

## **Some Experiments on Youtube Alan Macfarlane (18.8.07)**

### *Introduction*

I have been making films and later videos for nearly forty years. During that time I had accumulated many hundreds of hours of film of diverse kinds. There were a number of interviews of distinguished thinkers; anthropological fieldwork in the Himalayas and elsewhere; teaching films on the social sciences and others. But for a long time these could only be seen very occasionally and by limited audiences and in brief extracts within my teaching. The development of the Internet, of Digital Space in Cambridge, and other technological changes has made it possible to think about using these in a new way.

I started to upload videos to 'Youtube' on 22 October 2006. I called myself 'ayabaya', the name coined for me by my granddaughter and which, I naively thought, might make me anonymous. Since it very soon becomes clear who you are in the films, I could have chosen my real name. There are now some 370 films uploaded to my site.

I started as an ordinary user, which sets a restriction of 10 minutes or 100 MB on the file size, whichever threshold is reached first but soon applied to become a 'Director' which is helpful since, while there is still a limit of 100 MB in size, there is no limit to the length of the film.

Normally, if one compresses them to Mpeg4, one can get up to 15 minutes within 100 MB, but if one compresses using this 'web streaming' option from iMovie, it is possible to get nearly an hour within the 100 MB limit.

### *Contents and types of film*

My first films were mainly experimenting with a series of 'rushes' or 'offcuts' from the television series 'The Day the World Took Off', with the permission of the film company that made the series – Windfall Films. I had originally put these up on my website, holding the films on 'Digitalspace' (Dspace) in Cambridge (and also on my student Xiaoxiao Yan's website 'Digitalorient'). However, it had become clear that few people looked at them within an academic web site.

As well as about 150 such offcuts, I put up a series of short talks about Cambridge University and King's College filmed on an afternoon's walk round Cambridge. I also put up some of the three-minute interviews of academics from the 'Interviews with Ancestors' part of my website. This again made them better known, for on my website, although about 10,000 have visited this set of video interviews, the number watching some of the more popular ones (Clifford Geertz, Mary Douglas) was much greater on Youtube.

As I gained confidence, I started to put up other films. A tour round Essex and the village of Earls Colne talking about my book on *The Origins of English Individualism* and the Earls Colne project was added. I put up several pieces on anthropology – what social

anthropology is, how fieldwork is done, filming in fieldwork etc. I also started to put up sets of lectures – originally on kinship and marriage, and on war, famine and disease, and also parts of television interview on law, witchcraft etc.

As a background to my book *Letters to Lily* I put up a reading of the thirty letters from Lily to me over still images to see if that worked. I also began to add our own films on Japan and a few of our fieldwork in Nepal.

### *Usage and popularity.*

The first surprise was how many people looked at the uploaded videos. From the very start, there were tens of visitors a day, then hundreds, and now between five hundred and a thousand a day. This compares to an average of 30-60 visitors a day, to my website ([www.alanmacfarlane.com](http://www.alanmacfarlane.com)).

Part of the reason for the increasing number of hits was accidental. Quite early on I put on two films of Japanese maiko, long films that were either cut extensively or not used in the Channel four series. One was of a maiko making up her face, lasting for about 15 minutes. Beautifully filmed, it had always struck me as extraordinary, as it does Youtube viewers, over 70,000 of whom have visited this one film. At an early point it won a 'prize' for being the 19<sup>th</sup> most visited video in the category 'People and Blogs' on Youtube. It has also attracted hundreds of comments.

Likewise, a couple of other films on maiko attracted a lot of attention; one on a maiko being dressed in a kimono because it was so beautiful, the other because it was not clear whether the subjects of the film were real maiko or 'tourist' maiko.

Apart from these, the highest views are surprising. A short film of Clifford Geertz the anthropologist became particularly popular as it was put up just before he died – and the same thing happened with a film of the anthropologist Mary Douglas. A film of the political structure of the Ottoman Empire was referred to in an American blog (chicagoboyz) and much visited. Films on Venice and on crafts such as glass making, sword making etc. were popular. But I was surprised at the fact that over 2600 people have visited a rather limited short talk on 'What is social anthropology' and many have also watched my undergraduate lectures on 'Malthus', 'What is famine' etc.

The three indexes of use are the total number of views (currently, on 10 August 2007 about 178,000), the number of people who have looked at the whole channel, or channel views (currently about 4,600) and the number of 'subscribers', people who are notified when one puts something up (currently 159).

### *Disputes and discord*

It should be remembered that in 'publishing' on Youtube the uploaded videos may be viewed by anyone and that many of the viewers will have no sympathy, knowledge or

even real interest in what they encounter. This is totally contrary to my experience as an academic. There, when writing or lecturing, I had roughly known what the small and select audience I am addressing is like and can assume charity and interest.

Both the power and attraction, but also the danger, of Youtube is that it reaches the whole world. People of every kind, nation, age and predilection are out there. Although I have been pleasantly surprised by the intelligent comments of most of those who bother to write. I have also been surprised by occasionally vehement and fairly abusive, or racist remarks. It is worth noting some common features.

Basically, anything to do with religion is likely to attract rage. I have taken off a piece – or rather put back onto the ‘private’ side - comparing Buddhism and Christianity (albeit rather superficially and mainly in relation to technology) because of a series of comments of a very negative character. I have also put back into ‘private’ two pieces which argued that science was halted in Islamic civilizations – and I never put up onto the public area one on the deep links between politics and religion in Islam. But other pieces about the political or economic conditions in the Ottoman Empire have been widely viewed without apparent irritation.

A film about the destruction of the Australian aborigines also invited racist remarks, but I left this on as I did with a film on the Jewish ghetto in Venice, which also had some negative discussion. I originally put in a piece which I did about Rutherford and the splitting of the atom, but a professor from Manchester rightly pointed out that it was over-simplified and bits were incorrect. This was one factor which encouraged me to ask a historian of science, Simon Schaffer, to take me on a video tour round the Old Cavendish Laboratory. His films will soon replace my amateur efforts.

#### *Other observations*

I fairly frequently put cross-references from certain films to my website as embedded links – but there is no evidence that people follow these. Once on Youtube they seem to stay there.

Several people have discovered film that they have asked to have copies of to use elsewhere. A museum in New Zealand liked the blacksmith films, and a television program about the use of the web asked to refer to the channel. [A ‘channel’ is the Youtube term for the whole of one’s personal site.] They and others who require higher quality films I can direct to my own website and Dspace in Cambridge, where the MP4 films are much better quality.

So the different qualities of upload, leads me to differentiate films. If a film is important mainly for the sound, or it is important that a long (more than 15 minutes) film be seen in its entirety, I pre-compress for web streaming with iMovie. It is then re-compressed a bit by Youtube, but the sound is alright and the images passable. If the pictures, for example of a temple walk or maiko making up – are important I send the film up as an Mpeg4 film and cut it into sections if necessary (i.e. less than 15 minutes when they will exceed the

100 MB allowable).

As the number of films increased, it became important to organize them better. Basically they go up in submission order, with the newest at the top. For someone to scroll through 300 or more takes a long time. It is possible to search for the most viewed or the most commented on but otherwise there are no helps. If one searches for a film within a channel, it brings up all the films on Youtube, not just within the channel.

The only way I have yet discovered to order the films is to group them into 'Playlists'. I have about 30 playlists, which allow people to see all the films on, say, tours round Venice, or interviews with academics. These playlists are also useful since it is possible to send people a link to a playlist (an individual video) and it is possible to set a link – or embed the whole HTML – into another web page.

So, for instance, on the web-site behind my Japan book I did not need to set up pages with picture icons as I had done before with my books on 'Glass', 'Tea' etc. All I needed to do was to list the playlists as clickable references.

The 'Private' and 'Public' display options are also extremely helpful. With a faster connection in my university, I can send up a number of longer films and 'store' them on the private side of 'Youtube' with a brief description. When I want to release them, I can edit them for 'Public' display at home.

It is also potentially very useful for particularly sensitive material. It is possible to hold them on the 'Private' side and enable up to 25 named users to visit these private videos – or to set up special 'Friends' who can see the private side.

One user asked for an 'index' to the whole channel at the front. I shall try to see if this is possible, though I have not found a way of doing so yet.

As regards spam, and particularly porn sites, I had no problem until I reached about 150,000. I don't know whether it was the increasing popularity of the channel, or whether just in the last month or so there has been a change on Youtube. Since this I have had one or two spammers visiting and putting up messages about porn sites. At first I just blocked the user and deleted it from the individual video. Now I have discovered that by going to their legitimate Youtube channel (which often contains vitriolic abuse from a number of others who have been plagued by them), you can block the user from one's channel.

Youtube makes the world very small. Similar videos are grouped beside the one being shown, presumably using Google search techniques, so a walk in a particular park or visit to a certain theatre in Japan may lead to several other videos of the same park or performance appearing alongside each other. Also positive identifications have been made which improve my hazy recollections. Certain maiko in Gion have been discussed in some detail – a few Youtubers claiming to know them well.

My pace of uploading to Youtube depends on what I have to do elsewhere. Upload times

are fast, but sorting out what to upload, preparing it and putting in the metadata all takes time. This is one of the reasons, presumably, why, as far as I know, there are very few academics who currently upload to Youtube.

For some while I tried to upload twice a week, with 5-10 films at a time. I now upload once a week, or a few more films once a fortnight. I try to upload the equivalent of about ten five-minute clips, but with longer films this may consist of two or three longer films.

Since I now have a large number of subscribers, I feel it is better both to clump the uploads (i.e. Doing several in one session) and also to try to put up some variety of films. Those interested in, say, other countries, may not want anthropology lectures. I haven't yet discovered whether, if people 'unsubscribe' from my channel I am notified. If there is notification, it suggests that no one has yet unsubscribed.

*Final comment for now*

I had not expected 'Youtube' to be so interesting. Nor did I expect it to be so well policed. A number of the spammers putting up porn references have been banned from Youtube.

Compared to the few readers of my books or those at my lectures, most of whom are already sympathetic, the thousand or so random visitors to my films a day from all over the world is large, even if half of them only watch for a few seconds. The viewing figures for Youtube appear to be much higher than that on 'Myspace', where I have put up a couple of films.

Yet it is a lot of work. Every day now I get at least a dozen emails with comments and requests, which are very tempting to look at. So apart from the several hours a week of real time needed to process films and upload them, twenty minutes or so a day goes into administration. But as an experiment in a form of communication that is changing our world, it is definitely worth having a toe in the Youtube Ocean.