



Smile! You're on "YouTube!"

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If you haven't heard of YouTube by now you're probably not going to be reading this article either since you must live somewhere in the Australian Outback or the desolation of Antarctica. But on the off chance you don't know what it is, YouTube is a video sharing website where anyone can post public video clips free of charge.

Owned by web mogul 'Google,' the site offers self-appointed celebrities a place to see and be seen in all their home-made video glory. It seems harmless enough, but YouTube has some negative sides as well.

It has become common practice as well for people to post clips from their favorite movies, music videos, and television shows. That may not seem sinister but it might be to those who made those intellectual properties. Recently Viacom, the communications giant that owns Paramount Pictures and Dreamworks sued YouTube for a laundry list of copyright violations.

With echoes of the Napster court proceedings, Viacom argues that YouTube's acceptance of copyrighted media for sharing by users undermines the economy of the entertainment industry. Since the website does not charge for video exchange Google argues that the service is protected by the 'fair use' doctrine of copyright law which allows the noncommercial reproduction of works for purposes like criticism, comment, news reporting and research.

Regardless of the legality, the overall use of YouTube continues to gain momentum. Military families are one of the largest to gain by the YouTube site allowing them to share video from home with family stationed in Iraq. Aspiring pop stars are using it to showcase their talents and gain attention. Companies are using YouTube as well, making it one of their best sources for marketing.

Politicians are also getting into the YouTube rage. Nearly all of the 2008 presidential hopefuls have video clips posted online. Since it's a free website, the candidate's use of the service is unregulated and does not fall under the guidelines of campaign spending or broadcast media rules.

One of the downfalls of YouTube is when someone uses it to violate personal privacy. Anyone with a camera phone can post video at any time to YouTube – from a store security tape to a camera video of someone in a compromising position. The clips can be instantly uploaded to YouTube without the subject's permission. Even though users are warned against inappropriate video, YouTube either doesn't or can't police everything that is posted on their site.

You could be on YouTube and you may not even know it. Go to the YouTube website, www.youtube.com, and type your name into the search window. The days of Alan Fundt and the fun gags of Candid Camera are gone. Now, when you least expect it, anyone, anywhere, anytime, could say, "hey, didn't I see you on YouTube?"