

RANDOM SAMPLES

UT PROFESSOR MADE YOUTUBE HISTORY WITH FIRST VIDEO

Originally published in *The Blade* on Friday, May 7, 2010

BY RYAN E. SMITH
BLADE STAFF WRITER

When YouTube was born five years ago, Yakov Lapitsky was the midwife. He just didn't know it.

Who could blame him for the oversight? All the local man did was hang out with a high school buddy at the San Diego Zoo and videotape him standing in front of two elephants.

Sometimes history is made with a few well-chosen words while setting foot on the moon, but in this case it was 19 seconds of a guy looking into a camera and saying, "So here we are in front of the elephants and the cool thing about these guys is that they have really, really, really, long ... um ... trunks."

That's the substance of the first video ever posted on YouTube, shot by an unsuspecting Yakov, who was in town for a meeting, and featuring his friend Jawed Karim, one of the founders of what is now the third-most visited Web site on the planet.

"I had no idea what I was getting myself into," says Yakov, 29, a native of the former Soviet Union who grew up in Minnesota and today is an assistant professor of chemical and environmental engineering at the University of Toledo. He didn't learn about his role in history until a month after his visit to California when his friend sent him a link to the new Web site.

VIDEO

[Watch the first
YouTube video](#)

Uploaded to YouTube on April 23, 2005, and entitled "Me at the zoo," Yakov's handiwork ushered in an era where hundreds of millions of people could watch fat guys do funny dances online or catch up on clips from American Idol. Today, 24 hours of video are uploaded to YouTube every minute and there are more than a billion views each day, according to the company.

Yakov remembers the early days when things were just getting started.

"Whenever something out of the ordinary was posted there, I would receive an e-mail from Jawed saying, 'Check out this video' ... I was trying to finish my dissertation at the time and getting e-mails like this every 15 to 30 minutes was a fun distraction."

Since then, the entire notion of online videos has exploded. Overall, the average online video viewer watched over 12 hours of online video in March, more than double a year ago, according to comScore, a digital media measurement company.

What started out as a vehicle to help friends share videos easily has grown into something that has changed the world. YouTube has become a sort of time capsule for the human race, a repository for our collective humanity. You can learn how to tie a bow tie, watch the Iron Man 2 movie trailer, or see the Berlin Wall fall — over and over again.

Or you can watch a kid with a British accent complain about how his little brother bit his finger in "Charlie bit my finger — again!" You won't be alone. With more than 185 million views, it's the second-most watched video on the site behind a Lady Gaga music video.

Still, it's Yakov's initial contribution that represents the best in YouTube. The episode with the elephants may



seem inane or silly, certainly not earth-shattering, but it's moments like those that make up real life and that, when shared, help us get to know each other better.

I'm a regular user of YouTube, posting clips — most of them limited by privacy settings to specific viewers — of everything from vacations to a weird Harry Potter skit my young cousins performed. Nothing beats being able to share family videos with my mom with the click of a button or watching footage of a cousin's baby while the sweet little girl was still in the hospital.

There's no question that YouTube is an invaluable tool to educate and entertain us, but none of that tops its ability to connect us. And to think that it all began at the zoo. Talk about evolution!

Contact Ryan E. Smith at: ryansmith@theblade.com or 419-724-6103.

[< previous](#)

[next >](#)