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## What is Fred telling us? A commentary on [youtube.com/fred](http://youtube.com/fred)

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## What is Fred telling us?

Sonia Livingstone and Nancy Thumim

*for Teachers' College Record*

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In a world which struggles to get children to read books anymore, in which the youth television audience is increasingly hard to reach, and in which shared attention is fragmenting as everyone follows their own niche interests, an ordinary fourteen year old boy is reaching millions with his own channel on YouTube, the hugely popular user-generated content site - see [youtube.com/fred](http://youtube.com/fred). According to the blogosphere, Lucas Cruikshank has over 100,000 subscribers but after just a few months, he now reaches several million people per episode.<sup>1</sup> So, what's his secret? And can we learn from him about emerging forms of communication? About media literacy?

Presenting himself as a manic, weird six year old with an alcoholic mum and an occasional girlfriend, 'Fred' speaks rapidly straight to camera in a 'funny', high pitched voice as he reveals the everyday craziness of his life, each episode 'leaking' messages of children's naughty, insightful, naïve or idiosyncratic view of the insensitive and sometimes shocking world they must adjust to. For example, in 'Fred Goes to the Dentist', he begins:

'My mom got really mad at me yesterday because I ate all the dirt out of the vacuum cleaner. She said it was mad for me to eat the dirt but it just looks so cool I really want to eat it. I'm not going to do that any more though because my mom says if I do any more bad stuff she's going to put me up for adoption'.

The humour partly lies in knowingly revealing the usually-ignored perspective of the child (that dirt looks cool to eat) but also lies in the final shock - that an infuriated mother makes a terrible threat to a naughty six-year old, and that the child must live with the emotion this arouses. Bruno Bettelheim<sup>2</sup> said about Grimm's fairy tales that bedtime stories begin by announcing that the young hero is all alone in the world because his or her parents have died in order to let children face their unspoken fears in a safe setting. Fred's YouTube channel, like the modern soap opera, may offer no happy ending, but the cultural acknowledgement of life's hardships, so often screened out of the sanitised media produced for children, remains crucial.

Most people wouldn't know how to get their own YouTube channel, nor how to create pithy, coherent, effective video shorts. There is no doubt that Lucas Cruikshank is highly skilled – there are no duff notes, no awkward edits in his material. While on the one hand, the techniques are straightforward (mainly head and shoulders shot, few props, no other characters), on the other hand, they are used skilfully, confidently – this is not just learning how to use a camera, but a camera as a comfortable means of expression, like writing your own story in a previous era. And as Henry Jenkins sets out, in the eighth of his *Nine Propositions Towards a Cultural Theory of YouTube*:

“8. In the age of YouTube, social networking emerges as one of the important social skills and cultural competencies that young people need to acquire if they are going to become meaningful participants in the culture around them. We need to be concerned with the participation gap as much as we are concerned with the digital divide.”<sup>3</sup>

‘Fred’ certainly knows how to participate - creating as well as consuming online content, constructing a persona and networking with others. The to-camera video style, in which Fred is often seen running with the camera or engaged in frenetic activities in front of the camera, deploys an aesthetic that marks what we see as amateur content. This amateur aesthetic is so widely associated with participatory online culture that it has now been co-opted by powerful media institutions. Jenkins gives the example of Astroturf,

“fake grassroots media - through which very powerful groups attempt to mask themselves as powerless in order to gain greater credibility within participatory culture. In the past, these powerful interests would have been content to exert their control over broadcast and mass market media but now, they often have to mask their power in order to operate within network culture.” (ibid.)

Indeed, the big media producers have cottoned on to Fred and his productions now include product placements for which (apparently) Lucas Cruikshank is paid.

On the one hand, Fred’s creator is operating within the generic conventions of the network culture, exhibiting proficiency and ease with the tools and the environment and participating in a community that communicates via video and messages, references popular culture more widely, and even blurs the boundaries between powerful interests media interests and grassroots creations. Yet he is ahead of the game in knowing what kids find funny:

"They just think he's the funniest thing ever," says Valerie Moizel of the Los Angeles-based WOO ad agency, which found out about Fred after it conducted kid-centered focus groups for its ZipIt instant messaging product -- which later showed up in Fred's videos. "We watched them watch him -- they fall on the floor hysterically laughing. They're just mesmerized."<sup>4</sup>

Indeed, not only are they both clever and funny, Fred’s high octane monologues are redolent with a child-centred critique of the adult world. On Father’s Day, the school tells the children to make their father a card, but Fred’s dad is in the State Penn. When he tells us, in all innocence, that his mother dresses up to get money by standing on street corners, we know what he can’t grasp. Over and again, by touching on the taboos of our time – child neglect, poverty, abuse - the viewer is forced to recognise the pathos and powerlessness of children in an intolerant world. In this, Fred’s vision is strongly reminiscent of the striking disjuncture between childish presentation (silly voices, jumpy visuals) and strong critical and taboo messages of ‘South Park’ and ‘Family Guy’, controversial cartoons popular with teenagers but disapproved of by parents worldwide.

Through making visible experiences usually marginalised by our competitive, success-oriented world, this ‘trailer trash’ kid has a lot to say about everyday failure, and people not only want to listen, they also join in. When Fred’s mom was missing, plenty of subscribers sent in photos of overweight, badly dressed women to say they’d found her. Several fans have set themselves up as Fred’s girlfriend, telling her own story, deploying the same mode as that established by Lucas, an equally irritating voice for example, and providing video that responds to Fred’s ongoing story. These ‘video responses’ as well as the pages of written comments expressing preferences or insults towards the videos, their characters and their makers – are both intrinsic to the YouTube form and content, generating a wider dialogue of which the Fred Videos are just a part.

Thus, unlike the book author or television broadcaster, Fred does not simply speak to many, he speaks *with* many – understanding ‘the network society’ rather better than all those well-meaning, do-gooder messages to children to ‘join in’ and ‘have their say’ on fancy participation sites that host comments but provide little response, and certainly not the global adulation that Fred appears so effortlessly to achieve. Paradoxically then, this apparently powerless boy has found a powerful voice.

Of course Fred is not Lucas. And Lucas is clearly not powerless. Is he even giving a powerful voice to the fictional Fred (‘A six-year-old with anger management issues and an alcoholic mother...’)? Or is he, perhaps, laughing at the white working class ‘trailer trash’ America that it is acceptable to laugh at:

‘I’m gonna give the photos to Judy [...] ohmigod I’m in Judy’s house, ok I think I found Judy’s room I never knew the bedrooms inside her trailer were so big [...]’ (From ‘Fred Stalks Judy’)

Perhaps this is a new episode in the longstanding tradition of class hatred – analogous to Jerry Springer’s entertaining of middle class audiences with ‘scandalous’ representations of working class lives? Henry Jenkins, in his ninth proposition towards a cultural theory of YouTube, reminds us that inequalities and prejudices, and we can add, symbolic violence, are by no means absent from the participatory space of YouTube:

“9. YouTube teaches us that a participatory culture is not necessarily a diverse culture....minorities are grossly under-represented - at least among the most heavily viewed videos on YouTube, which still tend to come most often from white middle class males. If we want to see a more "democratic" culture, we need to explore what mechanisms might encouraged greater diversity in who participates, whose work gets seen, and what gets valued within the new participatory culture.” (ibid.)

Thus while there is much to note and indeed to celebrate in terms of the media literacy skills evidenced by the creator of the Fred channel and, more importantly, the vast user community who is in dialogue with these videos and others like them, nevertheless educators must attend equally to *who* is being represented, *how* they are being represented and *by whom*.

Media literacy includes the ability to create but also the ability to *critically interpret*.<sup>5</sup> Here a wealth of criticism predating YouTube comes in useful – perhaps the classics of media education are ripe for a return, including Stuart Hall's analysis of how stereotypes construct "a symbolic frontier between the 'normal' and the 'deviant,' the 'normal' and the 'pathological,' the 'accepted' and the 'unacceptable,' what 'belongs' and what is 'Other,' between 'insiders' and 'outsiders, Us and Them'" .<sup>6</sup>

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> 3 to 4 million hits for each video posted on YouTube, according to David Sarno, LA Times Internet culture and online entertainment writer.

<http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/webscout/2008/06/fred-the-puzzle.html>

<sup>2</sup> Bettelheim, B. (1989). *The uses of enchantment: the meaning and importance of fairy tales*. New York: Vintage Books.

<sup>3</sup> See [http://www.henryjenkins.org/2007/05/9\\_propositions\\_towards\\_a\\_cultu.html](http://www.henryjenkins.org/2007/05/9_propositions_towards_a_cultu.html)

<sup>4</sup> David Sarno, LA Times Quotes in

<http://www.detnews.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20080704/BIZ04/807040364&imw=Y>

<sup>5</sup> Livingstone, S., van Couvering, E. J., & Thumim, N. (2005). *Adult media literacy: A review of the literature*. London: Ofcom.

<sup>6</sup> Hall, Stuart. "The Spectacle of the Other." *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* ( 223-90). London: Sage, 2003. p.258.