Commenting on Comments:
Investigating Responses to Antagonism on YouTube

By:

Patricia G. Lange, Ph.D.
Postdoctoral Fellow
Annenberg Center for Communication
plange@annenberg.edu

Abstract: Scholars suggest that certain "lessons" supposedly learned from studying text-based information technologies may be applied to video-mediated environments. Some scholars believe that a key limitation of online text-based environments is a prevalence of anonymity which directly spawns antagonism. According to this view, increased amounts of identity information, such as ability to see faces and bodies in online encounters, will decrease communicative hostility. Examining video sharing practices on YouTube shows that such an assumption is flawed in multiple ways and is rooted in misunderstanding about the source of online hostility. For these researchers, hostility results from assumed online anonymity rather than from social or culture dynamics which may occur offline as well as online. The assumption ignores years of research that has demonstrated how embodied identity information is available and interpreted through textual exchange (Herring et al. 1995; O'Brien 1999; Baym 2000). Through an investigation of antagonistic or "hating" behaviors and reactions to it on YouTube, this paper argues that the addition of facial and bodily information in video does <u>not</u> guarantee cordial interaction. In addition, not all participants perceive online hostility or "hating" as a "problem" to the same degree. Despite the pain that hating causes for many people in the YouTube community, participants are often wary of implementing corrective mechanisms because they may complicate free speech and limit access to desired critical feedback. For many YouTube participants, certain regulatory mechanisms for ensuring cordial video reception and commentary are not perceived as effective or universally desired.

After two decades of research in information and communication technologies (ICTs), some scholars still support the generalization that conflict levels will reduce as more about participants' identities are known during online encounters (Tannen 1999; Choi 2003). For

instance, some researchers have asserted that seeing someone's face and body during online interaction will provide increased identity information and a more personalized environment than one supposedly offered through text alone. According to this position, providing such facial and bodily information is likely to reduce undesirable online conflict (Choi 2003). Extrapolating these views leads to the prediction that on video sharing sites such as YouTube, conflict will be reduced when viewers can see that a real person is behind the videos that are created and posted on the site. Further, as people expose visual aspects of themselves on camera, they will be less likely to verbally attack.

These assumptions are rooted in the belief that online communication inherently breeds hostility that is different from in-person dynamics such as arguing or bullying. It also assumes that participants believe that certain forms of conflict should always be discouraged (Tannen 1998). Yet scholars of conversational morality have shown that in-person conversations are hardly possible without numerous, morally-laden accusations and defenses (Bergman 1998). New scholarship on so-called flaming phenomena demonstrates that not all participants view certain types of online interaction as conflict, nor do they see all online conflict as harmful or as necessitating top-down policies to discourage it (O'Sullivan and Flanagin 2003; Lange 2006). If online conflict resembles certain offline forms of conflict, such as bullying, then providing additional bandwidth to transmit facial and bodily cues will not likely address the underlying social causes of the conflict.

Drawing from an ethnographic investigation of perceptions of online criticism in text comments and video responses on YouTube, this paper argues that not all participants view certain critical comments as a problem that necessitates regulatory mechanisms that threaten to limit participation. Before problems such as hating can be addressed, it is important to

understand whether and to what extent phenomena are perceived as problems and by whom. It is also important to evaluate some of the concerns about the negative consequences that may result from certain well-meaning policies that try to reduce what for many YouTube participants constitute painful, hurtful remarks. Participants often wish to preserve an aura of free speech and promote self-expression that may not be possible in certain in-person contexts. A particular concern is that limiting comments may discourage helpful feedback.

Many video sharing participants distinguish between hateful comments and constructive criticism, and they wish to maintain an environment in which comments are not pre-judged but freely circulated. They often wish to protect opportunities for free speech despite the fact that such hateful comments are cited by participants as a major contributor to the discouragement of self-expression on the site. However, it is also true that so-called constructive criticism can encourage normative ways of self-presentation because the recipient values constructive comments more than empty "hating" comments which some people choose to ignore. The paper will end with an ironic vignette that describes how so-called constructive criticism encouraged at least one YouTube participate to reconsider her mode of participation and self-expression in order to perform affiliation to normative goals and values espoused by respected YouTube members.

Research Approach

The data is from an ongoing, nine-month ethnographic investigation that combined participant-observation, interviewing, and analyses of video content to understand how children and youth participate on YouTube. The project is funded by the MacArthur Foundation and is part of a larger effort to understand how young people from the United States learn from and use

digital media technologies in every day life.[1] The goal of the larger project is to explore ways to design more useful educational software, systems, and online environments. My research project involves analyzing the semiotics of video production, sharing, and reception on YouTube and among video bloggers. Thirty people under twenty were interviewed as were eleven people in their twenties. Most of the interviewees were from the United States, although a few were from Europe. For the purposes of this discussion, a child is a person in his or her mid-teens or younger, while a youth is a person in his or her late-teens or early twenties.

The analysis draws on forty-one interviews with YouTube participants who may be classified as one of the following: 1) former participants; 2) casual users; 3) active participants; 4) YouTubers or "Tubers;" and 5) YouTube celebrities. Former participants no longer post videos but may maintain an account, watch videos on the site, and post an occasional comment. Casual users, who typically do not have an account, tend to view videos when they wish to search for something specific, when they surf the site, or when someone prompts them with a link to a particular video. Active participants have an account and usually upload videos or at least participate by leaving comments on other people's video or channel pages. A channel page is the YouTube equivalent of what other social networking sites call "profile" pages and includes personal information as well as a list of videos made by the participant, their subscribers, favorite videos, and subscriptions to other YouTube participants. Active participants may be aware of issues and people that are important in the YouTube community.

YouTubers or "Tubers" are people who have a more intense engagement with YouTube in terms of the amount and type of their participation. They are often on the site daily and certainly weekly, sometimes for an hour or more per session. Many, although not all YouTubers, promote

---

[1] For more information see: http://digitalyouth.ischool.berkeley.edu/

their work within and outside of YouTube. They upload videos and closely attend to and participate in YouTube debates and discussions. When asked if they are a "YouTuber" or "Tuber" during interviews they respond without hesitation in the affirmative showing a willingness to be identified as part of the YouTube community. The final group, YouTube celebrities, share qualities similar to those of YouTubers. However, they are also quite well known both within and often outside of the site. YouTube celebrities influence the discourse, goals, and activities on YouTube through their videos, comments, bulletins, and other forms of interaction.

The categories are not strictly mutually exclusive but provide a description of relative levels of YouTube participation. I have heard people refer to YouTube participation as if it were mostly made up of what I refer to here as casual users. But ethnographic investigation shows a more complex user typology, especially with regard to former participants who may be quite knowledgeable about the site but have stopped posting for various reasons such as wanting more control over the distribution of their videos or as a response to harassment. Further, former participants have been known to return and become active. In another example of category blurring, YouTube celebrities often consider themselves as "YouTubers." Most of the people interviewed for this study could be classified in the more active categories, although a few who were interviewed were former participants or casual users.

During ethnographic interviews I often asked interviewees: 1) to define a hater; 2) to provide examples of what constituted "hating on" someone or engaging in hating behaviors; 3) to discuss whether they had personally experienced hating behaviors and to describe their feelings and reactions; and 4) to consider whether they believed hating was a problem for them and/or a general problem on YouTube. I also asked interviewees to explore potential solutions to deal

with haters in the YouTube community. At first glance, it might seem as though this is a straightforward phenomenon that is widely recognized as a problem that must be fixed in standardized ways. The issue is certainly part of intense YouTube discourse as the topic appears in numerous videos, parodies, and video responses.

What the interviews revealed, however, was that the actual extent and severity of the problem was not generally agreed upon. Further, even in cases in which interviewees initially acknowledged that it was a problem (at least for others if not actually for themselves), as the interview progressed and solutions were discussed, many interviewees stated that the particular proposals could be more problematic than the actual hating behavior. Note that the proposals discussed were suggested by YouTube participants themselves. For many participants, finding ways to eliminate hating behavior risked complicating free speech and access to criticisms that they felt were important for their YouTube participation. They were concerned about having an ability to give and receive feedback to improve technique, achieve personal growth, and raise the level of quality of videos in the YouTube community.

Definitions and Framing the Problem

Perhaps one of the most well-framed definitions which echoes that of many interviewees came from Skazz, a male in his late teens who said, "A hater is someone who posts a negative comment that doesn't offer any [criticism] or any helpful information. Simply commenting with "Gay" is hater like. Saying "This sucks go die" is hater like. [They] insult you and offer no suggestions on [improvements]." Most interviewees distinguished hating comments, which are unconnected to the content of a video, to constructive criticism in which one person offers sincere assistance in helping the video maker improve his or her technique. Interviewees

sometimes included "stalkers" in the category of haters while others classified stalkers as a separate phenomenon. Stalkers typically engage in more aggressive behavior such as persistently sending sexually explicit or socially inappropriate messages. They also threaten actual physical violence. The focus of this discussion is not on stalkers and explicitly violent or sexually aggressive behavior. Rather, my questions focused on haters and hating comments in text or videos that insult other people and/or their work using mean-spirited and often stock phrases.

For many people, haters are associated with those who do not post their own videos, thus they are not vulnerable to criticism from others. Haters post pointless comments that have nothing or little to do with the video while never having to risk receiving unpleasant criticism themselves. Examples of comments are "Wow this sucks," and may involve metaphors of violence such as "You're a waste of brain matter. Go jump off a cliff" or "This sucks. Go die." Interviewees report that often the phrases haters use are repetitive, unimaginative, and similar to those of other haters. They are unable to offer "legitimate" arguments about why they hate something. For a few interviewees, "hating" also included swearing or curse words, although this was not routinely cited as a necessary or sufficient determinant of hating behavior.

Personal Experiences with Haters

Most of the interviewees who had opinions about what haters were and how they should be dealt with had personally experienced hating behavior. Yet opinions varied with respect to whether hating was a problem and whether the problem was severe or widespread. The answers generally divided into three positions. These positions were: 1) Yes, it is a problem for me and the YouTube community; 2) Yes, it is a problem for others, but not for me; and 3) No, it is not a problem.

Yes, it is a Problem for YouTube

Several interviewees cited hating as a major problem for YouTube and for themselves. While some YouTube participants and observers suggested that maturity plays a role in prompting hating behaviors, others argued that many young people are quite intelligent and are capable of participating on YouTube without making hateful comments. Suihanki, a man in his early twenties, admitted to feeling an urge to engage in hating behavior when he saw comments that were politically polemic or racist in nature. Frank, a boy in his mid-teens, noted that sometimes he felt hostility towards haters and found himself becoming embroiled in arguments with them. Frank also challenged the stereotype that it is exclusively children or youth that exhibit hating. He noted that hostility towards children can come from adults who create an environment on YouTube that is unsuitable for kids to post videos. As he put it, "It's really not much of a place for kids to post videos as of now. I'm not really sure what would be the best way to change that, but [it] just really can become an unfriendly environment if you're a kid trying to post videos on there and all you get are these, like, 25-year-olds with no life just leaving you mean comments." His observations that many popular YouTube celebrities are adults and that adults routinely post mean spirited comments complicate the stereotype that children alone have taken over and degraded the quality of YouTube participation through hating.

Widespread concern about hating behavior is evident in many ways on YouTube, which contains discourse and video parodies of hating behavior. Some of these concerns are well represented in a video that a YouTube celebrity named renetto posted on August 7, 2006 called "The Community of YouTube" in which he argued that YouTube is not a community because it is filled with haters who complicate participants' ability to comfortably post videos of

themselves without receiving cruel forms of criticism. In the video, renetto says that he received

email from people who are too intimidated by haters to participate on the site.

renetto: I get so much email from people saying I would never make a video and put it on YouTube. [mimicking what his viewers say] "Cause you don't understand, people will make fun of me, the way I talk, the way I am, the way I look." [in his own voice] I look at some of the people who were brave enough to leave videos for me and [some] of them, I've read the comments underneath their videos and there are like just people just going after them. I mean just flat out going after 'em for being brave enough to put up a video and talk about who they are 'cause maybe they're overweight or maybe they're old. I mean, old, that's what I get all the time…What's the crime in that?

Such a perspective belies the assumption that given increased bandwidth of the type directed

toward showing more visual identity information on camera, people will automatically be more

sensitive to others. Seeing people in videos does not guarantee that haters will acknowledge they

are belittling a real person, as opposed to someone supposedly disembodied through text.

Renetto's observations about vicious online criticism of appearance can also be observed in

offline contexts, suggesting that it is not anonymity (or anonymity alone) but widespread forms

of prejudice that lead to hateful messages.

Renetto's argument about being ridiculed is made all the more powerful when he uses offline

bullying metaphors to describe behavior he has observed online.

renetto: When you're out on recess and you want to play and there's one kid, there's three hundred kids on recess but they're all afraid of this one kid and his three little buddies who walk around and bully every body and tell you to get off of this, get off of that, and you go up and tell the teacher and the teacher makes fun of *you* for tattling, [saying], [mimics unpleasant teacher's voice] "Aw, get back out there. Stop being a sissy! Stop being a whine bag!" That is not good.

Renetto goes on to describe a more positive scenario in which a teacher takes a bully aside and tells him that for the benefit of the other people, he cannot use the playground until he acts more responsibly. He offers proposals to reduce hating behavior and he encourages his viewers to think about and discuss the issue.

Yes, it is a problem for others, but not for me

Some interviewees acknowledged that hating behaviors were a problem for others in the YouTube community, but they were hesitant to label them as a problem for themselves personally. For instance, Amelia, a youth in her late teens, felt that certain individuals whose aggressive style of video making sparks controversy tend to experience more hating comments. For her, individuals such as boh3m3 (pronounced bo-heme) and Stevie Ryan, known on YouTube as Little Loca typically encounter more hater comments. She argued that the confrontational nature of their videos often sparked incendiary responses that routinely appear in video responses as well as text. Such an observation challenges the assumption that haters exclusively hide behind the supposed anonymity of text comments. Disturbingly, Amelia also observed that female video bloggers tend to receive more hating comments than male video bloggers on YouTube. Providing additional identifying information about one's sex also does not reduce hating comments. Skittles, a youth in his late teens also echoed the perception that young girls receiving hating comments may take them more to heart than others might.

Notably, Amelia expressed the view that having an arena to argue online was important to her because the same kind of arguing was actually difficult to accomplish in certain offline social contexts. She appreciated having a forum that encouraged more honesty and free expression, even if such interaction was contentious. As she stated, "people can argue with you, disagree,

leave nasty comments and [I] think that's beautiful, it is something we need more of." In her view, Americans do not like to discuss things like religion and politics in certain social settings and she appreciated having the ability to connect with others who hold similar opinions or to argue with those who do not.

Even when interviewees acknowledged that hating was a problem for others, they did not necessarily agree that intervention was required. For instance, several interviewees said that posting on YouTube requires a certain amount of maturity to handle the criticism and feedback that will likely result by publicly posting one's work. One man in his twenties put it succinctly when he said, "if you don't want comments from "haters" don't post videos." He and other interviewees stated that just as it takes a certain level of experience and maturity to comment in socially appropriate ways, so too does it take a certain level of maturity to accept criticism, even if it is negative, and to ignore hateful comments from "jerks." As Liam, a boy in his early teens also pointed out, trying to create an environment in which only positive comments are allowed represents an unrealistic need for insulation from critical feedback. Similarly, suihanki contrasted the atmosphere of criticism on YouTube to that of an online art sharing community called Deviant Art. He felt that criticism was discouraged on the Deviant Art site to an unfortunate extreme. He argued that, because few people are willing to post criticism which may be unwelcome to the artists, people who post their work may have unrealistic understanding of how their art might be received beyond that community. Indeed, Crystal, a youth in her late teens told me that when she tried to post constructive criticism to some work on Deviant Art, she was rebuffed.

No, it is not a problem

Other interviewees emphasized that hating was not a "problem" for them because such people should be ignored. Whereas Amelia and others dealt with haters by deleting unwanted comments, some interviewees who did not see hating as a problem left the comments on their YouTube sites. W., a girl in her mid-teens, articulated a position that several interviewees held. For these interviewees, haters had a right to express their own views even if they were contentious, unhelpful, or shallow. Indeed sometimes haters provided a source of amusement for interviewees.

Patricia: Do you think that haters are a problem for YouTube?

W.:   nah, they have their own free will to dislike things...I think it's fine. I just think it was funny that they waste their time trying to trash someone's work.

Perhaps Skittles expressed the most extreme position. His work centered on comedic routines and humorous videos. He stated that he wished he had "more haters." I was not sure I understood him correctly and went back later in the interview to try and understand his position.

Patricia: Earlier, you said that you kind of wished there were – or maybe I misunderstood, but you said something like, "I kind of would want there to be haters," or you wouldn't mind it if haters posted. Did I get that right?

Skittles: Because – yeah, yeah, kind of, cause [you've] got to be creative in how you think, and it's fair game, almost, when people would complain about your things, cause when you put a video online, you're subjecting yourself to all this, haters or whatever.

Patricia: Yeah.

Skittles: That's what being online is, so if someone's gonna hate what I'm putting out there, then – and feels, like, the need to voice it, then so be it. Like, it's just interesting to me that someone would do that and care that much about it.

Skittles' position on the subject called to mind the comic onstage who must handle hecklers in productive and non-threatening ways. Hecklers become part of the act insofar as they provide a means for the comedian to display skills of quick wit and judgment in ways that preserve rather than detract from the integrity of the comedic routine and the audience's enjoyment of it. Skittles implied that going public with one's videos meant having the maturity to handle rejection, and he suggested that it was an interesting challenge to deal with less quick-witted opponents. Some interviewees noted that haters were not a problem for them personally because they were able to tune them out either literally by deleting their comments or emotionally by not allowing haters to deter them from expressing themselves on YouTube.

Perhaps one of the most poignant responses came from Anesha, a youth in her late teens, who initially told me that haters were not a problem. Later in the interview, she indicated that the worst thing about YouTube was haters. It became clear that she and I were defining the word "problem" in a different way. Since their comments could be deleted or ignored by the video maker, she did not categorize hating as a problem. Nevertheless, they caused undeniable emotional pain or at least discomfort for people trying to participate on YouTube.

Patricia:	What is the worst thing about YouTube?
Anesha:	haters.
Anesha:	most [definitely]
Patricia:	Hmm. Earlier you mentioned they were not a "problem." But you would consider them the worst thing about YouTube.
Anesha:	a "problem" as in they weren't causing anyone to stop going to youtube or to stop making videos because you can always delete their comments and what not. but it's still sucky to have some one talk about your videos in the way that they do.

Hating is a problem for many YouTube participants. What these comments reveal is that the definition of "problem" varies and further research is necessary to understand the meaning of the word "problem" when discussing haters' impact. One interpretation is that a problem is something that cannot be addressed by ignoring it or by manipulating one's own account, such as by deleting a comment. Interviewees reacted differently to various levels of hating behavior. Many of them feared it would be difficult to address hating commentary by implementing regulatory mechanisms, a topic to which we now turn.

Proposals to Deal with Hate

During interviews, I explored responses to a number of proposals for dealing with haters. Many of these proposals were indirectly inspired by or taken from renetto's video on "The Community of YouTube." Although not as widely viewed as his other films, this video continues to receive responses even though it was posted over six months ago. Renetto is an influential celebrity in the YouTube community, currently ranked as the 16th most subscribed director on YouTube. He has made over 100 videos and has over 1 million views to his channel page. Interviewees whom I spoke to, as well as several people who posted video responses to renetto's video, expressed gratitude toward him for tackling the issue and publicly exploring solutions. A few people agreed with renetto's proposition that YouTube moderators, like teachers at school, should become more active in dealing with the problem of haters by monitoring comments and dealing with haters directly. However, several people also stated that this might be practically difficult to implement given YouTube's scope.

In his video, renetto proposes a system in which participants rate other participants, just as they rate videos. Although he does not outline specific details, he suggests that as people participate more they gain more tangible credibility and "trustworthiness" within the community which would be reflected in a starred ranking system. Such a system is similar to "karma" systems on other participatory online sites. As participants gain credibility and have a higher number of "stars," they obtain access to more privileges. Using this system, individual participants could decide who they would interact with by examining other people's ratings. For instance, a particular video maker could initially decide that only someone with a high user rating would be allowed to post comments on their videos. As the video maker's confidence grew, they might widen the number and type of people who would be allowed to post comments, so that people with lower user ratings could eventually also post comments. People with lower star ratings may be inclined to be less polite, but over time a video maker may become better at handling different types of criticism. The criteria renetto proposes to gain credibility and more stars include posting one's own videos or participating for a certain length of time (for example, a week or a month). It has also been suggested that people of a certain age lack the maturity to know how to post in socially acceptable ways. Another criteria to determine participation in terms of being allowed to post comments could be age.

In interviews, I asked participants to comment on proposals that limit participants' ability to comment until they had met certain criteria such as: 1) posting a video they had made; 2) waiting a certain amount of time after obtaining an account before commenting; and 3) being a certain age before posting comments. Next, I asked participants to comment on renetto's proposal to rate users and determine their social readiness to post comments based on their community rating. Interviewees often rejected these proposals on the basis of three major concerns: 1) perceived

discriminatory unfairness of the policies; 2) ability to subvert and/or lack of ability to enforce the policies; and most importantly 3) concerns about preventing access to legitimate criticism.

Although a few participants felt that limitations based on age might reduce some hating behavior, most participants did not feel that this was a desirable policy since many young people provide important feedback to each other. It is also easy to subvert such a rule by lying about age. Further, as Frank pointed out, age is no guarantee of cordial and mature behavior since, in his view, members of the twenty-something crowd distribute plenty of hate. Instituting a rule that someone must post a video before making comments was also usually rejected mostly because of its discriminatory effect and ease of subversion. For instance, people could take an existing clip of someone else's work or make a 1 second video to make a video. They could then post this "video" and according to the rules, they could post comments—and "hate on" others. In addition, many interviewees acknowledged that some people do not want to post videos, but rather enjoy participating on YouTube by viewing and commenting on videos. One former participant and experienced video maker said that he does not wish to post his videos on YouTube but would like to be able to ask questions and comment on other videos. Therefore, a rule requiring participants to post videos before they could comment would potentially discourage people from achieving personal self-expression and/or participating through text comments alone. It could also deprive video makers of receiving potentially thoughtful comments from non-video makers.

A rule requiring people to wait a specified amount of time before posting comments had the most traction among the people I interviewed in terms of the rule's ability to discourage the amount of hateful comments. They felt that such a rule could reduce the number of "impromptu" messages of hate and would at least delay the hater's next round of unfortunate comments. Haters could certainly return after their account with its associated email had been banned. They

would only need to get another email and re-register, but the rule would then state they could not post comments until a pre-specified time, say for example one month. These interviewees agreed that such rule might discourage or delay hating (and spamming) behavior but would not likely eliminate it entirely. As W. pointed out, whether haters have been there "longer or shorter…it wouldn't stop people from hating." More importantly, interviewees expressed deep concern that such a policy would alienate too many new participants and seriously complicate YouTube's growth potential, which thrives on regularly attracting and retaining new members. A mandatory waiting period could frustrate legitimate new members who would likely leave YouTube and choose other sites with more liberal participation policies.

Only two interviewees fully embraced renetto's proposal to rate users and then grant privileges—such as ability to post comments—according to those ratings. Most interviewees brought up the same issues about discrimination (against age or people who do not make videos) and limitations on free speech as problems that would outweigh the benefits of the solution. Further, interviewees noted that users could manipulate rating systems by encouraging their hater friends to rate them highly, and thus perpetuate additional hating behavior through dishonest ratings.

Additional related suggestions emerged during interviews. A few interviewees suggested being able to flag comments so that people who are frequently flagged may be scrutinized or banned from participation. However, interviewees pointed out that people could unscrupulously flag others and get them banned to achieve goals stemming from their own campaigns of hate. Indeed one group of young teens that I spoke with who had been banned for inappropriate content argued that another boy on YouTube had been instrumental in getting them banned by flagging their videos. They could not account for the other boy's drive to get them banned.

Another interviewee pointed out that YouTube is already saturated in dealing with flagged

videos and additional flagging systems could overtax the staff and complicate enforcement.

One suggestion that I found interesting echoed renetto's sentiment to provide the user with

more refined control over their account not just by deciding which comments could appear on

one's page, but also by having more choices in setting up the comment systems. For instance,

each individual account holder could choose whether to enable comments from registered and

non-registered users or only from registered users. In his video renetto almost seems to be

describing a kind of balkanization of YouTube participation such that certain areas suitable for

all members as well as areas with more adult content would exist separately within the site. To

preserve a more wholesome community, renetto's proposal implies, the community must divide.

Of particular interest are the calculations made by interviewees on the subject of instituting

rules to address hating behavior. Speaking about low-level insulting comments, many

participants felt that even one constructive comment could emotionally outweigh a number of

bad comments. As Frank put it:

Frank: But then even when you get one good comment, that makes up for 50
mean comments, cause it's just the fact of knowing that someone else out
there liked your videos and stuff, and it doesn't really matter about
everyone else that's criticized you.

The idea that legitimate participants with useful comments could be filtered out was not

acceptable to these interviewees when discussing these particular proposed solutions. For them,

the ability to obtain useful feedback was far more important than dealing with low-level haters.

Encouraging participation and avoiding undue restrictions were particularly important to the

makers of certain genres on YouTube. Therapix, a man in his twenties who makes many popular

tutorial videos, was particularly concerned about policies that restricted the ability of his viewers

to interact with him, since many of them watched his tutorials because they were inexperienced in making videos and participating on YouTube. In a sense, YouTube functions as a living laboratory, or educational environment in which participants are socialized into Internet participation and instructed on how to make videos, including learning about content, social, and technical techniques, and values. Their defense of free speech was intimately related to ensuring their own ability to participate fully in YouTube whether they were old enough, experienced enough, or capable enough to make what others judged to be high-quality videos. Tolerating a certain amount of hating and even leaving them on one's account symbolically reaffirmed their commitment to promoting free expression for themselves and others on YouTube.

Scholars and others often take a synchronic and universal view of hating and flaming behaviors. In other words, hating is examined as if it were perceived the same way by all parties at every point in time. But such hating behaviors may not be perceived the same way by everyone, nor may the same individual maintain his or her original attitude toward haters or toward policies to deal with haters over time. For instance, Carl, a youth in his teens, expressed the view that he could see both sides of the hater issue. On the one hand, he felt when he was a younger teen, he had made some unfortunate and immature comments. On the other hand, he noted that many young people often make thoughtful and intelligent comments. Frank, who had made a video response to renetto's video, noted that his position about dealing with haters had changed between the time he posted his video response in August of 2006 and the time of his interview for our project in December of the same year. Whereas in the video, Frank strongly supported renetto's proposal, in the interview he admitted times that he could see, in a way, where some hating comments "were coming from" as he encountered YouTube videos with questionable taste.

Frank continues to advocate the promotion of free speech, but he nevertheless urges consideration of ways to promote a more friendly environment. Frank proposes a communicative, participatory forum in which people could get to know one another in a way that is not possible through exchange of cursory comments on the current implementation of video pages or channel pages. Other interviewees also proposed the idea of a forum as a way for people to get to know one another and foster a more positive social environment. Although a forum exists outside of YouTube, these interviewees felt that in order for it to promote more social engagement from participants it would have to be run by YouTube and its professional staff.

In exploring solutions to the problems, many interviewees and responders to renetto's video invariably concluded that promoting young video makers' and viewers' ability to participate, allowing them to gain feedback, and encouraging them to express themselves were of paramount concern. Any future policies to address haters should therefore closely attend to how they affect the perceived regulation of individual freedom of expression on YouTube.

(De)Constructive Criticism

Many participants distinguished between hating behavior and what they referred to as "constructive criticism" which are sincere attempts to improve a filmmaker's ability. Just as I have come to see responses to hating behaviors as more complex than I originally assumed, I have also come to view constructive criticism in a slightly different light. One example involving a teen's change of direction in her YouTube oeuvre illustrates this point.

While preparing for an interview with W. I glanced at the videos listed on her channel page. I noticed that most of her early videos prominently featured her lip synching songs. Lip synching is a popular although much maligned YouTube genre which some participants feel is overdone

and uncreative. I noticed that at a certain point in W.'s work, she stopped featuring lip synching and emphasized more of a video blogging style. In one of her videos, she credits her change of style to the influence of a well-known and very highly respected YouTube celebrity named thewinkone. The video, entitled "3:00 AM Madness," is a self-described "rant," which was originally posted on March 25, 2006 by thewinekone, who lists himself as "Tony" on his channel page. Tony described his video as: "A rant about people and their webcams. And then craziness ensues. (I don't really have anything against these people, I swear.)"

He first berates Web cam users for staring with "dead" eyes at their Web cams recounting pointless details from their mundane day and calls them "idiots" (a word popular in technical circles in my observation) who should realize how they are presenting themselves on the Internet to the "world." Tony moves on to "rant" about his issues with lip synching videos. He says, "Another beef of mine is when people use Web cams to make videos of themselves lip synching. I seriously don't know why all you Internet people, Internet users, love to download and watch others lip synch to their web cams. This doesn't make any sense to me! They're not good. They're not funny. Why? Why? Tell me why." Tony then proceeds to do a rather amusing parody of lip synching to the oft-used song "My Humps" sung by the Black Eyed Peas. His lips are not well synchronized to the music and his facial expressions are either comically deadened or listlessly parodic of the emotion that the song's characters supposedly elicit. He tells lip synchers that this is not funny and they need new material because that genre is "done with." He exhorts his audience to do something "innovative" and "unique" that "someone has never done before on a Web cam." He follows his criticisms with a humorous example of something unique, which is to randomly throw water bottles at the camera while speaking. So-called "random" humor is often highly valued in the technical milieu that I have studied over the years.

In one of W.'s videos, she directly addresses Tony's criticism and says that she agrees with him. Her video displays an intertitle that advertises it as her attempt to be "interesting." She says that Tony's video inspired her to show him that she could do something "productive" with her Web cam. She announces that this would be to throw random water bottles at the screen. At this point water bottles begin flying around in her video, some from behind the camera as thrown by a friend. She then jokes that she will throw stuffed dolls at the camera if this does not satisfy Tony. After the credits roll, she once again lip synchs—to the very same popular song, "My Humps," during which a friend again throws water bottles at her. W. told me that she alerted Tony to the video and urged him to watch it. I found it to be an amusing parody of him and his rant as well as a good lip synching performance in its own right, but W. told me that he had merely reiterated to her that throwing water bottles at the screen had already been done.

Tony's rant resembles a concept I have elsewhere called performing technical affiliation (Lange 2003). When people perform technical affiliation, they demonstrate alliance to certain technologies, values, and beliefs through words or actions in social encounters. Performers show these alliances in order to establish themselves as accepted members of technical communities. In this case, Tony's rant decries Web cam users who are derivative and engage in poorly-executed (from a technical perspective) lip synching videos that resemble material found all over YouTube. The rant method of presentation is also very common in technical circles devoted to computers, networking, and Internet participation. For many technical participants, it is an acceptable way to critique other people, as opposed to unproductive and unspecific hating behaviors. However, I have seen some Internet participants compare ranting to hating which suggests that these genres may have some similarities. Further investigation of the rant genre is needed to compare it to hating and to explore similarities, differences, and potential effects.

Perhaps many YouTube participants would characterize Tony's rant as constructive criticism. Rather than resort to stock phrases, of the "you suck" variety, he critiques specific elements in YouTube videos such as unimaginative Web cam-based lip synching that he finds objectionable and which do not meet his standards for adequate YouTube participation. By identifying his video as a rant, he is warning his audience of its critical content. Such a move frames his critique as something that is biased and emotional. This makes the substance of his critique socially acceptable since the user was warned of its position. Although he echoes the criticisms of many YouTube participants, he does so in his own comedic and inimitable style which is quite amusing—and influential to his audience. At least one member, W. indicates awareness of his criticism and positions herself as willing to change. Nevertheless, she also offers her own critique of his criticism by parodying his suggestion that throwing water bottles at a screen randomly is inherently more interesting than lip synching to "My Humps." Personally, I enjoyed her clever parody which interrupted Tony's performance of technical affiliation while at the same time acknowledged its validity.

The exchange between W. and Tony brings to light certain observations about the implications of so-called constructive criticism. It is arguably true that in addition to being "constructive" in trying to offer his viewers concrete suggestions about how they should improve, his comment is also "destructive" in the sense that his rant aims to deter people from continuing to make certain kinds of videos. W. had earlier said that she could easily ignore comments from haters, yet she seemed ready to reconsider and alter her video making style in response to receiving (de)constructive criticism from a YouTube participant for whom she had great respect. It would appear that the (de)constructive criticism in this instance affected her self-expression more than hater comments which rely on stock phrases that she says does not deter

her from making or posting videos. Wishing to be perceived as engaging in the right kind of technically-oriented YouTube participation, W. engaged in a performance of technical affiliation of her own by showing a person whom she respects that she understands that certain videos are not valued by a well-respected member of the YouTube community. That Tony is widely respected is reflected in the fact that he has nearly 2 million channel views, has made over 40 videos, and has over 39,000 subscribers. Currently, he is YouTube's 8th most subscribed director.

Despite the negativity surrounding lip synching, at least one participant, Crystal, described how lip synching was for her a useful (as well as pleasurable) exercise because it helped her to learn how to edit video and improve the synchronization of music to video. Such an observation prompts questions about the value of discouraging certain content on YouTube if such videos help people learn how to put videos together. Severe feedback at extremely early stages risks choking off experimentation, learning, and personal expression of genres that are seen as degraded forms of true art. On the other hand, interviewees have suggested that if an environment in which people can offer sincere suggestions is discouraged, then YouTubers will retain a reputation of making poor quality videos and individual video makers will struggle to improve. Clever framings of criticism in genres such as "rant" videos perform technical affiliation in ways that help people learn how to participate on YouTube yet may encourage normative forms of self-expression and video content.

Conclusion and Further Research

Comments from children and youth whom I interviewed suggest that attitudes towards hating behavior are complex. Although this paper and other discussions tend to characterize "haters" as a single category, the reality is that there are different types at different stages of life

24

with different agendas. Different policies may therefore be required to address different types of haters and their motivations. Interviewees expressed a range of attitudes about whether and to what extent hating was a problem. That YouTube is struggling with haters despite the arrival of video in which participants' faces and bodies can be seen belies the assumption that text-based online communities encouraged more hostility because people could not "see" human beings behind so-called disembodied forms of communication. The idea that adding video would reduce conflict assumes that the source of online conflict is different from that of offline conflict and can be addressed by increasing bandwidth to transmit facial identity information. Comments from interviewees suggest that offline analogues of conflict such as bullying and normative technical critique are not automatically addressed through increased identity information. It may be argued that hateful comments appear in text, but interviewees mentioned that hate videos are common on YouTube. In future the project will analyze hateful videos and rants to investigate this question.

Most interviewees had experienced hating behavior and many cited being emotionally hurt by hateful comments. Nevertheless, interviewees disagreed about the effectiveness of current solutions to deal with haters and expressed deep concern about mechanisms that may or may not reduce hating behavior but could severely complicate getting access to useful feedback on their work. A more productive first step in dealing with mean-spirited comments would be to explore how online hating behaviors may resemble offline bullying or performances of technical affiliation. Policies could then be tailored accordingly to address the varied sources of painful comments and reduce their negative impact on YouTube participants.

References

Baym, N.K. (2000). *Tune in, log on: soaps, Fandom, and online community*. Thousand Oaks and London: Sage Publications, Inc.

Bergmann, J. R. (1998). Introduction: morality in discourse. *Research on Language and Social Interaction*, 31(3&4), pp. 279-294.

Choi, K. S. (2003). Imposing computer-mediated communication theories on virtual reality, *International Conference on Information Technology, Research and Education, Proceedings,* August 11-13, 2003, New Jersey, pp. 207-209.

Herring, S., Johnson, D. A. and DiBenedetto, T. (1995). "'This Discussion is going to Far!': Male Resistance to Female Participation on the Internet," in Kira Hall and Mary Bucholtz, eds., *Gender Articulated: Language and the Socially Constructed Self.* New York and London: Routledge, pp. 67-96.

Lange, P. G. (2003). Virtual trouble: Negotiating access in online communities. Ph.D. Dissertation. University of Michigan.

Lange, P. G. (2006). What's your claim to flame? *First Monday,* Volume 11, Number 9, September 2006, URL: http://firstmonday.org/issues/issue11_9/lange/index.html.

O'Brien, J. (1999). "Writing in the body: Gender (re)production in online interaction," in *Communities in Cyberspace*, Smith, Marc A. and Peter Kollock, eds., London and New York: Routledge, pp. 76-104.

O'Sullivan, P. B. and Flanagin, A. (2003). Reconceptualizing "flaming" and other problematic communication. *New Media and Society* 5(1), pp. 69-94.

Tannen, D. (1998). *The Argument Culture: Stopping America's War of Words.* New York: Ballantine Books.