

SUNDAY FEATURES

SUNDAY, APRIL 25, 2010

13



Chad Hurley, left, and Steve Chen, right, co-founded YouTube with Jawed Karim (not shown) in February 2005. Google bought the video-sharing Web site in November 2006 for \$1.65 billion. PHOTO: AP

Happy birthday



In just five years, YouTube has changed the world. It's also brought us breakdancing babies, skateboarding ducks and a host of back-bedroom stars. So what's next for the world's third-biggest Web site?

BY PATRICK BARKHAM
THE GUARDIAN, LONDON

Charlie McDonnell may be the most famous teenager you have never heard of. He has just dyed his hair red, plays the ukulele and spends an inordinate time on the computer in his bedroom. This ordinary 19-year-old from Bath, southwest England, is Britain's biggest YouTube superstar. More than 350,000 people subscribe to his homemade videos, where he chats about *Doctor Who* and *Heat* magazine, answers viewers' questions and performs songs. Three-quarters of his subscribers are girls. This month, McDonnell is moving to London with his best friend, whom he met on YouTube. Without any kind of orthodox management or agent, he is earning enough from YouTube to call it his career. It is almost his whole life.

YouTube turned five on Friday. It is the third most visited Web site in the world, behind Google and Facebook. Its users will soon be uploading 1 million videos every day. It is revolutionizing advertising, broadcasting, music and the media; it is also changing us.

YouTube has changed British Prime Minister Gordon Brown. It made him smile. Gruesomely, YouTube has changed the way we talk to each other. It has changed the way we complain; Dave Carroll, a Canadian musician, may have helped wipe US\$180 million from United Airlines' value after uploading a song of complaint, *United Breaks Guitars*, when his beloved six-string was smashed on a flight. Mostly, though, YouTube has changed the way we waste our time, filling our Friday afternoons with skateboarding ducks and breakdancing babies.

As landmarks in history go, the clip of an anorak-wearing geek standing in San Diego zoo is pretty unprepossessing. "Right, so here we are in front of the elephants," says Jawed Karim diffidently. "Um, the whole thing about these guys is that they have really, really, really long trunks and that's cool ... and that's pretty much all there is to say." This shaky video, uploaded on to the Internet at 8:27pm on Saturday, April 23, 2005, was the start of a social revolution: the former PayPal employee had created the first ever video on YouTube.

People put their personal videos online before YouTube. But after struggling to find clips online of Janet Jackson accidentally baring her breast during the Super Bowl in 2004, YouTube's three founders, Karim, Chad Hurley and Steve Chen, created the site that made it easy, for the first time, to upload and share video footage.

YouTube took a while to flicker into life. New users had to be bribed with an iPod Nano competition to register. Its first mention in the British press was not until November 2005. That month, shortly before YouTube was boosted for the first time by venture-capitalist cash, the site showed 2 million videos a day. Two months later, it broadcast 25 million. Today it is well over 1 billion.

When Google bought YouTube in a deal worth US\$1.65 billion in October 2006, it was not simply purchasing a hot Web site. It was acquiring a community. Like other social media that define the era of Web 2.0, YouTube is participatory. Users don't just watch silly videos, they join in: imitating, parodying, mocking and paying tribute with their own clips. The loss of physical communities has been well documented during recent decades. Through YouTube, many users have replaced that with a virtual one.

"Don't forget how recent is our apparently universal willingness to share — our private confessions, our creativity, our humor," says David Rowan, editor of *Wired UK* magazine and the man who first mentioned YouTube in the British media. "YouTube has helped destroy the barrier between our private and public selves, much as blogging did a couple of years earlier and tweeting is doing today."

McDonnell posted his first video in April 2007 as "procrastination" during his GCSE revision. When the shy 16-year-old dressed up in a suit, put on a posh accent and made a cup of tea, his *How to be English* video became a smash hit. We may perceive YouTube as bristling with one-click wonders but, like many of its stars, McDonnell steadily built up a fan base.

"I get comments from people asking, 'What is it like to be famous?'" McDonnell says. "But I'm still a guy who sits in his bedroom talking to his camera, and that's it for me." He does, however, get recognized in the street — so he promised viewers that, if they approached him, he'd give them an "I spotted Charlie" badge. This easy intimacy with his audience on YouTube "boosted my confidence a lot," he says. "I'm a lot happier as a person,

so that's been a nice change."

YouTube's expansion has not been without growing pains. Inside, the site's community spirit has been shaken by debates over authenticity after the exposure of the likes of LonelyGirl15, the home-schooled American teen who turned out to be a New Zealand actor. Outside, it has been challenged legally by companies including Viacom and the English Premier League over copyright infringements and, more widely, by critics who see it as grotesquely trivial and narcissistic. As Lev Grossman said in *Time*: "Some of the comments on YouTube make you weep for the future of humanity, just for the spelling alone, never mind the obscenity and the naked hatred."

Is YouTube simply propagating a shallow and infantile culture of fraud, practical jokes and laughing at each other's pain? "That's absolutely true and absolutely false," says Michael Wesch, assistant professor of cultural anthropology at Kansas State University and author of the seminal Web 2.0 tract *The Machine is Us/ing Us*. "Any observer could stand at the front door of YouTube and conclude that there is a lot of superficial stuff here, but I guarantee there will be a lot of stuff that can surprise you. There's a whole club online that debates philosophy just by talking with Web cams. There's tremendous depth. Because it's networked, it's not a pile of videos sitting in the corner unorganized."

In lectures (posted on YouTube, naturally), Wesch argues that YouTube is not an immoral or amoral piece of technology. He believes we are defined and changed by the ways we communicate, and that YouTube is a new way of communicating, with strong values attached. While there is plenty of "hatred as public performance" in the disparaging comments posted below clips, Wesch says YouTube gives people "freedom to experience humanity without fear or social anxiety." "It's made the world a bit friendlier," says McDonnell.

For many, the site is more than Friday-afternoon work avoidance: It is therapy. Brian Nessel, a 37-year-old from the American midwest, has talked on YouTube of how his video performances and acceptance online helped him get over the death of his infant son. "This Web site, this community, helped bring me life again, and there's something really special in that," he says in clips cited by Wesch. When the anthropologist asked what YouTube meant to them, users replied "free hugs." A lonely Australian who returned to Sydney and held up a sign on the streets offering free hugs soon became a much-imitated YouTube legend.

"We were surprised to find that [deep connection] when we started our study," admits Wesch. "But it was exciting. The reason why people can connect so deeply is partly because they know they can just turn off the Webcam and walk away, unlike leaving a village community where you have to pack your bags first. The responsibility is less; people take more chances and reveal more about themselves. A lot of people feel like they develop into a better person because of what they do on YouTube, which seems strange."

Purists may complain that YouTube has become more corporate, but its adverts enable people like McDonnell to make a living (YouTube forbids him from revealing how much he makes from his share of adverts posted next to his videos, but it is enough to fund the move from his family home to a rented flat in London). However, the YouTube community's habit of "remixing" videos quickly subverts any corporate attempts at viral marketing,

and, according to Emily Bell, the *Guardian's* outgoing director of digital content, orthodox businesses have learned to back off. "You hear much less coming out of big corporations about how they must, in that awful cliché, 'harness the power of YouTube.' It is like trying to harness a particularly feral beast. It is not there to be harnessed. It is there to be understood, and if it lets you join in you're pretty lucky."

Of all conventional industries, television may be most threatened by the young culture of YouTube. More than half of its videos feature an 18-to-24-year-old, and their young audiences have radically different habits to those of old. McDonnell, typically, does not watch television, except for *Doctor Who*. "It's a lot more fun being a participant, being part of a community from your bedroom, than just being a consumer," he says.

"When YouTube first emerged five years ago," says Bell, "there was genuine horror in the broadcasting world about what a terrible, destructive and low-grade hosting site this was going to be." Now, she observes, when we want entertaining distraction, we go to YouTube rather than cheap television. "So this may be a controversial point, but YouTube has made TV better and it will continue to do so. It sifts out the crap and really changes what is acceptable at the bottom end of broadcasting."

But who will pay for this new cultural economy? Cynics say the stars of YouTube look just like the old ones churned out by the television, music and film industries, they just don't earn any money. YouTube celebrities want to know how they are going to get paid as well — and for many, the answer is still to break into the old mainstream. While McDonnell is eking out a living from YouTube, the teenager concedes he would still take a break on mainstream television, if it gave him the creative control he is used to.

A month ago, 23-year-old jobbing actor and comedian Matt Lacey squatted on a bucket beside some pot plants in a friend's garden and filmed *Gap Yah*. He uploaded the sketch about a posh kid vomiting his way around the world to persuade venues to book his comedy group, The Unexpected Items. "It sat there for two weeks. I thought, oh God, it was a bit better than that — maybe not worth 1 million views but at least 1,000," he says. Four weeks ago, it shot up to 30,000 in a day, and has now been watched more than 1 million times.

"It's got a life of its own now, completely beyond my control," says Lacey, sounding bemused. His video seems to have become "a cultural meme," as he puts it. "People are repeating it to each other and it spreads like a virus and takes on different forms." Users have posted their own versions and tributes, with fansites riffing on his character's

phrases from "Vomcano" to "Being literally in Burma." Thirty-five thousand people signed up to the Facebook group, "Hello my name is Iceland and I've just chundered everywhere." Election posters of David Cameron have been turned into Gap Yahs with, "And then I just chundered everywhere." It is as if a catchphrase phenomenon equivalent to that of *Little Britain* has been created on the Internet in three weeks.

Lacey has made no money from this furor, but is releasing a follow-up sketch on YouTube soon. He is "a bit of a luddite really" and now hopes it will kick start a conventional career as a comedian and actor. "I don't want to be the cat that can play piano," he says. "All this attention is fantastic; it's great for branding, but it's not real. It is just people clicking on a link." All that clicking has already opened doors: Since it went global, Lacey has had meetings with the BBC while industry figures swarm to The Unexpected Items' gigs.

If YouTube has sprung from nowhere in five years, will it be slumped in the Internet graveyard alongside Friends Reunited in five years' time? Most sages think not. Rowan outlines how YouTube will be at the heart of another Google vs Apple war, as it becomes a portal through which we pay for mobile video. Wesch, Bell and Erik Huggers, director of future media and technology at the BBC, all predict versions of a parallel trend: YouTube will move into our living rooms.

"Most people are going to be sitting in front of their TVs with on-demand video; YouTube may be the one that delivers that — and the advertising revenue," says Wesch. "Suddenly the advertising dollars that YouTube is struggling to get will be flowing in very nicely." Bell is convinced that YouTube will expand into long-form videos: "YouTube has got to work out its place as the iPlayer of the world."

Huggers is determined not to give YouTube a free run at this; he is overseeing Project Canvas, a cross-platform collaboration with TV stations and phone companies that, subject to approval from the BBC Trust, will launch next year, enabling people to watch the Internet on their television and order video on their remote control.

And while Huggers underlines the distinction between YouTube's user-generated content and iPlayer's "very high-quality long-form programming," he accepts this may not always be the case. "You're not going to buy an asset of US\$1.65 billion and do nothing with it," he says. "I think YouTube's long-term ambition is to offer any video ever produced on the planet to consumers."

PHOTO: BLOOMBERG