YouTube statistics, like statistics about the extent and costs of organized crime, tend to be mind-boggling. They can’t help but grab your attention, and suggest that society ‘as we know it’ is changing, has changed, and is unlikely to be the same again. Some examples: over three hundred thousand videos are uploaded to YouTube every day (p. 121); more than 35 hours of video material are uploaded every minute of every day (YouTube statistics site); and more video is uploaded to YouTube in 60 days than the three major US television networks have created in the past sixty years (YouTube statistics site). The rate of take-up of the facility is also increasing exponentially, it would seem. Some current websites still quote the figure of 24 hours of video material being uploaded every minute, as against the latest figure of over 35 hours. As a parent, I am well aware of how mesmerising and distracting YouTube can be to one’s children, in diverting them away from other non-screen based activities. According to Michael Strangelove’s new book, it is the favourite online destination for children between the ages of 2 (incredibly) and 11, and children under the age of 18 view more YouTube clips than any other age group (p. 60). On a more positive note, as an adult, I have become acutely aware only recently of how much potential there is for learning and self-instruction provided through this platform. As a mediocre, middle-aged guitar player, I can now find and learn guitar licks in a few minutes (sometimes from someone as young as 12 or 13 years old) that have eluded me for more time (decades) than I care to recall. Ouch, but thanks!

While there are other video sharing platforms, YouTube stands supreme in global terms. It has long (in its relatively short lifespan) ceased to be exclusively about Western cultural matters, expanding its reach into the realm of international politics and thereby exposing some of the suffering of people around the world. This is not to say that what appears on YouTube is still not predominantly about things other than politics, but as the YouTube site acknowledges, 70% of its traffic now comes from outside the USA, including increasingly, non-Western countries. In the mix are videos presenting apparent abuses by government security forces in countries such as Iran, Egypt, and Libya, countries ruled by authoritarian governments that by definition have little tolerance for the expression of public discontent. How much media such as YouTube contribute to political dissonance, and to political change, in countries such as Egypt is a matter of much current speculation and interest. The role of Facebook and Twitter also feature extensively in the practices of those critical of such regimes, so that the bigger question is really more about the collective significance of internet-based media for political change. Two recent books that take up these bigger issues are Tim Wu’s The Master Switch: The Rise and Fall of Information Empires (Knopf, 2010) and Evgeny Morozov’s The Net Delusion: The Dark Side of Internet Freedom (PublicAffairs, 2011). In these inquiries, which have barely begun to grapple with the phenomenon at the grassroots level, one can expect that YouTube will feature significantly, but in much wider internet company.
Strangelove’s book makes a welcome contribution to the small but growing literature that is attempting to assess the significance of YouTube in the contemporary world. It joins the 2009 publication by Jean Burgess and Joshua Green, *YouTube: Online Video and Participatory Culture* (Polity Press). What both these books do is remind us that YouTube is much more than a platform with the capability for uploading and disseminating user-created video content. Rather, it functions “as a communicative space and a community” (Burgess and Green, 69). In this space, a variety of cultural and political practices occur. Strangelove, drawing upon a wide range of cultural and social sciences literature, takes a relatively broad view of how this space is occupied, and indeed, colonized in some senses. He examines how YouTube has penetrated the family home, affected women’s lives, and impacted upon politics and the representation of religion and armed conflicts. Despite his broad engagement with the literature and the identification of an extensive range of practices and pressing issues, what is telling from reading Strangelove’s account is how much we don’t know about the longer-term significance of YouTube, especially for younger users of the medium. One thing that is clear is while there are many positive attributes already visible to those who participate in or observe YouTube culture, there is ample reason for caution and indeed concern. While it can be reassuring for a young person unsure of some aspect of their identity to find on YouTube others who share the same predicament, this cannot in itself stand as a good thing, especially when one appreciates the extent of extremism present on YouTube (and other forms of the internet) and the ability of strangers to influence the thinking and behaviour of impressionable and vulnerable young people. As Strangelove comments, on YouTube “we allow strangers to tell us who they think we are, and those strangers… are often vicious or obscene” (p. 59).

One of the interesting stories to be followed in this area is the relationship between established media and new media such as YouTube, how they ‘feed’ off each other and emulate each other in some respects. The use of these new media to promote commercial products is another related dimension of this engagement, as conventional media and advertisers have to contend with the immense importance of the “post-television audience,” to use Strangelove’s term. This issue is examined in the book’s final two chapters. This symbiosis is not just cultural and capitalistic in nature; it is also acutely evident in the political realm, as noted earlier. The power dynamics between forms of centralized power and the decentralized, even anarchic realm of media such as YouTube remain largely to be studied. How campaigns mounted on YouTube connect to conventional mechanisms of governance for the most part remains unknown. As we have recently witnessed in respect of political ferment in the Middle East, there are the internet optimists, but also there are also the pessimists. Both in international and domestic political terms, YouTube is accessible to the indifferent amateur (or ‘slack-tivist’, to use Morozov’s term) as much as it is to the truly committed activist.

In conclusion, this is a stimulating, and often disturbing, book. It should help to establish the research agenda in coming years around the significance of YouTube and its digital analogues. The sometimes provocative rhetorical style of the author should not distract the reader from the important questions raised in the book. I would quibble about the book’s sub-title. Much of what is found on YouTube is utterly banal and unexceptional. What is ‘extraordinary’ can only amount to a small proportion of what is on view. However, as Strangelove makes clear, many of the implications lie waiting within the myriad, mundane uses of this technology.