# 1. Situating Videoblogging

This book is about a particular moment in media history when the internet switched dramatically from a mostly textual medium to a fully multimedia one. At first the revolutionary potential of this digital transformation took place under the surface, indeed most people were oblivious to the changes taking place. Today, we take for granted the delivery of different media forms streaming seamlessly across the web, just as much as we take for granted the seemingly unlimited storage aspects for photo and video. However, back in the early 2000s standards were weak and complicated, bandwidth was slow and erratic, and storage was miniscule compared to today’s internet. One could say that we lived in a different media universe, and in important respects this would be true. Throughout this book I revisit this often forgotten world that was pre-social media, pre-YouTube and most importantly, refreshingly amateur in its experimentation and aesthetic. My focus is on what was known as ‘online video’ and what soon became known as *videoblogging.* I want to demonstrate the ways in which this practice which was mostly small-scale, self-funded and bottom-up, a truly experimental media form, was an important predecessor to, and anticipated, our current media ecology.

The story of online video is usually said to begin at 8:27 pm on Saturday, April 23, 2005, when a 19 second long video clip entitled *Me at the Zoo* was uploaded to YouTube, making it the first video published online through the YouTube platform and shared around the world through the website.[[1]](#footnote-1) This video featured a short recording of one of the YouTube founders, Jawed Karim, on a visit to a local zoo. The video was notable for its mundane sense of the everyday. As the New York Times noted, ‘the video has a certain pleasing obviousness. “Here we are in front of the, uh, elephants,” Karim says. “They have really, really, really long” — suspense, but no double entendre — “trunks”. Karim turns to face the elephants as if to confirm his observation. “And that’s pretty much all there is to say.”’[[2]](#footnote-2) Nonetheless, as of January 2018, the video has received over 44 million views and nearly four hundred thousand comments from viewers. This video represents a key moment in media history, however it was not the first, and perhaps not the most important video to be posted online.[[3]](#footnote-3)

In the years since, online video has been transformed from an expensive to distribute media-form to one which can be networked, shared, downloaded and re-used with ease. Digital videos, a kind of ‘vernacular avant-garde’, can now be found in a variety of short-form genres, from family videos to haul videos (documenting things people have bought) to unboxing videos (people opening the wrapper from their new purchases) and from a new type of YouTube celebrity to amusing ‘meme’ videos. Indeed, one of the most watched videos on YouTube is an amateur family video titled *Charlie bit my finger* which has had more than 857 million views as of January 2018. Between 2009 and 2010, it became a viral hit and temporarily became the most viewed video on YouTube. It has since been overtaken by a host of music videos like Psy’s *Gangham Style* (3 billion views),Wiz Khalifa’s *See You Again* (3.3 billion views) and Luis Fonsi’s *Despacito* ( 4.6 billion views). Today, music videos occupy at least the top 5 most viewed videos on YouTube, signaling a shift in digital video consumption from amateur to professional, often corporate sponsored, content. This further highlights the ways in which the internet continues to move in a more commercial direction. Video is now generating serious income for a number of different participants but also, and importantly, for YouTube itself.

Rewind to 2005, however, and YouTube was losing money. Despite being nearly exhausted by the massive costs of infrastructure, bandwidth and storage, YouTube nonetheless grew at a furious pace from 2005 to 2006, until it was bought by Google, a then seemingly puzzling purchase for a search engine giant. The cost was an outrageous figure of $1.65 billion (£2.2 billion in 2017), which made its founders instant millionaires. By 2010 YouTube hosted more than 120 million videos and 300 million accounts, creating new viral videos and must-watch clips daily which would be circulated by email and other media.[[4]](#footnote-4) As *The* *Economist* noted, by 2014 ‘viewers are spoiled for premium-quality choice… and remarkably [spend] close to an hour watching videos online’[[5]](#footnote-5) per day, in comparison to the 4.5 hours spent watching television. In 2016, online-video advertising in the US was forecast to rise to $10 billion, and Forbes forecasts that the US digital marketing spend will close in on $120 billion by 2021. This demonstrates the prescience of Google’s move into streaming media and highlights the way in which audiences have adapted to online video and transformed the possibilities for its monetization. From start-up, to incorporation into an internet giant, this narrative about the story of digital video is the dominant way in which we understand video becoming part of the internet.[[6]](#footnote-6)

In contrast, in this book I argue that one of the key moments in the development of the practices of online video actually begins *before* the founding of YouTube, as indeed do many of the practices and aesthetics that YouTube’s founders made use of in their early video work. In order to examine the often forgotten pre-history to YouTube’s later dominance of online video, I examine the earlier moment of community practice and video-making. In some ways my approach can be understood as complementary to a media archaeology, in as much as it seeks to uncover what we might call the ‘failed’ project of videoblogging, and is certainly informed by some of the insights of that method. Not only in seeking to uncover past technologies and old media forms but also using such media to think about contemporary digital culture. Indeed, I share a ‘discontent with “canonized” narratives of media culture and history… that widely endorsed accounts of contemporary media culture and media histories alike often tell only selected part of the story, and not necessarily correct and relevant parts.’[[7]](#footnote-7) As such, I want to add that this book is *a* history of videoblogging, and by no means *the* history of videoblogging, just as it aims to position itself in *a* history of some media, not *the* history of all media. It aims to highlight the continuities and ruptures and ‘construct alternative histories of suppressed, neglected, and forgotten media that do not point teleologically to the present media-cultural condition as their “perfection”.’[[8]](#footnote-8) Hence, this book uses non-institutionally archived historical resources, collected as part of the project, and focuses on different facets of online moving-image culture and its technological conditions of possibility to present a corrective to the overly YouTube oriented histories.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Nonetheless, the research materials on which this book draws form an archive of sorts – a distributed network of texts (interviews, emails, websites), memory (the videobloggers and others, materialised in texts but also through the affective re-experience of the films), and a large collection of videos. The videos are more dispersed than they were in 2005, particularly after Blip.tv, one of the main sites for hosting videoblogs, closed its doors in November 2013, but they are still mostly locatable, although not always straightforward to find. YouTube, which was considered such a poor platform by the videobloggers back in 2005, has ironically remained more stable as a site for storing, finding and re-discovering videoblogs – some videobloggers have even retrospectively uploaded their old films to YouTube.[[10]](#footnote-10)

I explore this early online video history and seek to understand it within its historical context as a creative and experimental community of video-makers that has been largely forgotten. The research project itself was originally conceived of in those early days, from around 2001, when the internet was rife with the ideological promise of creative freedom for rugged individuals (usually gendered as a man), entrepreneurial figures soon to become dominant on the web. A cyberlibertarian ideal, given to neoliberal ideas and venture capital funding, was soon to be seen making money on the ‘information superhighway’. These individuals knew how to take advantage of the wild west of the internet as it turned into what Tim O’Reilly called Web 2.0 – using what Barbrook and Cameron had previously described as the Californian Ideology; Information technologies are claimed to ‘empower the individual, enhance personal freedom, and radically reduce the power of the nation-state. Existing social, political and legal power structures will wither away to be replaced by unfettered interactions between autonomous individuals and their software.’[[11]](#footnote-11)

This was the idea of seeing the internet as a marketplace, populated by self-actualising rational actors in a competitive free market. For example, John Perry Barlow famously argued in his influential article *A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace* that cyberspace, immaterial in form and thus a ‘civilisation of the Mind’ should not – could not – succumb to the rules and regulations of the world of ‘flesh and steel’.[[12]](#footnote-12) The notion of the rational, individual actor, an entrepreneur, was further popularised through the work of a number of writers, for example Eric Raymond and Lawrence Lessig.[[13]](#footnote-13) It became an influential way to conceive of the political economic structures of the internet, and as Lanier later argued, the internet ‘needs entrepreneurs to come up with the products that are competing in the first place. In other words, clever individuals, the heroes of the marketplace, ask the questions which are answered by collective behaviour.’[[14]](#footnote-14) But of course, in reality

The Net’s development was almost completely dependent on the much reviled American federal government…. large amounts of tax payers’ dollars went into building the [internet] infrastructure and subsidising the cost of using its services. At the same time, many of the key [internet] programs and applications were invented either by hobbyists or by professionals working in their spare-time.[[15]](#footnote-15)

But we should also remember that the early internet was also populated by cyborgs, cyber-goddesses, feminists and queer bodies.[[16]](#footnote-16) And for others, the internet and the web offered something more than a digital market, a place of contact, communion and community – and this is where the videoblogging story really starts.

Indeed, videoblogging was also hugely reliant on the collective resources that produced the internet and its technologies. It was created through volunteerism and the contributions of videobloggers’ work towards a notion of community. Which is not to say there were not aspects of capitalism inherent in the development of these cultural practices and artefacts, in fact, some of the early pioneers were keen to create standalone possible ‘products’ that might be later sold or licensed in the creative economy. However, there remained an early commitment to free software, open source, community-oriented values and the excitement of building not only the technical infrastructure for videoblogging, but also a new aesthetic and grammar of video culture. These are the issues that fuelled videoblogging in its early days and drive the focus in this book.

We should remember, however, that the claims of technological and creative freedom often mask the gendered reality of an internet political economy that favoured the already wealthy, connected, or famous ­– indeed, the practices that emerged were sometimes less about creative freedom, and more about power, technical skill and know-how. The emergent practices that developed on the internet after 2000 were reliant on existing knowledge of how the technologies worked and could be applied, a gendered technological environment and political economy. Although this book does not formally adopt a political economic approach, it is clear that wealth and capital were hugely influential and technological know-how was unevenly distributed between the participants.[[17]](#footnote-17)

There are a few key issues I wish to highlight in relation to this. These are important, and underlie and inform this work. Firstly, many of the videobloggers I will go on to discuss self-identity as amateur. By amateur I gesture towards the idea that one does something without getting paid, that instead of monetary recompense, the personal satisfaction of having created (or achieved) something is assumed to be sufficient reward. In the digital age, the definition of being an amateur includes being someone who pursues a passion for personal, rather than professional, pleasure; someone who lacks either the knowledge or means to produce professional–quality work; or someone who labours without expecting to be paid.[[18]](#footnote-18) The definition of a media amateur can also describe ‘technically interested private individuals who acquire and develop technology before commercial use of the technology is even recognisable’.[[19]](#footnote-19) In other words, being an amateur may not be purely about doing something you love, for free, but is also linked to the access to and knowledge of a practice and is usually contrasted with professional work. It also refers in some sense to the notion of the ‘early adopter’. The definition of amateur also needs to be contextualised and historicised, and in her seminal study, Patricia Zimmerman shows how the concept of the amateur has shifted historically. She locates the origins of amateur film within a particular, historically specific romanticized vision of the bourgeois nuclear family, ‘thereby amputating its more resistant economic and political potential for critique’. For Zimmermann, amateur film ‘occupies one of the central contradictions of communications in the twentieth century: on the one hand, domination and consumption; on the other, resistance and hope’.[[20]](#footnote-20) This is a crucial starting point for thinking about the interplay of amateur media forms and new digital media.

Secondly, understanding of how early adopters of videoblogging practices engaged with the nascent technologies available to them is central to this book. This contributes to an understanding of how their practices developed and were conceptualised, alongside new kinds of visual tropes and styles that emerged from their practices and experimentations.[[21]](#footnote-21) New, often custom-written digital technologies and the emergence of new forms of amateur online communication, sharing and culture, crystallised in the practice of what they began to call videoblogging. A videoblogger was defined as someone who produces and maintains a videoblog, and is also likely to self-identify as a ‘videoblogger’. One of the main distinctions drawn between someone posting videos to YouTube (here referred to as ‘vloggers’) and a videoblogger, is that the videoblogger maintains her own blog. This was usually individually designed, with custom blog-rolls (or vlog-rolls), archives and about pages, where they post videos weekly or monthly.[[22]](#footnote-22)

Thirdly, the terms videobloggerand videobloggingshare their history with terms such as life-casting, video-streaming, video-podcasting and vlogging. It has become common to use the term videoblogging within academia when referring to the practice of posting home-made videos to video sharing sites such as Dailymotion, Vimeo or YouTube, but there are variations of the terms in use. Adrian Miles first referred to ‘vogs’ in his early writings and experiments with online video though he also refers to ‘desktop video’. Lange consistently refers to ‘vlogging’ and ‘vloggers’ in her work. Burgess and Green use both ‘videoblogging’ (and ‘videobloggers’) and ‘vlogging’ (and ‘vloggers’) to describe the practice of posting videos to YouTube, Venderbeeken refers to ‘Web Video’, Willett to ‘moblogs’ and Treske defines ‘the time and space that we as human beings share with ‘video’... a video sphere’*.*[[23]](#footnote-23) Despite these differences, there is a certain agreement in definition of the term(s) as videoblogging emerged as the social practice of posting videos on an internet blog, originally a form of online journal called a web-log. Thus, a videoblog is a blog that uses video as its main form of expression. This definition is complicated by the emergence of vlogs on YouTube, where vlogging would grow to include anyone posting a video of themselves online but also encompassed other kinds of user-generated content in video form. To distinguish between posting video on YouTube and within the videoblogging community, and following the practice of the videobloggers themselves, I refer to videos posted to YouTube as vlogging and vloggers, and in the videoblogging community as videoblogging and videobloggers.

Fourthly, videoblogging practices drew on blogging, on audio podcasting, and the sharing of photos which had emerged on sites such as Flickr. By the mid-2000s, the hype surrounding the concept of Web 2.0 was starting to make its way from tech journalism and into the mainstream media, and the ‘participatory turn’ in media was heralded as the next big thing.[[24]](#footnote-24) In this fervent environment, early videobloggers sought to create new art, documentary, film, technology and, in some cases, a hint of micro-celebrity.

By bringing these issues together, this book contributes to our understanding of the early practices surrounding online video production through a cultural history. By developing a critical understanding of how the practices developed and were used by the early adopters of videoblogging it outlines a new cultural-technical hybrid. It outlines an historical ethnography of the sociotechnical practices between 2004 and 2009. A running thread throughout concerns the challenges of studying a history such as the one I am analysing here, complicated by the fact that the empirical data is historically very recent. The book is also a reflection on the digital present, touching, as it does on many practices that were absorbed into ‘new’ technologies (these will no doubt be out of date within a few years too) such as Instagram stories and Snapchat.

I also want to challenge the claim that technology, especially internet technology, is ‘participatory’, this is a form of technological determinism. I want to restate that people make their own culture, but not always in the media ecologies of their own choosing. Although it is important to uncover the way in which hype and excitement about these possibilities served to actually inspire individuals and collectives seeking to build new technologies, we need to remain firmly focussed on the way in which people make their own history, their own culture and their own communities. By contesting fairly common descriptions of cultural practice on the internet, and providing a cultural history that creates dominant narratives, particularly the smooth corporate tales of mass market success and profitability, I hope to offer an alternative to, and corrective for, these celebratory descriptions. Today, with the success of massive socio-technical platforms such as YouTube, Blogger and Soundcloud, many of the smaller communities of practice across the internet, some of which were part of creating many of the practices around them that we now take for granted, have either been forgotten, disbanded or co-opted into corporate platforms. This highlights the importance of documenting these early cultural practices and communities. For example, the upset caused by Yahoo’s decision to shut down the social community GeoCities in 2009 led internet archivist Jason Scoll to pose the following question: ‘is user content a right, a treasure, a heritage, a meaningful part of the human condition?’.[[25]](#footnote-25) This question also lies at the heart of this book, preoccupied as it is with a history of a part of digital culture that is at risk of being forgotten, and which is becoming harder and harder to uncover due to the decisions by hosting companies to mass-delete large volumes of data from their servers and by contemporary accounts to overstate the contribution of corporate platforms at the expense of grassroots organising and creativity.[[26]](#footnote-26)

Despite a large volume of writing on YouTube, the use of online video in political campaigns and so forth, little has been written about the everyday practices of vernacular online video production at the turn of the millennium. These practitioners and artists avoided the emerging dominant platforms of YouTube and Vimeo, indeed they offered a direct critique to these giant aggregating systems. Videoblogging was the result of the rapid growth in digital technologies and the relative cheapness of new digital equipment for recording, storing and sharing data. This increased availability of digital media technologies, recording and editing software, networking platforms and distribution tools ignited a flourishing of creativity amongst amateur and semi-professional media creators, much of which converged (at the time) under the umbrella of either ‘citizen journalism’ or ‘the creative consumer’.[[27]](#footnote-27)

In 2004, a group of videobloggers came together to form a community of practice originally based primarily around individual websites and an email group. In subsequent chapters, I explore the contours of this community through interviews with a group of users (33 individuals in total, self-identified as 16 men and 17 women), and close reading of the technologies available to, utilised by and sometimes created by them. [[28]](#footnote-28) I also critically engage with the discourses surrounding these technologies and their practices and artefacts. I look at not just the material underpinnings of the video practices, but the practices themselves and the aesthetic these practices manifested.

Briefly, as a quick background to the book, I want to highlight the main empirical resources that were drawn on in the development of the argument. Firstly, I undertook semi-structured interviews to explore the interplay between the technologies used in videoblogging as moving-image culture, and the co-production of identity, community and critical technical practice[[29]](#footnote-29) that developed unique short-form narratives, aesthetics and meanings. Secondly, I use historical data specific to videoblogging, such as archived email lists, articles and books (written at and around the time by the videobloggers themselves) to develop a critical technical and cultural understanding of how the cultural-technical practice of videoblogging emerged and developed. Lastly, I combine this historical material with rich ethnographic data gathered from interviews and participant observation of the videoblogging community, and apply this knowledge to a selection of videoblogs to gain a deeper understanding of the aesthetic of what I call the short-form digital film. To this end, I asked the following questions; how did early communities of practice and related cultural forms crystallise around digital video on the internet between 2004-2009?; why did the technical-cultural assemblage of the videoblog emerge as a specific instance of short-form digital film, and how was the community around this media-form sustained?; and how did the videobloggers understand and conceptualise their own practice and the co-construction necessary in creating the conditions of possibility for videoblog work, sharing and community building? These questions inform my work and acted as a heuristic for the discussion in the book.

The concept of ‘community’ used here probably requires some explanation. Benedict Anderson argued that all communities are in some sense ‘imagined’ and that throughout history various forms of communication media have played an important role in determining the different styles these communities have taken.[[30]](#footnote-30) I argue that the videoblogging community can be understood similarly, although my meaning of community is defined in terms of the weak ties made possible by the internet, rather than the nation-state community that Anderson was interested in. Similarly, in early discourses surrounding the internet, the term ‘virtual community’ – first coined by Howard Rheingold – was often liberally applied to any group of people convening online around shared topics of interest. It follows, therefore, that the concept of ‘virtual community’ is open to a variety of interpretations at a variety of moments. That technologies affect social relations is also not a new idea. Already in 1990, Ursula Franklin announced herself “overawed by the way in which technology has acted to reorder and restructure social relations, not only affecting the relations between social groups, but also the relations between nations and individuals”.[[31]](#footnote-31) The term virtual community may seem somewhat out-dated today, as we now tend to think of groups of people who meet and socialise online as operating across social networks, yet to historically position videoblogging requires the utilization of certain concepts that were used at the time, such as ‘community’, ‘cross-post’, ‘meet-up’, and so forth. Social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram either did not exist or were in a very early development in the period I am looking at.[[32]](#footnote-32) Although the videoblog community did gradually migrate over to these platforms, the early history of the community was organised in a very different way with very different technologies.

In many ways, this book started by attempting to engage with and capture a rapidly changing “digital present” in which new technologies were announced glorified and abandoned on a yearly, if not monthly basis. Many articles, papers and books published at the time shared a certain naïve optimism about the potential of new digital technologies, seen for instance in Jenkins exploration of participatory culture which lauded digital technologies for their ability to bring people together and empower them to produce and consume content in completely new ways. As he later put it, ‘a participatory culture is one which not only lowers the barriers to participation but also creates strong social incentives to produce and share when one produces with others’.[[33]](#footnote-33) In some ways, today we are less likely to reproduce these overly optimistic observations, in a time when the reality of participation looks a lot more like surveillance than freedom.

When I started planning this study in 2005, the mainstream media, as well as media studies itself, was charged with anticipation about the new participatory turn in online culture, as well as excitement about ‘being digital’, ‘life on the screen’, online communities, etc.[[34]](#footnote-34) The promise of cheaper technologies, smoother learning curves and easier access to both digital technologies and the internet itself, spurred an excitement about a condition of possibility within digital culture that would somehow aid creativity and increase participation among users. Linked to this was the importance of digital literacy, with writers such as Livingstone arguing that digital literacy was ‘crucial to the democratic agenda’ because users of new media were not merely consumers, but citizens.[[35]](#footnote-35)

I mention these debates because they strongly shaped the original project that formed the basis of this book. In a sense, I am here attempting to historicise my own experience of early videoblogging because so many of the debates have since moved on to other questions – notably debates around automation, surveillance and the emergent political time-bomb that is fake news. This book, however, came out of another almost gentler moment in digital culture, a period in which questions of creativity, identity and community were very much at the forefront of culture. Within this small video sub-culture on the internet, was a relatively small group of artists and video-makers who enthusiastically spent their time producing short digital films that they shared with the world through their blogs. YouTube was still in its infancy, social media did not exist and, to use a common internet meme, ‘Pluto was still a planet’.[[36]](#footnote-36) And yet, this tiny community was ambitiously trying to create a new grammar, a fresh aesthetic and a genuinely sharing community of practice around the idea of ‘videoblogging’.

I conducted interviews with the videoblogging community in the period between June and September 2007. Around the time, the term ‘Web 2.0’ suddenly became a hotly debated topic on the internet. Tim O’Reilly’s paper on the social web seemed to encapsulate the very essence of what I saw was happening in the videoblogging community. The ideas and concepts in Web 2.0 were not so much new technological standards, as the articulation of the web as a platform, where ‘real-time streams’[[37]](#footnote-37) of live data could be accessed at any time and from anywhere via RSS and syndication, and where the individual device from which you accessed this data was rendered irrelevant because the software used to display that data was ‘written above the level of a single device’.[[38]](#footnote-38) Web 2.0 was always a contested term, for example Trebor Scholz argues that the ideology of Web 2.0 is merely a ‘framing device of professional elites that define what enters the public discourse about the impact of the Internet on society’.[[39]](#footnote-39) Nevertheless, its articulation still represented an important moment for the development of the social web and the starting point of many Web 2.0 companies, like YouTube and Twitter. It is also an important discursive moment in the history of videoblogging, particularly with regard to framing the practice within a wider discourse of participatory media.

Lev Manovich goes a long way to describe the ‘emergent conventions, the recurrent design patterns, and the key forms of new media’ [[40]](#footnote-40) which he sees as the new dominant cultural form of the 21st century. Manovich highlights numerical representation, modularity, automation, variability and transcoding as the main principles of new media, although he is perhaps more famous for his theorisation of the database as narrative form. In any case, the softwarization of media, and further, the softwarization of cultural artefacts and the rise of what has come to be known as a digital aesthetic or digital art, has contributed to a ‘new’ typology of sorts of what constitutes a digital cultural artefact.[[41]](#footnote-41) In terms of the commercial aspects and the wider questions of monetizing the Web 2.0 technologies, and knowing the amount of free labour that goes into the creation of both successful Web 2.0 businesses and the plethora of not-so-successful and failed businesses, it seems pertinent to reiterate that in this book, there are obvious political economic considerations related to the exploitation of free labour and the enclosure of what has been called the digital commons.[[42]](#footnote-42) Chanan discusses this in relation to videoblogging where, drawing on Marx, he conceptualises the work done by videobloggers as ‘free aesthetic labour’.[[43]](#footnote-43) However, whilst this is an important critique, this book seeks to do other work, more related to the socio-technical and cultural unfolding of a new aesthetic-technical project. As such, and for reasons of conceptual clarity and space, I largely bracket out the political economic issues. This is not to say that there are not important questions to be asked in relation to free labour and videoblogging itself, but that the focus in this book is the material cultural formations which relate to the condition of the web from 2004-2009[[44]](#footnote-44) under which videoblogging emerged and flourished as a cultural and material practice. This enables me to explore the way in which the technical, the social, narrative and imaginaries surrounding videoblogging are constructed in particular ways before the platform was commodified and co-opted into the larger digital economy.

The theoretical framework of this book draws on emerging theories surrounding materiality and digitalisation within the field of media studies, particularly drawing links with German media theory and its emphasis on the materiality of media, which makes explicit certain characteristics in relation to undertaking a media history that I find useful. I argue for a material understanding of the digital, seeing videoblogs as material artefacts. Indeed, videoblogs depend entirely on physical technology both during production, distribution and consumption. At no point does a videoblog escape from this materiality. Matthew Kirschenbaum’s analysis of the hard drive is a wonderful example of thinking about materiality. Storing a video for editing requires a hard drive. A hard drive is a non-volatile storage device made of rotating platters with magnetic surfaces, and a video file (as with all digital files) rests on this physical layer, without which it would not exist. In other words, although ‘as a written trace digital inscription [may be] invisible to the eye, […] it is not instrumentally undetectable or physically immaterial’.[[45]](#footnote-45) What this means is that, despite having little or no technical knowledge of the underlying structures of the computer, and particularly the hard drive, the videoblogger depends on its materiality, and it’s stability, for her work. The irony here, as Kirchenbaum points out, is that ‘since hard disks, in most users’ experience, either work ﬂawlessly or else crash spectacularly, the notion of the device as a binary black box with no capacity for error short of global failure is perhaps inevitable. But these functional extremes are precisely what reinforce the dominant perception of immateriality’.[[46]](#footnote-46) It is also notable that exemplary as Kirschenbaum’s forensic approach to the hard disk is, we must also note the historical nature of hard disks, which are themselves increasingly being replaced by a new material storage medium, namely solid-state drives (SSD). It is ironic that the very immateriality that hard disks made possible to experience, when looked back upon, were actually noisy mechanical, and actually quite fragile constituent parts of a computer. It is clear then that ‘immateriality’ is an historically constructed and technically created form of experience in relation to the digital, much like the model, floppy disc or CD Roms.

Equally, the early instability of the videoblogging practice begs the question of how to study it. Following a long tradition of scholars questioning how to study the media,[[47]](#footnote-47) N. Katherine Hayles argues for what she calls a media-specific analysis of media, an approach to critical enquiry which acknowledges that texts are always embodied entities and that the form of embodiment of a given text matters to its interpretative meaning. However, like McLuhan, Hayles does not call for media to be ‘considered in isolation from one another’, rather, following Bolter and Grusin, she argues that ‘media constantly engage in a recursive dynamic of imitating each other, incorporating aspects of competing media into themselves while simultaneously flaunting the advantages that their own forms of mediation offer’.[[48]](#footnote-48) This book, then, considers videoblogging a media-specific practice, meaning that its material and symbolic properties are both important. These properties are in constant interplay, and can be seen to co-construct each other. As Hayles argues, ‘in emphasizing materiality, I do not mean to imply that all aspects of a medium’s apparatus will be equally important. Rather, materiality should be understood as existing in complex dynamic interplay with content, coming into focus or fading into the background, depending on what performances the work enacts.’[[49]](#footnote-49) In this sense, some aspects of the videoblogging practice may be given more importance than others. For example, certain kinds of videoblogs require closer attention to the embodied use of the camera to convey certain messages, whereas others might place a stronger emphasis on narrative, editing or effects. The aim, then, is to highlight the dynamic interplay between the technology and the content, the medium and the performance, through which the videoblog is constructed.

Although questions of identity and community remain crucial in understandings digital culture, particularly with regard to a new generation of users, it is crucial to look at the symbolic and the material. For example, some of the early cyber-feminism literature argued that ‘the virtual and material are intertwined and superimposed on every aspect of cyberspace’. It is also interesting to note the growing influence of New Materialisms, for instance in the work of Iris van der Tuin and Rosi Braidotti. [[50]](#footnote-50)At universities, studying the digital is no longer confined to a single strand within media studies, tagged on at the end of the course, but is being adopted across the humanities and the university more generally. Today we are faced with ‘computational media’ and ‘computational culture’.[[51]](#footnote-51) We might note that Ursula Franklin argued that ‘everyone’s vernacular reality has changed’ and that ‘there are genuinely new activities that are possible now that could not have been done without the new technologies and their infrastructure’. In particular, she refers to the ability of these new technologies to more easily transfer, store and reconstruct information and the fact that ‘some of these affect our approaches to and perceptions of the future, that is, the projected realities’.[[52]](#footnote-52)

To understand this I have found Nick Couldry’s work on media as practice very helpful for developing my conceptualisation of videoblogging as a practice. Couldry makes it clear that he doesn’t want to reject other forms of media research, like studies of audiences or texts, altogether. However, he argues that by reorienting the study of media towards practice, one is allowed to answer questions about media in ‘more precise ways… based in the details of everyday practice and its organisation’. To Couldry, his approach is ‘alarmingly simple; it treats media as the open set of practices relating to, or oriented around, media’. In other words, he aims ‘to decentre media research from the study of media texts or production structures (important though these are) and to redirect it onto the study of the open-ended range of practices focused directly or indirectly on media’.[[53]](#footnote-53) In this book, then, practice is defined both as the way in which the videobloggers engage with the technologies available to them, the way in which these ways of engaging became adopted by the community as a whole, and how a sense of what videoblogging was became adopted as a kind of standard.

Equally, Roger Silverstone’s writing on media and everyday life has been very influential on my own research on videoblogging. In his work on technology and the everyday, Silverstone attempts to formulate an approach to studying media that takes into account both the material approaches associated with a political economic and structural side of media production, and the symbolic content of media, i.e. audience research, textual analysis etc. This book uses Silverstone’s argument that media are doubly articulated as its methodological starting point. Although referring to television, he could easily be talking about the digital when he argues, it is ‘through its double articulation into culture its significance is extended beyond its status “simply” as object or medium, for in its status as medium, and through the provision of information and entertainment, television provides the basis for an “education”, a competence, in all aspects of contemporary culture.’[[54]](#footnote-54) Silverstone’s work is situated in a long history of writings attempting to bridge the gap between the material analysis of media and the cultural signification of the media content. For example, Raymond Williams argued, ‘the social history and the social analysis needed to be directly related to critical and analytical examination of the materials *and* processes of the specific communication’,[[55]](#footnote-55) in contrast to Marshall McLuhan, who famously proclaimed that the medium is the message, emphasising the importance of studying medium-based analyses of media as ‘it is only too typical that the ‘content’ of any medium blinds us to the character of the medium’.[[56]](#footnote-56) In his attempt to reconcile these positions, Silverstone argues that media is not either-or, but both material and symbolic – hence his notion of the media as doubly articulated. This book follows in this tradition by emphasising not just the content of videoblogs, but their materiality. This is done in three stages; firstly, by tracing the technical constellation around videoblogging we start to see the outline of the videoblogging platform articulated by competing and often normative ideas of how the platform ‘should be’ – and eventually the emergence of a hegemonic platform imaginary. Secondly, through a formal analysis of a number of video blogs, a particular aesthetic emerges; a medium-specific aesthetic which is both influenced by and works in conjunction with the technical restrictions of the platform. Finally, by conceptualising videoblogging as a media practice, materially performed through embodied experiences and discursively reflected upon by the participants themselves, we see the emergence of a videoblogger identity. I now want to turn to situating videoblogging historically in the next chapter to broaden and deepen these discussions in terms of specific case of videoblogs and the practices of videoblogging.

1. The banality of the title and content pointed in some ways to early video on the internet was predominantly documentary/biographical or self-consciously aesthetic. As the New York Times observed in 2009, ‘this founding clip makes and repeats a larger point, too, with every pixel: Video — trivial or important — can now quickly and at no cost be published, broadcast and shared ‘Me at the Zoo’ also sets a style standard for the classic YouTube video: visually surprising, narratively opaque, forthrightly poetic’ Virginia Heffernan, ‘Uploading the Avant-Garde’, *The New York Times*, 3 September 2009, http://www.nytimes.com/2009/09/06/magazine/06FOB-medium- t.html?\_r=0 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Heffernan, ‘Uploading the Avant-Garde’ [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Including the very first, by the user Tim Leister, a friend of Karim who used the username COBALTGRUV, and who ironically described this founding video as ‘Interesting…’. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Hermione Hoby and Tom Lamont, ‘How YouTube made superstars out of everyday people’, The Guardian, 11 April 2010, http://www.theguardian.com/technology/2010/apr/11/youtube-web-video-stars [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The Economist ‘New Tube’, *The Economist*, May 3-9 (2014) [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Indeed, GAFA (Google, Amazon, Facebook and Apple) and related platforms now dominate the web and our experience of the Internet. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Erkki Huhtamo and Jussi Parikka, *Media Archaeology: Approaches, Applications, and Implications*, London: University of California Press, 2011: 3 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Huhtamo and Parikka, *Media Archaeology: Approaches, Applications, and Implications*. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. The lack of a historical archive is a major handicap to undertaking this kind of research project with early online video, relying in large part on the personal collection amassed by the researcher, and in some repositories, such the Internet Archive, or personal collections of the video-bloggers. A large cultural history has already potentially been lost due to the difficulty of persuading traditional archiving bodies to take internet culture seriously, and also to understand that it is more than a textual and still-image medium, requiring a complex set of technologies to be taken into consideration, such as the multiplicity of video codecs that were used for early work. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. For a similar exploration of groups and communities of video makers who actively avoided YouTube as their main platform for distribution, see John Hondros, *Ecologies of Internet Video: Beyond YouTube*. New York: Routledge, 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Richard Barbrook and Andy Cameron, ‘The Californian Ideology’, 1996,

    http://www.hrc.wmin.ac.uk/theory-californianideology-main.html [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. John Perry Barlow, A Cyberspace Independence Declaration, 1996,

    http://w2.eff.org/Censorship/Internet\_censorship\_bills/barlow\_0296.declaration [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Eric S. Raymond, *The Cathedral & the Bazaar*, Beijing: O’Reilly Media, 2001, Lawrence Lessig, *Free Culture*, London: Penguin Press, 2003. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Jaron Lanier, DIGITAL MAOISM: The Hazards of the New Online Collectivism, *Edge*, 2006, http://edge.org/conversation/digital-maoism- the-hazards-of-the-new-online-collectivism [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Barbrook and Cameron, ‘The Californian Ideology’. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Donna Harraway, ‘A cyborg manifesto: Science, technology, and socialist-feminism in the late 20th century.’ *The international handbook of virtual learning environments* (2006). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Geography might play a part here too, as observed by Rupert Howe: ‘Even though I was a geek, I was one of those people that used to think that people who spent time talking to other people on the internet were sad.  That attitude prevailed among the general population until Facebook blew it away.  I’d say it was much more prevalent in the UK than in the US.  Later when we met in person, Jay Dedman and I spoke about this.  I said that people in the UK were suspicious of technology and geeks.  He said, ‘Americans think that technology is the only thing that's going to save us’. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Michael Z. Newman, ‘Ze Frank and the poetics of Web video’, *First Monday,* 13.5. 2008 [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Brigit Richard, ‘Media Masters and Grassroots Art 2.0 on YouTube’, in Geert Lovink and Sabine Niederer (eds) , Amsterdam: The Institute for Network Cultures, 2008: 142. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Patricia Zimmerman, *Reel Families: A social history of Amateur Film*, Indiana University Press, 1995: ix-x [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Videoblogging as practice is not uniquely limited to the videoblogging community explored in this book, and one could argue that videoblogging has multiple of definitions and uses, however, in this book the terms ‘videoblogging’ and ‘videoblogger’ are used to specifically to denote the members of the early-adopter community under examination, in the period 2004-2009. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Today videoblogging has come to be strongly associated with posting video to YouTube, and a much easier process than all the technical know-how required in the early days. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Jean Burgess and Joshua Green, *YouTube*, Digital Media and Society Series, London: Polity, 2009; Rebekah Willett, ‘Always on: Camera Phones, Video Production and Identity’, in David Buckingham and Rebekah Willett (eds) *Video cultures,* London: Palgrave McMillan, 2009; Andreas Treske *The Inner Lives of Video Spheres*, Amsterdam: Institute for Network Cultures, 2013; Adrian Miles, *Vogma, a Manifesto*, http://hypertext.rmit.edu.au/vog/manifesto/, 2000; Adrian Miles, Softvideography: Digital Video as Postliterate Practice, in Byron Hawk, David M. Rieder and Ollie Oviedo (eds) *Small Tech: The Culture of Digital Tools,* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008; Patricia Lange, The Vulnerable Video Blogger: Promoting Social Change through Intimacy, *The Scholar and Feminist Online*, volume 5, no. 2, www.barnard.edu/sfonline, 2007; RobrechtVanderbeeken, Web Video and the Screen as a Mediator and Generator of Reality, in Geert Lovink and Rachel Somers Miles (eds) *Video Vortex Reader II: Moving Images Beyond YouTube*, Amsterdam: Institute for Networked Cultures, 2011. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture. Where Old and New Media Collide*, New York: New York University Press, 2006. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Laura E. Hall, ‘What Happens When Digital Cities Are Abandoned?’, *The Atlantic*, 2014,

    http://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2014/07/what-happens-when-digital-cities-are-abandoned/373941/ [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. This highlights the importance of current work on web archives, see for instance Niels Brügger ‘Web history and social media’, in *The SAGE Handbook of Social Media*, Jean Burgess, Alice Marwick and Thomas Poell (eds) London : Sage Publications, Incorporated, 2018, pp. 196-212, but also the work of Olia Lialina, ‘A Vernacular Web, The Indigenous and The Barbarians’, talk at the Decade of Web Design Conference in Amsterdam, January 2005, http://art.teleportacia.org/observation/vernacular/ . It is also worth mentioning the Internet Archive (http://arhive.org), founded in 1996 by Brewster Kahle, which is one of the earliest video archive or storage websites for video. Kahle has been committed to building a full archive of the internet, storing every webpage and providing a history of the internet through the Way-Back Machine. Referred to only as ‘The Archive’, this has the potential to be perhaps the most lasting of all the video archiving sites. It is still possible to find videoblogs from this period in these archives. Many videobloggers used the archive to host their earliest videos (before the founding of Blip.tv, another video-hosting site) and many continued to cross-post their films there for many years, as a backup. However, the majority did not, which means much of the early videoblogging archive is already lost. Cross-posting was an important videoblogger practice of uploading the same video to a number of different repositories and hosting sites in order to spread the risk of one of the sites going bankrupt or merely disappearing without notice from the web. It was also practiced as a way of spreading content to wider audiences. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Luke Goode ‘Social news, citizen journalism and democracy’, *New Media & Society,* 11.8 (2009): pp. 1287-1305; Jean Burgess, *Vernacular Creativity and New Media,* PhD Diss. Creative Industries Faculty, University of Technology, Queensland, 2007: 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. User is here used to refer to ‘active internet contributors, who put in a ‘certain amount of creative effort’ which is ‘created outside of professional routines and platforms’’, cited in José van Dijck, ‘Users like you? Theorizing agency in user-generated content’, *Media, Culture & Society,* 31.1 (2009) p. 41. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Phil Agre, ‘Toward a critical technical practice: Lessons learned in trying to reform AI’, *Bridging the Great Divide: Social Science, Technical Systems, and Cooperative Work, Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum*, (1997): pp. 131-157. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Maria Bakardjieva and Andrew Feenberg, ‘Involving the Virtual Subject: Conceptual, Methodological and Ethical Dimensions’, *Journal of Ethics and Information Technology*, 2.4 (2004): pp. 233-240. See also Benedict Anderson, *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*. London: Verso Books, 2006. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Ursula Franklin, *The Real World of Technology,* Ontario: Anansi, 1990, p.13. See also Sherry Turkle, *Life on the Screen,* London: Simon and Schuster, 2011; Sherry Turkle, *Alone together: Why we expect more from technology and less from each other*, London: Hachette UK, 2017. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. For instance, Facebook was founded in February 2004, but didn’t open registration to universities until October 2005, and to the wider public in September 2006. Twitter launched in March 2006. Instagram was first released on the iTunes app store in October 2010. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Henry Jenkins, ‘What happened before YouTube?’, in Jean Burgess, Joshua Green, (eds) *YouTube. Digital Media and Society Series,* Cambridge: Polity, 2009, p. 116. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. My initial thoughts on this were heavily influenced by the work of writers such as Nicholas Negroponte, *Being Digital,* New York: Vintage, 1996, Sherry Turkle’s *Life On the Screen* and Howard Rheingold, *The virtual community: Homesteading on the electronic frontier*. Harvard: MIT press, 2000 [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Sonia Livingstone, ‘Media literacy and the challenge of new information and communication technologies’*. Communication Review*, 7.3-14 (2004): p. 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. BWPWAP, or Back When Pluto Was a Planet, is “an expression used whenever one wants to talk about things in our recent past that have changed quickly”– for a more detailed discussion of this term, see the full curatorial statement from Transmediale 2013 in Kristoffer Gansing et al ‘BWPWAP CURATIORIAL STATEMENT’, *Transmediale 2013*, Amsterdam, http://www.transmediale.de/content/bwpwap-curatiorial-statement. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. David M. Berry, *The Philosophy of Software: Code and Mediation in the Digital Age*, London: Palgrave, 2011, p 143-171. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Tim O’Reilly, ‘What is Web 2.0. Design Patterns and Business Models for the Next Generation of Software’, 2005, from http://oreilly.com/web2/archive/what-is-web-20.html [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Trebor Scholz, The Participatory Turn in Social Life Online, 2007, http://www.slideshare.net/trebor/the-participatory-turn; see also Evgeny Morozov, ‘The Meme Hustler’, *The Baffler,* 2013, http://www.thebaffler.com/salvos/the-meme-hustler; and Caroline Bassett, Maren Hartmann, Kathleen O’Riordan, ‘After convergence: what connects?’, *The Fiberculture Journal*, 2008, http://thirteen.fibreculturejournal.org, who who were ‘wary and aware’ of the ‘discourse circulating around these innovations; one that proclaims their importance, underscoring and perhaps overplaying their radical novelty.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, London: MIT Press, 2001: 38. Manovich rejected the term ‘aesthetics’ in favour of ‘language’ – arguing that it ‘implies a set of oppositions which I would like to avoid— between art and mass culture, between the beautiful and the ugly, between the valuable and the unimportant’. However, as a field, digital aesthetics has been established as a useful concept in describing the collection of stylistic elements and tropes that encompass the digital and so it is used in this book to denote this enclave of practices, styles and techniques. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Lev Manovich, *Software Takes Command*, London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013a. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Tiziana Terranova, ‘Free Labour: Producing Culture in the Digital Economy’, *Social Text,* 18.2 (2000): pp. 33–58; Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude*, London: Hamish Hamilton, 2005; Eben Moglen, ‘The DotCommunist Manifesto: How Culture Became Property and What We’re Going to Do About It’, 2001, http://moglen.law.columbia.edu [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Michael Chanan, Tales of a Video Blogger, *Reframe*, 2012, http://reframe.sussex.ac.uk/activistmedia/2013/03/free-e-book-tales-of-a-video- blogger-by-michael-chanan/ [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. A note on dates; I define the period of the early videoblogging community as falling between 2004 (when the email list was started) and 2009 (by which time the community had more or less disbanded). However, at some points in this book, I refer to earlier instances of video-in-a-blog, notably Kontras and Miles as significant moments in the history of videoblogging. These moments are included to highlight the difficulty of pinpointing exactly when an historical period begins and when it ends, and further, the importance of keeping an open mind about the fluidity of periods of medial change. It is perhaps also worth noting that although I draw on archival material from 2004 onwards, my initial interviews were conducted in 2007, thus reflecting the historical specificity of that time (ie the videobloggers had already had a few years to reflect on their practices). [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Matthew Kirschenbaum, ‘Extreme Inscription: The Grammatology of the Hard Drive’, *Text Technology,* 13. 2 (2004): pp. 91-125. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Kirschenbaum, ‘Extreme Inscription: The Grammatology of the Hard Drive’, p. 95 [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Raymond Williams, *Television: technology and cultural form*, London: Routledge, 1990 (1974); Roger Silverstone, *Why Study The Media?,* London: Sage, 1999; Christian Metz, *Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema,* University Of Chicago Press, 1990. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. N. Katherine Hayles, ‘Print is flat, code is deep: The importance of media-specific analysis’, *Poetics Today*, 25.1, (2004): p. 69. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Hayles, ‘Print is flat, code is deep: The importance of media-specific analysis’, 2004: 71 [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Margaret Morse, ‘Virtually Female: Body and Code’, in Jennifer Terry and Melodie Calvert (eds) *Processed Lives; Gender and Technology in Everyday Life*, London: Routledge, 1997, p. 28. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. David M. Berry, *Understanding Digital Humanities*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012; Manovich, *Software Takes Command*. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. Franklin, *The Real World of Technology,* p. 47. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. Nick Couldry, ‘Theorising Media as Practice’, *Social Semiotics,* 14. 2 (2004): pp. 117; see also Nick Couldry, *Media, society, world: Social theory and digital media practice*. London: Polity, 2012. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. Roger Silverstone, *Television and Everyday Life,* London: Routledge, 1994: 123 [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. Williams, *Television: technology and cultural form*, p. vi (emphasis mine) [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. Marshall McLuhan, *Understandig media. The Extensions of Man.* New York: Routledge, 1964: 9-11. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)