

Chapter 15

Citizens on YouTube: Research–Method Issues

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ABSTRACT

Videos on YouTube can be analysed at two connected levels: (1) the content of the video, and (2) its context, which comprises viewers' comments and replies, tags, and related videos, and is both visual and textual. In order to comprehend the meanings of a video, researchers should focus on both levels and on all contextual facets. This chapter provides some suggestions on how to plan research pertaining to YouTube videos, with reference to videos focused on urban and planning issues.

INTRODUCTION

The Web 2.0 represents a key evolutionary step in the lifecycle of the Internet and, more generally, of the media. The Web 2.0 has two main characteristics: creative platform and networked interactivity. The Web has experienced a noteworthy shift from a platform of learning and consumption to a platform of creation (Kozinets, Hemetsberger, & Schau, 2008). In the past, Web users read articles online, downloaded files, and consulted the Internet as a limitless encyclopaedia.

This behaviour still exists, but it coexists with a more creative activity. Today, the Web 2.0 is a creative platform where individuals can create; this creation can take the form of posting of texts on forums or in the Wikipedia, photos on Flickr, and videos on YouTube, among others. Some of these creations are generated through collective rather than individual effort. Even companies have acknowledged the creative force of individuals, both offline and online, by allowing customers to participate actively in the co-creation of products or services (Vargo & Lusch, 2004). The creativity inherent in the Web 2.0 can radically change entire sectors. The most famous TV shows are

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usually re-edited by active viewers and posted online as new creations that can draw further attention and further creation from other viewers. A question arises: Where does the creation of the original producer (the media company) end, and where does that of the consumer start? There are no clear boundaries, and any creation eventually becomes a collective creation. This thinking is in line with the 'culture of remix' that characterises the Web 2.0 (Lessig, 2008).

The second feature of the Web 2.0 is its networked interactivity. Users are connected to each other not in a linear form (as with telephone or e-mail connections), but rather in a networked context (Venkatesh, 1999). Any contribution to a forum or social network, for instance, is not addressed to specific other individuals, but rather to a mass of users who can collectively react to the contribution. Networked interactivity in the Web 2.0 can be seen at two levels. First, there are interactions in the forms of messages, instant messages, chat exchanges, 'likes', 'pokes', and so on. Second, interactions can be silent—namely, a never-ending exchange of gazes among profiles. Facebook, for instance, represents a virtual place where people look at other people, update each other, seeing what is going on in others' lives, and share their own daily lives. Facebook and similar social networks establish a panopticon of gazes where anyone can freely subscribe to the idea of being watched and being able to watch others. Critics of these systems highlight the social control that social networks could exert over us by impinging upon our privacy. On the other hand, still others stress the free participation of people and the friendly environments involved, emphasising the novelty and advantages of Web 2.0 human communication. Creativity and interactivity allow citizens to debate common concerns, create and share possible solutions, and even develop some forms of e-democracy.

These two dimensions—namely, creative platform and networked interactivity—also characterise YouTube. YouTube is both a media outlet

where portions of mainstream TV programmes or self-made videos are broadcasted and a social network where comments, replies, and interactivity take place. In particular, YouTube is a place where the second form of interactivity—that is, a gazing interactivity—takes place: people look at other people's creations.

This chapter seeks to suggest possible approaches to exploring YouTube videos that deal with citizenship and urban issues. First, this chapter provides an overview of YouTube, and then proceeds to provide some research-method suggestions that are viable to the study of YouTube videos. A preliminary case study is then briefly illustrated. The final section draws some conclusions and suggests future research paths. The background question addressed in this chapter, therefore, is "How can one optimally study urban-related videos on YouTube?" This question will be of interest to city officials, urban planners, researchers, and whoever wishes to inform themselves about issues of a given city. With its huge repertoire of videos and comments, YouTube can serve as an interesting part of any research that focuses on a city or territory; however, as with most research materials, it must be approached critically and with caution.

YOUTUBE: BROADCASTING CITIZENS

Issues, Controversies, Problems

Since its origins, YouTube has been a topic of debate and even conflict among observers of the social-media phenomenon. Videos on YouTube can be posted by traditional media companies or be user-created; in fact, extensive research by Burgess and Green (2009) shows that around 60% of the most popular videos in YouTube are posted by users and not by traditional media companies. These videos can be parts of video-blogs, completely new videos, or television programmes

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