Chapter 11
The Functionality of Paratexts on YouTube

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ABSTRACT

This chapter investigates paratexts and their functionality on YouTube. It is argued that YouTube content is in fact characterized by its dependence and usage of paratexts as part of YouTube’s infrastructure. Paratexts are presented as being either auto-generated by YouTube or created by its users. They are furthermore identified through a distinction between spatial and temporal relationships. Based on these distinctions, a small survey of some of the most popular videos on YouTube is conducted in order to examine the appearance and functionality of paratexts. A principal argument of the chapter is that the functionality of the paratexts can be explained by what Genette characterizes as the paratext’s illocutionary force, which is examined in relationship to YouTube’s paratexts and, more specifically, the site’s implementation of links. The chapter also argues that paratexts may be characterized as a necessary tool for creators on YouTube to apply to what is being described as a culture of visibility in which paratexts serve both a promotional and a social purpose.

INTRODUCTION

Ample evidence is available on YouTube to show that new forms of user-generated content (UGC) are being introduced to a widespread audience, and for millions of ordinary people, audiovisual creation has become an everyday activity to such an extent that it is already an important part of people’s lives (as of July 2013, one hundred hours of video were uploaded per minute, according to YouTube statistics (Statistics, 2013)). With this enormous amount of content, the processes of organizing, distributing and, ultimately, consuming the videos are vital. These processes are overtly controlled by what can be recognized as metadata: either texts within the text (Rau, 1999) or specific information surrounding the videos (Jensen, 2010); this is analogous to what Genette (1997) terms paratexts. Genette (1997) defines paratext as a threshold (p. 2); that is, the surrounding information that informs its reader about the existence of the text. He emphasizes its principal purpose: “to make present, to ensure the text’s presence in the world” (Genette, 1997, p. 1) [italics...
in original]. Genette’s (1997) study is concerned with how paratexts make a book present, and he thereby pays a lot of attention to their functionality (p. 12). Although Genette does not provide a clear typological overview of the functionality of paratexts, the emphasis on functionality is a relevant starting point for investigating YouTube paratexts. Understanding the functionality of paratexts means understanding how content on YouTube is produced and consumed, specifically with regard to how creators of video communicate, connect, and promote their content.

The intention to make the text present is also a general picture of that which I will refer to in this chapter as an explicit culture of visibility. Visibility here is based on Turner’s description of ordinary people’s use of media as a “demotic turn,” which, according to Turner (2010), refers “to the increasing visibility of the ‘ordinary person’ as they have turned themselves into media content through celebrity culture, reality TV and do-it-yourself websites” (p. 2). Similarly, Thompson (2005) speaks of a form of visibility that he describes as “the society of self-disclosure” (p. 35), where achieving popularity through media has become a desirable value in modern culture.

On YouTube, visibility refers to a video’s ability to make itself present by attracting viewers through views, subscribers, comments or other kinds of traffic related to the video or YouTube channel. Visibility is an aspect of communication and supports the building of social ties between creators and viewers; socializing through videos has become an everyday activity, and social recognition is juxtaposed with visibility through data traffic on YouTube, as creators accomplish socialization through videos (e.g., via engagement with comments and links to social networks). With this achieved socialization, they simultaneously generate traffic around the video and thus gain promotional visibility in terms of numeric data. In that sense, visibility on YouTube can be identified as a mode of self-disclosure; here, commercial visibility via data traffic around the video (views, comments and subscribers) is analogous to social visibility in terms of socialization and social recognition, and therefore also analogous to how creators create authorization as producers of YouTube content.

This two-fold aspect of visibility is also influenced by the cultural context of YouTube, which is very much centred on the achievement of visibility. YouTubers are reminded about their desire for visibility by YouTube’s official encouragement in their YouTube academy (Columbiatv, 2011). Moreover, most of the books published about YouTube are guides on how to gain visibility and popularity. The following titles are evidence of this trend:

- *YouTube: An Insider’s Guide to Climbing the Charts* (Lastufka & Dean, 2008)
- *How to Make Money with YouTube* (Schepp & Schepp, 2009)
- *Get Seen: Online Video Secrets to Building Your Business* (Garfield, 2010)
- *Conquering YouTube: 101 Pro Video Tips to Take You to the Top* (Miles, 2011)
- *YouTube—Are you doing this? Get your video found on YouTube* (Lusk, 2012)

All of these titles seem to address the common objective of obtaining visibility in the context of YouTube via marketing and production commodity.

A principal argument is that this culture of visibility must be taken into account when studying paratexts on YouTube. It is a more direct and widespread mode of communication, as described by Turner (2010) and Thompson (2005), in which a whole generation of creators are presenting themselves in what can be considered a public performance culture that also exists beyond the perimeters of YouTube. It is furthermore a mode of communication that takes place throughout digital media, which can be characterized by a constant implementation of paratexts that links and makes the creators present on multiple digital media platforms.