

While any number of online video sites are making an impact around the world, perhaps none is more influential than YouTube, home to three billion videos and counting. From diaspora Rwandans in the United Democratic Forces FDU-Inkingi lashing out at the regime back home to comedian Khaya Dlanga's humorous take on life in South Africa, the King Kong of video file-sharing has enabled a plethora of users to reach across borders and potentially garner a worldwide audience.¹

by Melissa Wall

Google-owned YouTube raises interesting questions about the ability of new technologies to change the well-established communication patterns that historically have led to Western, particularly American, dominance of news, information and entertainment around the world.

While services such as the South African-based Zoopy represent a local alternative to YouTube, such initiatives are unlikely to catch on globally, and thus provide mainly a South African-to-South African distribution channel. YouTube, meanwhile, is busy launching specific country sites ranging from Japan to Brazil to Poland.

Over the past year, I explored the presentation of African images on YouTube, focusing specifically on Kenya and Ghana, two countries with growing economies, which are showing increases in Internet use.

I kept the question simple: If you typed "Kenya" or "Ghana" into YouTube's basic search box, what sort of image of those countries would you be offered?

What I initially found was:

Western voices, in particular, Americans, were dominant overall. Despite much hype about the fact that more YouTube users are now found outside the US than in it, the Americans topped the list of those posting videos about Kenya or Ghana, continuing their historical role of presenting the images of the rest of the world to itself. Interestingly, many of the Western-created videos

also just as likely to come from NGO public relations efforts as from traditional news outlets.

In the summer of 2008, I made a repeat search on YouTube and found that Ghana has not really changed its YouTube image. This was not the case for Kenya.

Kenya's election crisis on YouTube

In December 2007, Kenya's disputed presidential election resulted in large scale, unexpected violence that spilled into the new year as Raila Odinga and Mwai Kibaki both sought control of the country.

The unexpected death and destruction combined with several other factors to create an opening for YouTube videos about Kenya to take a dramatic turn.

The Kenyan government banned live television and radio coverage of the violence. However, Kenya's Nation Media Group had just a few months earlier launched its own branded YouTube channel, NTV Kenya, providing it with an alternative outlet for its reporting.

At the same time, the election violence meant that many tourists left the country, and were thus not filling up YouTube with their safari/missionary videos. Finally, the Western media began paying more attention to the country, producing more content that quickly made its way onto YouTube.

Kenyans working in concert with other Africans and Westerners interested in the country's welfare were feverishly trying to get images of the violence out in hopes of generating the political will to help end the crisis.

A YouTube channel was used by the Kenyan Red Cross to document the upheaval. A new channel set up by the US-based National Democratic Institute for International Affairs represented its organisation, Kenya Votes, which initially intended to help educate Kenyan voters, but turned to documenting abuses during the election.

Amateurs taped coverage from professional news media such as Al Jazeera or CNN and reposted it to YouTube. Some shot their own footage with cellphones or created montages of professional video and still photos to fashion pleas to stop the violence.

Much of this content was distributed through blogs, social networking sites like Facebook or other similar spaces; even with these other sites, YouTube was frequently the host for their video, so that the video service became a key alternative information clearinghouse.

This sudden, intense burst of activity in early 2008 appears to have had some impact on Kenya's representation on YouTube.

First, news items currently appear more frequently in the first few pages of a search based on "relevance," pushing down tourist or music videos. (Such videos also are more likely to emphasise violence and mayhem, common tropes for much of Africa.)

Also, whether because of the violence or YouTube's push for more "partners" to furnish content and hopefully draw in advertising money, more professional voices, especially from traditional news outlets, are now appearing on Kenya YouTube searches such as in reports from Al Jazeera but also from Kenya's own news channel, NTV.

The volume of additional content combined with the high interest level from visitors to YouTube may well have changed the nation's image on YouTube – at least for now – from amateur tourist and missionary content along with entertainment videos to news and information.

It should be noted, however, if the search is based on number of views, then tourists' animal videos and music return to the top.

Compared to Ghana, which remained fairly static in terms of types of content producers and images over the same time period, this suggests that a crisis may shift the sorts of videos being posted onto YouTube about a particular country or region. A search for "Zimbabwe" similarly turns up news videos first, likely as well due to the on-going political crisis and decline in tourism.

In the case of African news outlets such as NTV, this video file-sharing site represents a new means of gaining a potentially global audience as well as an ability under the right circumstances to skirt local control.

But will it change traditional communication patterns in which the West sets the tone and provides the most content? The results both before and after Kenya's election crisis suggest not.

YouTubing Africa

old patterns and new possibilities

were produced by amateurs – frequently tourists on safari or on missionary work. Neither group provided new images of Kenya or Ghana. Instead, they reproduced some of the most basic stereotypes: Mating lions and thirsty giraffes, or Africans eager for Western tutelage in Christianity.

African content was almost all entertainment. Africans did in fact post videos that featured Africans but these were almost all music videos, quite often appearing to have been taped off satellite television being viewed in the West by diaspora Africans. These videos too were stereotypical, imitating US hip hop music and video styles right down to their objectifying of young women who appear as sexually ripe props for the almost always all-male music groups. More African-produced television shows were posted for Ghana than Kenya; whereas Kenya tended to be associated with Western productions set in Kenya such as reality shows.

News and information were in short supply. In the videos I examined, YouTube was rarely being used as an alternative news distribution channel for African information, even though this was one of its most intriguing potential uses from a journalism perspective. In addition, information or news style videos were

Endnotes

1. Yi-Wyn Yen (2008) YouTube looks for the money clip. *Fortune*. <http://techland.blogs.fortune.cnn.com/2008/03/25/youtube-looks-for-the-money-clip/>