

**Digital Cultural Communication:
How Social Media Can Create Active Museum Audiences**

**Remarks presented at:
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Thank you very much—it's a great pleasure to be here with you today, and I am grateful to Angelina her limitless energy and to the government of Australia for the invitation to come from New York to Chicago.

In yesterday's Daily Variety, there's a handsome article about another promising company in the documentary field, Atlas Media, one of the most active producers of nonfiction programming for a dozen cable networks, with the news that it has set up a new division to develop and produce theatrical documentaries. Promising enough. But: "The first feature-length project, put together with Voom HD Networks, will focus on a behind-the-scenes look at Meat Loaf as he goes about prepping for an 18-month worldwide tour."

This is at a time when the Learning Channel, originally conceived of by founder John Hendricks with such promise, is showcasing programs like "What Not to Wear" and "Miami Ink," a show about tattoos; when the news doesn't tell us anything; and when, as I read this morning in my copy of USA Today, the U.S. military has, effective last week, cut off the access of our soldiers in Iraq to MySpace, YouTube, Photobucket, and MTV.com—a move less redolent of a Secretary of Defense Gates than a Secretary named Wladyslaw Gomulka in a closed society in a land and time far, far away.

Imagine, for a minute, a world instead where all of us in this room are stakeholders in the future of nonfiction; where curators, librarians, activists, etc. are passionately on the same side as producers and distributors; where there are the millions of consumers out there for education and for American and world culture; and where video is as easy to create and distribute and annotate and repurpose as a photograph is of an object in your collection today.

Imagine a world where museum education can connect to the outside world at various levels for intelligent contributions, in recognition of the fact that, the thousands of museum professionals, the 7,000 professional delegates to this meeting notwithstanding, there are, by any kind calculation, more smart people outside of this room, outside the walls or walled gardens of our respective museums, than inside them.

This is the world I am going to describe in my presentation today. This world is easy enough to describe, because it's already here.

In my 15 minutes, I am going to make four general points about today's media and technology environment; describe several opportunities for us as joint stakeholders in this environment; and, time allowing, mention three projects that we are involved in that are kind of fun.

To my four points:

First, demand for online video worldwide has exploded. Over 100 million videos are watched on YouTube alone, every day. The top 10 video-streaming sites—Fox Interactive [including MySpace], Yahoo, Google/YouTube, Viacom, etc.—stream some 7 billion videos a month (that's 10 million per minute); and BitTorrent, the internet protocol that facilitates online sharing and distribution of video and audio, is the number-one file format in use on the Internet worldwide, accounting for 50 percent of internet use at any single given moment today in China, for example, and as much as 30 percent here in the United States.

These aren't just people filming David Hasselhoff chundering or swinging their housecats around by the tail—they are accessing lectures, information, and resources that can, in fact, make us proud to be their neighbors. More on that in a second.

Second, opportunities to *produce* video have exploded. Teenagers (groups of all ages, but teenagers especially) are producing and posting rich media online in numbers that are growing exponentially. Over 70,000 videos go up on YouTube every day, for example. Most of these young people are buying, sharing, or building themselves tools for doing so. That's what's important. Young people in the United States and worldwide—mimicking what we old people do when we cut and paste casual text from a website or an e-mail or a Word document—now believe they have a veritable video access mandate—a new, almost inalienable right to work with video, any video, to access it, cut it, paste it, change it, post it, much as with text online.

In August 2006, Stanford Law School professor and Creative Commons founder Larry Lessig, never a shy one about identifying a trend, declared, quite spectacularly, after a presentation that featured several video mashups from young producers, that text—text, on which most of us were raised and through which most of us communicate—is dead, that the written word has become the “‘Latin’ of our modern times”; that the ordinary language, the “vulgar” or vernacular language, the new language of the street is video and sound; and that the software suites that facilitate video and sound editing—

Apple's iMovie, Adobe's Premiere, Avid's Pinnacle Studio, Yahoo's Jumpcut, Sony's Grouper, Eyespot, VideoEgg, and a new set of open source video editing tools (including Audacity; Assemble; Cinelerra; GStreamer; Jahshaka; KinoDV; Linux Video Editing; and Pitivi)—are the new essential “tools of speech” in the digital age.

What Lessig calls a shift in production and use patterns from “read-only” to “read/write” engagements with video now results in millions of original new videos and mashups of classic material posted on the sites I've mentioned, every week. Journalists, investors, the academy, media companies, and trend-trackers all have begun to chronicle, each according to his needs, the public's almost insatiable demand for accessing and—equally—*producing* moving image content. According to one estimate, almost half of all video online today is user-generated. That is quite a remarkable statistics about the topic of our panel today, when you think about it. Walt Mossberg of the *Wall Street Journal* has opined that “everyone,” now, “can be a video producer,” telling us that most every computer package on Mac or Windows now comes with elemental video editing software and a camera, and we can buy additional software for a few hundred dollars. At the NAB meeting last month, Apple released Final Cut Server (<http://www.apple.com/finalcutserver>); Adobe unveiled its new Adobe Media Player; and Microsoft showed off its new Silverlight software and Expression Studio, designed to compete with Adobe's Creative Suite 3. And the *Financial Times* has declared, with the blooming of YouTube and with the arrival of Joost (the new video service from the founders of Skype and Kazaa) that the “democratization” of video distribution is now officially under way

Their access, third point, is undeniable—first to professional resources (moving image archives; millions hours of audio and video around the world) and then to everything. Over the next 13 years, an iPod, or a device its size, will be able to hold a year's worth of video (8,760 hours) by 2012 (5 years from now); all the commercial music ever created by 2015 (8 years), and *all the content ever created (in all media) by 2020* (13 years).

As you can see here, by the time my youngest child Charlie, who is six, enrolls at Marquette University, where my wife went, an iPod, or a device its size, will be able to hold, in digital form, all human knowledge ever created, in all media. And whatever that device it, you can bet it will have a camera and a microphone on top of it.

This isn't meant to freak us out, though it should. It is rather meant to allow us to think of new opportunities, opportunities that are there to more systematically, and with the help of the public, to create active cultural audiences for museums out of everybody, basically, who is interested in nonfiction, and who has some kind of connection to a device with a screen or a speaker.

I'd say, the efforts of the Pentagon notwithstanding, that audience is huge—and it's engaging in debates and discussions over culture whether you are there to help it or not!

YouTube, for example, is in many ways a participatory locus and a brilliant site of collective intelligence, a lot like (and maybe even richer than) Wikipedia. Search on

YouTube for “House of the Rising Sun” (the hit song performed by the British group The Animals in the 1960s), for example. Of the 315 results I called up when I did this, some have been accessed more than 70,000 times, some more than 90,000 times, such as a classic video ripped from U.S. cable station VH1 (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xPznuQb2VjI&mode=related&search=>). Some video clips have about 100 comments; some have none; some have been rated as a favorite by hundreds of viewers. Some people will, for free, teach you, in their videos, how to play the song on the piano and the organ (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mPsQ30JjO8M&mode=related&search=>) and on the acoustic and the electric guitar (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2smyS60VSm8>; <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O0goOO6vvE8>); some will just want to show you their artistry on these instruments, or on the pedal steel guitar, the banjo, violin, ukulele, or just with the vocals. Others will remix the tracks with pictures of hurricane-devastated New Orleans (the song is set there) and add global-warming-related images of Al Gore (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XgFPIeQRX-o>) or just basic animation. Others will post covers of the song by bands like Frigid Pink or singers like guitar legend Chet Atkins, balladeer Tori Amos, reggae artist Gregory Isaacs (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KQnyunGnvwY>), and the Low Strung Cello Choir at Harvard’s Dunster House (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3vAE8mFfr5w>; which is grim), or video from a “jam session as the Pederson’s after Thanksgiving dinner” (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9Un3-FXORuA>). Some people will tell you Bob Dylan rendered it better than The Animals, others will back Joan Baez; Youtube will allow you to see the three and compare (at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nvPv85LnnKA> and <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gDwK-Zir8ls>). Some people will tell you lead singer Eric Burdon was too short; others will (more rightfully I think) swoon at his voice; some will debate over whether the song is an allegory about various social issues or about New Orleans specifically; some will provide the lyrics and the sheet music; and some will ask and argue over what kind of organ keyboardist Alan Price was playing. You will learn about the likely provenance of the song—theories range from a slave spiritual to an old English ballad to a folksong from Kentucky. User “JimWayne61” from Texas (apparently) tells us, in text accompanying video of his playing it (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O84lmsFMA14>) that:

Many people familiar with the song falsely believe that House of the Rising Sun was written by The Animals. Small text inside their album "The Best of the Animals", released in 1966, reveals that it was only arranged by them. The truth is Alan Lomax, in his 1941 book *Our Singing Country*, identifies the authors as Georgia Turner and Bert Martin of Kentucky, though the true history of the song dates back much further.

The debate will continue over whether the song was meant to be sung by a woman, rather than a man (watching Baez is instructive on this point: “it’s been the ruin of many a poor *girl*,” she sings; Alan Lomax, indeed, field-recorded it as such); and people will take issue with instructors over how many chords, in fact, there are. As the comments—

English, Greek, German, Italian—and clips (from German television network NDR, home movies, clubs in Spain and Texas and New York and living- and bedrooms) wash over you about this one piece of a piece of a piece of our cultural heritage, you can't help but think that this social networking force is teaching you something about the power of self-expression, the power of the crowd that Wikipedia has begun to show us—and that the demand for consuming and sharing moving-image information is now fundamentally unstoppable.

The opportunities are right there for us to engage this world. As a start I can list seven such opportunities—

to:

- produce accessible educational video for museum needs
- catalyze new, more formal production initiatives
- evaluate the use of such video in museum education
- build new tools—editing, annotation, search, summarization—for more cost-efficient video production, collaboration, and distribution worldwide;

and to:

- organize new multi-institutional collaborations into a distributed educational video production network
- establish an educational video commons with rich resources where use and reuse rights are identified
- and help to define best practices for the museum use of educational video

In this work, we have the opportunity, at the click of a button, to track new educational opportunities, survey moving image archives, and, as a result, be able to engage in what the media critic Lev Manovich has called for: “rational” experimentation on the order of what Bauhaus and the Russian constructivist media avant-garde conducted with the new media of their time—photography, film, new print technologies, telephony—back in the 1920s; and more “systematic, laboratory-like” research into new media elements and “basic compositional, expressive, and generative strategies”¹

I'll close with news of three specific experiments with Columbia University, with University of Virginia, and with the Smithsonian.

“Harlem”

The Harlem Digital Archive, launched by Columbia University's Center for New Media Teaching and Learning and Intelligent Television in 2006 and supported in its early development phase by the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, is establishing a

¹ Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001), pp. 15, 30. The Russian constructivists particularly appreciated what Manovich calls “factory logic” when working with their new media. See also Christina Kiaer, *Imagine No Possessions: The Socialist Objects of Russian Constructivism* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005).

vibrant, open, and what we call “living” repository of audiovisual assets about Harlem—its history, politics, and culture—building a peerless, profoundly valuable source for a range of teaching and learning materials about New York, African American history, American history, and world culture. I encourage you to look at the film we made to introduce it. We are working with a variety of cultural and institutions throughout Harlem and New York, and beyond, including sister educational institutions such as Washington University in St. Louis, with 35,000 items (including over 1,000 hours of film and video) in its Henry Hampton collection

(<http://library.wustl.edu/units/spec/filmandmedia/hampton/index.html>)

Manning Marable, Columbia’s professor of history, political science, and public policy and founding director of the university’s Institute for Research in African-American Studies, whose vision and activism suffuse this effort of ours, has written in the most recent of his 19 published books of the importance of “an honest interaction with the raw materials of the past,” of the need “to engage the problems of how black history can be both lost and sustained,” and of the new opportunity that has arisen to reconstruct the hidden and fragmented past with “a multidisciplinary methodology employing the tools of oral history, photography, film, ethnography, and multimedia digital technology”—what Marable calls “living history.” Living history—living archives—empower people. Through dynamic approaches to the past, he tells us, “individuals can acquire a greater sense of becoming ‘makers’ of their own history.”²

“The South”

Likewise, “The South,” with the University of Virginia. Rather than me talking about it, here is a short video clip from one of our interviewees.

Finally, “**The Shoes from Selma and Other American Treasures: Teaching American History in Multiple Media**” is a project and an experiment Intelligent Television is producing together with the Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History, the Center for History and New Media at George Mason University, and WETA Public Television in Washington D.C.

Juanita Williams wore these shoes during the famed 54 mile-long Voting Rights March from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama in 1965.

She bought them new

This project will develop and produce new multimedia materials for American high school students, with the support of the public broadcasting system, bringing some of the leading directors, producers, and cinematographers together with students to create short,

² Manning Marable, *Living Black History: How Reimagining the African-American Past Can Remake America’s Racial Future* (New York: Basic Books, 2006), pp. xiv, xvi, xx, 22, 28, 37. Marable writes, “Preserving the past creates a living legacy that can help shape the future” (p. xv).

10-minute documentaries along with additional hours of raw footage for students to mix and match, all along the state standards for history, to improve how students appreciate history, and the museum. For who here doesn't believe that you can tell the history of the civil rights movement by looking in some detail at this pair of shoes?

This is our new world—and it's easy.

Moreover, as our fundraising proposal says,

There is a pressing need—especially at the high school level—for help in making sense of primary evidence, both with artifacts like the shoes from Selma and collateral sources such as letters, speeches, diaries, and oral history interviews. This need has been clearly demonstrated in recent research in both cognitive psychology and learning theory. The National Research Council's important study of *How People Learn*, echoing what Adam told us, shows that active participation in learning through the integration of primary material greatly improves student interest, their ability to retain knowledge, and their overall satisfaction with the learning process. The National Standards for United States History maintain that “perhaps no aspect of historical thinking is as exciting to students or as productive of their growth as historical thinkers as ‘doing history’” by directly encountering “historical documents, eyewitness accounts, letters, diaries, artifacts, and photos.”

So that's it. New experiments such as these can bring together common stakeholders— young and old—in our cultural heritage, and with the tools and assets we're discussing, build new and loyal audiences for all of our work.

Thank you.