

John McCain gets BarackRoll'd: Authorship, Culture, and Community on YouTube

Hillary Savoie
PhD Student Communication and Rhetoric
Department of Language, Literature and Communication
Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute
brownh@rpi.edu

Abstract

The 2008 presidential election provides a clear example of how new media, in its support of individual expression, can be used to support and sustain community action among large groups of people. While this election does not owe its outcome entirely to new media, new media provided platforms upon which portions of the election played out, namely through YouTube, cell phone and email networking, facebook, and blogs. Specifically, this cultural studies analysis explores the viral YouTube video “John McCain gets BarackRoll’d” as an example of a text that utilizes the affordances of new media to construct a text from other fragmented texts. While this text is clearly constructed for individual expression and makes visible and tangible the human desire to create and transmit individualized messages, it is also a semiotic construction that utilizes a series of symbols to broadcast to other individuals for whom these symbols are shared and culturally significant. Much like the role print technology plays in Benedict Anderson’s imagined community, this YouTube text, while being fluid and easily appropriated, also represents an effort toward the establishment of commonality between individuals who might otherwise never interact. In other words, YouTube videos are examples of individual uses of technology to establish community and a sense of continuity within that community through the use of shared symbols.

The development of new media has created a technological shift that allows individuals to easily take on the role of author of their own cultural messages. The critical theorist Walter Benjamin predicted a similar shift resulting from the age of mechanical reproduction. In 1935 in his *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Benjamin suggested, “the distinction between author and public is about to lose its basic character” (p. 28). While he is referring to an era of mechanical reproduction, Benjamin’s description appears to predict the age of digital reproduction in which contemporary users of new media switch fluidly in one moment to the next from their role as “reader” to “author” of a text. New media allows consumers to access an infinite number of texts while affording them the ability to react in turn with their own individual thoughts, responses, and ideas through any number of vehicles including blogs, YouTube, and social networking sites like facebook.

The 2008 presidential election provides a clear example of how new media, in its support of individual expression, can be used to support and sustain community action among large groups of people. While this election does not owe its outcome entirely to new media, new media provided platforms upon which portions of the election played out, namely through YouTube, cell phone and email networking, facebook, and blogs. Specifically, this cultural studies analysis explores the viral YouTube video “John McCain gets BarackRoll’d” as an example of a text that utilizes the affordances of new media to construct a text from other fragmented texts. While this text is clearly constructed for individual expression and makes visible and tangible the human desire to create and transmit individualized messages, it is also a semiotic construction that utilizes a series of symbols to broadcast to other individuals for whom these symbols are shared and culturally significant. Much like the role print technology plays in Benedict Anderson’s imagined community, this YouTube text, while being fluid and easily appropriated, also represents an effort toward the establishment of commonality between individuals who might otherwise never interact. In other words, YouTube videos are examples of individual uses of technology to establish community and a sense of continuity within that community through the use of shared symbols.

This essay will begin with a discussion of how to address YouTube and its relationship to media theory. A description of the text under investigation will follow. Due to the relative lack of research that specifically addresses the questions of new media, this essay will draw upon existing television media literature, including Stuart Hall and John Fiske, in addition to new media theorists, such as Lev Manovich and Henry Jenkins, to explore the nature of YouTube authorship. Using Benedict Anderson’s concept of *imagined community* this essay will then address questions of individuality and the creation of community through technology. The essay will conclude with a discussion of the implications new media technologies have on authorship, community, and political commodities.

YouTube: New Medium, Vehicle, or Tool?

Literary critic and critical theorist Walter Benjamin in his *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* argued that the technological advances of mechanical reproduction, coupled with the growth of the press, created a scenario in which readers were increasingly capable of becoming writers. He predicted that, “the distinction between author and public is about to lose its basic character” (p. 28). While his argument refers to a change within traditional

media, his suggestion that “[a]t any moment the reader is ready to turn into a writer” (p. 28) provides an extremely apt description of a user of new media who now can move seamlessly from viewing television coverage of a political event to constructing and broadcasting a response via YouTube. This new role as media reader/writer has interesting affects on the analysis of new media.

Exploring the role of authorship of the reader/writer within new media is problematic insofar as it is difficult to pinpoint what type or types of media are being authored when referring to new media. Lev Manovich, in his *The Language of New Media*, draws attention to this through the use of the term *new media object* to describe what might otherwise be seen as distinct media, everything from a digital still image, to a computer game, to a Web site, and to, indeed, the Internet itself. Therefore, he suggests the Internet can be seen as both a platform for a series of types of *new media objects*, like digital images, digital video, and Web sites, as well as a *new media object* of its own. The Internet can be viewed as a vehicle for traditional media, a tool for the production and dissemination of traditional media, or as a source for a new medium that is specific to Internet technology. Limiting this discussion to YouTube, the next layer of complexities of authorship in new media becomes clear. The texts broadcast by YouTube range from pirated versions and clips of television shows, to fan fiction, to individual chatter, to family videos. YouTube provides a platform from which traditional mass media can be rebroadcast, remixed, or recreated. However, YouTube is also a location where new and individual uses of the site exist independent of mass media. There are so many possible uses of YouTube that its role as a new medium or as a platform for multiple and hybrid media (both traditional and new) can easily become confused. Is YouTube itself a medium? Or is it a vehicle for multiple media? Or is it a tool for creating media? This conflation of media, media platform, and media tool makes a media studies analysis of YouTube a daunting task. In order to discuss the media, cultural, and political implications of YouTube, or, indeed, any new media, it is first necessary to determine what type of media object it is and what media lens to view it through.

Certainly this question is complex and deserved of ongoing investigation, however, for the purpose of this discussion YouTube will be treated as a medium in itself and the distinction between types of texts and associated affordances on the site will be treated as generic distinctions. YouTube meets the principles of new media, as laid out by Lev Manovich in *The Language of New Media*. YouTube, like all Web sites, is digital, modular, and automated. Due to the social components of YouTube it is also infinitely variable. It changes with every visitor to the site. Finally, YouTube is an example of transcoding, in which media becomes computer data. Transcoded data has a dual identity: “...computerized media still displays structural organization that make sense to its human users...from another point of view, its structure now follows the established conventions of the computer’s organization of data” (Manovich, p. 45).

The choice to treat YouTube as a distinct medium, as opposed to a genre of social software or Web site, offers several affordances to this analysis. Due to similarities of presentation between television and YouTube videos, treating YouTube as a medium allows this analysis to draw upon traditional television media theory, whereas treating YouTube as a genre of social software, alongside Facebook and MySpace, would not allow for the use of television theory. Furthermore, treating YouTube as a distinct medium suggests the discussion of generic differences that make the video in question particular. The distinction between “John McCain gets BarackRoll’d” and other YouTube videos, for instance, the “Yes We Can” video or rebroadcast news coverage of an Obama interview, is essential to understanding both the

implication of the video and YouTube itself. Finally, YouTube allows for a series of activities associated with the text, namely, view text, comment, embed, and subscribe, etc. These activities are a part of the overall experience of the medium itself. While these characteristics of YouTube will not be discussed at length within this analysis, treatment of YouTube as a medium permits a detailed examination of the characteristics and affects of these particular activities.

By no means am I suggesting that YouTube should always be analyzed as a distinct medium. It can be argued that YouTube is not a medium in itself and that, rather, it constitutes a platform for multiple media or that it is a media tool or that it constitutes a genre of media. However, to date, this evasive quality seems to be a characteristic of new media. While Manovich does not explore this quality in detail, his definition of the term *new media object* as including “a digital still, digitally composed film, virtual 3-D environment, computer game, self-contained hypermedia DVD, hypermedia Web site, or the Web as a whole” (p.14) suggests a nested nature of new media. If the Internet itself is a new media and it contains other new media within it, it becomes necessary to discuss the media and their implications on micro, meso, and macro scales depending on what characteristics are under examination. Taking a lesson from quantum physics’ study of light—in which light is both a particle and a wave depending on how it is tested—I would posit that the treatment of platforms such as YouTube, at least for the time being, should depend on the phenomena under investigation. Since this analysis addresses a particular YouTube video, “John McCain gets BarackRoll’d,” the authorial affordances that YouTube offers, and the influence YouTube has on the construction of a community, a micro-level inspection of YouTube itself, as opposed to of other social software or the Internet as a whole, suits the analysis. Therefore, all texts available through YouTube will be discussed as texts that are created through a similar process of construction and the details of that construction—such as text selection, alteration, and/or creation—contributes to generic distinctions.

John McCain gets BarackRoll’d

Like many contemporary texts, an understanding of the YouTube video “John McCain gets BarackRoll’d” requires an understanding of the text fragments from which the video was constructed. In order to explore the meaning and implications of the video, these fragments will also be explained. This video evolved from a series of YouTube video phenomena that began, more or less, with RickRolling¹. RickRolling is an Internet meme that works on a falsely advertised link, often received in an email. The link is masked in some way, claiming to be a link to something of interest. However, rather than connecting to what it says, the link leads to a YouTube version of Rick Astley’s 1987 music video “Never Gonna Give You Up” in which Astley performs the song while dancing². The use and appeal of this particular video is unclear. Internet sources have referenced a number of characteristics, including alleged homoerotic undertones (encyclopediadramatica.com) and 1980’s “fetishism” (O’Brien, 2008).

According to a poll conducted by Survey USA over 18 million Internet users were RickRolled by April 2008. RickRolling now extends beyond the limits of the Internet and has

¹ RickRolling actually evolved out of an old Internet joke called Duck Rolling, which was a link leading to a duck on wheels.

² <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oHg5SJYRHA0>

been used as a prank in instances from college basketball games, scientology protests, NPR news coverage, and Carson Daly's late night show. Most recently, in November 2008 Rick Astley himself RickRolled the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade by performing the song on a float ostensibly dedicated to children's characters.

An August 2008, as a spin off to the RickRoll video, Hugh Atkin, a well-known producer of YouTube viral videos and Barack Obama fan, created "BarackRoll," as a parody of the Rick Astley music video. In it Atkin splices together a series of clips of Barack Obama speaking in order to show Obama speaking the words of "Never Gonna Give You Up" while the song plays in the background³. In keeping with the original music video's format, this video also includes clips of Barack Obama dancing on the Ellen Degeneres Show in a manner that is vaguely reminiscent of Rick Astley. The other clips that appear in the video include those taken from press conferences, interviews, speeches, and other campaign events. As of December 2008, BarckRoll had almost 5 million views on YouTube.

In September 2008, Atkin created the follow up to "Barack Roll" with "John McCain gets BarackRoll'd"⁴. This video makes use of the blank screen that appeared behind John McCain at the Republican National convention to play the "BarackRoll" video. The BarackRoll video appears to interrupt McCain's speech, much like a RickRoll prank. Although it did not actually happen, the video is cut in such a way as to make it appear as though McCain was "BarackRoll'd" as a prank. The clips of McCain show him appearing to respond to the video as an annoyance while an enthusiastic audience, including Cindy McCain and Sarah Palin, chants "Obama! Obama!" As of December 2008, this video had approximately 2.6 million views.

The "John McCain gets BarackRoll'd" video also appears within the context of a series of other YouTube videos that, while not directly referenced within this video, nonetheless create a genre of election videos of which this video is a part. These videos include clips of real and doctored election coverage, individual rants, support videos—like "Yes We Can,"⁵ attack ad style videos—such as "McCain's YouTube Problem Just Became a Nightmare,"⁶ and parodies of support videos—like "john.he.is,"⁷ to name a few. These videos often reference and feed off of each other much like the evolution of the "John McCain gets BarackRoll'd" video. These videos are generally youth focused, ranging from the humorous, to political critical, to sentimental, to apathetic. However, in the months leading up to the election, the trend of videos, in number videos, but more impressively in time viewed on YouTube, was clearly in support of Barack Obama. According to Tube Mogul, Obama's YouTube channel was watched for 14.5 million hours, compared to McCain's channel at 488, 152 hours (Ramirez, 2008).

While it is important to reference some of the other videos that make up the context of the "John McCain gets BarackRoll'd" video, it is also critical to note that viewers of this video may not have seen all of the contributing videos referenced in this analysis. Any given viewer of "John McCain gets BarackRoll'd" would understand the video differently based on how much interaction he or she had with RickRolling, BarackRolling, and the genre of YouTube election

³ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=65I0HNvTDH4>

⁴ http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_TiQCJXpbKg&feature=related

⁵ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1z2fPi2VtQI>

⁶ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GEtZIR3zp4c>

⁷ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3gwqEneBKUs>

video. The next section will discuss the affects that a user's context has on the way he or she authors or interprets a given video.

New Media/New Authorship

The process of construction of and interaction with a YouTube text can be seen as a process similar to the encoding/production and decoding/interpretation of a television text. Stuart Hall, in his *Encoding/Decoding*, discusses the difference between what is encoded into a television text—or what the producer/encoder of the text intends the audience to understand from that text—and what is decoded—or drawn from the text by the viewer/decoder. Hall's map for how messages are encoded and decoded into television texts involves a series of "moments" within the production process in which codes are applied and later decoded by an audience. Hall developed this theory for textual analysis to explain how that an audience does not passively accept a text, but rather constructs meaning for the text based upon his or her background.

The steps involved in the encoding and decoding follow. First, information from the "wider socio-cultural and political structure" is selected for encoding by the producer/encoder. This information is then encoded using particular meaning structures to make a text. This television text constitutes the "meaningful discourse" that the encoder and decoder have in common (p. 165). The process of decoding is a reversal of encoding; the decoder decodes the text based on his or her own set of meaning structures. The way in which the decoder understands the text, eventual feeds information back into the socio-cultural and political world of which the individual is a part. However, "the codes of encoding and decoding may not be perfectly symmetrical. The degree of symmetry—that is, the degrees of "understanding" and "misunderstanding" in the communicative exchange—depend on the degrees of symmetry established between the positions of the "personifications" of the encoder-producer and decoder-receiver" (p. 166).

Hall's map for the encoding and decoding of television media is a valuable lens for viewing YouTube media. YouTube texts are created through a similar process; however, YouTube, and other new media, expand the potential for text production. Since YouTube allows for the possibility of the individual production and dissemination of "television-like" texts, it opens up the encoding process; anyone with Internet access and a few simple tools can encode a video that could be viewed around the world. With slight adjustments, Hall's model for symmetry within communicative exchange can be expanded from the "one to many" model of television to the "many to many" model for YouTube.

Viewing "John McCain gets BarackRoll'd" through the lens of Hall's theory of encoding, the importance of the information that is selected from the "wider socio-cultural and political structure" comes under investigation. Clearly this text is intertextually constructed upon many references to other texts in the "wider socio-cultural and political structure": the RickRoll and BarackRoll videos, the prank nature of the RickRoll video's use online and off, the candidates in question, the Republican National Convention, the presidential race, etc. All of these references are used to construct a text. The text cites these references as symbols that, when combined, suggest another larger meaning.

Although the political intentionality behind the video is not necessarily immediately apparent without knowledge of Atkin's support of Obama, it references the image of Barack

Obama as being “in” on the RickRoll and BarackRoll memes and therefore youthful, internet-savvy, even hip (as far as contenders for the presidency go). On the other hand, McCain is the one being pranked in the video and is portrayed as humorless, unaware, and old fashioned. This video is reminiscent the way Andrew Wernick suggests a 1989 Polish election poster featuring an image of Gary Cooper from *High Noon* asks “whether the picture presented is a mirror or a window, whether what you see is your enemy or yourself. Which side are you on?” (1991, p. 126). “John McCain gets BarackRoll’d” asks the viewer which side they are on, that of humorlessness and the status quo or of technological savvy, playfulness, and change.

However, the text might be read in any number of ways depending upon which of the intertextual fragments of the video the viewer has seen and how her or she relates to those fragments. Hall’s theory of encoding and decoding leaves room for this asymmetry in decoding a text. One individual might decode the text in a way reads the text as one that is supportive of Barack Obama as a youthful candidate for change. Another individual might read in references to Obama’s irreverence and celebrity status and, therefore, to John McCain’s tried and true methodology. Yet another individual might miss the references to RickRolling or mistake the event as an actual occurrence.

Despite the fact that Hall’s model provides for messages to be decoded based on different meaning structures, he offers only three positions from which the television text can be decoded: (1) the dominant hegemonic position, (2) the negotiated code (a mixture of adaptive and dominant readings), or (3) the oppositional code (understanding the dominant code and resisting it) (Hall p. 171-173). These interpretive levels allow for a viewer who does not read the encoded meanings, or who reads them but interprets them as something other than the intended meaning. However, it does not lend itself directly to the interpretation of the multiplicity of “personifications” of viewers/decoders and the multifaceted media experiences an individual can have online. While the theory of encoding/decoding is valuable for looking at new media, the distinct decoding positions limit the discussion of YouTube texts. As a result of the vast amounts of information available online, those who use the Internet have an increasingly heterogeneous experience online. While there are viral videos that many or even most Internet users see, the wider socio-cultural and political structures that any two Internet users draw from may be vastly different. The increased access to information and rate of informational change shines a light upon some lack of subtlety in Hall’s model that may not be visible or problematic in the context of traditional media. Maintaining the pieces of Hall’s theory that are helpful to the analysis once it is expanded into a many-to-many model, namely the idea of encoding and decoding data within a medium, other theories that problematize the distinction between author, audience, and text offer more subtlety to the analysis of a YouTube text.

Drawing upon another analysis of television media, John Fiske’s work *Moments of Television: Neither the Text Nor the Audience*, opens up the understanding of author, text and receiver, broadening the position of viewer/decoder of a text in a way that is more appropriate for the understanding of YouTube texts. Fiske suggests that media studies of television often creates an over simplified and artificial distinction between the text and the audience. This division between text and audience misses the complex authorial activities that a television viewer engages in while watching a television show. For Fiske the text is not independent of the audience, instead it is at least partially determined by the audience. Rather than discussing the text as something that is encoded with meaning upon its creation and then simply decoded by the audience upon its consumption in hegemonic, negotiated or oppositional ways, Fiske suggests

that the audience plays an authorial role in the production of the television text. He posits that through his or her own interpretation of the text the viewer attributes meaning to the text that may be dramatically different from the encoded meanings. Fiske's understanding of the ways in which viewers read meaning into television creates a moment in which the decoder of a text is simultaneously the viewer and author of the text, dissolving the categories of audience and text. He suggests that television viewers author the texts they watch by changing the storylines, situations, and symbolism in such a way as to make them more meaningful. Fiske posits that individuals are not content simply to consume the stories distributed to them but that they also need to own them, to author them. He is interested in how people "turn the products of the industry into *their* popular culture" (p. 544). Drawing upon the work of Michel de Certeau, he suggests that people claim what is provided for them by mass media through acts of evasion, appropriation, and alteration.

Arguably, people have always acted to subvert the systems within which they function through appropriation and alteration. What is different in the case of new media is that new media tools, such as YouTube, make acts of story appropriation and alteration tangible and distributable. Fiske argues that the television audience was already deeply connected to the authorship of the television text. The tools available through new media support Fiske's assertion; these media answer the call for an audience to have the ability to tangibly author and re-author stories—and then to distribute them. New media act as venues for the constant and collective reinterpretation of meaning structures that are displayed within mass media. Through YouTube, and other media like it, contemporary users of the site are saying that they are not content to just hear stories and passively accept them; they are saying that they have always made their own meanings—and now they want to broadcast them.

Fiske's explanation of the meaning making process is clearly applicable to YouTube, where we see this process made tangible now that individuals have the tools to easily and tangibly re-author storylines in a way that can then be disseminated within the same medium. In the case of "John McCain gets BarackRoll'd" the author, Hugh Atkin, made use of a series of texts to respond to the texts of the Republican National Convention and the campaign. Taking the context of the convention, Atkin authors a new scenario for the convention. On his blog he explains: "after McCain delivered his acceptance speech in front of an alternately green and blue screen, it was too good an opportunity to pass up....It would be kinda awesome if John McCain does get BarackRoll'd at some point before the end of the campaign..." Atkin saw a moment and a scene that he would like to see played out: McCain gets Barackroll'd at the convention, and he created that event. Not only did he imagine it might happen, but he created documentation that shows it happening. Although he goes on to explain that the footage is not of a real event, the video is introduced on his blog as though it happened. The title says: "This seemed to get cut from the coverage of John McCain's acceptance speech." Atkins re-authored and re-scripted a historical moment, and then he broadcast his re-scripted history. Through the use of new media tools, he took what would have been a "wouldn't it be funny if..." joke scenario, and created the event, broadcasting it 3.2 million times on YouTube (and still counting).

New Media, Meaning, and Community

In their introduction to *Democracy and New Media*, Thorburn and Jenkins, discuss the evolution of the role of new media in national politics. They suggest that there will be no

decisive moment in which the power of new media alters American politics in the ways of previous traditional media, such as radio and television. This is in keeping with the nature of new media as a slippery definition; many Americans may not notice the slow creeping of new media into their daily lives. After all, they still read the New York Times or the New York Post, watch CNN or Fox News, they just do so on their laptops, iphones, and blackberries. The cultural changes associated with constant access to information anytime and anywhere may not always seem that apparent, but the devices of modern life change the culture of travel, connection, and communication, to name a few.

These cultural changes Thorburn and Jenkins suggest, are important steps on the way to political changes. They say, “the effects some have ascribed to networked computing’s democratic impulses are likely to appear first not in electoral politics, but in cultural forms: in a changed sense of community, for example, or in a citizenry less dependent on official voices of expertise and authority” (p. 2).

Looking at the ways in which communities and culture are created and how new media like YouTube effects community and culture becomes an essential piece in understanding the long-term effects YouTube might have on politics and our society. If new media objects like YouTube videos can be understood as cultural artifacts that citizens can easily encode and distribute, what are the implications of this new affordance on culture and communities? Indeed, how do the artifacts themselves affect community? Looking at mass media and advertising use of cultural signs offers some insight into how the production and reproduction of, to use Stuart Hall’s terms, “meaningful discourse” contribute to the “wider socio-cultural and political structure.”

Semiotics is built upon the idea that “human intellectual and social life is based on the production, use, and exchange of signs” (Danesi p. 28). The “production, use and exchange of signs” is what allows communities—imagined or otherwise—to form, the extension of the ability to exchange those signs through technology results in the formation of Anderson’s imagined communities. Media semiotics concerns itself with the ways in which mass media utilize and recreate familiar signs in order to produce meaningful imaginaries for their audiences. Marcel Danesi, in his *Understanding Media Semiotics*, offers Superman as an illustration of how a familiar sign, that of the mythic hero, can be recycled and retooled in such a way as to remain culturally recognizable and, at the same time, fresh and relevant. He says, “Heros are character abstractions, in short, who embody lofty human ideals for all to admire—truth, honesty, justice, fairness, moral strength, and so. Modern-day audiences feel this intuitively, as did the ancient ones...” (p. 34). Danesi suggests that our ability to understand signs, such as Superman, comes from our ability to read connoted meanings, or culturally significant meanings that have “cultural history behind them” (p. 34). By drawing upon familiar story lines, character roles, and other culturally recognizable signs, mass media can tap into relatable symbolism and, thus, into community. In other words, mass media utilize technology to distribute symbols across large geographic distances. The symbols that are distributed create a commonality upon which an imagined community can form. These common symbols serve as culturally significant symbols, or “meaningful discourse,” because they serve as a mediator for a community and, thus, for a culture.

Through his investigation into nations and nationalism, Benedict Anderson coined the term *imagined community* to refer to communities, such as nations, that exist only as a result of

an imaginary that ties them together. Rather than being built, like smaller communities, around a reasonable expectation of interaction, nations are constructed around shared symbolism. Anderson argues that such communities are imagined because the members “will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them or ever hear of them, yet in the mind of each lives the image of their communion” (p. 6). Nations, and other *imagined communities*, are social constructions and exist only because the members of the community perceive the group and see themselves as a part of it. Every member of the community holds in their minds an image of what it means to be a part of that community; this imaginary is built on common symbolism, such as ideographs, morals, stories, and/or information. The creation of the community relies on the existence of commonality in order to provide a foundation upon which people can build a community together. These communities are distinguished “by the style in which they are imagined” (pg. 6).

According to Anderson, print technology, map-making, and museums, to name a few examples, help in the establishment of communities, like nations, that need a constructed sense of commonality in order to envision themselves. Museums, maps, newspapers and the like created a means for individuals in different physical locations to access the same information and the same vision of their community. By having access to the same information across large distances individuals with disparate lives and experiences could establish commonality with others. This created a sense of a community built on a technology of information communication. The people who access this shared information build meaning around that information and—despite not physically interacting with the members of their *imagined community*—are able to construct a sense of a continuous community for themselves. This continuity becomes the basis of a political community within which decisions for the whole are made on the basis of the individuals that make it up and their vision of the goals, needs, and characteristics of the community.

It is important to note here that other aspects of Anderson’s theory of *imagined community* touch upon colonialism and the ways in which nationalism not only permits, or even encourages, the domination of other peoples. While this aspect of his work is insightful, it is not within the scope of this analysis. This analysis is primarily concerned with Anderson’s suggestion that technologies provide new ways of producing and distributing the concepts that help to produce an idea of a community. With the acknowledgment that the envisioning of an imagined community is not always the privilege of those who are subject to it, this analysis draws upon Anderson’s theory that the imaginary constructed by every member of a community is spurred by similar information, experiences, and locations, or, in other words, common signs.

Conclusion

People, as Fiske says, “turn the products of the industry into *their* popular culture” (p. 544) because they desire to connect with, indeed, to create and share culturally significant signs. The human desire to create and disseminate individual texts is a desire for individuality; however, it is also a desire to connect to culture through actively engaging and re-authoring culturally significant signs. What makes the individual creation of such texts particularly interesting is their affect on the ways in which community can be envisioned.

The technological affordances granted by tools such as YouTube endow users with the ability to engage cultural signs and use them to tangibly explore and display the ways in which they connect to their culture. Arguably YouTube videos are not only instances of individual expression for the sake of itself, rather they are also cultural artifacts created from cultural signs. In much the same ways as newspapers and other print technology allowed for the creation of communities beyond the reasonable expectation of personal interaction, new media, like YouTube, allows users to extend their cultural reach and to establish and engage with other new imagined communities. However, unlike print technology, new media allows community members to both receive—or decode—and transmit—or encode—meaningful cultural messages. Thus new media, like YouTube, create communities that are imagined because members cannot interact with most fellow-members; however, these communities are flexible and in continuous renegotiation because the imaginaries of the individuals who make up the community are constantly being rebroadcast in tangible expressive forms. As a result, the demarcation of the community is very difficult to establish.

The video “John McCain Gets BarackRoll’d” makes use of a series of symbols that are culturally significant to a number of communities: Americans, YouTube users, political satirists, those who Rickroll, etc. Atkin utilizes symbols from a series of communities, those that have been broadcast to him in mainstream media, as well as those symbols that have been broadcast via many-to-many media such as YouTube, and engages them to construct a complex text that constitutes another culturally significant sign or “meaningful discourse.” His video, along with being entertaining, is a statement on the current political environment, on the candidates as individuals, on the power of viral videos. His video is not only about self-expression, it is about collective interpretation of a cultural moment. While his favor of Barack Obama is public knowledge, the video is not only significant in reference to his political opinion; it is also significant as a cultural artifact that is representative and meaningful within several communities.

The recycling and re-encoding of cultural symbols is nothing new. What is new is the recycling and re-encoding of cultural symbols by those who were formerly designated the decoders of cultural symbols. Both of these instances of symbol use—that of the traditional encoders and the traditional decoders—results from the same desire: the search for a sense of community and shared meaning. The slippage between the roles of “reader” and “author” results in many more points of cultural creation and, through technology, imagined community building.

New media, such as YouTube, rather than providing only a venue for individual expression and meaning making, works as a tool to help people better engage and re-create existing cultural signs and meanings in order to connect to other individuals. Humans are constantly in search of the knowledge that we are individual, but not alone in that individuality; we crave community acceptance as well as the sense of powerful individualism. The age of “John McCain Gets BarackRoll’d” is one that contains examples of a powerful cultural symbols resulting from many-to-many production. What YouTube, and other new media show us, is that people want to broadcast themselves.

Broadcasting implies receipt of a message; the desire to broadcast oneself is synonymous with the desire to feel connected, to know that the meaningful symbols encoded into a YouTube video are grasped by others out there. That is the desire to touch a common ground, to create community; that is not “depthlessness.” It is the opposite; it is connectedness. This connectedness may be shallow, but it is connectedness nonetheless.

References

- Atkin, H. (2008). John McCain gets BarackRoll'd. Retrieved November 24, 2008, from *Margins of Error* Blog: <http://hmatkin.blogspot.com/2008/09/john-mccain-gets-barackrolld.html>
- Anderson, B. (2006). *Imagined Communities*. London: Verso.
- Barthes, R. (1977). The death of the author. In S. Heath (Ed.), *Image music text*. (S. Heath, Trans.). New York: Hill and Wang. (Original work published 1968).
- Benjamin, W. (2008). The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction. In M. G. Durham and D. M. Kellner (Eds.), *Media and cultural studies: Keywords*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.
- Danesi, M. (2002). *Understanding media semiotics*. London: Hodder Arnold.
- De Certeau, M. (1984). *The practice of everyday life*. (S. Rendall, Trans.). Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Fiske, J. (2000). Moments of television: Neither the text nor the audience. In P. Marris and S. Thornham (Eds.), *Media studies: A reader*. Washington Square, NY: New York University Press.
- Hall, S. (2008). Encoding/Decoding. In M. G. Durham and D. M. Kellner (Eds.), *Media and cultural studies: Keywords*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.
- Jameson, F. (2008). Postmodernism. In M. G. Durham and D. M. Kellner (Eds.), *Media and cultural studies: Keywords*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.
- Manovich, L. (2001). *The language of new media*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- McGee, M. C. (1990). Text, context, and the fragmentation of contemporary culture. *Western Journal of Speech Communication*, 54, 274-289.
- McLuhan, M. (2008). The medium is the message. In M. G. Durham and D. M. Kellner (Eds.), *Media and cultural studies: Keywords*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.
- O'Brien, T. (2008, March 28). *What's "Rick Rolling" and why should you care?* Retrieved from , <http://www.switched.com/2008/03/24/whats-rick-rolling-and-why-should-you-care/>
- Ramirez, J. (2008, November 10). The big picture. *Newsweek*. Retrieved from <http://www.newsweek.com/id/168269/page/1>
- Rickroll. (n.d.). Retrieved March 15, 2009. From Encyclopedia Dramatica: <http://encyclopediadramatica.com/Rickroll>
- Thorburn, D. & Jenkins, H. (2003). Introduction: The Digital Revolution, the Informed Citizen, and the Culture of Democracy. In D. Thorburn & H. Jenkins (Eds.), *Democracy and new media* (2-17). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Wernick, A. (1991). *Promotional culture*. London: Sage Publications.
- "You Wouldn't Get This From Any Other Pollster". SurveyUSA (2008-04-09). Retrieved from <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rickrolling> on 2008-11-23.