How to approach the coupling of objective appearances and subjective purposes?

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Cite as: Schellewald, A. (2020). How to approach the coupling of objective appearances and subjective purposes. In S. Broadhurst, E. Papadaki, D. Ploeger, & M. N. Goddard et al (Eds.), Radical immersions: Navigating between virtual/physical environments and information bubbles - DRHA 2019 Conference Proceedings (pp. 32–37). University of London / DRHA. https://gala.gre.ac.uk/id/eprint/31046/

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Abstract

The paper advocates the importance of reintroducing the idea of 'contradiction' into contemporary cultural analyses of digital media. In particular, it takes YouTube videos of old Vine clips as case to showcase the value of joining the conceptual lens of post-humanist theory with the perspective of ethnographic inquiry. It outlines the messy reality in which the objective appearance the videos and YouTube's algorithms create is coupled to the subjective purpose of user's desire to experience and relate to the world through the style and format of Vine clips, documenting absurd, funny, and comedic everyday realities. Herein the paper critiques overly holistic diagnoses of an 'always on' culture and instead emphasises the importance of embracing the nuances and subtleties that rest in contextual particularity. It closes with a call for the humanities and social sciences to join resources in order to create tangible representations of this contradictory and messy reality of digital media.

Keywords: affect; digital culture; digital ethnography; poetics of platforms

Taking digital culture seriously

The argument I want to advance in this paper is simple. If we are to really understand the powers digital media wield, we need to scrutinize more thoughtfully the process in which they do so. Questions of how today's media environments are attached to and negotiated by 'the people' seldom receive focal attention in debates. Digital devices are strongly present in daily life, fueling large-scale operations of datafying human behaviour and creating targetable 'data doubles'. This justifies skepticism and critique. To some degree digital technologies have rendered people more prone to affective control. Users are simultaneously human and more-than human, remain present in a database elsewhere (Clough 2018). Digital technologies increasingly take an infrastructural role in social life. Doing so they render possible a future in which they function as the groundworks of a new, colonial-like social order taking shape (Couldry and Mejias 2019).

However, cultural critic Joanne McNeil (2020) makes an important comment in her recent book 'Lurking'. She argues that the stories of ordinary users today ever so less sit at the heart of such discussions. Instead, technology and its architects face public scrutiny. While they should, the view nonetheless appears incomplete. Within the push towards accountability and social responsibility one must keep in mind that culture is a contradictory process. As Stuart Hall wrote: "The danger arises because we tend to think of cultural forms as whole and coherent: either wholly corrupt or wholly authentic. Whereas, they are deeply contradictory, they play on contractions, especially when they function in the domain of the popular." (1981: 233). Recent empirical research on the affective experiences of digital environments underlines this point. Feelings of discomfort over the lack of control can as much be observed characterising encounters with digital environments as do feelings of joy over momentary experiences of emancipation and participation (see e.g. Bucher 2017 or Kennedy 2018).

Put differently, the precondition to be affected, to be touched and moved, and likewise to evoke such sensation, is embodiment. Post-humanist theorisations of digital technology, such as those of Kathrine Hayles (1999) or Mark Hansen (2000), have prominently shown how this embodied and material facet of digital media has historically been ill-addressed. Emphasising that digital media have an affective presence, that they materialise an energy capable of setting into motion thoughts, feelings, and actions, has herein been vital. The work of Hansen (2014) specifically has provided a rich terminology addressing the expanded 'worldly sensibility' digital media broker today. However, the work of Hansen, and others, remains lacking on other levels.

Hansen (2016) argues that it is important to understand the coupling of objective appearances and subjective purposes. That is the question of how media and their presence come to be interlinked with rhythms of social life, allowing the former to have an impact on how the latter unfolds. It is this question on the 'affective economy', to borrow a term from Sara Ahmed (2004), which Hansen, like others, answers by reproducing narratives of an 'always on' culture. As Hansen writes: "contemporary capitalist industries are able to bypass consciousness - and thus to control individual behaviour - precisely (and solely) because of their capacity to exploit the massive acceleration in the operationality of culture" (Hansen 2014: 189). In this view the presence of digital media is seen as smooth and continuous force field, rendering ineffective a 'temporal gap' between occasions of affective experiences as potential site of negotiation and resistance. Charting such holistic views, 'the people' become of less analytical importance compared to 'the media' and their sustained presence.

Such diagnoses are theoretically sophisticated. However, they need to be approached with doubt for do they lack empirical nuance. After all, the early work of Hayles (1999) emphasised not only that digital media are material and embodied but also that this

embodiment is always contextual, that means specific and negotiable. If we are to take seriously digital culture, the ways in which it expands not only ways of connecting to one another but also sensory contact to worldly becoming more generally, we need to be more thoughtful on matters of process.

In order to see the possibility of life within capitalist ruins, as Anna Tsing (2015) argues, requires arts of noticing. It is such arts of noticing which allow attending to questions of power more thoughtfully. Ethnographic studies on the social uses of internet and digital technology have long advocated the importance of looking at the ways in which people actively integrate media into their daily rhythms (see e.g. Baym 2010 or Miller 2011). Combing this ethnographic view with the conceptual lens of post-humanism does, I argue, enable such arts of noticing for our present-day situation. It generates a more complete perspective on the processes in which human and technology affectively encounter each other. It creates sensibility for all those nuances and moments which contradict and conflict what is otherwise seen as smooth and continuous presence of digital media, a whole and coherent condition of life today.

'Vines that keep me alive'

Other than confronting the analytical inaccuracy that I have here gestured towards on a theoretical level, I am going to present an empirically concrete case to illustrate the benefits and value that shifting the analytical view on digital media can offer. The case along which I want to do so is that of YouTube montages of old Vine clips. Vine was a Twitter-owned short-video platform that was founded in 2012 and ended its service in late 2016. At its peak Vine had 200 million active users and was a vibrant home of online video culture. Vines, the short-videos that could be created, shared, and consumed on the Vine app, where therein only seconds long and often documentations of absurd, funny, and comedic moments in everyday

settings. Ripe of pop cultural references and remixes, Vine themselves soon turned into a talking point among youths in order to relate and makes sense of others and the world around.

Yet by now Vine appears largely forgotten. It remains a memory slowly overshadowed by the presence of TikTok, the short-video platform that has more than 800 million users and been downloaded more than 2 billion times. Despite TikTok already launching internationally in late 2017, it is only in recent times that it reached widespread popularity, and resultingly public scrutiny. Frequently the short and seemingly arbitrary videos commonly known as TikToks are discussed in a skeptical view. Some even going so far to render the app 'digital crack cocaine' (Koetsier 2020) or the ultimate time-wasting machine, holding people in a constant state of flux and distraction (Odell 2019).

Short-video contents, and their distribution in algorithmically curated content feeds, had in the time of Vine, as now in the time of TikTok, their meaning and value often put into question. Just like amateur filmmaking practices had frequently been ill-labelled as 'artless' or 'silly hobby' (Zimmermann 1995), short-video contents and their ephemeral nature contradict ideals of meaningful experience. They are what Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht (2012) once described as 'images made resistant to interpretation'. Their complexity, as Ulrik Ekman (2015) observed, rests less in their textual depth but possibility to broker sensibility for the moments they document. Their meaning stems not from being singular textual artefacts in which deeper meanings are hidden and a wait to be deciphered. Instead, short-videos like Vines, as an assemblage, materialise a flow of sensibility one can join in on. It is this quality which post-humanist ideas such as Hansen's (2014) 'worldly sensibility' or that of 'embodied vision', not focused on interpretation but following the image's rhythm, offer a profound analytical grasp on.

When Vine ‘died’, in the sense of its material presence, databases and servers, shutting down, so ‘died’ the space capable of assembling this flow of ‘worldly sensibility’. However, Vine culture, the practices and lived experiences, ‘survived’ this shut down ingrained into people’s memory. In search for a new ‘home’ many Vine users thus ‘migrated’ to YouTube. And one practice deployed in that situation was the creation of compilation and montage videos of old Vine clips. Apart from more ‘ordered’ montages, for instance archiving all videos from a specific creator or personality, these videos quickly reintegrated the comedic and ironic facet central to Vine culture into the nexus of archival practice. Montages, 10 to 20 minutes of length, started functioning as containers holding Vines not for purposes of neatly archiving contents but recreating the experience of flow. Where once Vine’s algorithms provided people with a seemingly endless stream of clips, users now shifted from one 10-minute YouTube montage of clips to the next.

While this practice of care in itself already underscores the significance these seemingly arbitrary clips had for people, thus contradicting their connotation as ‘meaningless’ and lacking depth, the way in which such montages were titled is further insightful. A popular formula for such titles is that of Vines that '... keep me alive', 'cured my depression clean', 'keep me from ending it all', or 'butter my croissant'. These titles are deictic gestures. They not only express the significance of Vines in general, and those in the montage particularly. Rather does their ironic and comedic tone show awareness. These titles overstate the impact Vine had on people’s life. They are playful appropriations showing that within that ‘temporal gap’ between occasions of affective experience there exists vital moments of resistance. People express awareness for their ‘addictive’ relation to digital media, laugh about how they could not live without it, and thus showcase the possibility to intervene and negotiate this relationship others render a wholly corrupt ‘always on’ culture.

Algorithmic Inaccuracies

Gathering data via YouTube's API on the likely recommendations surrounding the search query 'vines that', we can further observe the powers at work in this sphere of digital culture. Using gathered data, we can create a network map of the recommendations surrounding these typical Vine montage videos. Or, put differently, we can visualise the database creating the objective appearance that is experiencing the flow of Vines on YouTube, one 10-minute montage at a time.

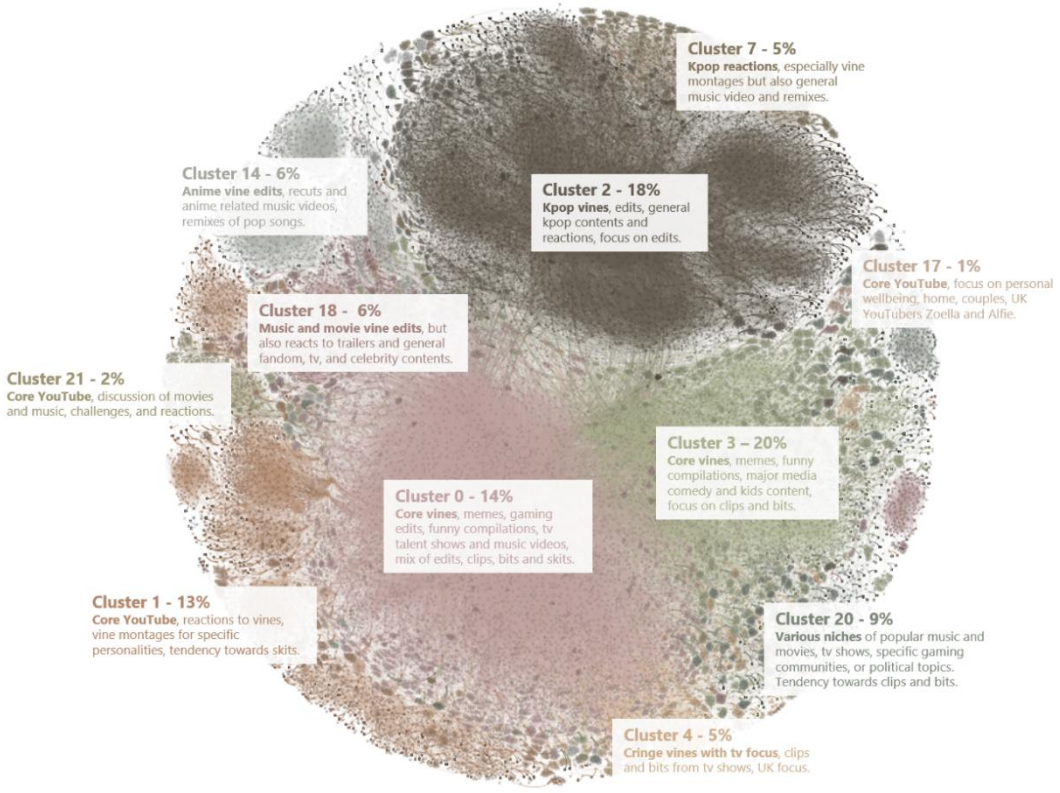

Figure 1. Annotated network visualisation of the related videos network for the search query 'vines that'. Around 48.000 videos and on average 6.6 connection between them. Data was analysed using network modelling and qualitative content analysis techniques.

At first glance, what we can see within this map is that YouTube manages to categories and cluster videos into recommendable building blocks along the lines of different genres. In the

centre, for instance, we find the classical ‘vines that’ montages, followed closely by clusters of different music or pop culture specific Vine montages. Yet we can also see how the map, at its edges, links and directs people towards other content on the platform. Here we can for example see other compilations of ‘funny moments’ or home video montages, similar in style to Vines. All this suggests that YouTube is very likely efficient at keeping people in the loop, that means engaged in a more or less continuous flow of Vines and similar video clips bundled into 10-minute long videos.

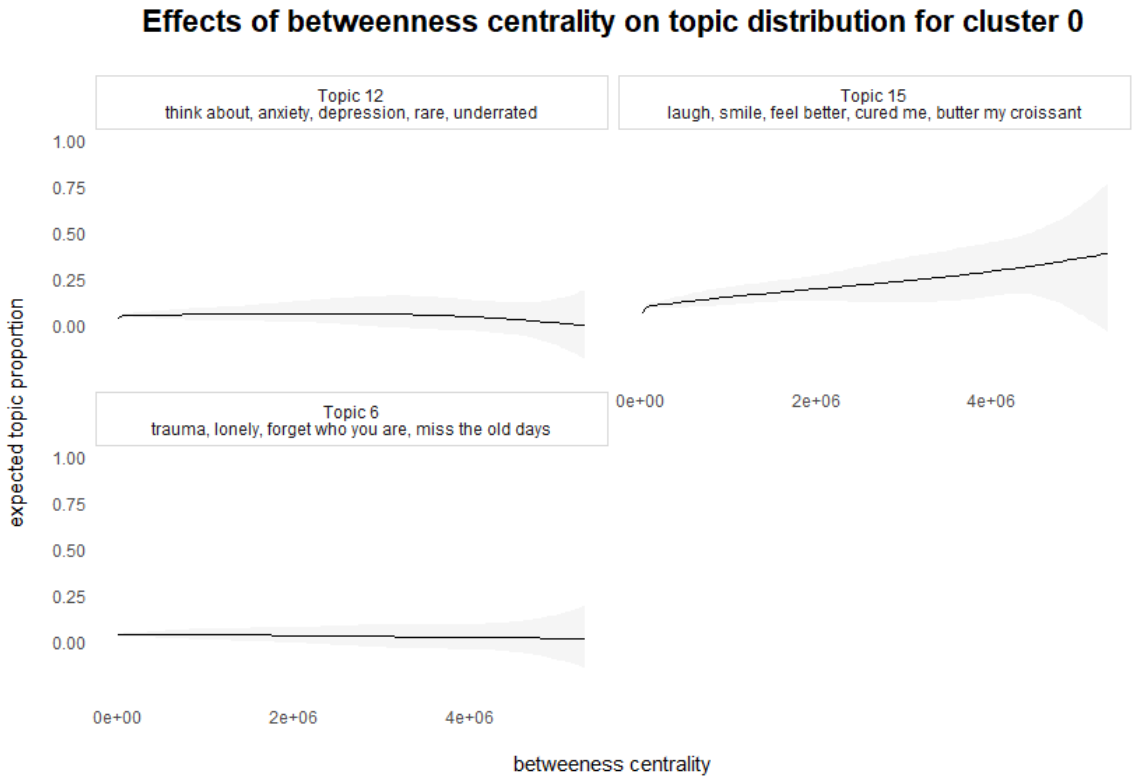

Figure 2. Results of topic model on cluster 0. Showing the betweenness centrality (likeliness for recommendation) score developing over expected distribution of topic (video with specific terms in title).

However, when we zoom in more closely, and look at the dynamics of the network, we can make an interesting observation. The algorithmic system of YouTube injects a logic, that of

positive/negative terminology, into the cultural sphere of ‘vines that’ which has not existed in that cultural sphere beforehand. Videos in the most central cluster that have negative sounding terms in their titles, Topic 12 and 6 in the above figure, are less central in the network, which means less likely to be recommended, than videos in Topic 15, which have more positive sounding terms in their titles. This is an interesting observation because we have previously seen how these terms are used in ironic and comedic statements. They all are used to express videos to be of value and significance, that is videos people would be interested in watching, so to say.

This highlights two things. Firstly, it shows an inaccuracy on the algorithmic side, that of the objective appearance, questioning the narrative of algorithms being fully efficient at understanding and controlling user behaviour. Yet, secondly, it also underscores the structural imbalance in place. Even though users were, be it intentional or not, able to create this inaccuracy through their signifying practices in the video titles, they nonetheless have comparably little control over the means of the database and its operation as such. While they can make the decision to watch a video or not, they have no real impact over how the objective appearance takes shape for them. Their ways of intervening in the coupling of this objective appearance to their subjective purpose of relating to other people and the world through the lens of Vines are limited. However, even if limited, it is important to note that they do exist.

Steps towards a processuality of the post-human

In sum, what the concrete exploration of the case of Vine montages on YouTube has shown is the importance of nuances and subtleties. Other than creating a smooth and continuous presence, there are cracks which substantially impact how the ontological powers of digital media should be enunciated. Combining post-humanist theory with a digital ethnographical

practice has allowed to uncover different layers of the process in which the meaning of short-video contents is negotiated. It has allowed us to look at the coupling of objective appearances and subjective purposes. We were able to observe this coupling as contradictory and messy process in which neither algorithms nor users are ever fully in control.

Further, as much as ethnography is a mode of inquiry, it is also one of writing. The poetics and politics of creating cultural representations in such descriptions and stories are likewise an integral point of reference for future reflection. In domains of digital culture this process especially extends towards modes of scholarly expression less frequent, namely those that are visual. Beyond joining resources in-between humanities and social sciences on a conceptual and methodological level I do therefore believe questions of expression to be of further importance. Taking seriously digital culture is thus not only a matter of stance and perspective but also making tangible the contradictory nature that defines its complexity and negotiates its consequences.

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