Discussant's Comments
by
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on
Participating in YouTubing practice: towards a practice perspective to understand user participation
motivations.
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Below are my reflections on the paper "Participating in YouTubing practice: towards a practice perspective to understand user participation motivations". I have written them in form of a set of questions that came to my mind when I tried to understand the argument of the article and assess its relevance in current media studies debates. I am looking forward to the discussion.

best, Ursula

Comments: "Participation in YouTubing"

The paper examines people's motivations to upload videos on YouTube. How do social networks and habitual practices influence people's online behavior? The research context is Australian You Tube users. Two methods come into play. Firstly, the author set up a "research oriented YouTube channel" to observe what people do on YouTube. Secondly, he conducted 23 interviews with people, who posted videos on YouTube in the past, to find out what prompted them to upload their first video. He finds that film uploading (1) complements other activities of sharing, (2) that social actors follow the encouragement of peers or bosses, and (3) it helps people cope with loneliness in times of personal crises. The author concludes that video sharing follows on from complex social negotiations, and is not simply the result of an individual decision by a rationally calculating actor.

When I first read the paper, I wondered about the target audience of the article. The author appears convinced that most media studies scholars subscribe to a rational choice model and assume that all "human action is purposeful, autonomous, proactive and pragmatic". We know from sociology and anthropology that social worlds, including media worlds are much more complicated. Today there exists a host of sophisticated internet studies (e.g. Daniel Miller, John Postill, and many more) that explore complex communication practices in a media saturated world. The author does little to take their arguments – about the social embeddedness of decision making, the relation between online and offline activity, the way affordances of technologies, personal taste and negotiated relations influence media usage – into account and thus overstates the originality of his findings, namely that people's activities are socially embedded.

The author characterizes his study as "participant observation". However, it appears that the findings are all drawn from 23 interviews, in which users provide their own interpretations of their

actions and narrate their personal memories. Qualitative research requires the collection of substantial contextual data, so that any particular case study can be understood and interpreted in relation to its position within a broader social field that drives it, shapers its meaning and establishes its social relevance. When I read that the author set up a "research oriented YouTube channel" for participant observation, I expected that the article would include some auto-ethnography. However, we learn nothing about YouTube as social platform, or the author's activities and observations as participant in this virtual community. What did the author do and experience? What did he observe? Did his observations influence the selection of interview topics or direct him to particular informants? Background on YouTube as social environment and the way people become active members might have helped to provide context for interpretation and thus supported a more in-depth account of You Tube as a place for dense human interaction.

The author adopts a social practice approach and seeks to analyze YouTube engagement as part of a flow of practice. Some of these practices are reflected others are habitual. Considering this aim, it is surprising that he singles out one particular moment – uploading of first YouTube video – as key moment that best describes the motivation for participation and determines the character of YouTube participation. This assumption contradicts earlier statements that we must consider the flow of everyday life if we wish to understand the motivation and changing character (?) of You Tube practice. The author quotes Nick Couldry to remind us that practice analysis when taken seriously "leads to the 'death' of consumers and users by viewing them more as social actors carrying out basic social practices in everyday life". If the author wishes to follow this line of argument, why does he equate YouTubing with uploading one video? An analysis of practice will need to establish a broader context within which the uploading, watching, commenting, ignoring, noticing of videos is related to social negotiations in the online and offline world. The notion of participant observation implies following these flows and engaging with users, as both actors and consumers.

I think the paper touches on a very important subject. And it creates interesting and important links between offline and online world. From my point of view it has the potential to tell us more about how using You Tube is embedded in a broader social context of negotiating social relations. In order to make the paper more convincing I would suggest providing more "thick description" of media activity (and if possible media related activity). Furthermore I think the author should engage more explicitly with the recent sociological and anthropology debate on media practices and state how he is contributing to this vibrant debate.