



Evolution of YouTube could mark beginning of age of personal media

Updated 6/13/2006 9:18 PM ET

SAN MATEO, Calif. — This place can't be the nexus of a global entertainment experiment. Can't be home to the entity that unleashed a couple of paradigm-bending phenomena, namely *Bus Uncle* and *The Evolution of Dance*.

For crying out loud, it's an unmarked glass door between Ni-Mo Japanese Cuisine and Amici's cafe.

But, yep, this is YouTube. And there's co-founder Steve Chen, sitting on a ledge outside with a large coffee and his cellphone — looking, with his always-spiky hair, like a wayward clerk from a skateboard shop.

Go inside and up the stairs and the place feels like a cross between a fraternity and your great aunt's living room. Red floor-to-ceiling curtains from Ikea act as room dividers. The break area is an exposed sink next to shelves stocked with chips and Doritos. The 30 employees work at desks scattered around an open floor, with toys and musical instruments propped in between.

These are confusing times in the media, and YouTube is making it more so. In a charming but frustrating way, the company doesn't even pretend to know how it's going to change the concept of media in coming years.

There is a sense that YouTube accidentally built a rocket and is willing to hang on to see where it goes. Co-founders Chen and Chad Hurley can be like the main characters in *Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure*, who go for joy rides in a time-traveling phone booth and marvel at where they land with a "Whoa, duuuude!"

"There are so many things we can do," says Chen. "We'll wait and see what happens in the market."

"We're in a position where, if we think about something (for the site), we can just do it," says Hurley.

In the meantime, as 35,000 videos are uploaded to YouTube each day, the site has become the primordial ooze out of which rise new forms of video entertainment. Case in point: *Bus Uncle*.

Back in May, YouTube turned on technology that makes it easier to send video from cellphones directly to the site. "It will be interesting to see what content will be like when everyone who has a cellphone with them can take video of anything," Chen said then.

About the same time, YouTube enabled something it calls "spinoff and response video." It's a way to alter or respond to video on the site, posting it like comments in a blog, so there's a threaded series of videos.

All of that came together when, on a public bus one night in Hong Kong, passenger Elvis Ho tapped the shoulder of the man sitting in front of him, Roger Chan. Ho asked Chan to talk more quietly on his cellphone.

Chan snapped, turned around and berated Ho for six minutes with raunchy language and a line that's becoming a catchphrase: "I've got pressure!" Across the aisle, Jon Fong quietly captured the harangue on video using his cellphone and posted the clip on YouTube.

It turned into a sensation — first in Hong Kong, then around the world. People quickly added subtitles, set the video to music and shot spoof versions. The different versions of *Bus Uncle*— so named because Ho began by addressing Chan as "uncle," which is polite in China — have been viewed at least 3 million times.

The Evolution of Dance is simpler but bigger. It is a six-minute routine by comedian Judson Laipply — just him doing different dances of the past 50 years. Posted a couple of weeks ago, it's been viewed more than 23 million times.

These videos follow in the grand tradition of other Internet phenomena such as the dancing baby, or JibJab's *This Land is Your Land*. YouTube, though, takes what had been random and gives it order — some semblance of a system. And because of that, Web-based video is flourishing. As Hurley says, "We've built a short-form entertainment experience."

In his essay *Farewell Information, It's a Media Age*, futurist Paul Saffo called this the beginning of the age of personal media. Instead of monolithic media entities firing news and entertainment one way, personal media means that it flows in lots of directions. Consumers can make and post videos that get seen by millions. This rise of the creator-consumer is the same trend that fueled blogs and amateur music sites such as GarageBand.com.

And, Saffo adds, "The shift from mass to personal inevitably translates into big changes in market structures."

Advertisers want in

Again, that's only beginning. On YouTube, the average user watches 30 minutes of videos a day, though the average length of each video viewed is about 2 minutes. The site just began accepting limited advertising, validating its concept with money.

When I ask Hurley if advertisers are seeking out YouTube, he replies, "More than we can deal with. Potential partners — that's another wave of e-mails. We're having discussions with all the major studios, (record) labels and networks."

The owners of mass media content want to seed YouTube with movie clips, promos and music videos — which are, in a *Twilight Zone*-ish twist, designed to pull consumers back into mass media from the personal media that's about to eat into the mass media's audience and income.

Then again, YouTube brings up the question of what constitutes mass media. If 23 million people around the world see *The Evolution of Dance*— that's pretty mass. Yet it's still niche and personal and user-created. It's all those things, which is what makes this moment so confounding, and so ripe with possibilities.

What does all this mean to the media business? There isn't a soul who really knows — except to know it means that a tiny company above a Japanese restaurant can alter the balance of the entire industry.