

## **Is that a Kevin Smith in Your Pocket? Notes on a (Possibly) Emerging Platform**

By Ethan Tussey

In the past year, social networking websites and viral video hubs like MySpace.com and YouTube.com have revealed themselves to be ideal venues for new media expression. The implications of these developments have preoccupied the pages of industry magazines and the popular press. *Time* magazine named everyone on the planet “Person of the Year” in a ham-fisted attempt to recognize the importance of online communities. As new media increasingly receives popular attention once reserved for film and television, social networking websites represent an important step in the digital revolution. The next step could be made among the new media formats that have yet to establish conventions that are culturally understood. Whether it is on cell phones, iPods, or Zunes, entertainment-on-the-move or mobile media is becoming ever more pervasive. These technologies merely await their own unique content phenomenon (think MySpace.com for mobile) in order to become an influential media genre. Media conglomerates plan to be the ones to produce this hit, thus avoiding the expensive purchase of a creative independent producer.<sup>1</sup>

As a scholar, student, and child of new media I attempt to stay aware of the media texts available within the mobile media universe. In the summer of 2006 I received an invitation to participate in a new class being offered in the fall at UCLA. The email described the class as an opportunity to produce a mobile media show. As an added bonus, filmmaker Kevin Smith was attached as an honorary professor. Smith’s name recognition virtually guaranteed viewership, which I believed translated to extended creative possibilities for the show. I accepted the offer, considering the class an opportunity to help define the emerging new media format. I felt that the collection of participants, including MTVu financing and distributing, Amp’d mobile exhibition, and the Kevin Smith brand, dramatically increased the potential that this class could produce a new media phenomenon.

Unfortunately, the stark reality of the entertainment industry awaited me. On the first day of class it seemed that we were already behind. After a short meeting of the students and the faculty supervisor, the class created a rough outline of our hopes for the show. Most of the ideas, however, felt like adaptations of existing cinematic practices: linear narrative, reoccurring characters, etc. On the whole, there was not much consideration of what Lev Manovich has outlined as the “language of new media.” When Smith and MTVu entered the room, the concept of the show was further transformed into an exercise in replicating existing mobile phone content. The discussion was punctuated by Smith’s instruction that we “not think of the show as something for mobile phones,” and instead consider it a television show.

Repurposed content is easily the most viewed programming on mobile devices. Scanning through the top ten downloaded programs for the video iPod on iTunes, the titles are consistently miniature versions of existing media. It is not surprising that the financiers and Smith would assume that this is the safest way of producing a hit. The result of this guidance was a news magazine show that fluctuated between field reporting and a mini-narrative taking place at Smith's comic book shop where students informed a professor, played by Smith, of "cool" things to do for the weekend. Entitled *Sucks Less with Kevin Smith*, the show was, at its best, interactive and informative, at its worst, recycled vulgarity.

The marriage between UCLA and MTVu is the latest addition to a growing trend in academia. Jeff Sconce points out in his essay "Tulip Theory" that scholars are encouraged by school administrations to develop new media research in an attempt to entice outside donors. Sconce points out that merely invoking the terms of the emerging field of study can often be enough to guarantee funding. The danger, he warns, "is when the integration of such vocational training leads to ramping up programs with resources and personnel that over represent a very narrow (and potentially fleeting) intellectual and technological moment" (183). Most often, Sconce argues, these alliances produce a dialogue between theory and avant-adventurism which represents little of the way that digital media will actually be used. John Caldwell deepens the rift in his essay "Electronic Media and Technoculture," explaining that there is a fundamental difference between the ways that academia and industry approach new media. Yet, the addition of the Kevin Smith brand promised to be a way to escape the "theory for theory's sake" repetition of new media projects. Smith's presence guaranteed industry clout and a devoted audience that would make the text of the class much more culturally and industrially relevant than any "avant-adventurism." His participation on the Internet and general focus on new media outlets, combined with his persona as a "fan boy," fit well with the tone of a majority of new media content.

This possibility of adventuring beyond the avant made the final product perhaps even more of a disappointment. Early on, there were brief discussions of ways to engage the format of mobile phones, ways to really concentrate on the uniqueness of new media. Yet the business aspects, time constraints, and the preservation of the Smith brand became much more important and together stifled any possibility for true creativity. It became obvious that mass produced new media is handicapped by the rules of *old* Hollywood. While this system, however one might try to describe and explain it, has been ideal for cinema for quite some time, it does not appear to be the most effective way of producing new media content. This is especially the case as user based content has become more popular and easier for the amateur crowd through the proliferation of desktop editing suites and viral video distribution. In addition, and greatly opposed to the studio system, the most viewed content is less than industry quality, conventionally authentic, crude, and a return to the "cult of liveness." In many ways new media content resembles Kevin Smith's first film, *Clerks*. The film's grainy, homemade look and sarcastic slacker heroes are just the type of programming that has become popular throughout new media venues.

The structure of the class more often resembled a virtual MTVu boardroom than a UCLA classroom. Meetings were often conducted over a sponsor-provided Amp'd mobile phone. As a class we spent hours interacting with a telephone and the voice of our MTVu contact, which was ironic considering the lack of time we spent focusing on specific content for that same device. The class would troll the newspapers, recount past experiences, and mine friends' accounts of interesting things to do for the weekend. MTVu believed that developing content would be the easy part. After all, we were college students in LA. Of course we were privy to all the hip and trendy things that our undergraduate counterparts loved to do. Unfortunately, the majority of the students were past their keg-stand years—consumed instead with attaining advanced degrees at one of the most competitive academic institutions in the country.

Our instruction was informed by two sources. The first was a seemingly endless exchange of emails between the various directors of the episodes and the MTVu brass and/or Smith. The director would implement minute changes deep into the night until the professionals were satisfied or time ran out. This hectic schedule caused more than one director to abandon the program before the completion of his/her episode.

The second area of instruction was brought to us by Smith, who would attach a link to his MySpace.com message board as an example of “our critics.” The Internet postings were comprised of subscribers to Smith's blog. While this did an excellent job promoting the show, shockingly, it was not the most effective evaluation of the program. Inexplicably, the people were fans of “Kevin.” The majority of the comments focused on Kevin and Kevin alone. A typical post would be like those found after the second episode. HEateHer wrote, “everything you touch turns to f\*cking genius,” while Naomi praises “You sir are a rather good actor contrary to your own opinions :)” These MySpace.com users are taking their status as Kevin's “friends” a little too literally to be considered reliable reflections of the audience, or even a typical Internet community filled with opinion and debate. However, Kevin Smith's point was that there really is no way *yet* of gauging an audience's reactions to a media product of this type, and that looking at one's own fans—who are doubtlessly the core audience—is perhaps not a bad way to go. The history of television and film is also littered with stories about different programs that got cancelled or propped up based on scant more evidence than a letter-writing campaign or a few postings on a fan page. Executives no doubt have ulterior motives when making these decisions, and use the “fan response” merely as a smoke screen for what seems to be truly carcinogenic. In this instance, the fans seemed to have reflected the fortunes of the show as MTVu reported that *Sucks Less* was its highest-rated program ever.

In the end, these conflicting messages exacerbated an already frustrating situation. The majority of the class (the instructor and more advanced students excluded) had little to no industry experience and were expected to deliver professional product. Not unexpectedly, the students made a great many mistakes. The inexperience of the filmmakers resulted in a lot of demands of revision from MTVu, which essentially doubled the workload. The class was consistently reminded that this was the value of the class. It gave us the opportunity to understand the way the business really works. This lesson came at the expense of many sleepless nights, unrealistic expectations, and a

finished product that some felt was unworthy of their personal reels. On the other hand, MTVu received a show that cost next to nothing, under the auspices of education and with a big name talent attached. The university spent half of the semester attempting to hammer out a contract that would compensate the class members for their work, which was ultimately described by former industry professionals in the department as basically slave labor.

UCLA traded the time of their students for the privilege of being, or at least trying to be, at the forefront of new media exploration, while also making connections within the industry. Everyone, however, missed out on an opportunity to do an educational exploration of the potential of new media texts and their position within an established industrial system. What if the class had spent some time with MTVu and Smith researching, pitching, and understanding possibilities for the show within the realm of new media? Such a situation would be extremely appropriate and easily incorporated. Searching MTVu's other new media projects, such as the Digital Incubator, a user will find fascinating work being done by UCLA students for MTVu which fundamentally considers the specific potentials of new media.<sup>ii</sup> The Digital Incubator, however, lacks big name attention and so it goes relatively unnoticed.

But perhaps I am being a bit too harsh. After all, there were moments, especially in the final two episodes of the first season, which foreshadowed the ways that new media may redefine the mediascape. Of particular promise was the moment when Smith asked the home viewer to present identification in order to watch the episode or else suffer a high voltage attack that would destroy the home viewer's circuitry. Not only did this moment in the show acknowledge the unique connectedness inherent in new media but it provided commentary on an Internet video that was affecting UCLA's campus community. The video in question was provided using a cell phone camera and captured police brutality on a student in UCLA's library. Within a matter of days, *Sucks Less* was able to dramatically comment on the footage. The interactive relationship between audience and author—especially in the case of mobile media—is one of the most fascinating aspects of the new format. Unlike other formats of media expression, mobile media finds the viewer wherever they are through update alerts. For example, through Amp'd mobile there is a telephonic alert which notifies the owner that a new program is ready, helping to keep the user ever connected to the mediascape.

In this timely and astute episode on police brutality, the show was able to reflect that relationship. While it is not particularly revolutionary to argue that police brutality is bad, there is a large element of activist spirit on campus that facilitates the production of the program. Evidence of the sixth episode's status as different from the rest of the season is that it actually elicited discussion on Kevin's website that was not just hollow praise.

One of Smith's MySpace "friends," Jason, chastised the filmmaker for his choice to use police brutality for comedic ends. Order on the comment board was restored when another "friend," Justin, explained that Kevin is not supposed to be an activist and that when Kevin makes light of serious issues he is only following in a proud comedic

tradition. It is true that the large majority of the comments focus on the wonderfulness of Kevin Smith, but the fact that there was some discussion of the police brutality only further emphasizes that the show could have done more had it been designed to, or if Smith had simply advertised it differently. The headings of the bulletins often determined how his fans would respond. What would have happened if this same episode had had the bulletin “Kevin Smith Strikes Back at UCLAPD?”

Studio inability to effectively produce new media content is all the more obvious when considering that this final episode almost did not happen. The script was written a day before the shoot and did not have a chance to pass thorough inspection by MTVu, which meant that there was a chance it could have been cut. The class, excited about the prospect of social commentary and emboldened by the fact that it was the last episode, adopted an affinity for the topical and produced the first truly “new media” content of the season. New media content seems to require this type of current, adaptive attitude. It is leading to the creation of a “monitorial citizenry.” I would like to take this characterization a step further and say that new media-savvy audiences not only monitor the mediascape but participate through parody and commentary. These acts of participation position new media as a democratic medium, making it difficult for the studios to produce content in the traditional top-down hierarchy. As a result, the studios continue to find ways to reappropriate existing content. It is what the entertainment industry has always done: stick with the financially familiar and adjust once they have been upstaged. YouTube.com and MySpace.com have realigned the industry, and the media conglomerates are attempting to adapt their content. The combination of Kevin Smith, “hip” university students, and MTVu sounds like a collaboration that could replicate cyberpunk ethos, yet failed to flourish within the rigidities of the studio structure. For the media conglomerates to succeed, it appears that this time studio oversight will have to adapt right along with content and style.

To its credit, UCLA held an additional class session after all the episodes were completed. The Chair of the department sat with the students for over an hour and discussed the process of the class. The students were able to share their opinions and grievances. True to the department’s reflexivity and commitment to academic standards, the class has subsequently been retooled for next year. Additional credits are being offered to correspond with the workload, professional skills are being required from every student, and there is a deeper commitment to revealing the pedagogical values throughout the class. These improvements will certainly rectify any labor issues of the class, but they do not address the main criticism of this article. The list of improvements does not include any specific content or style reconsideration that move beyond technical requirements. The participants of the second season of *Sucks Less with Kevin Smith* should be introduced to interesting literature revolving around the medium. The directing students are required to take film studies courses, so why should production for digital media be any different? There should be consideration of the unique qualities of the medium, numerical representation, modularity, automation, variability and transcoding, all of which are laid out by Lev Manovich in *The Language of New Media*. The second season could reflect these attributes without corrupting Smith’s brand or ignoring MTVu’s audience.

For example, the show could send correspondents (the students) to interesting activities, but instead of throwing back to the segments in Smith's comic shop, they could access him via the telephone for advice. If a correspondent did not know what to say in a given situation, Smith could provide the dialogue. If a character got bored at an activity, Smith could be contacted over the phone to suggest hilarity that would reinvigorate the event. The show could even post downloadable content that would allow fans to simulate contacting Smith on their own phones. Not only would this foreground the mobile aspect of the new entertainment media, but it would force the students in the class to consider the important question that media conglomerates are racing to answer: how will mobile content distinguish itself? Perhaps this suggestion would not appeal to the participants involved, but it demonstrates the kind of consideration for new media that was sorely lacking from the first season. A university class should not focus on the *business* of repurposing, but rather on its academic roots by producing challenging, innovative possibilities.

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<sup>i</sup> Articles discussing industry positioning within the mobile media format:  
“[Ericsson, Turner partner to deliver media content to mobile phones](#)” The Associated Press, February 5, 2007.

“[WMG, Sony BMG invest in China mobile market](#),” VNU Entertainment News Wire, January 24, 2007.

“[Viacom, Adobe enter partnership](#),” The Associated Press, August 10, 2006.

<sup>ii</sup> Please see MTVu's Digital Incubator: [howdoisaythis.com](http://howdoisaythis.com)