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Where Quality Matters: Discourses on the Art of Making a YouTube Video

Like many other digital achievements, YouTube's and other video-sharing sites' accessibility have provoked visions of a total democratization of the audiovisual space, where there are no more barriers between producers and the audience, or between professionals and amateurs. For example, *Wired* magazine announced in May 2006: "Any amateur can record a clip. Follow these steps to look like a pro."¹ Producers of digital photo cameras and video equipment, indeed, provide users with the most accessible technology and software to record and share clips on the go. Casio, for instance, has introduced with one of its new models a "YouTube capture mode" which supports optimized recordings according to YouTube's standard. And as a convenient extra, these cameras automatically record any 15 seconds before the record button is pushed.² Thus, if a user realizes with some delay that a situation turns out to be a typical "YouTube moment" worth recording and sharing online, it is (almost) never too late to push the button: the camera has already captured 15 seconds of the immediate past.

As a matter of fact, many of the countless video clips on YouTube give evidence of its low barriers for anybody who has access to technological means of recording and uploading a video clip. Many of these clips seem at first sight to demonstrate that most of these "anybodies" have no skills in videomaking at all, or have no ambitions and just don't care about the quality of their clips.³ As the website's self-promotion goes and as commentators repeatedly affirm, YouTube is first and foremost a cultural space of community building and shared experiences. Many critics therefore lament the poor aesthetic quality and moral shiftiness of many of the self-made clips on YouTube, often recorded on the spot with facilities like mobile phones, webcams or digital photo

cameras and then uploaded without "wasting time" on postproduction. YouTube is—at least for "contributing users" as opposed to "lurking users"⁴—all about sharing moments online with a potentially worldwide audience, but actually a limited number of viewers.

Against this background, enthusiast advocates of participatory media discuss the new possibilities of Web 2.0 as a challenge for critics, educators and policymakers, since, as Henry Jenkins states in his White Paper on *Media Education for the 21st Century*, one cannot subsume that users would acquire the necessary skills and competencies "on their own by interacting with popular culture." As a consequence, Jenkins claims "the need for policy and pedagogical interventions." He identifies three main concerns, namely the "participation gap," the "transparency problem" and "the ethics challenge." In addition to the problem of unequal access to digital media—the participation gap—and in addition to the problem of participants not being aware of the conventions and protocols defining conditions of digitally enabled participation—the transparency problem—Jenkins also points at the "ethical problem of participants" lacking skills in and knowledge about the use of digital media. This derives, as Jenkins puts it, from "the breakdown of traditional forms of professional training and socialization that might prepare young people for their increasingly public roles as media makers and community participants."⁵

This critical perspective on the challenges of participatory cultures differs fundamentally from the enthusiastic perspective on users' activities Jenkins develops in *Convergence Culture*, in which he praises the participatory achievements of digital media.⁶ What Jenkins performs with these two different takes on participatory media I would call the "participation dilemma" that is inherent to a lot of theorizing about digital media and participation. On the one hand, critics embrace new possibilities of participation as a democratization of our media culture: untrained non-professionals can now gain access to the formerly exclusive world of professional media and start redefining the tacit norms and standards of the established media culture. On the other hand, this is identified as a problem, since the new, "uneducated" participants neglect professional standards of craftsmanship, aesthetic quality or ethic norms. As a reaction, professionals, critics and educators identify the need to train the new participants in order to guarantee the "state of the art," or, as Jenkins argues in his White Paper, to prevent inexperienced participants

from being exploited, abused or mocked. The dilemma then is that the new participants have to achieve some skills that enable them to contribute to online cultures in meaningful ways, but whenever a cultural elite starts to train and thus to “professionalize” new “ordinary” users, those traditional cultural barriers and hierarchies that have been questioned by the emerging participatory cultures are rebuilt.

Jenkins points to the dilemma above by developing two contradictory perspectives on digital participation. However, I would argue that this dilemma derives from a “theorization” caught up in 20th century media theories’ binary thinking in oppositions of top-down versus bottom-up forces; the industry versus the audience, producers versus consumers, the power block versus the people, etcetera. These traditional oppositions tend to romanticize the “user” as an authentic, self-conscious subject, as well as condemn “the industry” and educational institutions as manipulative exploiters by definition. Therefore, academic research trying to understand the forces that shape the YouTube as a “space of participation” has to go beyond such traditional oppositions.⁷

One of these shaping forces, for instance, is the popular discourse about YouTube where participants discuss questions of knowledge, skills and video quality—if still on a basic level. That is to say that beyond the world of suspect academics, conservative cultural elitists or “the industry,” there is a discourse on YouTube engaging in teaching skills of videomaking for YouTube. This discourse cannot be identified as either top-down or bottom-up; rather, it is a discourse in, on and about YouTube negotiating the site as a specific space of expression, exchange and community building.

In this article, I will take a closer look at this discourse and the ways in which it has emerged on YouTube and in YouTube-related video tutorials. My analysis will draw on the so-called “production of culture approach” as it has been developed in cultural sociology to research professional practices of production. According to this approach, the “explanation of cultural practices depends on the identification of the discursive fields providing the ‘constitutional infrastructure’ that enables actors to construct the knowledge frameworks upon which action is based.”⁸ Similar to other defining discourses, such as the economic, legal and technological powers materialized in the interface and the protocols of use,⁹ I take here the “quality of discourse” as one of the cultural forces that construct YouTube as a new space of cultural participation.

Who Cares about Quality?

According to a traditional dichotomy, the “quality discourse” would be identified as a top-down force that maintains the cultural elite’s control of an emerging field of creative practice—whereas new groups of users, probably identified as “the people,” challenge and question established hierarchies based on traditional notions of aesthetic norms and standards. But there is also evidence that not only academics, educators, and full, semi- or pre-professionals contribute to a discourse in teaching “dabblers,” “novices” and “amateurs” how to make a professional-looking video clip. Actually, many of the “contributing users” on YouTube themselves engage in the quality discourse on discussion boards, even if this is hardly done in an articulated and sophisticated manner.

In her inspiring study of social networking in small communities of video sharers, Patricia G. Lange documents some reflections on the quality of videos, probably provoked through the formal setting of her ethnographic research. Though Lange argues that “critics fail to understand that video quality is not necessarily the determining factor in terms of how videos affect social networks,” her study reveals that some participants are “dismissive of the standard of *other* people’s videos. Their objections are often related to technical issues (including poor editing, lighting, sound, or some combination) or content (too many videos about people sparring).”¹⁰ Lange’s accurate wording implies that quality certainly *can* be a determining factor and that—even if it is not determining—is actually a matter of reflection even among groups of “contributing users” that are first and foremost interested in building and maintaining small-scale networks. This is not astonishing, given the fact that aesthetic styles are determining factors of community building in many areas of youth and popular culture.

One of Lange’s informants seems to reflect explicitly on this mechanism when he explains that what Lange calls “privately public behavior” is to be read as a deliberate strategy. “He cloaked himself in a character in order to develop video skills, garner a fan base, and then reveal himself, once successful, to his old friend RJ,”¹¹ Lange writes. Skills are in this user’s perspective directly associated with the dream of making successful, if not viral, videos that would help him to gain the appreciation of his friend and other peers. Against the background of ethnographic studies like Lange’s, I argue that it is unproductive to

create an opposition between social aims and aesthetic means. Users who engage in small-scale social networks are also sensible of the quality of clips shared online. Though these users' motivation might be more socially than aesthetically grounded, the means to achieve social recognition among peers and maybe beyond is often articulated in terms of videomaking skills and product quality. Therefore, it is more productive to generally assume that users are conscious of aesthetic quality, even if not in an articulated and reflected way.

In fact, discussions on quality emerge on different levels and on different occasions at YouTube: the interface asks users to rate clips and to add comments, and many users actually express their affinity with feelings, experiences and preferences on the YouTube forum, or mock a video's poor quality.¹² There is the official YouTube award, where the YouTube staff calls out some of the most popular videos and asks users to rate them and indicate which ones deserve extra recognition. Beyond that, there is the genre of instructional videos and "how-to books" teaching the art of YouTube videomaking to those users who aim at larger, diverse audiences. Tutorials, then, can be understood and analyzed as a discourse that articulates and negotiates aesthetic sensibilities and ideas of what defines the quality of a YouTube video.

"Quality" According to YouTube Tutorials

Since 2006, there has been a growing number of printed tutorials on how to make effective use of YouTube. Titles such as *How to Do Everything with YouTube*; *15 Minutes of Fame: Becoming a Star in the YouTube Revolution* and *YouTube: An Insiders Guide to Climbing the Charts* all contain separate chapters teaching the ploys for creating attention for a clip and making it circulate widely, if not a viral hit. Next to these types of general introductions, there are tutorials that advise businesses how to exploit the possibilities of advertising and marketing on YouTube: *Plug Your Business! Marketing on MySpace, YouTube, Blogs and Podcasts and Other Web 2.0 Social Networks*; *YouTube: Making Money By Video Sharing and Advertising Your Business for Free*; and *YouTube for Business: Online Video Marketing for Any Business*. Getting as many hits as possible is, according to these tutorials, the currency of videos on YouTube. However, widespread circulation of a video does not only imply

popularity and thus potential economic revenues; traditionally it is also associated with the notion of publicness and thus with a framework that triggers certain collectively acknowledged norms and conventions. This is the rationale behind printed YouTube tutorials like *Wired* magazine's above-quoted short reference in six steps or the book-length *YouTube for Dummies*.¹³ *Wired magazine's* tutorial, though very condensed, is a prototypical example of the genre. It reminds the maker of a few things to keep in mind: "Choose your weapon; Record clear audio; Keep it steady; Light your subjects; Film multiple takes; Edit edit edit."¹⁴ Except for the first imperative, the other five read like a professional critics' advice about what mistakes to avoid.

As Martina Roepke has suggested with regard to handbooks on amateur filmmaking, tutorials can be read as professional interventions into amateurs' and dabblers' home-movie practices.¹⁵ For example, Michael Miller's book-length *YouTube 4 You* explains what to pay attention to in a short chapter of only ten pages. Most of it is devoted to technical aspects of convenient video standards, questions of recording television footage and ripping fragments from DVDs, whereas only three pages address original videomaking. However, the question of quality is addressed specifically. Here, too, the structuring question is: "What makes a great YouTube video?" According to Miller, a clip should target a small audience; should address a specific topic from a personal point of view; should be funny and attractive for some other reason; should be original, since "the world of YouTube needs innovators, not imitators"; and should be as short as possible. Reading tutorials as reactions to poor practices, Miller's tips in reverse would give a description of the average home-made video on YouTube: thematically and stylistically unfocused, not providing any personal or original perspective, not entertaining and far too long.¹⁶

Obviously, the aesthetic norms Miller draws on are based on the concept of authorship, and thus in sharp contrast to what, for example, José van Dijck has described as the characteristic of the "snippet" on YouTube. Van Dijck uses the term snippet to refer to the transient status of a clip within the potentially endless process of reusing, recycling and remaking on YouTube.¹⁷ However, handbook authors like Miller draw not only on authorship as a defining concept, but also on craftsmanship when addressing more technical skills of videomaking. Miller explicitly advises users to professionalize their practice by taking into account

basic aspects of camera, lighting and sound when filming. "In general, it pays to be professional. If you're shooting your own videos, use adequate lighting, set up attractive camera [angles], and definitely make sure that your sound quality is up to snuff. Even amateur videos can look good and better-looking videos attract more viewers than do dimly lit poor-sounding ones." Next to the concepts of authorship and professionalism, Miller draws on a third concept traditionally associated with the artistic mastery of a medium or art form when he advises to "Play to the medium's strengths. Know that your video will be seen in a tiny window on a small computer screen and then shoot it accordingly. Use lots of close ups, keep the background plain, avoid long shots, and employ simple images with high contrast. Visual subtlety is not your friend."¹⁸

As Miller recommends, videos made for YouTube should acknowledge the very characteristics of the medium. The quote makes clear that such remarks are based on the traditional idea that an emerging medium is defined in a process of aesthetic differentiation. Interestingly enough, Miller's recommendations read like some of the early reflections on the nature of the small screen from the 1950s, when film was the established medium television was compared with. The idea of medium specificity is accordingly linked to the discourse on how to achieve aesthetic quality. Thus, a video playing to the characteristics of YouTube in an original way, and at the same time meeting the professional standards of production, proves authorship and, vice versa, would show that YouTube is an artistically specific medium.

The concepts of authorship, professional craftsmanship and medium specificity are defining components of the "quality discourse" in printed tutorials for YouTubers. Online tutorials, available on YouTube itself, do not differ fundamentally from printed versions. YouTube's "own" official tutorial covers the familiar topics, traditional handbooks or Websites of video filmmaking address. Short clips averaging 40 seconds explain the basic features of lighting, camera, sound and special effects. These clips, too, seem to point at—from a professional perspective—the most common shortcomings of the "average" video on YouTube. Not surprisingly, these clips are provided by and linked to the website of *Videomaker*, a magazine for film amateurs that advertises on YouTube's website. The presenters in these online tutorials use a rather informal way of addressing the audience, as if they were talking to a community of peers:

"Hi, I'm Issak from *Videomaker* and I'm going to give everyone a tip out there to make their YouTube videos a lot better looking."¹⁹



9 "Of course, you need a camera!": One of Youtube's own video tutorials

Probably the most traditional of these how-to videos on YouTube is a classical instructional clip of ten minutes produced by the retired local radio and television columnist Jim Carter, notorious on YouTube as the producer of more than 250 videos for "do-it-yourselfers." As a former professional, he raises in his tutorial "How to make a



10 "How To Make a Video": James Carter knows

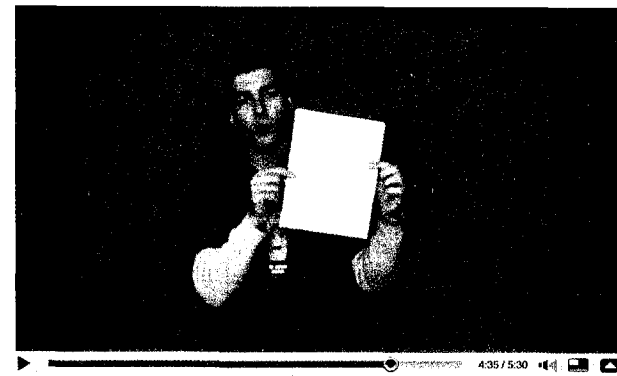
Video” the typical topics: the selection of equipment, the actual filming, decoupage and editing, scriptwriting and acting in front of the camera. Particularly interesting regarding the online tutorials is the dialogic dimension, when users comment on the tutorials and react to the makers’ tips and advice. For example, Carter receives some mocking comments for his old-fashioned sense of humor. At the same time, there are users who express their thankfulness in short responses like “great vid, it helped,” or in longer comments that seem to underline the need for professional interventions: “Sweet, I saw a lot of my friends’ problems in this video’s solutions, good job.” Carter, obviously enjoying his authority deriving from his professional experience, reacts in a rather untypical way for YouTube. He uses the maximum space of 500 characters to answer questions accurately, adding some extra advice. To a users’ disrespectful comment “10 minutes? WAY to long dude,” a comment that reaffirms the norm that a video online has to be short and to the point, Carter responds in a demonstratively polite way, again using his old-fashioned sense of humor: “Thanks for your comment. I went to your channel. No wonder you said my video was too long. Your videos are as short as the miniskirts women wore in the 70’s. I have a challenge for you. How about covering the same topics I did and see how long your video turns out.”²⁰

It is obvious that different styles of communication meet here. Some younger producers of tutorials on videomaking for YouTube have created different styles of presenting themselves and addressing their



11 Mark Apsalon on chroma key and his DVD

viewers as peers. Examples are Mark Apsalon’s short videos addressing specific questions such as the use of chroma key, or the tutorials of Mr. Safety who, such as in “How to Improve Video Quality The Cheap Way,” addresses videomaking novices in particular who are unable to spend a lot of money. Whereas Tim Carter, a retired cameraman, is a post-professional, Mark Apsalon and Mr. Safety can be characterized as semi-professionals or pre-professionals who use YouTube to promote their own work. Apsalon’s tutorials, for example, are teasers for his one-hour instructional videos on filmmaking that can be ordered on DVD.



12 “That’s the color it should be!”: Mr. Safety

Apsalon and Mr. Safety both receive many laudatory comments for their tutorials and are addressed as authorities by a community of users who want to improve their skills in videomaking. Such hierarchies and the discourses maintaining them are characteristic for traditional amateur cultures, and YouTube is all but free from traditional cultural hierarchies — obvious, for example, in the following comment by user EA060: “Some of these things seem hilarious to me, being a professional cameraman and video editor. But those advices are good for the amateurs. An interesting way to make people understand some things. About ‘white balance’ on VX cameras don’t use the auto function because it’s not JVC to work properly. You better make the white balance manually, or use the presets (int/ext) because you will have to work more on an editing software. The same thing for DSR 150 and DSR 170 from Sony. Good luck!”²¹

What is interesting here is not so much the specificity of information exchanged, but more the style of user EA060: by introducing himself as a professional cameraman whether this is true or not, he creates a hierarchy between “the amateurs,” the pre- or semi-professional whose advice is useful for amateurs, and himself as a true professional who possesses the superior ability to evaluate the tutorials. The common ground of this discourse recreating traditional hierarchies is the culturally shared belief that the better the quality of a public utterance, the bigger the audience and the stronger the impact of the message will be. And quality derives, according to the rather traditional discourse, from authorship, craftsmanship and the professional use of the mediums’ specific features. The quality discourse thus perpetuates traditional cultural norms even with regard to the open and easily accessible space of participation that YouTube offers.

Conclusion: Sharing versus Participating

This article’s analysis of the quality discourse on YouTube aims at a better understanding of (some of) the cultural powers that define YouTube as a cultural space of participation. Like in other cultural realms where the professional world and the world of the consuming audience is mediated by a rich, differentiated and powerful amateur culture,²² quality discourses function not only to create taste hierarchies, but also to professionalize dabblers and novices and make the public and professional world more accessible for them. Users with different backgrounds and interests in YouTube contribute to and maintain this quality discourse. Full, semi-, pre- and post-professionals use YouTube to share *and* promote their knowledge, and dabblers, novices and amateurs contribute to the same discourse through their questions and comments. As opposed to the era of mass media—with producers on the one side and consumers on the other—there is a diverse field of positions in the space of participation YouTube creates. From the few tutorials I have discussed in this article, it is obvious that they draw on traditional media aesthetics and cultural conceptions of authorship and publicness, and can thus be characterized as sort of a conservative power working to format YouTube as a space of participation.

One could characterize this discourse as a disciplinary one that works to domesticate “ordinary” users’ original creativity and to subordinate the open, participatory space of YouTube to the regime of hierarchical mass media and traditional cultural norms. But this would be a romantic misconception of users’ “authentic creativity.” All users are without any exception part of already existing cultures and have to work through these cultures’ norms and conventions to develop their own creative interests and skills. Tutorials in videomaking are a means to develop such skills, especially for those whose engagement on YouTube aims not just at sharing moments and experiences, but at contributing to and participating in a broader audiovisual culture. Far from blurring the boundaries between the spheres of production and consumption, online video culture redefines and institutionalizes the relationship between these spheres in a more differentiated way. The quality discourse is one powerful force within this process of redefinition and differentiation. Although video-sharing sites allow for more diverse forms of participation than traditional mass media ever did, the quality discourse on YouTube works to structure possible acts of audiovisual participation according to well-established conventions and standards.

Endnotes

- 1 Jim Feely, “Lights! Camera! Vodcast! How to make your own viral clip,” *Wired*, 5 May 2006.
- 2 See advertisement for the camera at www.focus.de/digital/foto/digitalkameras/tid-6811/allround-digitalkameras_aid_130827.html [last checked 15 February 2009].
- 3 Patricia G. Lange, in her contribution to this volume, addresses a type of YouTube video that aims at connecting people with shared interests. Since such “videos of affinity” are not meant to be watched by a diverse audience, they don’t have to be original and well crafted. These videos, according to Lange, are often “stereotypical, spontaneous, and contain many in-jokes” and can still fulfill their social function, though they seem to “draw undeserved attention” from viewers who do not share the specific interest.

- 4 On the need for a better differentiation of types of users and forms of participation, see José van Dijck, "Users like you? Theorizing agency in user-generated content," *Media, Culture & Society* no. 1, 2009, pp. 41–58.
- 5 Henry Jenkins, *Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education for the 21st Century* (Chicago: MacArthur Foundation, 2006), p. 3.
- 6 Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture. Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New York University Press, 2006).
- 7 For a detailed discussion of the concept of "spaces of participation" see Eggo Müller, "Formatted spaces of participation: Interactive television and the reshaping of the relationship between production and consumption," in *Digital Material – Tracing New Media in Everyday Life and Technology*, eds. Marianne van den Boomen et. al. (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2009).
- 8 Jarl A. Ahlkvist, "Programming philosophies and the rationalization of music radio," *Media, Culture & Society* no. 3, 2001, pp. 339–359.
- 9 See for a thorough discussion of regimes shaping participating online Mirko T. Schäfer, *Bastard Culture: User Participation and the Extension of Cultural Industries* (Utrecht: Utrecht University, 2009) and the contribution of Frank Kessler and Mirko T. Schäfer in this volume.
- 10 Patricia G. Lange, "Publicly private and privately public: Social networking on YouTube," *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* no. 1, 2007, pp. 361–380; see her article in this volume also.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 See Patricia G. Lange's contribution in this volume.
- 13 Chris Botello & Doug Sahlin, *YouTube for Dummies* (Indianapolis: Wiley Publishing, 2007).
- 14 The tutorial is quoted from Jim Feely's article "Lights! Camera! Vodcast! How to make your own viral clip," *Wired*, 5 May 2006.
- 15 Martina Roepke, *Privat-Vorstellung. Heimkino in Deutschland vor 1945* (Hildesheim, Germany: Olms, 2006).
- 16 Michael Miller, *YouTube 4 You* (New York: Que Publishing, 2007), p. 87.
- 17 José van Dijck, "Homecasting: The end of broadcasting?" *Vodafone Receiver* no. 18, 2007 – <http://212.241.182.231/rcb1/?p=36> [last checked 15 February 2009].
- 18 Miller 2007, p. 87.
- 19 See www.youtube.com/handbook_popup_produce_light?pcont=lightbasics [last checked 15 February 2009].
- 20 All quotes are reactions to Tim Carter's instructional video entitled "How to film a video" – www.youtube.com/watch?v=3zFePU1uvtc [last checked 15 February 2009].
- 21 Quoted from EA060's comment on Mr. Safety, "How to Improve Video Quality The Cheap Way" – www.youtube.com/watch?v=OePFgmyvW0 [last checked 15 February 2009].
- 22 In contrast to the general perception, professional and semi-professional productions usurp, as Green and Burgess argue in their contribution to this volume, more and more space and attention on YouTube and are starting to define the site's cultural meaning.

The YouTube

Reader

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