

NETWORKED EMPOWERMENT:  
THE INTERNET AS MEDIUM FOR ENVIRONMENTAL FILMMAKING

by

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## ABSTRACT

Whether the Internet represents a true revolution in human communication or is merely a much-hyped relative to existing media is the subject of much debate. However, regardless of whether the Internet represents revolution or just evolution, it does provide a unique and unprecedented opportunity for environmental filmmakers to engage viewers in a thoughtful dialogue about how to improve the quality of our natural environment and the health of its inhabitants. This thesis examines how the Internet's capacity for nonmarket individual production and peer collaboration provides the basis for a new Internet film aesthetic that filmmakers can use to share stories of environmental crisis and hope. Specifically, the essay explores three storytelling techniques that work well within the medium of the Internet – the use of personal voice, the encouragement of community participation, and an embrace of a nonlinear structure. The thesis concludes by arguing that, rather than abandoning traditional, market-based media and relying exclusively on the Internet, environmental filmmakers have the most potential to affect change by creating films that can be adapted to work in a variety of media. The Internet may not be a revolution in itself, but it can be used as a tool for environmental filmmakers who seek to revolutionize our society's views about the environment and our place within it.

## INTRODUCTION

We are in the midst of a quite basic transformation in how we perceive the world around us, and how we act, alone and in concert with others, to shape our own understanding of the world we occupy and that of others with whom we share it. Patterns of social practice, long suppressed as economic activities in the context of industrial economy, have now emerged to greater importance than they have had in a century and a half. With them, they bring the possibility of genuine gains in the very core of liberal commitments, in both advanced economies and around the globe.

- Yochai Benkler, 2006

Much current debate about the Internet centers on whether it represents a revolutionary new medium for human communication or is merely a much-hyped extension of existing media such as print or broadcast. In The Wealth of Networks, information technology scholar Yochai Benkler argues for the Internet's revolutionary potential. The Harvard law professor and social networking theorist makes his argument from an economics standpoint. The Internet, he says, is transforming the production of information goods from an industrial model, in which commercial interests control the dissemination of media products, to a post-industrial model, whereby many more individuals can share information, knowledge and culture using a nonmarket, commons-based approach of peer collaboration. Benkler calls this new model a "networked information economy," an environment characterized by "decentralized individual action – specifically, new and important cooperative and coordinate action carried out through radically distributed, nonmarket mechanisms that do not depend on proprietary

strategies” (3). Benkler argues that as long as the Internet can remain a space for information exchange unmediated by market forces, the system of social networks currently emerging on the Internet provide a locus for an emerging collective intelligence that can, when put to its best use, help promote human welfare, development and freedom. “We have an opportunity to change the way we create and exchange information, knowledge and culture,” Benkler states. “By doing so, we can make the twenty-first century one that offers individuals greater autonomy, political communities greater democracy, and societies greater opportunities for cultural self-reflection and human connection” (473).

In this thesis, I will move Benkler’s argument from the realm of economics to that of filmmaking. Specifically, I will apply it to environmental filmmaking, defined here as the production of films that address negative human impacts on our natural environment, as well as films that explore how humans are affected by environmental degradation. In the course of this essay, I will argue that the Internet’s capacity for individual production and peer collaboration provides a unique and unprecedented opportunity for environmental filmmakers to engage viewers in a thoughtful dialogue about how to improve the health of our planet and its inhabitants. First, I will describe how the Internet does indeed represent a fundamental break from other audiovisual media due to the Internet’s more democratic structure and the casual, interactive peer relationship it creates between filmmaker and viewer. I will point out how this unique filmmaker/viewer relationship on the Internet reduces the efficacy of several film styles that have



traditionally found success in other media and encourages the environmental filmmaker to adapt their storytelling style for the Internet. Next, I will suggest that environmental filmmakers can take best advantage of the Internet by working in a new Internet film aesthetic that incorporates three key storytelling techniques. The first method is the use of personal voice. Films in this style use first-person narration by the filmmaker or otherwise encourage transparency so the viewer can easily identify whom the filmmaker is, what she stands for and how she might be manipulating the subject's depiction. The second method is the encouragement of community participation. In this context, community refers to a group of online individuals who come together to communicate with one another on the basis of shared interests rather than physical proximity. Third, environmental filmmakers can take advantage of the Internet's nonlinear structure, in which people actively navigate through and link to a variety of information sources, to enable viewers to find the information they need in order to understand and take action on environmental issues. I will conclude by suggesting that, despite Benkler's claim that the Internet must remain predominantly nonmarket in order to maintain its revolutionary potential, the real potential for revolution may be the Internet's capacity to allow collaboration with market-dominated mass media and engage society as a whole in reshaping values and creating change.

While an argument about the economics of information exchange on the Internet may not be the most likely starting point for a film thesis, it is a simple fact that the Internet as a medium for film is a new concept and, as a result, a very limited number of

scholarly writings are currently devoted to it. So, as I am on relatively new ground here, I chose to lead from an argument made from an economic perspective. I believe it makes sense that some of the most advanced scholarship about the Internet's societal effects comes from the field of economics. After all, with many emerging technologies, economic discussions often come early in the game, as people strive to find ways to profit from the technologies. The artists and activists are usually only steps behind.

For environmental filmmakers, the Internet's emergence as a full-fledged audiovisual medium could not come at a more important time. We are in an era in which our impacts on the environment have reached a critical threshold. It is probably asking too much of the medium to prescribe Internet film as our greatest hope to reinvigorate discourse that can turn us away from environmental devastation and toward a new relationship with our planet and the other living things with which we share it. However, the Internet may well offer one of the best opportunities we have to engage one another to advocate for a step back from the environmental brink. At a time when the camera eye has become our species' dominant sense, environmental filmmakers are in a unique place to manipulate the tools within the medium and help drive this dialogue.

## A MORE DEMOCRATIC, MORE PEER-ORIENTED MEDIUM

In The Wealth of Networks, Benkler defines a democratic culture as one that is self-reflexive and participatory (4). Indeed, in its current, non-market-dominated state, the Internet democratizes film production and consumption to an extent that no other medium has achieved. The Internet promotes cultural self-reflexivity in a number of ways, perhaps most visibly in what has become the world's largest online repository for user-generated video – the video sharing Web site YouTube, with its slogan “Broadcast Yourself.” The participatory potential for Internet film is also much greater than for previous media. The tools of Internet filmmaking are much less expensive than those of any mass audiovisual medium preceding it – a video camera, computer and Internet connection are financially attainable by many people in economically advantaged societies. Moreover, the most basic Internet videos can be created with even simpler tools; for instance, a cell phone equipped with a video camera and Web connectivity is enough to create an Internet video. A number of popular video sharing Web sites such as YouTube ensure that virtually anyone can make their video available for public viewing.<sup>1</sup> Since many of these sites filter videos by their number of views or viewer votes, the sites' users play an enormous role in determining whether a film will be posted in a spot on the Web site with high visual real estate value and thus get spotted by more viewers.<sup>2</sup>

The fact that users often determine whether a film gets seen by a wide audience is one way in which the medium empowers the viewer and helps collapse what was

previously a filmmaker/viewer hierarchy into a peer relationship. However, the precedent for peer-to-peer relationships in Internet communication was set long before YouTube. It dates back to the medium's infancy and the Internet's U.S. military predecessor, ARPAnet, developed by the Advanced Research Projects Agency. As computer networking pioneer Joseph Licklider describes of his early experiences with networked email, "One of the advantages of the message system over letter mail was that, in an ARPAnet message, one could write tersely and type imperfectly, even to an older person one did not know well, and the recipient took no offence (sic)" (Licklider and Veza 1330). With the Internet's tendency from the start toward informality and a flattening of formal communication hierarchies, it makes sense that users readily accept the lower production quality of much Internet video, even as high quality film dominates most other viewing situations such as in broadcast, cable and theatrical media.

Adding to the informal nature of the medium is the level of intimacy we have with the electronics surrounding it. With theatrical film, we physically travel to the screen and sit in a highly focused and ritualized space before it, following its established rules very carefully lest other moviegoers complain and we get booted out of the theater. This dedicated space with well-defined social norms helps to maintain a hierarchy between film and viewer. However, this hierarchy is different than what exists between artists and audiences in other media. As Walter Benjamin famously notes in his essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," audiences engage with film in a much different way than they interact with other works of art. The decay of the referent's aura,

through authenticity-invalidating reproduction and de-situating, causes the “tremendous shattering of tradition” we witness with the advent of film (221). The ritualized space of the movie theater is an attempt to replace some of the original referent’s aura with the aura of the movie theater space and the screen itself. In watching a film in a theater, we acknowledge a reverence for the screen. The movie theater screen dwarfs us, and we sit at a distance. (Of course, this is partly due to our biology – headaches and sore necks are the price of sitting too close.) By paying for our tickets, we acknowledge a value for the film we have invested in. The fact that movie theaters have managed to survive in a world where the same products are available - sometimes simultaneously - on the Internet is evidence of a movie theater aura and a value of the rituals surrounding it.

Along those same lines, the lost aura of the referent – often a human actor - sees a recovery attempt in, as Benjamin describes it, “an artificial build-up” of “personality” outside the studio. He argues, “The cult of the movie star, fostered by the money of the film industry, preserves not the unique aura of the person but the ‘spell of the personality,’ the phony spell of a commodity” (231). To extend this idea to documentary film, it is notable that some nature films attempt to create such a “spell of the personality” with animals by giving them names or fleshing out their lives as characters in a constructed nature drama markedly similar to popular human dramatic narratives. Some nature films even give landscapes a sort of personality, making them relatable characters in the story. This is most easily accomplished in extreme environments such as Mount

Everest and Death Valley, as the landscapes arrive to the viewer as archetypes, antagonists with quite literal superhuman power.<sup>3</sup>

Television represents a partial loss of the re-created movie theater aura and the spell of the personality. As we invite the television into the intimacy of our home, the screen's aura is diminished. We regard both the screen and its actors in an atmosphere of distraction (while making dinner, playing with our kids, or using it as background noise to stave off loneliness.) The film and filmmaker lose some power in this situation and the viewer gains some, as the viewer has more control over how much of what films she will watch and feels free to view in distraction rather than to merely sit, watch and listen. In addition, in the medium of television, our screen is much smaller. Instead of commanding reverence, the screen becomes part of our home décor. Television begins to collapse the filmmaker/viewer hierarchy.

Today, with our dominant screens being our computer, our cell phone and our iPod, we have completed the process of dismantling the screen's (or, as it is now, screens') aura. We now carry our screens with us. We watch Internet videos while we are on the bus, while we are waiting for the plane, and while we are in the restroom. We decide – or, often, external things such as our plane's departure schedule decide – how long we deign to give our attention to the screen. We expect filmmakers to respond to our new uses by giving us video in bites that are digestible in the amount of time we choose to devote to them. Furthermore, we physically dwarf our new portable screens. Instead of the screen and its built environment holding us, we hold the screen. Perhaps the most

obvious example of this complete removal of the aura is the physical abuse we subject our electronics to and the degree to which we expect the components to be able to withstand being jostled in a purse, dropped on the ground or tossed onto a car seat. We value the screen as a tool, but we don't have reverence for it. We have collapsed the hierarchy between film and viewer into a peer relationship befitting the Internet experience.

If we look at this hierarchy collapse from a film content perspective, this means that there is no longer an ingrained viewer response to the filmic referent as an object of inherent value simply because a camera was turned upon it. The "spell of the personality" is broken. Indeed, most Internet video assumes no prepackaged viewer respect for the subject - the many pieces devoted to children falling off of swings, cats tumbling off television sets, and embarrassed frat boys caught with their pants down attest to that. This may have as much to do with this new aura-free attitude toward home-produced Internet video as to the ease of carrying portable gear that make these moments accessible to the cameraperson, and to our ceaseless cravings for low culture humor.<sup>4</sup> Viewers readily assume the role of critic, judging the piece and the people depicted within it. Benjamin argued that a key difference between live theater and film is that the filmed actor (whether they are a professional actor or a social actor seems to work equally well here) is subjected to a series of optical tests while performing for the camera. The film audience identifies with the camera instead of with the actor and assumes the role of testing. Viewers thus become critics. On YouTube and most other video sharing

Web sites, people can vote and comment on what they have seen without making any distinction as to whether they are casting their vote based on the quality of the film or the performance of the actors within it. Presumably, the resulting score represents a mixture of both in unknown and dynamic quantities.

To return the focus to environmental film, this means that such filmmakers have lost some of the tools in their traditional filmmaking toolbox. Take for instance, films that aim to evoke an emotive response to the spectacle of nature via beautiful landscape images that have high production value. This style can be called the nature-as-spectacle film. Theatrical films in this genre, such as Winged Migration, March of the Penguins and the many nature films produced for Imax distribution, are immensely successful largely because viewers can get lost in the emotive natural spectacle of a beautiful landscape depicted on a grand scale. Broadcast programs such as those on the PBS series' Nature and Nova also often strive to depict nature as spectacle, although these smaller screen films often include character drama to help keep the viewer engaged in a medium with smaller and lower-resolution images.<sup>5</sup> But on our smallest screens, spectacle is a much more difficult thing to create. After all, how much fear, awe and reverence can a lion truly inspire when we are holding its image in our palm and we are listening to its roar on \$10 headphones? How can we be shocked at the immense degradation of a landscape when that landscape is two inches wide? The medium significantly reduces the authority of the image.



However, rather than striking an unrecoverable blow to the environmental filmmaker advocating for protection of natural landscapes, I believe the loss of efficacy of that tool - the ability to generate spectacle when presenting a video via the Internet – provides a profound benefit for the causes environmental filmmakers highlight. The failure of nature-as-spectacle video on the Internet may be a very good thing for filmmakers whose main goal is to advocate for environmental action since spectacle films, by presenting wild places and wildlife as pristine, send a contradictory message that can actually rob viewers of the feeling that they need to take action. After all, why hurry to protect a place if it is clearly still intact enough that the filmmakers could travel there and capture footage that depicts it as untrammelled by humans? While it is common practice to include a short aural message near the end of a nature-as-spectacle film about negative human impacts on the environment being depicted, this message is too often drowned beneath a much more compelling wash of high-production-value images showing a human-free, untouched wilderness teeming with wild, healthy animals. With the Internet, environmental filmmakers have a more ready-made venue for countering this traditional model; they can post videos that have less beautiful images and refocus the viewer on the argument.

Furthermore, the expository film becomes tricky when presented via the Internet. This style of filmmaking is one of the “modes” of documentary discourse that Bill Nichols defines in Representing Reality. According to Nichols, expository films “address the viewer directly, with titles or voices that advance an argument about the historical

world” (34). The expository mode is sometimes the form to which nature-as-spectacle films adhere. However, it applies to far more than just spectacle films. The challenge expository films face on the Internet is that, unless they are presented with clear connections to high profile institutions of authority (large museums, respected government scientific institutions, etc.), they have no innate authority when presented online. If the Internet is a community of peers, then the expository film’s voice of God narration becomes, to viewers, the voice of a neighbor with his \$200 video camera and free YouTube account proclaiming himself to speak the voice of God. The opaqueness of the communicator – the voice of the filmmaker masked through the voice of God – flies in the face of the transparency so lauded in the online community. Internet users tend to be exceedingly wary of material in which the content creator’s motives are not readily available for scrutiny. Among activist communities on the Internet, fears abound of “astroturfing” – the artificial representation as a grassroots organization by underlying commercial interests.<sup>6</sup> As a result, the expository film’s lack of filmmaker transparency can promote skepticism of the message. Finally, as Internet communication usually consists of casual conversation, expository films usually come off as didactic, pompous and ridiculous – and, very likely, given the ease of posting criticism to a Web site, ridiculed.

The downside to this for environmental filmmakers with limited time and resources is that expository films are often the easiest to make. Videos in the expository mode are often much cheaper to produce and videos that use the Internet as the primary

distribution medium usually have the smallest budgets of any video media outlet. This means that the expository form remains the most financially feasible style for Internet filmmakers. Expository films often require less field time, as gaps in the story can be filled with more generic b-roll and narration. They also tend to make it much easier for filmmakers to convey their argument efficiently and clearly without having to make expensive and time-consuming trips back to interviewees to obtain a clip that articulates the filmmaker's point more clearly or to seek out new interviewees that might convey the argument more fully. In addition, expository films can usually be edited more quickly, reducing post-production costs. Finally, if environmental filmmakers seek to encourage action on the part of viewers, their films might include references to upcoming events, legislation and other changing aspects of the argument. It is much easier and cheaper to update these films' mention of such current affairs by replacing voice of God narration rather than by re-cutting field footage to convey the changes.

Just as nature-as-spectacle and expository environmental films seem out of place in the peer-negotiated atmosphere of the Internet, others more naturally tie into the peer relationship in which Internet users are accustomed. A prime example is films that take full advantage of the filmmaker's personal, individual voice rather than relying on spectacle or a voice of authority.

## THE PERSONAL VOICE FILM

The personal voice film solves many of the problems expository films face concerning diminished authority in the Internet environment. I use the term personal voice film here to refer to films that employ first-person narration by the filmmaker or otherwise encourage transparency so the viewer can readily see the filmmaker's manipulation of the subject. Films that fall within three styles – the journey film, the interactive film and the performative film – are examples of the kinds of films I consider personal voice films. Just as with the nature-as-spectacle and expository film styles, these categories are not mutually exclusive. Stella Bruzzi defines journey films as films that borrow from both the *cinéma vérité* tradition of focusing on the moment of encounter and the direct cinema tradition of close attention to detail and personality (99). Nichols first defined the categories of interactive and performative film. He describes interactive film as film that “stresses images of testimony or verbal exchange and images of demonstration” (*Representing Reality* 44). He describes performative film as film that stresses “the emotional complexity of experience from the perspective of the filmmaker him- or herself” (*Introduction to Documentary* 134). Rather than attempting to collapse the space between image and referent, all of these forms highlight the distancing processes that the filmmaking effort produces between the viewer and the imaged referent. In effect, they tell the story of the filmmaker's evolving relationship with the subject rather than creating an unmediated experience with the subject itself. In many

such films, the only reality viewers expect to take away is the reality of the filmmaker's perspective. We learn about the filmmaker – why they care about the topic, the journey they took to represent it, and the factors that might influence the direction in which the representation skews from the referent.

The reason these films may be easier for Internet viewers to embrace is that they do not presume to speak from a position of authority. As mentioned above, authority is not automatically granted to the filmmaker on the Internet. This is a fundamental break from other media, even the Internet's closer relatives, broadcast and cable. In broadcast, viewers acknowledge the media organizations' FCC responsibility to represent an argument from a fair and balanced perspective. In cable, viewers believe that the organization wants to protect its image by providing accurate information; or, at least, viewers have access to knowledge of the channel's consistent bias and can thus gauge their response to the information based on that knowledge. On the Internet, no such agreement exists. An independent filmmaker has the ability to present a film with little expertise on the subject and with little repercussions if that lack of expertise is revealed. She can slip away into the Internet night and emerge in mere moments with a new name and identity. Internet users tend to cautiously approach online material with this in mind, despite the fact that the self-policing power of Internet communities has been surprisingly and demonstratively effective. (Wikipedia's high regard despite its free access to editing by anyone affirms the efficacy of allowing knowledge communities to do their own

housekeeping.) So, to be taken seriously, filmmakers have to establish their own credibility instead of relying on authority to be inherent in their role as filmmaker.

Rather than attempting to depict an absolute reality, filmmakers, through a personal voice film that is well-researched and thoughtfully argued, can make a compelling case for *their* reality, which is much easier for jaded audiences raised in a spin society to swallow. And, depending on the viewer's independent assessment of the filmmaker's expertise with the subject, the viewer might be more compelled to assign authority to the film and filmmaker. Should enough viewers agree and the video rise in the ranks of YouTube or other video sharing Web sites, a new filmmaker authority is established. The users of the Web site, rather than an external group of critics, select their own experts. Authority is awarded on a different set of criteria – quality of argument rather than role in society. Media scholar Henry Jenkins notes in his book Convergence Culture that this departure from academic or critical attribution of expertise is commonplace in a collective intelligence such as those that are emerging in the collaborative, peer structure of the Internet. “While participants in a collective intelligence often feel the need to demonstrate or document how they know what they know, this is not based on a hierarchical system and knowledge that comes from real-life experience rather than formal education may be, if anything, more highly valued here. (54)”

However, in a time when we desperately need people to connect with environmental issues and do so while our impacts can still be stopped or reversed, might

the personal voice film subvert the environmental filmmaker's goals by adding another layer to sift through, another obstacle between viewer and scientific content? In some ways it does, especially if the filmmaker falls victim to ego and becomes consumed with her own representation at the expense of the issues the film seeks to represent. But when the topic is human impacts on their environment, personal voice films can reinforce the idea that, as part of rather than separate from the environment, we can perhaps only see our world with any clarity through various human perspectives. As befits the collaborative nature of the Internet, the perspective of each individual creates a collective intelligence that is greater than the sum of its parts.

In addition, environmental filmmakers can use to their advantage the extra layer the personal voice film places between the viewer and the subject. They can highlight this obstacle to help illustrate the idea that unspoiled natural landscapes are no longer easily accessible but are being degraded and lost. A similar form has emerged in landscape painting as artists create works in which the canvas is frequently small and encumbered by a massive frame that overwhelms the painting within. This style emphasizes the alienation the artists feel from nature; many are city dwellers whose chief visuals of nature arrive to them via postcards and magazine photos rather than by actual physical contact with natural landscapes. By making nature diminutive and shackling it in a frame, works such as those by landscape painter Mark Innerst remind the viewer "that he is looking at an artifact in a museum, an experience that undermines the assumption that nature will always be here for us (Kernan 110)." Artist Don Suggs makes a more obvious

statement in his paintings. His works include a traditional landscape of Mount Shasta that is partially obscured by a large box of vertical bars in the foreground. This box dominates the image and renders the landscape behind the box inaccessible. New York art critic Suzaan Boettger says of these new works, “[The artists] don't want the illusion. They don't want to pretend you can really go back to that idyllic world. They're saying, ‘How wonderful it is . . . and you can't have it because you're ruining it’” (qtd in Kernan 105).

The personal voice film has the potential to frame the natural referent in a similar way, giving the environmental filmmaker an opportunity to highlight not only the environmental issue at hand but also to make a larger statement about how our society is losing not only wild places themselves but also a sense of connection to those places.

Interestingly, the small, handheld devices on which we often watch Internet films can also be said to underscore the inaccessibility of the natural referent. Like Innerst's massive frames, devices such as current iPod models are usually much larger than the screen they contain. It is difficult to imagine that a viewer watching a film on an iPod would consider the small size of the device and the video's frame as integral to the filmmaker's argument, particularly since the choice of frame is ultimately out of the filmmaker's control and in the hands of the viewer. However, the idea that the Internet filmmaker cannot determine the ultimate frame in which the viewer will experience the film aligns in interesting ways with the idea of society's inability to accurately predict our cumulative human impacts on the future of our natural world. Thus, the Internet provides a unique opportunity for filmmakers and viewers to engage one another in discussions



not only about environmental issues themselves, but also about how the media in which we communicate these issues shape our reception of the information.

Finally, the filmmaker has, through the personal voice film, an opportunity to strip away any remaining vestiges of aura and authority and make a more direct peer-to-peer plea to the viewer. Instead of having her voice subsumed by a narrator or behind images that remove through omission the camera crew and filmmaker from the physical setting, the Internet filmmaker has an opportunity to step forward and more clearly say, “This is who I am, what I care about, and why I think you should care, too.” This level of transparency, which might seem unsophisticated in a broadcast, cable or theatrical film, is far more readily accepted on the Internet. In fact, it is even sought after, for reasons mentioned above about skepticism of the source.

One way some filmmakers are working toward this transparency is by slowly and collectively developing a new Internet film aesthetic. For years, nature filmmakers have focused on the beauty of the image as part and parcel of maintaining the aura and illustrating their authority (along the lines that, if they can frame quality images and afford the expensive equipment that creates these glossy images then they must have considerable training and financial support behind them). Today, in our aura-smashing exuberance, many Internet filmmakers prefer to shoot with low-end cameras, using on-camera microphones, forgoing tripod work for hand-held, and making their camera moves more responsive to events than pre-planned. The result mimics the amateur films on the Internet and reaffirms the peer relationship between viewer and filmmaker. In fact,

just as the lower-production-value aesthetic and the personal voice form succeed precisely because they produce videos that viewers feel they themselves could create, these films create a bridge for Internet user empowerment, allowing viewers to move from the role of passive receptors to active transmitters in the filmmaking process. The tools not only for creating films but for creating successful films now lie in the hands of the user; they can easily step over into the role of filmmaker. With the Internet, people have the opportunity to share their stories with others, and many are making videos specifically for that purpose. As Jenkins attests in Convergence Culture, “No longer home movies, these films are public movies – public in that, from the start, they are intended for audiences beyond the filmmaker’s immediate circle of friends and acquaintances; public in their content, which involves the reworking of popular mythologies; and public in their dialogue with the commercial cinema” (142-143).

But are we truly interested in taking that step to from consumer to creator, and do we want to create for public consumption? Or have we become too passive after accepting the role of couch potato in Benkler’s industrial mass-media-dominated information economy? Are we now unmotivated to do anything but consume? To answer those questions, I offer evidence of YouTube’s astronomical success. Within a year of YouTube’s official launch, the world’s most popular video sharing site was not only getting requests for 100 million downloads each day; it was also receiving an estimated 65,000 daily uploads.<sup>7</sup> While a fair portion of this material is appropriated commercial (and often copyrighted) video, much of it is original content. We were clearly a society

just waiting for our own chance to upload, which is an act of creation regardless of whether the content is original or appropriated material. It is true that most of this content can fall into the category of recreation or play, rather than serious discourse. However, play is where we learn how to navigate our new environment so that, when we're ready to be serious, we know how to work within the rules and how to bend them to our own ends. Indeed, Jenkins has already applied this notion of play to the development of our collective intelligence on the Internet. "Collective Intelligence," he says, "can be seen as an alternative source of media power. We are learning how to use that power through our day-to-day interactions with convergence culture. Right now, we are mostly using this collective power through our recreational life, but soon enough, we will be deploying these skills for more 'serious' purposes" (4). Sure enough, already within the vaults of the ever growing YouTube archive and other Web video sharing sites are a large number of pieces that fall into a more intellectual category – videos that illuminate critical issues, including environmental issues. These are the videos that escape the domain of the id and, as Bill Nichols describes it, operate in the documentary realm "where the reality-attentive ego and superego live" (Representing Reality 4). Clearly, viewers are ready to take the step from viewer to filmmaker, illuminating what they deem important societal issues. Indeed, as YouTube demonstrates, many already have.

## INTERNET FILM AS COMMUNITY COLLABORATION

While creating environmental films with a personal voice can inspire individual viewers to share their own environmental stories through film, engaging viewers in the process of environmental filmmaking as a group can help us move toward a new understanding of the power networked individuals and their collective intelligence can yield to improve the world in which we live. The Internet is currently reshaping our notions of community, just as various media have long shaped the nature of our interactions with one another. In the time of print media dominance, this medium brought us in physical proximity – to the library, say, or to the newsstand. The movie theater both united and divided us, bringing us physically closer but distancing us through its darkness and taboos about talking. Television helped redefine the nuclear family as the basic unit of community, as each family gathered in its own living room at the expense of maintaining stronger bonds outside the home. The Internet, as first glance, has redefined community in broader terms once again, this time bringing people together based on shared interests rather than physical proximity.

Of course, the idea of community on the Internet raises many issues about how well that term's traditional definitions ultimately fit the social networks that have emerged online. Issues about lack of responsibility to other community members, falsification of identity, and bridging versus bonding all come into play. Furthermore, some fear that the Internet will fragment existing social relations that are based on face-

to-face interactions and, if we take this fear to the extreme, lead to social problems that will cripple society. Myriad studies have shown those fears to be almost exclusively unfounded, and Internet communities appear to have been incorporated into our culture as supplemental relations rather than replacements for non-Internet communities.<sup>8</sup> As Benkler describes, “The basic observation that the Internet permits the emergence of new relationships that play a significant role in their participants’ lives and are anchored in online communities continues to be made.” He adds, “Much of the research suggests that the new online relationships develop in addition to, rather than instead of, physical face-to-face human interaction in community and family – which turns out to be alive and well” (359).

While Internet communities tend to be looser, more dynamic, and more purpose oriented, they are communities nonetheless. In Future Shock, futurist Alvin Toffler coined the term “adhocracy” to describe this new kind of post-industrial social structure (113). The natural human response to the overwhelming amount of information on the Internet is for people to search specifically for the information niches that hold their interest. And, as they discover others who share that interest, they often form surprisingly cohesive communities on the Internet.<sup>9</sup>

The existence of communities where filmmaker and viewer can openly communicate and move freely between the two roles is unprecedented in film history. This provides a great opportunity for environmental filmmakers – especially emerging filmmakers - to learn what aspects of their argument and aesthetic connected most with

their audiences and create films that are more successful in educating and inspiring viewers to protect our natural world. Internet community members can correct factual errors and suggest the inclusion of particular stories that make the filmmaker's arguments more powerful. The medium also allows the viewer to participate in the process of filmmaking, as filmmakers can go back and incorporate viewers' insights into new cuts of the film. This relationship also helps viewers because, by understanding how to read and critique films and learning to share that critique with the filmmaker, viewers become a more informed and critical audience. This two-way street of communication and benefits is summed up well by Benkler: "The practice of producing culture makes us all more sophisticated readers, viewers and listeners, as well as more engaged makers" (275).

Web filmmakers and Web video repositories can take this idea of filmmaker/viewer interaction even further, allowing viewers to dictate the next step in the evolution of a serialized video - allowing the community to direct the argument or even contribute content to the story. Again, this technique has so far been used mostly for play. For example, Google's email service, Gmail, promoted a collaborative 2007 video whereby email users contribute clips that illustrate, in tongue-in-cheek fashion, how a piece of e-mail physically travels around the world.<sup>10</sup> The result is not just a funny piece of media but also a rather wry commentary that illustrates the very fundamental differences between new media and older methods of sharing information.

In environmental filmmaking applications, this collaborative strategy of story development could work very effectively. For instance, a filmmaker might initiate a collaborative project whereby she introduced the argument that global warming was already having noticeable effects on our natural world, presented one story of such effects as a first chapter, and then offered the film to the online community for people to add their own video entries of global warming effects in their region of the world. The resulting film would be a community effort toward an understanding of global climate change based on a new model that only the medium of the Internet can currently sustain. While such a model would cause the filmmaker's individual voice (and perhaps even her argument) to become diluted or lost through the collaborative process, the resulting film might do more to advocate for environmental protections precisely because it illustrates that our understanding of the natural world is evolving and suggest that our incomplete understanding is an important part of why we should not impose irreversible changes on our environment. Communities such as these are what cyberculture theorist Pierre Lévy describes as environments that facilitate "collective discussion, negotiation, and development." Through this process, they can create real change. "Unanswered questions," he says, "will create tension... indicating regions where invention and innovation are required" (20).

It is tempting to get swept away with this notion of collaborative film and imagine a world of global, cooperative filmmaking efforts resulting in greater truths than the individuals within that collaboration could have discovered. However, it is important to

note here that the intense community nature of the Internet also holds the potential to backfire, resulting in less diversity of stories and less original art.

Just because everyone with an Internet connection can communicate with everyone else does not ensure that they are going to communicate in more productive ways. As the Internet fragments our communities into smaller groups based on increasingly specific common interests, each individual participant in these micro-communities holds more sway over the direction in which that community will evolve. As filmmakers – particularly those with professional aspirations – strive to reach and maintain an audience, they often place increasing importance on keeping their community of viewers intact. Thus, the viewer has more power to dictate the direction of the conversation and perhaps even drive the film’s argument in ways that do not necessarily benefit the filmmaker’s original goal. And while the Wikipedia project can be cited here as a powerful example that many Internet users seek to serve the greater good and create beneficial content, some people will wield this power for the sheer joy of being able to manipulate others. As education technology scholar Lowell Monke warns in “Charlotte’s Webpage,” a cautionary essay about computers in the classroom, “Technology can provide enormous assistance in figuring out how to do things, but it turns mute when it comes to determining what we should do. Without . . . moral grounding, the dependence on computers encourages a manipulative, ‘whatever works’ attitude toward others” (n. pag.). The quality of the video and discussion around it can be undermined by people who have little stake in the film itself and have given little critical



thought to the process of filmmaking or film viewing. While the global warming example presented earlier suggests that it is not necessarily a bad thing for a video's original message to get subsumed by the larger message of a knowledge community, the quality of that community is key. In a filmmaker's quest to maintain a large community in a highly fragmented environment, she could easily forget her role in constructing a meaningful, rather than merely populated, community.

Methods such as using personal voice and incorporating online communities serve as tools to create effective Internet films, particularly environmental films. But to stop the discussion here ignores a more fundamental question of what an Internet video really is and where its boundaries lie. Web sites, and the videos they contain, are not things we experience in their entirety, from start to finish, or in one sitting. Internet users pop in to a Web site from a variety of links, navigate them in myriad ways dictated by their specific interests and whims, and dodge out whenever they see fit. So where does that leave film, which has traditionally relied on being watched from start to finish or at least in a linear fashion, in telling an effective story?

## INTERNET FILM'S NONLINEAR CAPABILITY

Perhaps the biggest challenge to our traditional filmmaking storytelling style comes as we contemplate how to work with the Internet's nonlinear structure. As an on-demand system, viewers select what they want to view from a virtually endless store of options. The two keys to navigating through this sea of information are the medium's capacity for searchability, where Internet users can type in words and phrases and connect to Web sites that use these terms, and linking, where viewers can click on hyperlinks to connect from information on one Web site to information on another site or another section of the same site. An analysis of Internet navigation technologies is well beyond the focus of this essay. These technologies are the subjects of a vast body of work in and of themselves. However, this nonlinear searchability is critical in helping Internet users – including film viewers – find their way through the clutter to the information they seek.

Yochai Benkler models this nonlinear approach with his book, The Wealth of Networks. He offers the book to Internet users as a nonlinear, searchable source, as well as providing it in its entire form. He makes it available via a wiki – an online commons for creating, editing and linking content (Wikipedia is probably the most famous example of a wiki). The wiki for The Wealth of Networks states that the site is “an invitation to collaborate on building a learning and research environment based on Yochai Benkler's book.”<sup>11</sup> The site includes the text of the work in its entirety in various searchable

formats, as well as language translations contributed by users, a listing of Weblogs and reviews discussing the book, and other online resources that relate to the book and its subject. The wiki offers Internet users with a variety of ways to navigate through Benkler's original text and other readers' responses to it.

While a number of print works have used the Internet as Benkler has in this fashion, this potential has yet to take root with Internet film. However, this nonlinear structure holds clear opportunities for environmental filmmakers. Filmmakers can tailor versions of their videos to specific or broad audiences as they see fit, and they can link their films to others on similar subjects and other environmental Web sites so that viewers can broaden their knowledge of the topic through multiple perspectives.

In our society with its high value of speed and efficiency, filmmakers can also compartmentalize their films to help viewers navigate within a film to the information and stories in which they are most interested. This aspect of searchability within a film has not yet been fully employed on the Internet, but it has interesting potential. Films could be indexed like chapters in a book, where a section would come to a close and the viewer could choose which section to watch next, spending time only on what interests them most. The process transfers more power to the viewer, allowing her to decide if she wants to hear the filmmaker's full argument or merely to glean the information she wants out of the film and move on to another text. With complex and evolving issues such as environmental challenges, this kind of searchability would enable Internet users much easier and quicker access to the specific information they seek in order to make informed

decisions and take effective action. Of course, we must remember that a film would still have a master at the helm, controlling the options available by selecting what to incorporate and what to exclude from the film. Other tools for promoting an argument, such as editing, camera angles, and lighting still remain and serve the filmmaker's argument. Viewers might be more likely to forget about these more subtle tools shaping their reception of the material if they assume they have more autonomy over the videos and section of videos they choose to receive.

Fiction filmmakers are already experimenting with using nonlinear, user-driven storytelling. An example is The Onyx Project, an interactive film about a fictional U.S. Army Special Forces Officer involved in a military mission that goes wrong in Afghanistan. The video content is available on a DVD that is navigable on Windows-based personal computers. While watching the DVD, the viewer selects among a variety of possible scenes to choose how the story will unfold. According to Richard Siklos' New York Times article on the project, the filmmakers hope that this initial foray into nonlinear filmmaking will lead the way to a new genre that "will include documentaries or educational videos with thousands of links that viewers can click to take them wherever their interests may lie." (n.pag) While The Onyx Project is currently not available on the Internet but is instead bound to special DVD software, it is easy to imagine filmmakers using the Internet as the delivery platform for similar nonlinear projects.

As we become more focused on communication speed, nonlinear filmmaking may be the future of much online documentary film. We can think of this method as a “choose your own adventure” model of film viewing where each documentary film is compartmentalized and thus becomes less narrative (or multi-narrative) and more informational. Videos are already responding to the medium by becoming shorter and serialized, both as a result of current limitations such as download speed and due to Internet user habits of moving quickly from one piece of information to another. This searchability would come with a cost, of course – the filmmaker would lose much of her ability to promote a cogent argument and films would, in many ways, become merely vessels for information rather than tools for providing valuable human perspective on issues. With viewers’ intense desire to explore personal stories and community interactions on the Internet, however, nonlinear film will probably be just one model among several to emerge in response to this medium.

## CONCLUSION

In The Wealth of Networks, Yochai Benkler states that the networked information economy of the Internet holds the potential to transform individual freedom, political discourse and quality of life. He warns, however, that these positive developments are by no means inevitable. Market interests threaten to strangle the freedoms that the medium offers. He details the systematic offensive launched by the industrial information economy – the barons of broadcast, cable and other corporate interests – to assume control of the medium through what he calls “a concerted effort to shape the institutional ecology in order to help proprietary models of information production at the expense of burdening nonmarket, nonproprietary production” (381).

As the traditional media struggle to shape the Internet into a market medium more similar to their own, it is worth noting that the Internet is quietly but profoundly reshaping the traditional mass media, as well. An example of this is the watchdog role many bloggers have assumed in checking mainstream news stories for accuracy, forcing the mass media to quicken the pace and accuracy of their reporting. Reason Online magazine editor Jesse Walker notes this change in “Old Media and New Media,” a discussion of a news scandal in which bloggers caught inaccurate information on CBS’ 60 Minutes Wednesday in the days leading up to the 2004 presidential election. Walker notes, “The new media outlets aren’t displacing the old ones; they’re transforming them.

Slowly but noticeably, the old media are becoming faster, more transparent, more interactive – not because they want to be, but because they have to be” (n.pag.).

Another example of the Internet reshaping traditional media can be seen in broadcast and theatrical film’s increasing appropriation of the lower-production-value Internet filmmaking aesthetic in an attempt to collapse the filmmaker/viewer hierarchy and create a sense of a peer relationship. A prime example of this Internet aesthetic can be seen in Michael Moore’s successful theatrical film on the American health care system, SiCKO. SiCKO is a personal voice film in which Moore works firmly within the performative mode. To create a low-production-value look, he used handheld cameras in a run-and-gun style and chose to shoot on high definition video rather than film stock.<sup>12</sup> These choices negate any aura re-created by the film’s theatrical presentation and promote a sense of intimacy with the subject matter and filmmaker that facilitates a peer connection with Moore – we find ourselves rooting for this filmic David as he takes on the corporate Goliaths of the health care system. Of course, it is certainly true that Moore was employing the same aesthetic long before the Internet became a popular medium for film; this style is evident beginning with his first film, 1989’s Roger & Me, which certainly predates the Internet’s rise to prominence. This serves as evidence that qualities of the emerging Internet film aesthetic are not new. However, we are witnessing a much wider application of this low-production-value, personal style with the advent of Internet film. It should be noted that Moore has achieved more success in the years since Internet access has become widely available in American society – 2004’s Fahrenheit 9/11 still

currently stands as the highest grossing documentary film in history,<sup>13</sup> and Moore won a 2003 Academy Award for Bowling for Columbine.<sup>14</sup> His increasing success is, of course, probably primarily due to his maturation as a performative filmmaker. However, it may also be due to the fact that more people are becoming accustomed to his aesthetic, a style that is so comfortable on the Internet but has always been very atypical of theatrical film.

As traditional media and the Internet evolve their aesthetics in negotiation with one another, the greatest ultimate potential of the Internet may prove to be the ability it gives individuals and communities to engage a dialogue with traditional media to make all media better represent and serve society. Instead of placing the nonmarket information economy and the industrial information economy at opposite and contentious poles as Benkler does, a better model may be to utilize both to maximize the unique advantages of each. As Jenkins duly notes in Convergence Culture:

The power of the grassroots media is that it diversifies; the power of broadcast media is that it amplifies. That's why we should be concerned with the flow between the two: expanding the potentials for participation represents the greatest opportunity for cultural diversity. Throw away the powers of broadcasting and one only has cultural fragmentation. The power of participation comes not in destroying commercial culture but from writing over it, modding (sic) it, amending it, expanding it, adding greater diversity of perspective, and then recirculating it, feeding it back into the mainstream media. Read in those terms, participation becomes an important political right (257).

How can environmental filmmakers, then, harness the Internet's ability to diversify and the broadcast media's ability to amplify stories of environmental crisis and hope? Perhaps the best current model is not to take films developed in the traditional mass media and adapt them to the Internet, but to work in the emerging Internet aesthetic



and adapt these films to function in the traditional media. As mentioned above, the techniques inherent in the emerging Internet aesthetic are not new. They have been deployed successfully in as wildly different a medium to the Internet as the movie theater. By adapting a film for various media and allowing online communities to adapt it to serve their needs, a filmmaker can reach a broader audience with a film that shares the individual's personal voice and incorporates the thoughts, passions and stories of the online community in which it has been developed. Indeed, Michael Moore has already recognized the power of media convergence in advocating for change. Just prior to the release of SiCKO, he posted a video to YouTube in which he makes a direct plea to YouTube users to create and upload their own stories of how America's health care system has failed them.<sup>15</sup> In his video, he says he will take the community's videos and share them with Congress as he advocates for health care reform. The collection of videos YouTube users post may indeed make a more compelling political statement than Moore's original film because they have the weight of many more individuals behind them. Rather than merely representing the voice of one filmmaker, the video collection would represent the broader voice of the people.

If Internet video can indeed successfully move back into traditional media applications, it begs the question of just how different the Internet is from its predecessors. It may be a revolution, or it may just be an evolution in human communication. It is too soon to tell, and certainly too soon to know definitively what ultimate role the Internet will play in transforming our culture. Benkler points this out in

the online discussion surrounding market and nonmarket social production on business writer Nick Carr's blog Rough Type. Benkler responds to Carr's assertion that we cannot yet predict which model will end up dominating the Web by countering, "...of course it is 'too soon to tell for sure.' 'Knowing for sure' is the sure sign of religion, not analysis" (n.pag.). However, Benkler clearly believes the nonmarket model will win out, and that, when it does, it will transform our existence. In The Wealth of Networks, Benkler stops short – but just short – of calling the Internet a revolution. He says

Enabled by technological change, we are beginning to see a series of economic, social, and cultural adaptations that make possible a radical transformation of how we make the information environment we occupy as autonomous individuals, citizens, and members of cultural and social groups. It seems passé today to speak of "the Internet revolution." In some academic circles, it is positively naïve. But it should not be. The change brought about by the networked information environment is deep. It is structural. It goes to the very foundations of how liberal markets and liberal democracies have coevolved for almost two centuries. (1)

Whether the Internet represents a revolution in the way humans communicate with one another will no doubt remain a subject of debate long after the Internet has emerged from its current adolescent state. As a medium, it has only been in widespread use for a little over a decade. It will be a long time before we can assess the full impact the Internet will have on the way we live our lives and view our world. Similarly, it remains to be seen whether an evolved media collaboration will ultimately serve as an effective motivator for renewed interest in solving our world's many problems, from environmental degradation to human injustice. The people who use the medium must provide the impetus for positive change; the technology alone cannot provide it. As

journalist Thomas L. Friedman notes in his comprehensive new history of 21<sup>st</sup> century technology and its societal impacts:

There is absolutely no guarantee that everyone will use these new technologies ... for the benefit of themselves, their countries, or humanity. These are just technologies. Using them does not make you modern, smart, moral, wise, fair or decent. It just makes you able to communicate, compete and collaborate farther and faster... We can only hope that more people in more places use them to create, collaborate and grow their living standards, not the opposite. (460)

While films that share a personal voice, invite community involvement and take advantage of the Internet's nonlinear capability may be the most successful films at empowering filmmakers and viewers to take action on critical environmental issues, it is ultimately the stories themselves, and the passions of the people who create and engage with them, that hold the power for revolution.

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APPENDIX A

NOTES

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> For a listing of what kinds of content are allowed and prohibited on YouTube, see their community guidelines at <[http://www.youtube.com/t/community\\_guidelines](http://www.youtube.com/t/community_guidelines)>.

<sup>2</sup> Not all videos on YouTube are nonmarket. The Web site does include commercially promoted content. On the YouTube home page, this featured commercial content is placed under a separate banner.

<sup>3</sup> One recent example of this is “Life in Death Valley,” which aired on PBS as part of the series Nature. In the show, the valley was portrayed as a “brutal” yet beautiful antagonist that humans continually strive to conquer.

<sup>4</sup> Of course, low culture, homegrown video has also achieved success on television. Shows like America’s Funniest Home Videos have long taken advantage of the free content home viewers provide.

<sup>5</sup> “Everest: The Death Zone” is an example of a film that focuses on character drama in a natural setting. It is part of the PBS series Nova.

<sup>6</sup> For the online community’s definition of astroturfing, see the Wikipedia article on the subject at <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Astroturfing>>.

<sup>7</sup> These statistics were taken from Scott Woolley’s article, “Video Fixation,” in Forbes magazine.

<sup>8</sup> In The Wealth of Networks, Yochai Benkler provides an excellent description of the debate over whether the Internet has led to a fragmentation or rejuvenation of communities and an outline of the major social science research studies that have looked at this issue. To summarize, Benkler concludes, “. . . it seems that the Internet is allowing us to eat our cake and have it too, apparently keeping our (social) figure by cutting down on the social equivalent of deep-fried dough – television. That is, we communicate more, rather than less, with our core constituents of our organic communities – our family and our friends – and we seem, in some places, also to be communicating more with our neighbors. We also communicate more with loosely affiliated others, who are geographically remote, and who may share only relatively small slivers of overlapping interests, or for only short periods of life (376).”



<sup>9</sup> Again, Yochai Benkler offers an excellent overview of the body of sociological research on online and offline communities in chapter ten of The Wealth of Networks.

<sup>10</sup> The resulting Gmail video is hosted by YouTube and available at <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VfDW7qAdFGk>>.

<sup>11</sup> The wiki for The Wealth of Nations is available at <[http://www.benkler.org/wealth\\_of\\_networks/index.php?title=Main\\_Page](http://www.benkler.org/wealth_of_networks/index.php?title=Main_Page)>.

<sup>12</sup> SiCKO was shot on HDCAM and HDV, according to IMDB: the Internet Movie Database. See <<http://www.imdb.com>>.

<sup>13</sup> These statistics were taken from Box Office Mojo. See <<http://www.boxofficemojo.com/genres/chart/?id=documentary.htm>>.

<sup>14</sup> Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. [Web site]. 18 Nov. 2007. <<http://www.oscars.org>>.

<sup>15</sup> Michael Moore's YouTube video advocating for users to submit their own health care horror stories can be viewed at <[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VEFoq\\_5RbC4](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VEFoq_5RbC4)>.