with on a regular basis. You come here on a daily basis. You’ve got a place to call your own. Your own channel where you hang up your portraits, or your videos, snapshots of you, your thoughts, your feelings, your emotions. For people like you or me, residents, this place has become the town meeting hall,
the local park, the place where you go to share yourself with others. A place where you go to have others share themselves with you...Now when I make this distinction to create a class system, a tourist isn’t better than a resident and a resident isn’t better than a tourist. It simply is a distinction. It’s just a way to describe your place on this site. What are you? Are you a YouTube resident or are you a YouTube tourist?

Unlike Jones’s (2004) conception of Web home pages—which he characterizes as “narcissistic” to visit regularly—YouTube channel pages are places to frequent in order to interact with others. Looking at one’s video pages shows text and video commentary that has been posted in response to one’s work. Checking in on the channel page is a logical way to keep up to date on bulletins, or messages that others have posted. Hardly a description of a “frontier,” Blunty3000 uses an orienting metaphor in which a well-established group of people that includes “friends, family, and neighbors” interact on a “regular” basis. He juxtaposes this image with a portrait of people who come to “visit,” sometimes on a regular basis, and sometimes not.

Certain phrases arguably portray tourists in a negative light. For example, he suggests some of them are “couch potatoes” while others may wish to visit YouTube but “wouldn’t want to live there.” The “tourism” metaphor may connote problems that include ill-treatment of locals and a desire to “take” rather than give back to popular locations. Yet, Blunty3000 says that he does not “make this distinction to create a class system, a tourist isn’t better than a resident and a resident isn’t better than a tourist. It simply is a distinction.” He also films his remarks during a visit he makes to a popular, local tourist site. He juxtaposes images of the physical site with questions to viewers about why they come to YouTube and what kinds of practices they engage in.

The site he is visiting physically is Cataract Gorge in Launceston, Tasmania. He says at the beginning of the video that he chose this site because it attracts in “equal numbers” tourists and residents “on a regular basis.” He is suggesting that YouTube attracts residents and tourists in a similar way. By showing that he himself is a “tourist” at the Gorge, he potentially deflates negative judgments about tourists on YouTube. While posing questions to viewers about their behaviors and investment in the site, he focuses on beautiful scenes in the Gorge such as water, stones, and wooded areas. His structural technique of juxtaposing his questions with focusing on the physical scenes he is seeing implies that YouTube, like the Gorge, is a beautiful “place” that is worth experiencing. His orienting metaphor of “tourism versus residency” determines difference based on behavior. Whereas tourists may or may not visit frequently, they do not share as much of themselves or give back to the community in the way that residents do, by maintaining friendships and making oneself vulnerable through the sharing of personal materials in videos and comments. Although he picked an outdoor, nature setting, the metaphor orients around participation and sharing, not staking individualistic claims. Blunty3000 invokes notions of a “town hall” or “local park” or other civil places one goes to share themselves with others.

An entire paper could be written analyzing the over 800 comments Blunty3000 received on his video. Finding a topic of interest to many people and asking them to comment is a common method for attracting viewers and subscribers on YouTube.4 Clearly many people found his question interesting and engaged in some self-reflection about their YouTube practices. A casual glance at the comments reveals at least four categories of commenters who say they are: (1) tourists; (2) residents; (3) both; and (4) currently a tourist but planning on becoming a resident. As one respondent noted, “Tourist through and through, I have a couple subscriptions, but only because I only started a YouTube account about a month ago, and in the near future I want to make a few videos and become a resident.” Another stated “im [sic] currently a tourist, just browsing the videos, seeing the sights, giving a comment here and there. But I am in the process of moving here. As soon as I get a camera, I will become a resident.” It is fascinating to see how obtaining a camera (an artifact that connotes tourism) becomes a symbol of residency on YouTube, as more intensive participation involves making and posting videos (although many people classify themselves as YouTubers if they watch videos and comment but do not post videos).

Other people placed themselves in more definite camps. For example, one poster noted, “I’m a tourist, I watch videos and stuff, I don’t want to make videos because I know they wouldn’t be good, and I don’t want to spam the site with crap. I’m fine with just watching the videos that I like, especially the funny ones.” This commenter associates posting only good videos with residency and therefore refrains from posting videos which “wouldn’t be good” as that would create “spam” for people on the site. Despite characterizing himself as a tourist, the poster displays sensitivity to what he perceives to be group norms and standards. Another poster said:

I consider myself a YouTube resident, because I am a member of the YouTube community for more than one year, I have more than 150 favorites, I look for new videos everyday and I’m working on my second video now. Anyway, this was a great video, good job man!

In this example, the commenter cites participating in the YouTube “community” for a considerable length of time...
(more than one year). Although he or she is working on only a “second” video the trajectory shows interest in participating in a more normative way—by making and posting videos. The commenter says that he or she has watched many videos, and has even marked 150 videos as “favorites.” The commenter provides supportive feedback to Blunt3000 and tells him that he has made a “great video” and done a “good job.” Providing supportive feedback is a crucial way in which people participate in the YouTube community or social groups within it. In this example, sensitivity to norms, sharing, and participation illustrate behaviors of residenity. Rather than connoting frontierism, Blunt300’s metaphor analyzes categories of participation based on intensity of contribution and mutual sharing.

**The Proud Republic of Youhtubia**

Another metaphor of civility that has been used on YouTube is that of the “Republic of Youhtubia,” a concept put forward by a video maker named Paperlilies. Her videos on Youhtubia playfully invoke a metaphor of a group of people who should think of themselves as united in a symbolic and regimented way. In a video entitled, “The Proud Republic of Youhtubia” which was posted on August 11, 2006, Paperlilies proposes that we declare ourselves as an independent, national state! In the style of many of her other videos (and those of other video bloggers), she sits directly facing the camera. She states:

*I think with the increase of different people from all around the world, from all different ages and types of people, [that] are using YouTube and blogging on it, or vlogging, [that] it’s becoming like an independent place, like an independent state. And I think the name of that independent state needs to be ‘Youhtubia.’ And anyone who makes a blog and is therefore a citizen of Youhtubia, is a ‘Youtubian.’* Now, seeing as how I really believe it is becoming like an ideological ‘place’ in an existential kind of way, it needs to have a national anthem, a flag, and I don’t think like an official flower or something. [It] also is going to need official delegates from each country. I would stand as the English one, but you know, I don’t mind who it is. I would nominate Blunt300 to be the delegate from Australia, Zen Archer for America, I don’t know, who ever else from where ever else.

Paperlilies, who self-identifies as being from London, is an extremely popular video maker who has achieved fame on and off of YouTube. Her channel page indicates that she joined in May 2006. As of March 2008, she had over 30,000 subscribers, more than 1.5 million channel views, and her videos regularly receive on the order of tens of thousands of views, with some exceeding 1 million views. She is a YouTube partner and is currently ranked as the #66 most subscribed YouTube video maker of all time and the #49 most viewed partner of all time.

The metaphor that she uses to characterize YouTube is not one of a frontier but one of a modern state, complete with demographic diversity, symbols of nationality (such as anthems and flags), recognized leaders in the community (such as Blunt3000 and ZenArcher), a global presence, and organized, international representation. She invites participants to post their versions of anthems and other symbols of Youhtubia nationalism in a video that, as of April 5, 2008 saw over 6,000 views. One month later, on September 6, 2006 she posted another video called “Youhtubia National Broadcast” which she characterizes as an “official address from the convener of Youhtubia.” As of April 5, 2008, that video saw over 9,000 views. She invites people who would like to serve as the representatives of Youhtubia from different U.S. states or other countries to post a video response explaining their interest. She then proceeds to sing a proposed national anthem, sung to the tune of “God Save the Queen,” which she credits as being written by a YouTube participant named BadAlbert. She raises her right fist and sings:

> God save Youhtubia and all who sail in her concurring media, let us vent some spleen, God save all of us, Filthy Whore to dickponderous, God save our digital dreams, God save boh3m3. This is Youhtubia, land of new media, out-of-focus screaming teens, God save boh3m3.

Upon completion she puts her right hand over her chest, raises her fist, looks at the camera, and nods meaningfully as the image fades out. The metaphor is playful and quite far from the notion of a masculine frontier that should avoid governance and representation. The metaphor invokes an idea of being united and requiring emotional symbols that characterize a group that shares identifying attributes (such as displaying an interest in “venting spleen” and putting up videos that are “out-of-focus” from “screaming teens”).

A search of the term “Youhtubia” using the YouTube search feature returns at least 345 videos with titles that offer Happy New Year and Christmas greetings. There are videos that use the phrase to call people on YouTube to action, for serious causes such as fighting poverty to fanciful proposals for a YouTube president, anthem, and flower. There are documentaries about why people elected to “enter” Youhtubia, how they felt going to a Youhtubia meetup, and what a day in the life of a “Youtubian” looks like. One interesting video is called
“Living in YouTubia.” It quotes both Blunky3000’s and Paperlilies’ videos and provides advice to someone new to Youtubia and who may receive hurtful comments or criticism on their videos.

The video was posted January 23, 2008, by VioletKitty411 who is popular among a number of YouTubers but not, as of March 2008, as apparently well known as Paperlilies. Her channel page shows that she joined YouTube in June 2006. She has over 2,000 subscribers and over 170,000 views of her channel page. Her videos receive roughly 500 to nearly 2000 views for each video. Her videos are conducted in a personal, video blogging style in which she generally directs information, feelings, and emotions to the camera. Topics that she addresses include, among many others, hurtful gossip, people who have hurt her, and interviews with other YouTube participants. Her channel page, which viewers may or may not choose to view prior to or after seeing her videos, sets up a kind of tone with which to view her videos. She writes, "THIS IS A DRAMA-FREE ZONE. IT’S MY CHANNEL AND I HAVE CONTROL ISSUES. NO JERKS ALLOWED. CAN YOU SAY "DELETE AND BLOCK"?" Her capital-letter warning (which is interpreted in many online milieus as angry shouting) collectively addresses users who may wish to be "jerks" and post hateful comments on her videos.

Blunky once asked, are you a visitor or a resident of YouTube? And of course Paperlilies calls this place Youtubia... if you’re fairly new, there’s a few things you need to know about living in Youtubia. Rule #1, do unto others as you would have them do unto you. It’s one of the easiest rules in life, yet amazingly, so many people don’t treat others the way they wish to be treated. Rule #2, when you encounter people who break Rule #1, you need to employ a very simple plan. This is not my idea, this is by Pipistrello. It’s recognize, ignore, delete, RJD. Recognize that the person has a very poor opinion of himself, and is thus projecting the way he feels onto others. Ignore the person by using the block feature. I am proud to say I probably have the biggest block list in YouTube, about 1300 names, that’s an average of about 5 per day. And the more you use it, the less you’ll get effected [sic]. And delete the comments.

VioletKitty411 goes on to offer other advice on features that were added since she joined. She recommends setting the comments to “friends only” posting, rather than allowing anyone to post a comment. Although a video maker can remove comments posted to a channel page, having tighter settings reduces the chances of receiving unwanted comments. VioletKitty411 advises people to set video comments so that friends can automatically post a comment to a video she makes, while others must have comments approved before they are posted. She notes that most of the “fun” in posting hateful comments is “having others see it.” For her, these mechanisms help remove unwanted comments and people from one’s social circle on YouTube.

If someone starts seriously harassing someone, VioletKitty411 advocates contacting YouTube and urging them not only to suspend their account and privileges but to ban them altogether from YouTube by blocking anyone at their IP (Internet Protocol) address from using YouTube. This strategy is more effective when an IP address is permanent, such as when someone uses particular kinds of access services (such as cable modems) that provide a static IP address. Large Internet Service Providers (ISPs) who provide access for many people generate a random IP address for their users. This makes it difficult to ban particular users. Banning everyone from a particular IP address (such as a company or school) is often considered extreme by online participants. Finally, VioletKitty411 also recommends that for matters of serious harassment people should contact the Internet Crime Complaint Center, which is a partnership between several U.S. agencies, including the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

Many of the children and youth interviewed for the study approached their YouTube experience quite differently. For example, several of the children I spoke to had never blocked anyone. In contrast, VioletKitty411 says she has a long list of people she has blocked (1300, which she says averages out to a rate of 5 per day). Although many children received hurtful comments, a number of them left the comments on their pages in a symbolic effort to support free speech. Some of them expressly came to YouTube in order to promote their work and having comments of any kind helps increase their comment tallies. While some participants thus tightly control what was posted, others permit more forms of commentary. YouTube arguably functions less as one site, and more as an aggregator of individual video pages with different settings. Each video maker may set their own standard for what will be allowed on their video pages. However, YouTube’s terms of service rules (such as not permitting participation of children under 13 or posting copyright material) trumps individual preferences.

If a video maker violates terms of service, material may be removed and people may have their account suspended. While some people complain that YouTube is insufficiently vigilant about closing accounts with offensive material, other video makers complained bitterly about having their accounts closed without receiving an adequate explanation for why their account was closed. Some people told me that children’s accounts have been
closed, even though they have their parents’ permission to make videos. When YouTube posted a reminder that children under 13 are not allowed to create an account (which people interpret as due to legal restrictions about protecting people under 13 online), one commenter responded:

Interesting to see this. Funny thing is, you just proved your mistake with the YoungTubers and Jesari accounts right here. As can be proven several times over, Jesari and YoungTubers United were both registered by Jesse’s father, who is over 13. So... why are these accounts not yet restored? I think on behalf of thousands of YouTube users and many more to come I’m sure, we would like to know this.

Other people have complained that YouTube inappropriately took down comments from a YouTube participant named Mikma, who often places the comment, “Mikma was here” on people’s videos. Some people claimed that YouTube removed these comments because they considered them “spam” and deleted them. Some people protested YouTube’s alleged action and said that Mikma’s comments reflected his personal style and gave people warm social feelings. Mikma’s account includes a video called “WARNING YOU TUBE” which was posted on December 5, 2007. Its description states, “My son wanted to make a video in my support. For You Tube removing all comments that I have ever made AGAIN. You Tube has not told me why they did this. Are have the contacted me in any way [sic]. Not even to say “sorry dude our bad.”

Several participants expressed concern both in videos and interviews with me about becoming a YouTube partner. They were concerned with their work being too visible. They felt that having limits on their right to incorporate copyrighted material in their videos would be too restrictive for their personal expression, and therefore they refrained from becoming a partner, even though it meant eschewing potential ad revenue.

These events may seem incongruous to light-hearted metaphors of “state,” and may set off alarm bells for those who prescriptively wish the Internet could be a frontier because they are understandably concerned about abuses of top-down entities. In any case, the metaphors described above hardly depict all Internet participation as classic frontierism. YouTube participants are subject to many layers of laws, rules, policies, and sanctions of corporations, government entities, and peers. YouTube has a terms of service policy and people are suspended when video makers allegedly violate those policies. YouTube participants have expressed, in videos and in interviews with me, their frustration with the way YouTube handles issues such as youth participation, alleged spam, and use of copyrighted material. While some participants accuse YouTube of not going far enough to reduce harassment, others expressed frustration that it has gone too far in closing accounts or removing comments that certain members of the community feel conform to appropriate social parameters. What the metaphors and responses to them show is that interactional parameters are negotiated, often in ways that seek an ideal of respect for one’s work and mutual vulnerability, rather than social isolation.

Conclusion

Scholars writing about Internet interaction often assume that online participants interact as though the Internet is a lawless frontier. However, it is important to suspend prior assumptions and examine available data to see if this metaphor accurately describes particular forms of interaction online. The present research shows that for many YouTube participants who video blog, the frontier metaphor is not particularly useful. Assuming, prior to empirical investigation, that a frontier-like environment must exist, simply because the interaction takes place online, risks eliding other patterns of interaction that do not exhibit frontier-like qualities.

Orienting metaphors and terms are at once helpful, obfuscating, politically-charged, and likely to change many times and across contexts. Current metaphors of tourism and symbolic states emphasize sociality rather than individualism, and a sense of mutual vulnerability and sharing that is sensitive to formal and informal norms on the site. “Living” in “Youtubia” requires border work in which members architect social aspects of their own social space while dealing with legal and corporate terms of use. What these YouTubers describe are social spaces, with borders that depend on personal disclosure and social sensitivity. These orienting metaphors set up expectations that true participants will not just visit the site or stake out independent claims, but will establish an ongoing social presence, complete with “friends and neighbors” in ways that require interactively negotiated social contributions and civility.

NOTES

1 A video blog is similar to a web log, or blog, in which entries are added to a web page in reverse chronological order with most recent entries listed first. Video blogs (or vlogs) often also contain text and photographs, but usually privilege video as a primary way of communicating and participating in video blogging communities. Video blogs, like web logs also spring from a number of genres, including “show” type vlogs, diary forms, news and journalistic themes, cooking shows, and other themes and topics.

2 A subscriber is a person who has a YouTube account and is notified when a video maker to whom they are subscribed uploads a new video.
3 A channel page is the YouTube equivalent of profile pages, which are found on social network sites such as MySpace. They contain self-reported identity information, as well as information that YouTube tracks, such as number of videos the person has watched on YouTube, the number of subscribers they have, and the number of views the channel page has received.

4 In fact, one commenter asked, “Is Blunty trying to get featured?” Blunty3000 responded, saying, “Heh, now that you mention it this is the kind of vid they tend to like to feature… but no, I’m not TRYING to get featured by making this vid, the whole tourist/resident thing just popped into my head last week and I’ve been thinking about it since, so I decided to make a vid about it.”

5 Pronounced bo-heme.

6 The term “friend” here is used in the social network site sense. A participant on YouTube may send out a “friend” request. If the person accepts, they are mutually considered “friends” on YouTube and they may elect to display this friendship relation on their channel pages. People have different expectations about what it means to be a YouTube friend, their practices vary. While some people routinely accept any friend request (even from people whom they do not know) in order to increase their network, others are much more circumspect, and only agree to friend someone they have met on- or offline.

7 She provides a link to the following Web page: http://www.ic3.gov/, which states that they investigate matters of cybercrime such as fraud and identity theft.

8 YouTube posted the following message on July 10, 2007, “While we permit users between the ages of 13 and 17 to register for an account with parental permission, we do not allow children under the age of 13 to create an account. We understand that young people, when properly supervised by their parents, are capable of making valuable and significant contributions to the YouTube community, but we also respect the limitations in place to protect how personal information of people under the age of 13 can be shared and used. This is why YouTube, like many other websites, limits registration to people 13 and older.”

9 An example can be found from tlg847 called “MIKMA IS STILL HERE” URL: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ESSS85de4A

10 See for instance, K80Blog’s video, “Why I’m Not in the YouTube Partners Program” URL: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H0Nz8Y4wJl

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