Research Article

Tutorials on YouTube. A Study from the Perspective of Digital Humanities

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Abstract: This paper studies the influence of vlogger culture on YouTube tutorial videos, from the perspective of Digital Humanities (Manovich, 2011; Moretti, 2007). The sample studied consists of 300 video tutorials from 30 channels on different issues. Out of this sample selected, 41.33 % shows two distinct characteristics of vlogs (Aymar, 2009): a presenter on the screen who looks at the camera and speaks directly to the audience and the use of close up and medium close up shots. Our research focuses on the impact of adopting the stylistic attributes of vlogs in the interactions with the audience. We found that the “tutorial-vlogs” have more views, “likes” and comments than other tutorials, encouraging greater participation from users. Then we analyse the “emotional tone” of the audience conversation from a “distant reading” (Moretti, 2007) using visualization tools to see relationships between elements, patterns and shapes, instead of details. The last section analyzes which format is predominant in tutorials: either a narrative, which has traditionally dominated human culture, or a database, typical of software culture (Manovich, 2006). Saussure’s notions of the paradigm and the syntagm are used to theorise the relationship between database and narrative.

Keywords: Digital Humanities, YouTube, Social Media, Vlogging, Software Culture.

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1. Introduction

This paper summarizes the first results of a collaborative research entitled “YouTube Project” which took place in 2014 at Universidad de Buenos Aires (UBA) with participation of advanced students from the Science Baccalaureate in Communication. The project aims to study YouTube as a cultural software for “distributing, accessing and combining (or “publishing”, “sharing”, and “remixing”) media” (Manovich, 2008, p.24). Software studies are an emerging, trans disciplinary, computational literacy that needs new methodologies such as “distant reading” (Moretti, 2007) that allows to process and make sense of a large amount of data.

YouTube is a key element in the way we think about our online experience and digital culture. As Uricchio (Op. cit. Kavoori, 2011, p.3) states, “YouTube stands as an important site for cultural aggregation...(...) where variously sized videos, commentaries, tools, tracking devices and logics of heirarchization all combine into a dynamic seamless whole”. We decided to focus on a specific kind of content: tutorial videos.

Two phenomena converge in YouTube tutorials: the “Do It Yourself” (DIY) and the vlogger culture. Vlogs (video Web logs, video blogs or video logs) are considered an expression of a self. They are expected to be reflections of real people or at least aspects of real personalities. Aymar (2009) studies the rules and codes of vlogging; “a set of standards that distinguishes it as either “real” and “sincere” versus “fake”, “insincere” and “professional”. Self– and community– centered as opposed to audience– or market– centered, to frame it another way”.

This paper begins with the question of whether it is possible to speak of similar rules in the case of YouTube tutorials, and if there is any relationship between the adoption of these rules and the interactions with the audience. The problem to examine is at the heart of social practices and
emerging players in the media platform. Which analysis indicators should we consider relevant to show those rules used by different types of “uploaders” and well known by the audience?

The paper examines 300 video tutorials pertaining to 30 channels of diverse subjects -including music, cooking, makeup, video games, dancing, sports-. From each YouTube channel 10 videos were selected. In order to analyse the visual content of videos, 10 images were captured for each one. This database of almost 300 images was processed by visualization software such as Many Eyes, Infogr.am, Wordle, Voyant, which allows studying the cultural patterns from a large amount of data.

The first section analyses the stylistic attributes of the tutorials in the framework of the “broadcast yourself” culture and the set of rules and codes of vlogging (Aymar, 2009). In addition to this, as YouTube is grounded by the language of celebrity (Kavoori, 2011) we wonder if the strong presence of the “youtuber” displaces the topic of the tutorial from the centre of attention.

The second section focuses on the participatory culture surrounding the video (Jenkins, 2008) including "likes", comments and responses to videos, which generates a positive feedback. We also analyse whether that participation is still seen “outside” YouTube, in other social networks such as Facebook, Twitter and Google+. The comments from the audience are analysed with visualization tools in order to describe the “emotional tone” that audience conversation has.

The last section analyses whether a linear narrative or database format predominates on tutorials, following the distinction observed by Manovich (2006). We propose a categorization of paradigms according to the degree of complexity that each format introduces in this framework.

2. Methodology

The methodology used in this paper corresponds to Digital Humanities (DH) (Berry, 2011; Manovich, 2008; Moretti, 2007) and integrates techniques from software studies for the analysis of visual social media (Hochman & Manovich, 2013). The epistemological shift proposed by DH involves passing from the study of the exceptional cases -and details- to a great mass of facts. In other words, working with abundance and not scarcity (Berry, 2011).

Moretti (2007) defines this new method of study “distant reading”, as opposed to “close reading”, the Anglo-Saxon tradition based on the study of a particular text. Distant reading uses graphs, maps and trees which are the result of a process of abstraction and reduction of the great amount of information contained. In this new model, distance is not an obstacle to knowledge but is one of its specific forms, allowing a better understanding of relationships, patterns and shapes (Moretti, 2007). We no longer have to choose between data size and data depth, in terms of Manovich (2011).

Studying social media also implies the shift in the notion of the object of study, which is no longer static or closed, but becomes a “stream” of data in real time, with different modulations and granularity (Berry, 2011). Its analysis requires working with visualization tools that develop abstract models to allow tracing patterns or relationships between elements.

The collection of videos was organized around the following variables: (i) dominant type of shot -with the following values: close up, medium close up, midshot, wide shot-, (ii) presence / absence of the introducer or “youtuber”, (iii) type of edition -not edited, simple editing, complex edition, (iv) narrative (syntagmatic) / database (paradigmatic), (v) number of views, (vi) number of “likes”, (vii) number of comments or responses.

3. Brief genealogy of “broadcast yourself” culture

This article includes studies from various disciplines. First of all, the text of Aymar (2009), entitled Real vlogs: the rules and meanings of online personal videos, examines the set of rules and codes of vlogging from a cultural and media literacy perspective. His analysis describes the set of rules that construct vlogging as an expression of sincerity, which focuses on the community; as opposed to professional and market-focused productions.

Aymar (2009) argues that there is an expectation of realism in vlogs, to show and see something “real” -a kind of revolutionary “honesty” (Serfaty, 2004. Op. cit. Aymar, 2009)-. Reinforcing this idea, White (2006), author of a study about women and webcams, says that watching a webcam is an “intimate” activity, in which the viewer is enveloped in the image. However, this “realism” is constructed from a series of conventions, some of which come from the movement of the
webcam -such as bringing the camera to the actor or his gaze to camera- while others come from movies and television.

The first vlogs are the closest examples of YouTube’s slogan “broadcast yourself” and have four characteristics in common, which have laid the foundation for its own aesthetic: (i) the vlogger is looking at the camera, (ii) the most common visual perspective is the close up and medium close up shots, (iii) they provide information about themselves, including opinions, likes, hobbies, etc., and (iv) the videos are edited (with at least two cuts) (Aymar, 2009).

Other less common but popular features are the use of text on the screen, the use of effects that manipulate the image or sound, the use of music, discussions on the future of the channel and self-reflection on vlogging. These aspects show that the vlogger has more awareness of how his/her videos or channel should be. Finally, it should be noted that vloggers don’t move the camera, film on location or use photographs (Aymar, 2009).

Another significant reference to the present work is given by Burgess & Green (2009), who studies popular culture of YouTube using a methodology based on categories defined in the platform -the “most viewed”, the “most liked”, the “most responded”, the “most discussed”-. It seeks to relate these categories to the type of user who uploaded the video -either traditional media or amateur users-, gender, and themes. It is worth noting that these indicators involve some degree of audience participation and are considered as part of the new media culture that defines the user as a “prosumer”.

Burgess & Green (2009)’s study shows that content created by users occupies two thirds of the “most responded” and “most discussed” videos -63% and 69% respectively-, while the contents of traditional media are among the “most watched”. The sample used by Burgess & Green (2009) included a large number of typical forms of videos created by users such as short films, fanvids, mashups, music anime and video game tutorials.

Beyond the diversity of formats, vlogs dominated the sample, occupying 40% of the “most discussed” and more than a fourth of the “most responded” (commented) videos. Vlogging is characterized by immediacy, direct feedback from the audience and conversation: all these aspects are typical of user created content.

In addition, the text of Burgess & Green (2009) designed its study of popular culture on YouTube focusing on the audience and their value-creating practices. That is, not only does it perceive YouTube as a new agent in the context of media -with a “top-down” view- but it also highlights the amateur creativity -“bottom up”- as an important dimension in the struggle for the meaning of this platform.


What we have called “tutorials-vlogs” pick up YouTube’s slogan of “broadcast yourself” and, while they teach some technique, they are also self-referential and exhibit characteristics of vlogs. Among them: the presence of the “youtuber” in most of the video screen, who looks at the camera and speaks directly to the audience, and the predominance of close up or medium close up shots over other types of shots.

From the total 300 videos analysed, 124 showed those features of “tutorials-vlogs”. The main topics addressed are makeup, fashion and beauty, 34%, and music tutorials, 18%, but extends to other topics such as sports, 14%, crafts, 11%, technical, 11%, dance, 6%, kitchen, 2%, and others, 4%.

In this subgroup of 124 videos that have the characteristics of “tutorials-vlogs” we investigated the type of edition used, an aspect that is related to the realism of the video. This has generated some controversy among theorists: some of them are in favor while others are against. Aymar (2009) argues that those who are in favor of editing are winning the debate. In this context, we inquire whether the predominant type of edition in “tutorial-vlogs” is simple or complex, with a greater presence of editing resources such as the use of the split screen, links or overlays on the image-published.

The sample showed that all the “tutorials-vlogs” are edited; 60% have a complex edition while 40% have a single one, which confirms the thesis of Aymar (2009). The text on the screen is the most widely used resource in the edition to reinforce personal information of the “youtuber”.

As the study of videos showed a clear self-referential imprint of the vlogger, we analyzed the “tags” that they had used to upload the videos, which is also a key to understand the research criteria of users. We used VidIQ tool to recover “tags” in the form of text and processed them according to a distant reading method.
The analysis showed that although the words related to the format and topic -“how to do”, “learn”, etc.- have a clear predominance, the words that make a reference to the person of the “youtuber” -such as the name of the channel- also have a significant presence. The most recurrent themes refer to tutorials of makeup, fashion and beauty.

5. Sympathetic “youtubers” and participating audiences

The second dimension of our analysis questions the relationship between “tutorials-vlogs” and their audiences. In so doing, we examine the interaction modes that appear from viewing videos through “likes” and comments. In other words, we wonder whether the use of vlogging rules involves audience participation. At this stage the investigation was extended by other networks like Facebook, Twitter and Google+, as we mentioned before.

During the analysis, we observed that there is a relationship between the amount of views and participatory culture surrounding the video in “tutorial-vlogs”: more views imply a larger number of “likes” and comments or responses. The total views of “tutorials-vlogs” amounted to 1,900,000 while the rest of the tutorials added up to 462,700. Therefore it was decided to consider videos that had 1,000,000 views to compare “likes” and comments in “tutorials-vlogs” and the rest of tutorials analysed. In this new research, unlike the previous one, the audience participation was virtually the same in both groups.

When considering the videos’ circulation in other social networks the trend is the same: “tutorials-vlogs” have more views, “likes” and comments. However, if we take into account the same amount of views, vlogs don’t have more “likes” and “shares”. They maintain a slightly higher participation through comments.

Distant reading of comments allowed us to examine and track the topics that audiences talk about, what they are saying and what emotions or feelings embody that comments. Here the fluid and dynamic nature of the data we are dealing with is revealed. We analysed the first page of comments for each “tutorial-vlog”, investigating whether they are referring to the “youtuber” or to the subject of the tutorial.

The analysis showed that in 30% of the comments the vlogger was mentioned whereas in the rest the topic was predominant. These results confirm what have shown the analysis of “tags”. Only in makeup tutorials the comments about the presence of the “youtuber” and the subject are matched, reaffirming this subgenre as a paradigmatic case of “tutorials-vlogs”.

The “emotional tone” of the comments in these tutorials showed a high degree of satisfaction in the audience. Their opinions are largely positive, expressing appreciation and referring to the “youtuber” with a personal tone. The use of words such as “loved”, “liked” and “thanks” are the ones that appear the most often.

Figure 1. Audience participation in tutorials-vlogs and other tutorials through various social networks.

Figure 2. Audience participation in tutorials-vlogs and other tutorials of the same level of views (1,000,000 views) through various social networks.
6. Syntagm vs. Paradigm. Another approach to the study of tutorials

Before introducing the categories of syntagm and paradigm it is necessary to explain the distinction between narrative and database proposed by Manovich (2006). Database, as a cultural form, represents the world as a list of items which refuses to order. By contrast, narrative creates a line of cause and effect. In that sense, they are opposing categories.

However, with new media, the database is able to take a variety of cultural forms, ranging from direct translation -in which a database remains a database- to a narrative whose logic is the opposite of its own material form (Manovich, 2006). The author takes Saussure’s notion of paradigm to refer to the database and the syntagm to represent the narrative.

“The syntagm is a combination of symbols whose support is the space (...) the speaker generates an expression through the establishment of a succession of elements, one after another in a linear sequence” (Manovich, 2006, 297). Each element is chosen from a set of elements that are related: that is the paradigmatic dimension. In that way, the syntagm is explicit and the paradigm is implicit. However, new media seem to reverse this relationship, giving the paradigm a material existence -and dematerializing the syntagm-.

Given that vlogs are a fertile ground for technical experimentation (Burgess & Green, 2009) we observe the ways in which this tension appears on tutorials.

We developed a typology to describe a range of possibilities between the syntagm and the paradigm:

Degree 0: the format has syntagmatic characteristics: linear narrative and succession of elements;

Degree 1: with additional information, both visual and auditory, that helps understanding;

Degree 2: implementation of internal and external links in the video to promote interaction with the producer and / or platform;

Degree 3: use of screen fragmentation as a resource: it can contain different levels or also use the software as a complement,

Degree 4: implementation of digital production software, which becomes the center in the video.

Research was performed on 139 videos from the original database, including sample tutorials that are not vlogs and different topics such as dancing, cooking, sports, makeup, music and software. To mitigate the effect of technological advances and changes in the methods of video production, the categories were developed from videos of the year 2013 to date.

The study showed that the paradigmatic videos widely predominate over syntagmatic or degree 0 videos. The predominant genre for this degree was sport tutorials. Degree 1 is the most
widely used, which dominates 66% of the video genres: cooking, dancing, makeup, and software. The less used is degree 4 due to its complexity and it predominates in music tutorials.

7. Conclusions

From “distant reading” of Digital Humanities, the presence of vlogging rules are seen in many tutorials -41.33% of the total- in various subjects but especially in the subgroup of makeup and music tutorials. The most striking features of tutorials taken from vlogs are the presenter or “youtuber” on the screen looking at the camera and talking to the audience and the use of close up and medium close up shots.

“Tutorials-vlogs” -a subgroup of 124 from 300 videos- are fully edited. A predominance of complex edition is observed in 60% of cases over a simple edition. The complex edition uses resources such as split screen, links and image overlays. The text on the screen is the most widely used resource to reinforce personal information. These features are recognized by Aymar (2009) as belonging to vlogs.

The analysis of “tags” showed that the words relating to the format and topic -“how to do”, “learn”- have a clear predominance. Nonetheless words that make reference to the “youtuber” such as the name of the channel also have a significant presence. The most recurrent themes refer to tutorials about makeup, fashion and beauty.

The use of this style in vlogs has its implications on the interactions with the audience. The views of “tutorials-vlogs” added up to 1,900,000 while the rest of the tutorials only reached to 462,700. This difference implies a larger number of “likes” and comments. However, if you take an average of views, the audience participation was virtually the same in both groups of tutorials.

The same pattern is observed in other networks such as Facebook, Twitter and Google+. “Tutorials-vlogs” have more views, “likes” and comments. However, they don’t have more likes and shares if we consider the same amount of views (1,000,000). There is a slightly higher participation of viewers through comments.

The analysis of comments showed that while there is a strong presence of the “youtuber” -30% of the comments- the person does not impose over the subject that dominates -70% of the cases-. Only in the case of makeup tutorials the relationship between self-reference and the subject is levelled. This result confirms what the analysis of “tags” has shown; that the self-referential function does not erase the teaching function of tutorials.

The “emotional tone” of comments in this kind of tutorials is mostly positive, expressing appreciation to the “youtuber” through an emotional and personal language.

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