Online Videos Become Internet's "Most Valuable Player"

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By Carol Martino

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Publisher: Martino & Associates – United States – http://www.OnlineVideoMVP.com

Preface

"The future is here, It's just not widely distributed yet."

Although that comment was made by William Gibson, the sci-fi writer who coined the term "cyberspace," nearly a quarter of a century ago, it still holds true – especially when it comes to new technologies for online communications and social networking.

Take "blogs" for example. More than 66 million blogs are currently being tracked on the Internet, and that figure increases *every* second. Although people worldwide are finding huge audiences for these personal, online journals, it took me most of an afternoon to find a few people in my own community who have even heard of a blog.

Let me mention that I was among the uniformed until recently. Little did I know that Shakespeare's words *"All the world's a stage"* are ringing true more than ever. Today, most anyone can take the stage through a phenomenon known as "social networking." This online networking is part of the Web 2.0 shift from traditional websites to interactive platforms that are enhanced with audio and video.

When it comes to social networking, Instant Messaging (IM), also known as "text chat," has been widely recognized since the late 1990s. But newer social formats, which include video e-mails, blogs, podcasts, video conferences and webcasts, are taking online communications to greater heights as easier to use software tools become more accessible. And they're exploding all around us, according to Rich Schott, president of Funmark Advertising, Inc., Annapolis, MD.

Social networking generally refers to people who connect to websites to expand their contacts, either socially or professionally. Mostly, it's used as a social platform for people to express themselves or to meet others who share common interests. "It's a great way to develop friendships – sort of like chatting over the world's fence without leaving your own backyard," Rich said. For professionals, this networking provides unparalleled potential to establish business contacts with anyone in the world.

Also, a growing number of users are leveraging the social network to share information, philosophies, and views – to literally be heard by the world. Think about the power of a single voice, *your* voice, or the chant of millions penetrating these massive channels often referred to as citizen journalism.

Rich believes this techno-explosion has been the most dynamic force in communication since the masses began using the Internet in the mid 1990s, and its potential is just now being fully realized. "The mass media we grew up with is fast becoming the media of the masses, and it's reshaping every aspect of our lives. With the advent of digital technology, ordinary people are deciding what's important to listen to or view. The World Wide Web is ushering in a new era as it emerges into the World *Live* Web. And it's turning the world upside down," he said.

Online Video Technology

If a picture's worth ten thousand words, like the Chinese proverb claims, then how much is an online video worth? Ask the mother whose fears ease a bit when she receives an online video from her son who is serving in Iraq. Ask the grandparents who yearn to see their far-away grandchild's first tooth, or virtually attend a ballet recital, soccer game, or birthday party. Or ask the son whose loving face gives comfort to a dying father halfway across the world. They'd agree that today's online video technology, most purely realized, is priceless.

These beating-heart videos, which come in many forms, have been changing the way we communicate with family and friends. With a simple click, miles are bridged as loved ones connect worldwide. And this new technology isn't just transforming our personal lives; it's changing the way we do business and enhancing every other aspect of society**.**

Video E-Mail

Since childhood, I've had a great passion for writing letters, yet I sent my first e-mail in the mid 1990s with a sigh of skepticism. I wasn't quite sure how the heart could be transmitted through this new technology. Now it's hard to imagine life without the immediacy of e-mails.

Then came video e-mail. I remember the day I purchased a webcam so I could send videos e-mails to my far-away grandchildren. I couldn't believe how easy it was! I simply recorded my heartfelt message and hit send. The next time they opened their e-mail, excitement danced in their eyes as my face came to life on their computer screen. And soon, a video e-mail reply came saying, "We love you too Grandma." Since then, video e-mails have become part of my daily life when communicating with family and friends.

If you want to add a "human" touch to your online communications, nothing does it better than a video – whether for personal or business use. Facial expressions can convey emotions or nuances that don't come through in text. And sending a video is just as easy as sending a text message, sometimes easier when you consider that most people talk faster than they type. Besides, people are more visually driven these days and would rather watch a video than read text.

Maybe that's why video e-mails are becoming one of the hottest marketing tools in business. For example, Jason and Kelli Schott, who own Bank Schott Billiards in Severna Park, MD, record short videos to highlight specials or to remind customers that it's time for a three-year maintenance on their tables. "It's a great way to add a personal touch. We only have to record the message once and can then send it out as often as we want to," said Kelli.

The Schotts also integrate videos into their e-mails for direct and target marketing. Jason said, "Video e-mails give us face-to-face contact with our customers and also provide a way to forge new business relationships. The video format is more engaging than text, so it holds promise for a better response. Also, it increases brand awareness because our business card is embedded in each message, directing viewers to our website."

Video e-mails are also enhancing communications in the Christian environment. One of the best examples I've seen is the www.ChristianFaithLive.com website where Dr. Buddy Bell, founder of Ministry of Helps International, Inc. and others highlight various ways to spread the Word of God by using this latest technology. This first-rate website features the video e-mails of several pastors interacting with their staff, answering prayer requests, following up with visitors and welcoming new members, and even entertaining children with a cute, sing-song message about Jesus.

With today's wireless connection, you don't even have to be sitting at your desk to benefit from video technology. For instance, the captain and crew of Chesapeake Bay Sport Fishing encourage clients on their fishing charters to share their grand catches with family, friends or colleagues through wish-you-were-here videos aboard the "Jessie Girl."

These are just a few of the innovative video e-mail applications that can be viewed at www.VideoExamples.com. Check them out!

 Many of today's computers have webcams and microphones built into the system, and since broadband transmission and streaming media have gone mainstream, video quality has increased as well as its speed. "But the vast majority of the Internet population uses the text-only format because they're unaware of the video option, or they question the need for it," according to Rich.

He compares the scenario to the mid to late 1990s when consumers questioned the need for an e-mail address or website -- and now both are commonplace. The same will soon be true for video e-mails, especially for businesses that want to keep a competitive edge. "In the next three to five years, everyone you know will be using some form of video to communicate," Rich said. "Some will require users to install special programs or download the videos on their systems before playing. An ideal solution is to find a company that provides web-based services that don't utilize resources on your computer to store video content, which would allow for true video streaming." he added.

With the latest technology, consumers can also take digital footage with cameras or camcorders, upload it to a web-based account, and send it as an e-mail or easily post it on a website or blog. Once again, an ideal solution would be to send it as a streaming video e-mail rather than an attachment. Businesses can even welcome consumers to their websites though video clips – sort of like having their own TV commercial.

Actually, with streaming media, there's no end to applications for online video communications. It took me a while to grasp the magnitude of the streaming revolution,

a technology that enables Internet users to communicate through audio and video, sometimes even in "real time" such as in live webcasts.

Early on, I thought this new technology was only for teens and techno-geeks, but when I realized it was being used by mainstream America, I was eager to jump on board. And it's been a great ride! (I'll spare you the details of a grandmother's heart "connected," but let me just say this, there's nothing like "virtually" tagging along with a grandson when he gets behind the wheel for the first time!)

Needless to say, online videos have been impacting the lives of people worldwide since becoming the Internet's "most valuable player." Everyone will soon turn to this cutting-edge technology, from home users to Fortune 500 companies. It's destined to explode and, in my opinion, will someday be as commonplace as electricity.

The Blogging Boom

The latest craze is "blogging," which is giving voice to the world. This technical phenomenon has generated so much excitement that *TIME* magazine named "You" as "*TIME*'s Person of the Year for 2006" – yes you, "for seizing the reins of the global media, for founding and framing the new digital democracy…," according to the magazine.

Sitting in a coffee house the other day, my friend asked, "Just what *is* a blog anyway?" A young lady using a laptop looked up to see who the dinosaurs were two tables over. I had to smile because it wasn't that long ago that I was asking the same question.

To put it simply, a blog is an online diary with entries posted regularly and displayed in reverse chronologic order. It's this order, and an interactive format for viewers to text in comments, that sets blogs apart from traditional websites. Also, while websites are *static*, blogs are *live* and constantly evolving.

Posting an entry is called "blogging," and anyone can do it. You don't need to be a technical expert or spend much money, if any, to get started. A few months ago, I launched my own blog and found that with today's software tools it requires only a few basic steps to be transformed from a web reader into a web writer – or even a radio talk show host or TV producer!

Think about it! Typical folks with a computer can share their thoughts or even video snippets of their lives with the entire world if they choose. Or, they can make their blogs password accessible. Though I don't interact with the world like some, I've invited family and friends to my site, and I'll soon expand it to include news and updates for business associates.

While early blogs were limited to text entries, today's streaming capabilities allow bloggers to integrate a combination of rich media. So many of those spewed into the

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global blogosphere are enhanced with videos (vlogs) or podcasts which can be audio or video. Another popular format takes in photoblogs which are displayed in blog style but emphasize photography rather than text. No matter what form they take, blogs are redefining the way we communicate.

Blogging actually began in the mid 1990s with diarists who wanted to express themselves. But it took a while to catch on because early blogs could only be created by people who were familiar with HTML, according to Brett Irby of Lynchburg, VA. "It started out as a geeky underground forum for exchanging information. But few people knew how to do it, so it was very obscure until 1999 when it gained attention in the political arena," he said.

Within a few years, new companies were launching user-friendly blog tools and the phenomenon spread rapidly to the less technical population. Over 66 million blogs are currently being tracked through Technorati, a widely recognized blog search engine, according to Derek Gordon, vice president of marketing. He noted on the company's website that "Blogs are powerful because they allow millions of people to easily publish and share their ideas, and millions more to read and respond. They engage the writer and reader in an open conversation, and are shifting the Internet paradigm as we know it."

During a recent conversation with Derek, he assured me that the emergence of the *live* web is just beginning. "Blogging has been here for a while, but it's just the first indication of a much larger phenomenon known as 'citizen media.' It's an old impulse for humans to record their lives and make themselves heard. It's no different than the cavemen who documented their lives on cave walls. But now, we can be heard and seen by the world if we want to, or we can choose to expose our lives to only a small family circle," he said.

As people gain access to high-quality and inexpensive editing and publishing tools, they're rushing to blog, vlog, and podcast, according to Derek "Not only because they've won a way to publish and produce, but also because they're finding captive audiences. It's a great way to bypass editors and other media gatekeepers," he said, adding that young people on the web are even publishing their own video games.

Blogs cover a vast range of topics from personal thoughts and essays to family updates, journalistic news, opinions, and political views. The subject matter is limitless, running the spectrum of mundane diaries (which I call "blahgsam") to dynamic exchanges of ideas and philosophies.

Niche Blogs

Most blogs, however, focus on niche topics, such as politics, pets, literature, or cooking. It's a great way to have on-going conversations with like-minded people around the world. For example, an increasing number of "baby blogs" are springing up, offering an outlet for young mothers to share advice and nurture friendships – all while creating a sense of community.

Another community rallies around the military. The other day I was talking to Lt. Jeff Barnett, a 25-year-old Marine who recently returned from duty in Iraq. Shortly before being deployed, he started a blog to say farewell to family and friends. He said the new technology held "an aura of mystery" at first, but he soon embraced the daily lifeline home through his blog, *Midnight in Iraq*. "It was a great way to keep in touch with my family, but to them it was so much more than that. When they read my daily entries, they knew I was doing well. They feared for my safety more than I did," he expressed.

What started out as a son's heartbeat home was eventually posted on the military.com blog, and before long Jeff's audience expanded to a legion of caring strangers. In March 2006, the *New York Times* asked him to contribute to their *Frontline* forum.

Business, Professional and Ministry Blogs

Although most blogs are personal, they're having an increasing impact on society as the masses recognize the expansive reach of the interactive platform.

For example, businesses are reaping the benefits of posting special promotions, sales, and product announcements. Blogs also serve as a great branding tool. But one of the greatest benefits is the two-way communication that allows businesses to connect with their customers and get valuable feedback. The interaction builds trust which often equates to marketing gains.

Blogs also level the playing field for small businesses with zero marketing dollars by giving them an enormous audience, according to Derek. "A Mom and Pop shop on Main Street can be catapulted into worldwide notoriety if they have a product or service that catches fire with everybody on the web," he said.

Educators are among the growing number of professionals who understand the value of blogs. They use "edublogs," to post homework assignments, grades, messages and lunch menus, to communicate with parents, and also to share information and network with colleagues. "It's a great resource for getting information out to students and parents. And it's interactive, so they can easily communicate with teachers and other staff. It's completely changed the dynamics of communication," according to Julie Schott, assistant principal of St. Paul's Lutheran School, Glen Burnie, MD. And when daily homework assignments are available with a simple click, there's no "wiggle room" for excuses, she added.

The ministry is also finding an historic opportunity to share the Gospel beyond church walls. Hungry souls are flocking to sites to be spiritually fed through daily prayers, inspirations and devotionals. Pastor Peter Migner of Emmanuel Church of the Nazarene, Madison Heights, VA, is a pioneer in digital ministry. He uses the emerging technology to reach the masses through engaging text, video and audio.

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