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YOUTUBE AND YOU

EXPERIENCES OF SELF-AWARENESS IN THE CONTEXT COLLAPSE OF THE RECORDING WEBCAM

Michael Wesch

New media not only introduce new ways for us to express ourselves, but also new forms of self-awareness—new ways to reflect on who we are and how we relate to others. This article analyzes the experiences of self-awareness generated by creating, viewing, and responding to deeply personal, unaddressed vlogs on YouTube. Using a symbolic interactionist framework, it is argued that the globally connected, recording webcam linking privatized spaces creates a context for sharing profound moments of self-reflection and for creating connections that are experienced as profoundly deep yet remain ephemeral and loose.

Slightly more than a decade after launching the first iteration of the journal Explorations with Marshall McLuhan in the 1950s, anthropologist Edmund Carpenter was hired as a communications consultant for the Territory of Papua and New Guinea. Colonial administrators were seeking advice on how they might use radio, film, and television to reach, educate, unite, and "rationalize" remote areas of the territory as they moved toward independence. It gave Carpenter (1972), as he writes, "an unparalleled opportunity to step in and out of 10,000 years of

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Michael Wesch is a cultural anthropologist at Kansas State University exploring the effects of new media on society and culture. Following his doctoral fieldwork exploring the effects of writing on a remote indigenous culture in the rainforest of Papua New Guinea, he turned his attention to the effects of social media and digital technology on global society. He has won several major awards for his work, including a Wired Magazine Rave Award for Video, the John Culkin Award for Outstanding Praxis in Media Ecology, the 2008 CASE/Carnegie U.S. Professor of the Year for Doctoral and Research Universities, and National Geographic recently named him an Emerging Explorer.

Direct all correspondence to: Michael Wesch, Digital Ethnography Working Group, Kansas State University, 204 Waters Hall, Manhattan, KS 66506

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media history" (p. 115). He recorded and created some of the most remarkable events in local media history throughout the territory, such as the first time people actually saw their own photographs in Polaroids. In the remote village of Sio he recounts that when he first gave people a picture of themselves they could not read them. To them, the pictures were flat, static, and lifeless—meaningless. But "recognition gradually came into the subject's face. And fear." He describes this fear as the "terror of self-awareness," evidenced by "uncontrolled stomach trembling." He describes the depths of the effect as one of "instant alienation," suggesting that it "created a new identity: the private individual." He argues that the Polaroid and other recording media created a situation in which, "for the first time, each man saw himself and his environment clearly and he saw them as separable." When he returned to the village months later he didn't recognize the place. "Houses had been rebuilt in a new style. . . . They carried themselves differently. They acted differently. . . . In one brutal movement they had been torn out of a tribal existence and transformed into detached individuals, lonely, frustrated, no longer at home—anywhere." Such experiences left Carpenter disillusioned about the effects of media on indigenous peoples and concerned about the effects of media everywhere. "I felt like an environmentalist hired to discover more effective uses of DDT," he lamented (p. 134).

Figure 1. Edmund Carpenter gives a man in New Guinea (Telefomin) a picture of himself. Reprinted with permission from Edmund Carpenter.

Today a new medium emerges every time someone creates a new web application. A Flickr here, a Twitter there, and a new way of relating to others emerges, bringing with it new forms of self-awareness—new ways for contemplating one's self in relation to others. Listing our interests, joining groups, and playing games on Facebook; sharing and tagging photos on Flickr; sharing our thoughts, ideas, and experiences on blogs; and following, being followed, and tweeting on Twitter are not only ways of expressing ourselves, they are new ways to reflect on who we are, offering new kinds of social mirrors for understanding ourselves. And because these technologies are changing so quickly, we are not unlike the villager in Sio seeing a photograph of ourselves for the first time. We are shocked into new forms of sudden self-awareness.

The simple fact that there are now so many different ways to reflect on one's self has significant implications, but we have to start small and specific, working toward generalities as we go. In this article I begin this endeavor with an analysis of a particular genre of video that has emerged on YouTube; the deeply personal, unaddressed vlog. Like a soliloquy shouted into the ether or a message in a bottle set adrift at sea, these vlogs have no specific addressee. They are meant for anybody and everybody, or possibly nobody—not addressed to anyone in particular—or perhaps only vaguely addressed to "the YouTube community." They are videos of people sitting alone in front of their webcams and just talking to anybody and everybody who care to click on their video. These vloggers talk about their day, their problems, their accomplishments, their hopes, dreams, and fears. They represent less than 5% of the videos uploaded to YouTube, yet with YouTube bringing in more than 200,000 videos per day, their numbers are not insignificant, numbering in the thousands every day. A thriving community has emerged around such videos, one that some participate in and believe in with almost religious zeal.

If the Sio villager could be said to look into those photographs and "see himself and his environment as separable," thereby fostering new forms of individualism, what might be said of the YouTuber staring into a webcam connected to a global distribution system, watching him or herself in what must be the most public space on the planet, or watching others in this most public space on a distant and private screen? What forms of self-awareness are fostered in such contexts and what are the implications for how we understand our relations with others and ourselves?

To answer these questions, 15 undergraduate student research assistants and I have been studying YouTube since January 2007. Central to our methodology has been 18 months of participant-observation, meaning that we do not just observe YouTubers, we also participate with them; creating videos, leaving comments, and "friending" other users. To date, we have viewed more than 20,000 videos related to this project, and carefully examined more than 500 personal unaddressed vlogs. We also have interviewed several vloggers through YouTube's private messenger service, e-mail, and sometimes through the video response system. In February 2007, as our attention moved increasingly toward personal, unaddressed vlogs, we began creating our own. Some students were unable or

unwilling to participate in this aspect of the research because of the deeply personal challenges of self-analysis the process requires (described in the following analysis). We met frequently to analyze and discuss our vlogs, and more importantly, our inner experiences of vlogging and their impact on our understanding of our relations to others and. Periodically, we also posted updates of our findings as videos on YouTube to create additional opportunities for feedback and discussion with active YouTube users.

The Context Collapse of the Webcam

In face-to-face communication events we carefully assess the context of the interaction in order to decide how we will act, what we will say, and how we might try to construct and present ourselves. As Erving Goffman (1959) demonstrated, we continuously and often unconsciously take note of the physical surroundings, the people present, and the overall tone and temper of the scene among many other things. As social beings, we have become remarkably adept at sizing up such situations, often performing herculean social calculations almost unconsciously in the micro-second gaps of conversation or even occasionally in a more conscious and deliberate manner even as the conversation continues to buzz along. When engaged in social interaction, we are not only evaluating the situation, but also our own selves and how it fits into the situation. Such evaluation is necessary for us to engage in the conversation effectively. In Goffman's (1967) terms, a person must develop a "line," presenting his or her version of the situation, others, and his or her own self (p. 5). The image we portray of ourselves (our "face") is constantly being negotiated, a process Goffman calls "face-work" (p. 12). And although the individual takes an active role in presenting, preserving, and sometimes adjusting his or her face, it is not an object of solo authorship. Face is not simply defined by the person's actions, but how those actions are perceived and judged by other participants in the flow of the encounter. Face-work is a complex collaborative dance in which all participants and their every word, wink, gesture, posture, stance, glance, and grunt take part. In short, how we present ourselves (and by extension, who we "are") depends a great deal on context; where we are, whom we are with, and what we are doing, among many other factors.

Now look carefully at a webcam. That's there. That's somewhere else. That could be anybody. On the other side of that little glass lens is almost everyone you love, everyone you know, everyone you have ever heard of, and even those you have never heard of. In more specific terms, it is everyone who has or will have access to the Internet—billions of potential viewers, and your future self among them. Some have called it at once the biggest and the smallest stage—the most public space in the world, entered from the privacy of our own homes. Through it, we can reach out to a next-door neighbor or across the world . . . to people we love, people we want to love, or people we don't even know . . . to share something deep or something trivial, something serious or something funny, to strive for fame or to simply connect. That seemingly innocuous and insignificant glass dot is the eyes of the world and the future.

What does one say to the world and the future? Faced with such a daunting question, it is not surprising to find many would-be first-time vloggers perplexed by the webcam, often reporting that they spent several hours transfixed in front of the lens, trying to decide what to say.

The problem is not lack of context. It is context collapse: an infinite number of contexts collapsing upon one another into that single moment of recording. The images, actions, and words captured by the lens at any moment can be transported to anywhere on the planet and preserved (the performer must assume) for all time. The little glass lens becomes the gateway to a black hole sucking all of time and space—virtually all possible contexts—in on itself.

The would-be vlogger, now frozen in front of this black hole of contexts, faces a crisis of self-presentation. In Goffman's terms, the would-be vlogger is "out of face" with no "line" to present, unable to size up the context and situation (p. 14). Like a building collapse, context collapse does not create a total void but a chaotic version of its once-ordered self. The would-be vlogger sits stultified as his or her imagination races through the nearly infinite possible contexts he or she might be entering, all of which pile up as parts, pieces, and pieces of parts, a rubble that becomes the ground on which the vlogger must struggle to get his or her footing. The familiar walls that help limit and define the context are gone. The vlogger must address anybody, everybody, and maybe even nobody all at once.

We know our selves through how we imagine others view and judge us, what Charles Horton Cooley (1902) called the "looking-glass self." So this crisis of self-presentation in the face of infinite possible others throws the vlogger into a sometimes tortuous but often enlightening process of self-analysis. Not only does the actor not know what to say to an infinitely ambiguous audience in an undefined context, at that particular moment the person may not even be sure who the audience is.

George Herbert Mead (1934) builds on Cooley's notion of the looking-glass self by noting that "self-consciousness in the full sense of the term" is not attained until an individual not only understands him or herself in relation to others but also in relation to the "generalized other," the unity of all others, rules, and roles within a social group (pp. 152–154). Here Mead distinguishes between two phases or poles of the self, the "me" and the "I." The "me" is simply the attitudes and judgments of the generalized other internalized, whereas the "I" is the agent that reacts to these judgments. Mead (1925) concedes that there are many "generalized others," each representing its own collection of participants, rules, and roles. As long as these generalized others do not come into conflict or present themselves simultaneously in the same context, we can maintain our self, take a "line" with confidence, and maintain our "face."

The problem facing the would-be vlogger frozen in front of the webcam is the problem of too many possible generalized others. The webcam forces the vlogger to imagine a virtually infinite number of possible others, potential futures, and different contexts—each of which bare different perspectives and judgments on his or her self. There are many possible "generalized others"—many "me's." In the context collapse of the webcam, all of these me's come into conflict and the I freezes.

Figure 2. Research assistant Rebecca Roth vlogs on YouTube, holding a camera up to the webcam to demonstrate, "this is what I'm talking to, not you, but this, well you, but this. I'm talking to you but for the time being I don't know who you are" (thepoasm, 2007).

The attempt to break through the confusion and anxiety often inspires an introspective analysis of one's self, which is not a simple exploration of one's own inner life, but an analysis of one's relations to others and especially the many "generalized others" with whom one relates. What in one sense is the cerebral construction of a self suitable for all others and all contexts also is a deep meditation on how all others and all contexts may be thought of as a single unity—a "generalized generalized other." Coming to terms with this "generalized generalized other" and internalizing its perspective and judgment of the self (if only for a moment) may elicit profound feelings of revelation, "finding one's self," or discovering the "true self." But for most vloggers, this is nothing more than an imagined possibility teasing them with what seems like the ultimate way out of their webcam-induced crisis of self.

The crisis is deepened by the fact that the would-be vlogger not only must present to infinite and ambiguous others, but also to one's own future self. The vlogger may feel anxious that his or her future self may be different and may be ashamed of the self currently being presented. The perceived possible judgments of this future self may be the most daunting of all, for it bears the weight of that generalized generalized other—everybody as understood and internalized by that future self.

As a result of these tensions and anxieties, first vlogs almost are invariably awkward. Many first-time vloggers find it impossible to escape the awkwardness and make the awkwardness itself a key element of the video, incorporating outtakes of their anxiety-induced mistakes, spontaneous commentary on newly discovered idiosyncrasies revealed by seeing themselves on camera, and scenes from their various bouts of self-aware frustration.

Once the recording begins, yet another process of self-analysis emerges as they now can view themselves with a heightened sense of the judgments of that generalized generalized other. Some vloggers view themselves while they are

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recording, a situation that often elicits profound spontaneous moments of self-reflection. In one of her first vlogs, one of my research assistants began carefully studying herself and in one of those rare uninhibited yet deeply self-conscious moments realized, “I guess that’s what makes me so uncomfortable about talking on camera. It’s like, I’m looking at my face and like . . . good God/” At this point she pauses, readjusts her position, looks away for a moment, sighs, and looks back at herself on the screen of the camera before continuing, “cause when I think of myself I guess I don’t really think of myself as I appear to other people” (MaKMelman, 2007).

The act of recording these moments adds the possibility of what McLuhan calls “re-cognition.” In an interview with Father Patrick Peyton on Family Theatre, McLuhan notes, “We live in the world of the instant replay. Around the planet, all the events are not only being recorded but replayed. And the amazing thing about the replay, is that it offers the means of re-cog—recognition—the first time is cognition the second time is recognition, and the recognition is even deeper” (DrFallon, 2008). McLuhan goes on to explain to Father Peyton the importance of replay “on man and his awareness of himself,” noting that just as the repetition or “replay” of Catholic ritual such as the Rosary elicits a deepening for the devotee, so does our replay culture elicit deepening understandings of our selves. For many YouTubers, the possibility of replay is a significant factor in their desire to vlog, as they hope to look back at themselves over time and see how they have changed, an ongoing and “deepening” process of self-reflection.

But although we add the self to the infinite and ambiguous number of people who might watch the video, it also is important that the recording itself usually takes place where nobody else is present. In fact, many vloggers feel uneasy if others are physically present or even within earshot, often sitting in private bedrooms with the door shut or even tucked away in a closet for additional privacy. The vlogger often controls virtually all aspects of the physical context in which the vlog is recorded. This controlled context becomes part of the message—part of the self that is presented in the vlog. In this way, the space in front of the webcam becomes at once the most public space on the planet in the most private space imaginable. Context collapse takes on a new dimension in which the collapse of infinite possible contexts, what we might call a virtual “ideal type” of “the public,” itself collapses with the individual’s construction of an ideal private outside of all contexts. The scene exemplifies what Anthony Elliot and Charles Lemert (2005) describe in The New Individualism as the “disappearance of context” in which “we have replaced the old contexts of tradition and custom with a focus on our individual selves” (p. 13).

This has still more implications for the presentation, awareness, and understanding of self. As one vlogger pointed out, “you know that other people will be observing you, but they’re not at the second you are making your video, so you’re more yourself.” Here the vlogger is recognizing that different contexts and participants shape a person’s presentation of self and proposes that the webcam can eliminate or at least hide away those contexts and participants at the moment of self-presentation, thereby allowing the person to be “more”

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themselves. Unlike the complex collaborative dance of face-to-face encounters, a vlog is a solo act performed at a time and place apart from the recipients. There are no gestures, grunts, glances, or other messages to offer feedback to the vlogger. In this way, vlogging is by necessity an uninterrupted introspective conversation with one's self. Even those vlogs that are not explicitly about self-reflection and self-awareness require this profound inner dialogue, even if it remains unconscious.

This uninterrupted introspective inner dialogue, combined with the perceived privacy of the webcam experience and the relative anonymity and ambiguity of the "generalized generalized other" create the groundwork for what may be the most surprising form of YouTube vlog: the confessional. Vloggers sometimes reveal secrets on YouTube that they have not yet revealed to their closest friends and family. YouTube provides the ultimate social mirror, the mirror of all mirrors, reachable from a private space that can feel safe and secure at the moment of recording. As a result, among the plethora of videos on YouTube that typically ranges from ridiculous to shocking, offensive to banal, and outrageous to mundane, also are these profoundly introspective, self-reflexive personal narratives and confessionals forming the basis for a profound experience of human connection.

SCREENING THE SELF AS A GATEWAY TO ESTHETIC ARREST AND ENCHANTMENT OF THE HEART

These moments of profound self-reflection captured on webcam are viewed through a screen, which literally "screens" the viewer from the viewed. Unlike the situation of the vlogger facing an infinite and ambiguous number of contexts, most viewers are not in view of anybody, often sitting alone in private areas away from all social contexts. The viewer is as anonymous as he or she chooses to be, unknown to the viewed unless he or she posts a comment or video response.

This anonymity, the physical distance between the viewer and viewed, and a YouTube comment system that manages to foster only rare and ephemeral dialogue, enables (or perhaps seduces) the viewer to engage in social behavior with little fear of social consequence. This would seem to at least partially explain the "hater" phenomenon of YouTube expressed so well by Lev Grossman (2006) in Time magazine when he noted, "some of the comments on YouTube make you weep for the future of humanity just for the spelling alone, never mind the obscenity and the naked hatred." Commenting on the severity of some of these comments, YouTuber kayleewyatt jokingly asked, "Have you ever wandered into a comment and left with scars???"

But this same anonymity, distance, and ephemeral dialogue create another possibility: Viewers are free to view others without engaging them in interaction and therefore without creating or experiencing social anxiety. They watch free of others' expectations. They get a break from the complex social calculus of reflecting on their own relationship to the situation, the person speaking, and the generalized other. In a response to Boh3m3's question, "Why do you Tube?"

Domino1023 offered the following insightful remarks, "It allows you to watch other people without staring at them, or making them uncomfortable, because they don't see you watching them. You can just watch their videos." She concludes with the powerful suggestion that this creates a situation in which "you can just like see their being, you can see their person."

To see "being" is to see the person beyond your typical judgment of that person. To see "being" is not to "see" but the empathic experience of recognizing shared being. The viewer achieves what James Joyce calls "esthetic arrest," a state in which "the mind is arrested and raised above desire and loathing." In Joyce's beautiful words, it is "the luminous silent stasis of esthetic pleasure, a spiritual state very like to that cardiac condition which the Italian physiologist Luigi Galvani . . . called the enchantment of the heart."

This enchantment is often expressed by YouTubers who find themselves "amazed" by the depth of connection they feel and the sense of community they can experience on YouTube. The feeling and experience of depth is enhanced by the self-reflexive contexts in which vlogs most often are produced and the private contexts in which they most often are viewed.

CONNECTION WITHOUT CONSTRAINT: DEEP AND LOOSE CONNECTIONS

Yet many of these experiences of deep connection are experiences only, never manifesting into tight relationships with the kinds of responsibilities we associate with face-to-face relations. Many YouTubers do create strong and tight relations on YouTube that extend beyond the screen into physical contexts, and there are a growing number of YouTube gatherings worldwide in which Tubers meet one another face to face (Lange, 2007), but the experience of profound and deep connection with relatively (or even totally) anonymous strangers viewed on the screen from a distance remains an important phenomenon with important implications for how we understand ourselves and our relations with others.

Such connections may be described as both deep and loose. Although these terms seem to contradict each other logically, they in fact enhance each other in practice. YouTubers can feel free to create or experience deep relationships because they are loose, and they may choose to keep them loose precisely because they are deep.

This experience of deep and loose connection fits with broader social trends in postindustrial Western societies. As our institutions and behavior have increasingly emphasized individualism, we also long for and increasingly value community as we feel it slipping away. And yet, although we all crave human connection and community, our sense of individualism, independence, and privacy makes us see these connections as constraints. YouTube and other online communities seem to offer a tempting solution: the possibility of connection without constraint. In a study of more than 30 interviews with people involved in various online communities, Jan Fernback (2007) recently found this connection-without-constraint theme to be prevalent throughout the Web, suggesting that the

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metaphor of community in such contexts is "one of convenient togetherness without real responsibility" (p. 63) She reminds us of Richard Sennett's (1977) argument in the Fall of Public Man that Americans want to be "left alone to contemplate the benefits and responsibilities of communal existence when convenient" (p. 64).

ANALYZING "THE MESSAGE": IMPLICATIONS FOR THE EXPERIENCE OF COMMUNITY ON YOUTUBE

The looseness of connections might lead some to wrongly assume that the YouTube community is not a "real" community. But the interesting question to explore is not whether deep and loose connections are "real," but the specific characteristics of such connections and the implications for how we understand our relations with others and ourselves.

With so many videos produced in that self-reflexive space of context collapse, YouTube has no shortage of videos commenting and reflecting on such questions. One of the most interesting is simply called, "The Message" by MadV, a series of 82 YouTubers stretching their hands toward their webcams with messages for the world to see set to simple, soothing, and moving melodic music. The video is a massive collaboration that started with the simple "One World" video by MadV posted in April 2006, a 41-second video made up mostly of simple white text on a black background inviting viewers "to make a stand, to make a statement, to make a difference" by writing a message for the world on their hand and posting it as a response to the video. MadV demonstrates with the message

Figure 3. MadV invites YouTubers to send a message to the world.

"One World" written on his hand reaching out to the camera. From behind the hand we catch a glimpse of MadV wearing his trademark Guy Fawkes mask, the mask itself invoking a sense of movement, revolution, change, and significance.

MadV is an illusionist, and like his namesake "V" from the movie V for Vendetta might be described as "a humble vaudevillian veteran." His anonymity is key to his effectiveness. His anonymous "visage, no mere veneer of vanity, is a vestige of the vox populi," not a voice for the people (he never speaks) but a platform through which people find their voice (Wachowski & Wachowski, 2005).

More than 2,000 people responded, making it the most responded to video of all time on YouTube. MadV selected 82 of these to create "The Message." In the video, YouTubers literally reach out with messages of "respect," "compassion," "tolerance," "altruism," and "union." They ask us to "accept," "forgive," "care," "share," "move," "laugh," "listen," "think," and "imagine." They encourage us to "be awake," "be free," "be kind," and "be true." From the intensely self-reflexive context of context collapse on the world stage of the webcam they ask us to "be you," "be seen," "stand up," and "speak up."

The words reflect their deep self-reflexive experiences and moments of esthetic arrest and enchantment they have had on YouTube. They express deep connection with the viewer even as the viewer is unknown. "You are beautiful." "I believe in you."

The relationship between viewer and viewed is deep and profound but not strong. It is not just "loose," it is in most cases completely anonymous, fleeting, and ephemeral. It is a deep yet diffuse experience of connection; an anonymous hand with the message, "You are not alone."

This form of connection is not specific or conditional. "Love one another." "Love all the people." It is not judgmental. "End bigotry." And it is not bounded. It is global. "End world hunger." "Fight AIDS." "Make poverty history." "The Message" is an expression of universal values, not universal in the sense of being present everywhere, but universal in scope, asking us to recognize our universal connection with one another. "Join hands." "We are all connected." "Come together." "Together as one," "united as one," "the human race," "we're all in this together," "one collective," "one life," "one move," "one peace," "un monde," "yup, one world," "one planet," "one world."

In the comments section, viewers call it "incredible," "amazing," "touching," and "magic." They say it "warms the heart" and "that really gave me chills." Viewers recount the feeling of deep and profound emotion; "I couldn't stop crying." "I've got the biggest lump in my throat right now." Some find themselves out of words. "Just wow . . ." The feelings of deep and diffuse connection expressed in the video are shared by viewers. "I love you all," writes 1938superman.

THE "ME" THE "I," AND THE "US": INTERNALIZING THE "GENERALIZED GENERALIZED OTHER"

"The Message" and the reactions to it express the message of the vlogging experience. The context collapse of the webcam creates a platform for reflection on one's relation to the "generalized generalized other," a universal mirror for the

self. The viewer is in the remarkable position of being on the backside of the mirror, watching the most profound moments of self-reflection through the looking glass. Outside the views and judgments of the generalized other, if only for a moment, the viewer experiences the person beyond desire or loathing, achieving a state of esthetic arrest and enchantment. From these experiences emerge yet another form of self-awareness, another understanding of one's relation to the generalized other. It is not the generalized other internalized as judge of the self, but the generalized other internalized as the self, a recognition of shared generalized humanity. This is the message of "The Message."

It is an experience of the "us" that may be considered (if only briefly in the moment of revelation) as much a part of the self as the "I" and the "me." The "me" is the internalization of the views and judgments of the generalized other. The "I" is the agent that reacts to these views and judgments. The "us" is the recognition of the shared human experience in the joys, sorrows, hopes, and trials of the world.

Like the "me" it is an experience produced through specific social interactions. It is not instinctive, natural, or universal, although it is likely found and inspired in many diverse contexts throughout the world. Nearly a century ago, Emile Durkheim (1912/1995) found it in ecstatic community gatherings of Australian Aborigines and suggested that such experiences are to be found in all cultures in different forms. He describes the experience as one of "collective effervescence" in which people feel lifted outside of themselves by an indescribable force, feeling as if they are a part of something bigger than themselves. He argues that such experiences are the "ever-present origin" of the idea of the sacred, the foundation of religion, and a celebration of society.

The difference between the Aboriginal form of collective effervescence and that of the YouTuber is specificity and scale. The Aboriginal form creates an experience of deep and binding connection with specific others—one's totem. The YouTube form creates an experience of deep but loose or even anonymous connection with diffuse others—all of humanity. The YouTube form is global; not an internalization of a specific and bounded generalized other but of the universal and unbounded "generalized generalized other."

RETURN TO SIO: EXAMINING THE IMPACT OF NEW MEDIA ON SELF AND SOCIETY

A look back at the impact of the photograph on Sio may help us understand the limits of this analysis, while providing a deeper context for the conclusions I have drawn. For villagers in Sio, seeing a photograph of themselves allowed them to reflect on themselves in relation to others and their environment in new ways. According to Carpenter, this created a sense of alienated individualism with profound impacts on the society. We might ask then, what kinds of broad society changes might be expected from the forms and process of self-awareness created by YouTube or other new media forms.

One might draw the conclusion that the YouTuber's experience of a deep connection or internalization of a generalized and anonymous "us" would be a mixed

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blessing: its depth and breadth expanding to all of humanity does away with our tribalisms and may inspire values of human equality and unconditional love for all, yet its looseness along with the values of autonomy protected by such looseness, may lead these same loving people to not take any of the real actions needed to create human equality or help those in need living half a world away. It is the often-cited problem of awareness with inaction; feeling a deep emotional connection with the world yet failing to see or act upon systemic structural power inequalities. Although we do see this phenomenon occurring, we should be careful before attributing such a broad and deep trend to YouTube alone.

As Carpenter notes, Sio was in the midst of many broad scale changes when he arrived with the new media. Missionaries and government officials had been introducing them to Christianity, biomedicine, and formal schooling for a decade. Michel Foucault (1975, 1978) and others (e.g., Dumont, 1986; Taylor, 1989) argued that the discourses and practices of these institutions covertly impose conceptions of a bounded, inward, independent individual. Comaroff and Comaroff's (1991, 1997) analysis of South Africa at the turn of the 19th century illustrated that even when the overt content of Western messages (such as the Gospel) are rejected, the terms of encounter and "hegemonic background assumptions" may yet be incorporated. From this it would seem that the people of Sio were already in the midst of broad cultural changes. As Carpenter (1972) himself notes, "a more isolated people might have been affected far less [by the Polaroids], perhaps scarcely at all" (p. 134).

Likewise, we must recognize that the deeply personal, unaddressed vlog and the experiences of self-awareness it entails did not emerge on their own, but from several broad social trends and required several social, cultural, political, and economic preconditions. Such vlogs are a response to the perceived loss of community, a reflection and example of what Barry Wellman (2001) called "networked individualism," and enabled by increased personal autonomy. They are predicated on affluence that affords webcams, personal computers, and privatized spaces, politics that allow for relatively free expression, and a culture through which identity-work is largely done through individualistic self-expression and self-creation. In this way, the experiences of vlogging described here are embedded in, and reflective of, broader social and cultural trends and contexts.

Carpenter argues that the "terror of self-awareness" provoked by the Polaroid "tipped the scales. Hidden changes suddenly coalesced and surfaced" (p. 131). His argument rests on the assumption that something transformative occurred in the inner life of each person in the society. The difference between Sio and YouTube is that whereas everybody in Sio viewed a Polaroid of themselves, the number of people vlogging on YouTube is a small fraction of a fraction of all people. If there are deep inner changes going on, they will not likely manifest as broad cultural changes unless a more substantial number of people participate.

We might also question the extent and depth of changes Carpenter describes. Many of the changes he reports—changes in housing and clothing styles—are superficial. His deeper conjectures about alienation, individualism, and cultural homelessness have not been confirmed by more recent ethnographic studies in the region. In fact, throughout Melanesia (where I have done more than 20

months of anthropological fieldwork) we are finding that despite the introduction of Western institutions, including new forms of media, notions of the self have been maintained. Marilyn Strathern (1988) and others describe Melanesian concepts of the self as "dividual" rather than "individual," pointing out that Melansians conceptualize themselves as defined and constituted by social relationships rather than independent from them. The Melanesian self is consciously recognized, emphasized, and experienced as socially and collectively constituted. A person's strength, health, intelligence, disposition, and behavior depend on the strength and nature of one's relationships (Knauft, 1999; Read, 1955). Such a conception sits uneasily with Western institutions of religion, education, medicine, law, and government but such institutions have not fundamentally changed local conceptions of the self. Instead, what has become interesting is the many ways in which locals navigate, incorporate, and/or contest these Western institutions in their everyday lives and how local conceptions of self conspire, conflict, or conflate with the embedded assumptions of Western individualism (LiPuma, 2000; Wesch, 2006).

I suggest that this might also be the way forward in studies of the impact of new media on self and society. The YouTube experiences I described here are only significant in so far as they impact, transform, question, challenge, or merge with other patterns of self-awareness experienced elsewhere—both online and off. Although there may be similar experiences on Stickam, Seesmic, Twitter, Facebook, message boards, and other social media platforms, there may be important differences as well. Further study into new (and old) forms and experiences of self-awareness online and offline, as well as an understanding of how these various experiences conspire, conflict, or conflate with one another, will be necessary before drawing any broader conclusions.

Carpenter braved the possibility of career suicide to publish his studies on these matters. He was severely criticized by top anthropologists such as Marvin Harris and Clifford Geertz for his media experiments (Bishop & Prins, 2003). He had anticipated the criticism in the book itself, admitting, "It will immediately be asked if anyone has the right to do this to another human being, no matter what the reason" (p. 134). His defense, although framed within the context of a generation ago and half a world away, should still resound with us today. "If this question is painful to answer when the situation is seen in microcosm," he asked, "how is it answered when seen in terms of radio transmitters [new media] reaching hundreds of thousands [or millions] of people daily, the whole process unexamined, undertaken blindly?"

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