

The YouTube Granddads

To many seniors, Web 2.0 is still unknown. All the more, young people love pensioners who venture to blog.

By Friederike Haupt

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Peter has a job that keeps him busy until late at night ever so often. During the daytime, he sits at the computer for many hours anyhow, but if extra hours become necessary, he works overtime without complaining. Sometimes, he even gets up especially early, to get the upper hand over the [many] mails.

"But this is fun for me," says Peter, who lives in the small English town Leicester. At noon, he usually puts in a break, has something to eat and watches the news on TV. After that, he goes back to work. Because many people who he talks to [*"telefonieren" = misleading; means "on the phone"*] live in different time zones, he ever so often sits on his computer until late into the night. Peter signs his e-mails with this first name; his full name is Peter Oakley, and he is 82 years of age. For thousands out there, he is "The Internet Granddad" — the granddad from YouTube. In 2006, self made videos won him an incalculable number of grandchildren in a landslide.

He had never intended to become a star of Web 2.0, though. But still he was one of the first senior citizens, who found a means in blogs and networks, to invite the colourful and chattering Internet community right into their ever so often lonely living room. In the last few years, many seniors have discovered this possibility. Ever so often with the aid of their children and grandchildren, they conquer a world

that would have been, in the days of their own childhood, declared as a lunatic's utopia.

At Twitter, for example, a 74 year old American gathered fame and 1.2 million fans, because he has his snappy and smarty pants every day pieces of wisdom published: Under the nome de plume "shitmydadsays", his son enters the latest quotes for the old man. "The universe is 14 billion years old. Seems stupid to me, to celebrate one single year, then," he remarked, not long before his own 74th birthday. "That's kind of like I have a parade marching whenever I take a piss."

Also Marga, a 91 year old resident of the German town of Munich, rose to become a star in November, when her niece gave her the blog "marga1919.blogspot.com" as a present. Marga's first question, about what the Internet was in the first place, was being answered by more than 100 people. Some made little jokes: "The Internet is a device for rapid mass distribution of kitten photographs." Others wrote long essays and articles on the topic. But every single answer reflected the liking people felt for the old lady, who does not close her mind to the world of the young. At Facebook, senior citizens make friends with strangers, others founded the portal "seniorennet.de". And the pensioners band The Zimmers ("My Generation"), that was founded last year, even dared to establish a MySpace site. Among them: Peter Oakley.

When Peter started to put upload videos of his own to YouTube, he did not know the expression of "video blogging" yet. His two minutes long "First try" was published on August 5th 2006, when the online platform still was still in its infancy. Within just one week, Peter rose to be the YouTube user who had the most subscribers. His first video has been watched over three million times up to date.

But Peter had not done anything spectacular at all: He chose a modest alias ("geriatric1927"), sat down at his desk and talked unexcitedly into his webcam, after having played a [music] snippet from an old record. Light blue shirt, beige coloured sweater, big glasses, white hair, slightly overdriven sound — it was a not all immaculate address to the net community, in which he announced

that he would be, from the view and perspective of an elderly person, nagging and grumbling a bit, but in a nice way. And this is what he does to the very day: He talks about the war, and about his everyday's life, about his love for motor bikes and music. He posted more than 200 videos; the latest one is only a few days old. "Hello YouTubers", his already legendary greeting, comes over his lips most easily. If you ask him how YouTube has changed his life, he replies: "In one word: Enormously!"

It did so, more than a regular pen pal relationship might have done. This is what Peter wished to find, when, 12 years ago, his wife died. "I felt lonely," he says. But his attempts to find pen pals, were "not very successful." His two children were out of the house, a heart condition and arthritis reduced his radius of action. He had had [so he says] a few good friends, and kept himself busy with reading and listening to music. "And of course, living on your own makes it inevitable that you have to take care of a lot of boring household and cooking chores, before you can enjoy some free time."

Peter used this free time for another hobby of his: Photography. He bought a computer, to archive his photos. And then, Peter discovered YouTube, watched videos of other persons, and found a liking in that.

Much has changed since his first appearance, which caused so much of a stir, that Peter even was, by the BBC, talked into giving an interview, and was invited by Johannes B. Kerner [German TV host] to [the German TV show] "Jahresrückblick 2007" ["Review of 2007"].

"I believe that my entry at YouTube's made more elderly people follow my example". He wanted to encourage and boost inter-generational communication. And that worked: "I am glad that the youth has given me such a warm welcome."

Today, his YouTube contacts use up most of Peter's time every day. A few of his Internet grandchildren have already paid him a personal visit, and with many of them, he talks on the phone [on Skype] on a daily basis.

Apart from Peter's life, YouTube itself, too, has changed. The millions of new users, the numerous videos, and the commercialization do not bother the Briton. He believes in the "Power of the masses" of people who gather there. "And YouTube also improves its own [technical] quality. We now benefit from a much faster upload speed, and we even can present our videos in HD quality."

Sentences like "In the old times, all was better" are not in the pensioner's vocabulary. On the contrary, he takes up the cudgels for the young people. "I think it is important to get to know the view of the world of other generations. Many of those bad things that you can read in the papers, about the younger generation, are absolutely wrong."

Peter Oakley does not think of stopping to vlog. "It has made my life so much better. Due to my vlogging, I even got to meet the Queen!" But on YouTube, and also on his homepage "askgeriatric.com", it is most of all younger people who seek contact to Peter. And at the end of the day, they are, indeed, a bit more amusing than the Queen.