

Youtube: fragments of a video-tropic atlas

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Abstract:

In this article I make a plea for human geographers to make use of the rapidly growing collection of video materials that can be found on Youtube. My tiny atlas of Youtube picks out three videos in order to exhibit the richness of audio-visual materials to be found there and also one potential way of analysing them. These videos are common amateur genres on Youtube: home movies of family occasions, a video-blog and the counter-surveillance of the police. I argue that geography is particularly well situated to turn toward the video itself on Youtube as a source of data on the temporal, embodied, bodily, material and mobile aspects of spatial practices. Brief analyses are also provided of the videos to demonstrate how they can be analysed in those terms but also toward understanding video practices within different settings. Finally, I present a case for selecting 'badly produced' videos for good analytic reasons.

Keywords: Youtube, video cultures, recording, video blogging, home movies, counter-surveillance, video analysis, spatial practices

Video-tropics

'I hate Youtube and users' or so Lévi-Strauss might begin his *Tristes Tropiques*, were it a melancholy journey through the user-generated worlds of Youtube on the wane. And as Youtube becomes dominated by commercial broadcasters it is hard to avoid dismay over a disappearing possibility for diversity and alternative forms of broadcast and communication. Yet for the Lévi-Strauss of Youtube there is hope: the disruptive and the marginal, the quirky and quaint, the conservative and the radical are still to be found with or without an atlas. Youtube continues to host more than mainstream broadcast media and advertising once did, providing not only materials for the media to harvest but also grist for the mill of geographical research. In the production of media the amateur has always operated in relation to the industrial and the distinctiveness of Youtube was that "the practices and identities associated with cultural production and consumption, commercial and non-commercial enterprise, and professionalism and amateurism interact and converge in new ways" (Burgess and Green, 2009a: 90). My purpose here is to present three common forms from the amateur mode to demonstrate how Youtube provides a window into social practices and how a concern with the details of practice then provides the criteria for selecting Youtube materials to study.

What makes Youtube both easier and harder to approach is that, like many other social media, Youtube is used for many purposes by many parties: as an archive, a broadcast medium, a platform, an online community, a system of circulation, an advertising medium, a distribution system for amateurs and more (Burgess and Green, 2009b). The idea of fieldwork in and on the internet being akin to an ethnographer's journey is one method for trying to study it as an archipelago of amateur, lay and fan communities (Hine, 2000; Sumiala and Tikka, 2011). Another is the traditional cultural geographer's work of decoding or interpreting or analysing broadcast media. Yet another is using interviews or focus groups with its contributors and viewers. There is, then, no one appropriate method nor form of analysis for investigating Youtube because Youtube is itself polymorphic, polytopical and praxiologically diverse. Consequently in this short article, rather than reviewing the multiple forms of analysis that can be used on video materials, I will draw loosely on ethnomethodological approach (Laurier, 2014a) and in doing so, provide hints of what bringing the two together can contribute to not only geographical research on action, language and embodiment but also on video practices.

It is a commonplace to remark upon how textually-centric the social sciences remain and we see this in many of the studies of Youtube that have concentrated on the commentaries made on videos rather than the videos themselves (Reilly, 2013; Uldam and Askanius, 2013). Human geography meantime has been video-tropic from the outset in that it has turned toward the video itself, following a trajectory established by its approach to the visual (Rose, 2001), to media (Lukinbeal and Craine, 2008) and embodied and bodily practices (Simpson, 2011). Pioneering work on birthing videos by Longhurst (2009) considered the changing visibility and social distribution of giving birth. In a related vein Del Casino and Brooks (2014) trace out the complex politics of pharmaceuticals, bodies and sexuality to be found in commercials, home videos and vlogs (video blogs) on Youtube. Cutting across both the textual-centric and video-tropic studies is how the public and private spheres are being renegotiated through Youtube. Relatedly political struggles are played out on Youtube which allow for new form of collective action (Meek, 2011). Studying activism on Youtube brings together the relations and responses between traditional and new media so that rather than finding ourselves dismayed by the arrival of commercial and broadcast materials we can examine their remediation (Cupples and Glynn, 2013).

In making use of amateur video on Youtube I want to propose a slight narrowing of focus in their treatment from being understood in terms of media to being drawn upon as recordings and

sometimes as public records. Their special value to us, in those terms, is that they can then be utilised in order to pursue analysis of the timing and spacing of whatever practices they are recordings of (Simpson, 2011). Mainstream broadcast footage has begun to be used for those ends for understanding walk-outs in news interviews (Llewellyn and Butler, 2011) swearing (Butler and Fitzgerald, 2011) and arguments (Reynolds, 2011) however amateur and other alternative videos remain barely utilised..

Good analytical reasons for selecting badly produced videos

Given the daunting quantities of material contributed by Youtube users (100 hours every minute at the time of writing¹) one of the problems it presents is how to select and collect manageable amounts of material from it. In her study of birth videos Longhurst (2009) looked at hundreds videos, from a potential pool of hundreds of thousands, by working through 10 a day. Longhurst also read through comments, noted down the viewing statistics that provide further frames of reference in Youtube. She combined the video materials with the other digital media on Youtube in order to “build a more robust picture of what Rose (2001: 30) refers to as the ‘technological modality’, ‘compositional modality’ and ‘social modality’ of the images.” (2009: 50). Del Casino & Brooks (2014) collected 257,000 videos for quantitative analysis and then selected 25 by three themes for closer analysis. However other studies draw upon Youtube as a media resource amongst other media resources rather than using it as complete dataset and thus also render it more manageable (e.g. Meek, 2011; Cupples and Glynn, 2013).

For the recovery and study of spacing and timing of embodied practices a different criterion to use for selecting videos - that they are ‘uncut’ or un-edited. Editing, while central to construction of narrative, meaning, time and space in film through montage, becomes a problem for recordings of action because in the act of creative destruction it shreds the temporal, spatial and sequential continuities of the original event (Mondada, 2006). Cutting video loses how one action was timed in relation to another, how one action is a response to another action or indeed simply how long it took for an action to be accomplished. For instance, in edited interviews questions are systematically removed, as are re-starts, interruptions and other routine features of the interview. In terms of the embodied practices that produce labour in pregnancy or labour on the assembly line, or play in the nursery or play in mountaineering the duller details of these practices are usually cut away before they are uploaded as three minute videos on to Youtube. In pursuing material for analysis on Youtube there are then, to adapt a phrase from an old ethnomethodological study, good analytical reasons for selecting and collecting badly produced Youtube videos. Over the next three sections I will offer three examples of uncut videos or uncut sections of longer videos which will hopefully show elements of what can be studied using amateur recordings. The examples range across a number of common amateur genres on video from the home movie to the counter-surveillance of police activities.

Home videos of the family

The home movie as a cultural form precedes Youtube by a century and has already been utilised by geographers as an archival resource for understanding children’s geographies (Nicholson, 2001). As Nicholson points out the home movie can tell us as much about the adults behind the camera as the children in front of it and, as Nicholson concludes, ‘it offers only a partial mapping of children’s spatial encounters’ (2001: 137). In home movies we find, as we do with amateur photographs, a

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/yt/press/en-GB/statistics.html>

preponderance of conventional memorable events such as births, holidays, birthday parties and as we will examine in a moment, Christmas day (Rose, 2010; Moran, 2002).

Like photography before it, as video has become a more common feature of family life, the very recording process has become part of reflexively constituting Christmas as memorable. Many of the Christmas videos on Youtube are placed there for other family members who were either there at the original event, or, are being called upon to be belated witnesses to the family celebration. They are also often in search of other witnesses and audiences to their life and part of the rapidly shifting geography of privacy and publicity of social media (Strangelove, 2010). There are a number of video-able family events to Christmas: meeting Santa, eating a Christmas meal together, singing songs together, relatives and friends visiting, children waking up to find presents and, in figure 1, opening presents.

Central to the circulation of presents is the identity of the giver, the receiver and analysing the meaning of the gift not least in terms of its evidence for appropriateness, thoughtfulness, generosity and social standing. (Good and Beach, 2005). Youtube recordings made by family members offer us access to how families collectively and intersubjectively produce the local circulation of gifts. Figure 1 is a fragment of a three minute video found during a search for Youtube materials on gift-giving and gift-receiving. It is a recording of eight members of a three generation family in a sitting room where the camera itself was also passed around during the openings. We will very briefly examine one of the family members - Eve - opening a gift from her sister while her grandmother watches closely from the right (see fig. 1).



Fig. 1 Opening presents on Christmas Day.

Quite how the family members should analyse the meaning of each gift was set in motion by identifying which other family member had given it. We see this form of sense-making in action when the grandmother says “who’s it from” (see also (Good and Beach, 2005) for a similar pattern at children’s birthday parties). The daughter does not only say her sister’s name but also emphasises it, and brings her grandmother’s gaze around toward her sister. Other family members beside the sister on the sofa (out of shot) also treat this as a newsworthy item with a choral ‘oh’ marker. The grandfather continues this sense of the significance of the giver by adding ‘wow’. The family as witnesses to the unwrapping are, then, not only aware that it is the receiver’s sister that is the giver but by her emphasis and their response they collectively show their awareness of the meaningfulness of this particular present (compared to one from a distant uncle). Everyone has been brought to pay close attention to this unwrapping and so it would then seem that the risk of the gift being inadequate, or equally, that the receiver fails to show appropriate appreciation, is all the higher. There is not the space to report on our more detailed findings here, but for each unwrapping by present siblings the work of especially parents and grandparents was in finding what was good about gifts, especially, where they were about to be, or had been, under-appreciated by their recipients. Efforts to interpret lowly and cheap objects, such as a tin of fake snow, showed an orientation toward the high stakes of the day and the possibility of injury to the givers and receivers.

As noted above, I want to direct our attention toward Youtube’s involvement in the reconfiguration of the private sphere. Fig 5 appears to be part of a recording that would have once sat within a family archive to be narrated for, and seen by, family members and friends of the family (Strangelove, 2010). Yet like the photographic album (Rose, 2010), the home movie is also a device for presenting and narrating the family to later new members, visitors, witnesses and other audiences (Moran, 2002). Christmas day itself is a shared and collective event which forms a central element of belonging to particular national cultures. If family members are willing to be recorded and/or have a desire to share certain family events on Youtube for as yet unknown later viewers, Christmas sits not far from weddings, as the occasion where the a group presents itself as that most public private institution - a family.

The problem that we, as researchers, face in analysing family videos is how we then respond to the recordings of personal events that we find on Youtube (Strangelove, 2010). In terms of a university ethics board, they are published material in the public domain and, at first brush, might seem straightforward to study. However in watching a home movie on Youtube we are researching it through a communicative structuring that links the personal and impersonal through, to adapt Scannell’s (2000), phrasing ‘someone-as-anyone’. Our ethical response is, at a basic level, to respect and reproduce a certain level of privacy, the mark of which in this article is a certain level of anonymisation of the transcripts through the common practice of applying a filter to the graphics. The application of a filter is not a complete technical solution to the recovery of the identity of the original participants instead it serves as a reminder of how the family in the video ought to be understood not personally but impersonally. It is perhaps better understood as ‘any-misation’ because the purpose is to analyse the actions as being of *any* family rather than the *some* family that it is.

Amateur broadcast - Video Blogs of Recovery

Video-blogs (or vlogs) on Youtube are a genre of interest in their own right, having been studied as forms of home production (Laurier, 2014b), ‘post-television’ (Tolson, 2010) and intergenerational communication (Harley and Fitzpatrick, 2009). “Anita’s Adventures in a Brain Trauma” is a video-blog from a sub-genre in which video-blogs are kept as part of fund-raising activities, either by charities or, in this case, by individuals. Most video-blogs are un-edited, yet they are of a monological character: daily diaries or expert tutorials directly addressing a later viewer (Tolson, 2010). This video blog was a little different because it was also closer to a carefully crafted amateur

documentary series. Rather than being shot by the blogger it was recorded and uploaded by a brother of his sister's struggles to recover after a serious accident. It draws on the observational camera style of longer traditions of cinema vérité. Each episode is numbered by the days since Anita's accident and registering the struggles she has with her injuries.

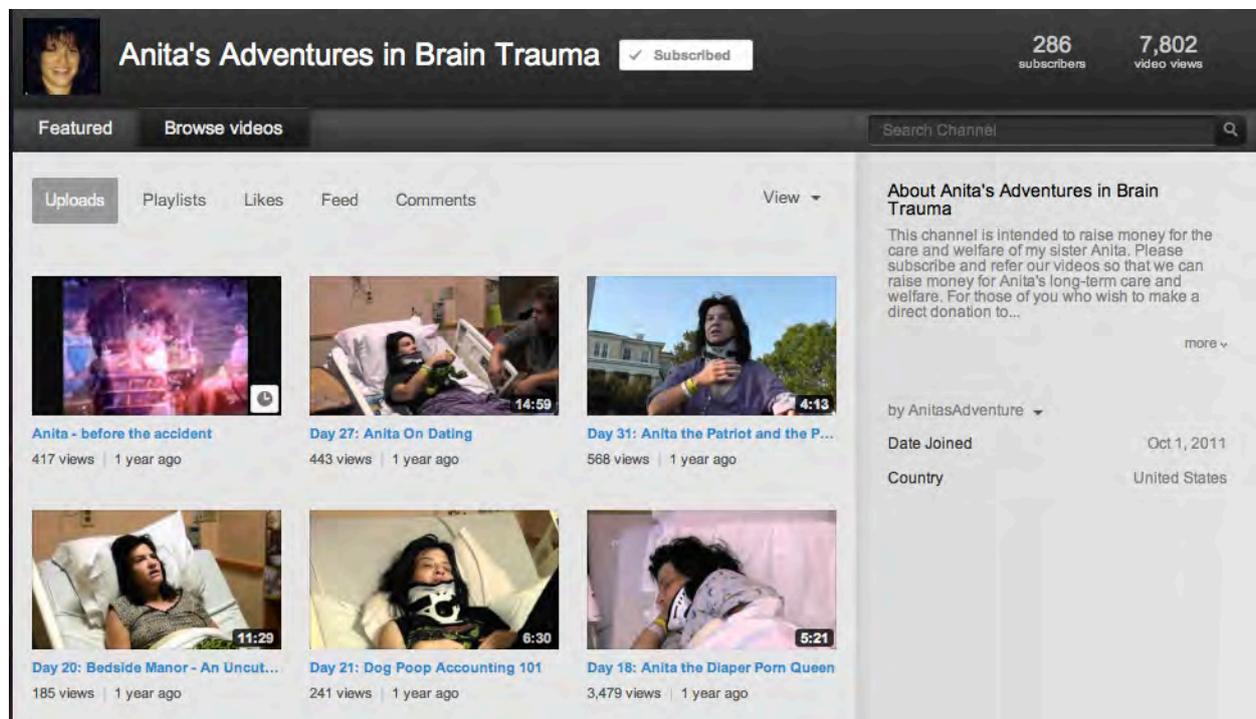


Fig. 2 Video-blog of recovery from injury

For many of the videos, the camera was left running while Anita's brother and other relatives were visiting, capturing their inquiries into how she is feeling, Anita updating them on what has been happening with her treatment and so on. The camera set-up for Day 27 (fig 2 & 3) was a medium shot of the events taking place at the bedside. It places the viewer as a third party witness to the events taking place that have brought together brother and sister in a hospital room. What we have an insight into, from the video blog is the unfolding of suffering and the responses of a caring relative. In fig.3 Anita is expressing that suffering through griping about the indignities of no longer being able to take herself to the toilet because of her "dumb hand". In response to her mentioning her hand, which she has lost control of due to her brain injuries, her brother picks it up.



Fig.3 Suffering and sympathy

She formulates her degradation through no longer controlling going to the bathroom. The brother having picked up his sister's hand, cradles it and then rocks it, while his sister recounts the degradations her "bullshit hand" has caused. From the video we see not just that the brother showed his sympathy at the right moment but his embodied acceptance of this "bullshit" part of her body which she is at least dejected about if not rejecting of. He cradles it where he might have ignored it, or worse, recoiled from it.

Because the video was not produced by researchers as part of a project on suffering and compassion there is much that is missing, for instance, in many of the recordings the family members looking after Anita are out of shot. Even with their embodied work invisible to us, the verbal actions of proffering and receiving care remain a resource for study. The recordings themselves capture Anita as the object of concern, how much progress has she made and they are also designed to evoke sympathy from us as witnesses to Anita (rather than to foreground the caring practices of her relatives). However because they adopt a documentary style they do much more. They also allow us to witness a bedside geography of care that turns not just on the giving of that care but also the receiving of that care (Barnett, 2005).

Counter-record - Police Encounters

Police encounters are a relatively common genre of recordings on Youtube and are a new form of 'secondary visibility' of police and security activities (Goldsmith, 2010) or 'sousveillance' (Reilly, 2013). In the US, Jones and Raymond used third party video recordings of police encounters kept by a resident of an African American neighbourhood 'to document and deter police brutality' (Jones and Raymond, 2012: 110). The handheld videos of police incidents in the resident's neighbourhood were being produced not only 'to deter' at the time but also 'to document' for later uses. Video tapes could potentially be evidence for later viewers, potentially in court cases, to assess and judge the police procedures.

Jones and Raymond (2012) noted that alongside the resident's successful capturing of a number of incidents of vicious police actions he also inescapably catches routine encounters between the police and residents:

To catch instances of police brutality on tape, the videographer had to record police-citizen encounters whenever they occurred, from as close to the beginning as possible to the very end, whether or not they escalated into conflict or entailed violence. As a result, his archive of video recordings includes interactions that are sometimes quite dramatic and sometimes quite banal. In spite of a lack of concern for objectivity, this third-party videographer has produced a collection of potential negative cases that can be useful to social scientists interested in building a theory based on observations. (Jones & Raymond 2012: 118)

Discovering positive and negative recordings of policing similar to the video tape collection will require extended exploration of the material stored on Youtube because incidents of brutality are pushed to the top of searches. However even in recordings which document controversial arrests the richness of the video material may shed light on wider topics. Figure 4 is a recording from Youtube, drawn upon in turn by the Guardian newspaper, that documented the detention and arrest of two photographers by the police under the notorious and now repealed 'section 44' of the Terrorism Act 2000. While providing powerful evidence of the injustices of section 44 in action, the recording also provides insight into the camera practices of counter-surveillance and uses of the notebook by police officers.

In figure 4 two police officers have approached the two photographers to request information from them. A few minutes earlier a police community support officer had interviewed them, mentioning Section 44. Throughout, the photographers attempt to clarify their rights and whether they are being detained. Their repeated question, 'are we being detained?', has legal consequences which the officer seeks to avoid by not answering the question directly.



Fig. 4 Camera and notebook movements during police encounter²

In figure 4, the officer out-of-shot makes a request for the other officer not to be filmed and the photographer with the camera complies with remarkable rapidity by adjusting the angle of shot, however he does not switch the camera off or put it away. In the face of the officer's continuing request to stop filming the photographer provides the reason for his filming ('our protection'). The shift of camera angle produces its purposes as being 'for the record' rather than of person of one officer through a shot of her face.

Audio recording of interviews with suspects is a commonplace practice of producing evidence 'for the record' (Stokoe, 2009) and, perhaps consequently, the police officer provides a somewhat reluctant acceptance of the continuing use of the camera. Having considered how the camera's recording is reconfigured by adjusting its angle we can shift to the notebook. Although it had been closed earlier it was still in the police officer's hands up until panel 4, in panel 5, she begins to put it away, possibly serving as a pre-closing of their inquiry (for the time being). However the photographer's verbatim restatement of their ongoing question is responded to with an immediate retrieval of the notebook and thus return to an on-the-record inquiry for the 'details' of the two photographers. In effect we see both the routine use of the police record in the form of the notebook and the production of a counter-record by the photographers. A counter record that is particularly consequential in this case because it lead to both national press coverage and ultimately a successful out-of-court settlement with the police.

Filming of situations tends to be dealt with usually just in terms of the simple question its presence polluting the 'naturally occurring' character of the original events (Laurier and Philo, 2006; Jones and Raymond, 2012). In figure 4 it is not a simple intrusion, it is instead already there in the events themselves. It begins to tell us how the police respond, not simply to the presence of cameras, but to the pointing of those cameras at particular categories of objects (buildings) in particular categories of space (city centres on alert after 9/11 and 7/7) and by particular categories of persons (those filming who are not recognisable as family members, professional film-makers, tourists etc.). It is, in other words, rich material for studying the spaces of video practices

Conclusion

The Mass Observation Archive was deliberately under-girded with the principles of volunteers documenting their lives as families or as workers or whatever roles within society and thereby to stand for *any* family or *any* work and *any* member of society that was of their time. Youtube was not established with the same lofty ambitions and has instead almost accidentally become a repository for materials that scholars can access to understand the lives of *someones* that can be studied as *anyones*. There are many methods that human geographers can employ to research Youtube and what I have sought to provide in this article is a sense of why we might be video-tropic in our approach.

² The story and recording can be found here: <http://www.theguardian.com/uk/2010/feb/21/photographer-films-anti-terror-arrest>

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