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K-STATE PROFESSOR CAUSES, STUDIES WEB VIDEO SENSATION

MANHATTAN — Web videos go "viral" every day. That is, a user-created video becomes so popular that virtually everyone who logs on views it — friends tell friends, blogs link to it, Web sites feature it.

For one Kansas State University professor, a video he made and posted has not only become immensely popular online, but it also has given him and his students something to study.

Michael Wesch, assistant professor of anthropology, created a video explaining Web 2.0, the "second wave" of Web-based services allowing people to network, share and collaborate online. The video, posted Jan. 31, was the most popular video on the Internet Feb. 5, according to Technorati.com; the No. 1 featured video on YouTube Feb. 9; and has been featured in more than 5,000 blogs. More than 1 million people have viewed the video on YouTube, an online video-sharing site. It is one of the top 100 favorites of all time on YouTube, recently surpassing Beyonce's latest pop music video, and is the No. 1 favorite of all time in YouTube's science and technology section.

Wesch is serving as the guest editor of a special issue of Visual Anthropology Review, "Beyond e-Text." He was writing about what can be done with new technology, such as blogs, wikis, video editing, Web feeds and social networking sites, and he found himself in a strange position. Wesch was trying to describe how digital media has gone beyond simply imitating paper, but he himself was using paper to describe this phenomenon. He decided that using video was much more relevant and so he created "Web 2.0...The Machine is Us/ing Us" to describe his path through the Internet. His creation can be seen at <http://youtube.com/watch?v=6gmP4nk0EOE>

He said one of the reasons the video has become so huge is that the subject matter appeals to people who enjoy and have the ability to "launch" video — sending it to friends and posting it on blogs. For others, it explains something they might not have understood before. To Wesch, his message is that the Web is increasingly about connecting people, not just information, which the response from his video has shown.

Wesch has created a working group in digital ethnography at K-State, in the form of a course that students applied to attend. He describes digital ethnography as the presentation of ethnography — the representation of a culture — in digital form, such as a DVD, CD or Web site. Or digital ethnography can be the ethnography of digital worlds, such as YouTube. He feels people need to understand the impact of digital technology on human interaction.

(more)

"We are now to the point where there is a growing interest in online communities," Wesch said.

Communication is about how we relate to other people, Wesch said. If we change the technology of communication, we change how we relate to others.

"This changes everything," Wesch said. "There's no telling how far it can go." His video suggests we need to rethink everything: ethics, rhetoric, governance, commerce. Studies on the printing press show it changed lives by making books available to the masses and not just the elite.

Wesch said he has hopes and fears about this new communication. He said his hope is that by allowing people to see much of the world through the Web, we will feel compelled to help those less fortunate; "the more we see the less we can ignore," he said. The fear, on the other hand, is that we will get so into virtual reality that we forget about reality.

"The machine could end up using us," Wesch said and his video title suggests. "Human needs could become invisible."

Wesch's video will be shown at the Web 2.0 expo in April and other conferences and conventions worldwide. It has even been shown at an electronic art show in Illinois. "The Machine is Us/ing Us" has already been translated into four languages and has more than 3,000 comments and responses, including video responses. Wesch finds this all fascinating.

"How long would it take a journal article or book to be translated into another language? Or rebutted?" he said. "We're tapping into the collaborative nature of the Web."

More information on K-State's digital ethnography working group is available at: <http://www.k-state.edu/sasw/anthro/wesch.htm> or <http://www.mediatedcultures.net/ksudigg/>

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