**Aalborg Universitet**

AALBORG UNIVERSITY
DENMARK

**User-Generated Video and Intertextuality**

Christensen, Lars Holmgaard; Rasmussen, Tove Arendt; Kofoed, Peter

*Publication date:*
2009

*Document Version*
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

# "User-Generated Video and Intertextuality"

**"Keywords in Communication"**

2009 Conference of the ICA

May 21-25., 2009

Chicago, Illinois, USA

Lars Holmgaard Christensen, (lhc@djh.dk), Danish School of Media and Journalism, Aarhus, Denmark.

Tove A. Rasmussen, (tover@hum.aau.dk), Department of Communication and Psychology, Aalborg University, Denmark & Peter Kofoed, (kofoed@vrmedialab.dk), Department of Communication and Psychology, Aalborg University, Denmark

*Abstract*

*This paper discusses the changing relationship between texts, producers and audiences and tries to understand user-generated audio-visual content or to be more precise, intertextuality in user-generated videos in relation to distribution formats, cultural form and genres.*

*Continuing on from the work of John Fiske and the notion of vertical and horizontal intertextuality this paper tries to develop Fiske's original ideas so that his model incorporates the changing relationship between producers and their audiences, the text generated by mainstream media and the text generated by ordinary people, in particular user-generated videos uploaded and shared in social media networks online.*

*Finally we are informed by Paul Ricoeur's work on hermeneutics and self as another, we explore the role of user-generated content as a specific kind of mediated sociability we suggest that user-generated content may be seen as a collaborative effort to navigate the meaning of life. Hence we address questions of mediated sociability, offering a critical perspective on textual self-expression and self-identity.*

*Keywords: Intertextuality, User-generated content, Social media, Sociability, Self-Identity*

## Introduction: User-generated content and its cultural form

With the internet, television flow has been replaced by interactivity and by users' activation of audio-visual material by clicking the 'play' button and navigating among different video clips and other activities such as voting, commenting and quiz participation and the like. For digital interactive television, especially in the UK, these attempts at activating users have already been explored extensively by BBC, bSkyb and others, but also outside the UK although with a lower success rate[1].

Nonetheless, in Raymond Williams' terms and in line with his flow-theory, we may say that traditional television flow dominates individual programs and the interactive mode of selecting television programs namely by 'zapping' is in fact a matter of selecting among flows rather than selecting among single programs[2]. However, when push comes to pull online, the programs or video clips are dominated instead by interactive selection, navigation and commentary by users.

In the late 1970s, John Fiske[3] also talked about television as the "bard" of modern society, with TV serving as the (m)oral storyteller of modern times: the bardic reference is of course about the oral aspects of TV evidenced by talking heads but it is also about the narratives and the moral ideology of a given society – the cultural commons of the nation in particular. In contrast to these imaginary cultural national commons where television hosts simulate conversation with people as if they were someone specific[4], the world wide web is both global and private: anybody can publish his or her website from anywhere which everybody or nobody may visit from everywhere and any user can send e-mail to someone else's private and very local address or somebody may comment on somebody else in the 'appropriate' form of mediated personal communication.

One of the problems with the first wave of web applications and sites was the lack of communication and sociability. Talking heads and sociability being pushed to viewers in the form of para-social interaction with simulated eye contact and direct address to the viewers becomes less immediate online where the audio-visual content is dominated by text, pictures and links with quite few social interaction elements such as comments or questions: There is no transparent intention of communication, no simulation of face-to-face communication and no sense of common time, which again is in opposition to television where a here and now is simulated and needs to be established in order to secure immediate sociability. However, it could be argued that the chronological time code on blogs also serves an important communicative function.

Television viewers' expectations fall mainly into the two super genres of fact and fiction, although many subgenres do try to blur and play with such conventional expectations. So news, documentaries and drama dominate television flows and hybrid genres such as reality TV, although lifestyle TV and sports, etc., play an essential part, too.

Technologically, 4:3 and 16:9 are the viewing formats used for the television experience, so in these terms format becomes the way content is viewed in a given medium. However, when it comes to the actual mediated content, we also see format as a conventionalized basic form that is not confined to a particular program or genre. For instance, an interview is a format seen in news programs, talk shows, documentaries etc. However the format can also coincide with a genre. Quizzes may be found as a format used in youth programming, sports and consumer programs but also as a genre in its own right when we categorize such shows as *Who Wants to be a Millionaire* or *The Weakest Link*[5].

However, while the main function of categorizing TV series and documentaries as distinct programs is of course to inform viewer expectations, it also serves to inform the production of TV guides and the coding of Electronic Program Guides (EPG). As for the user-generated videos, there is a blending of genres or in extreme cases a metamorphosis of content, where viewers cut, copy and paste in available TV recordings, shared video clips or home recorded content. Many user-generated videos may therefore seem new as far as genre goes but also in the way the content is organized through user-driven tagging.

Tags may therefore be both a development and a subversion of existing genre expectations and even a communalization of expectations for specific content through the collaborative creation of meaningful folksonomies.

**The intertextual reality of user-generated content**

As evidenced in the development of reality TV, the aesthetics and narrative codes of the real, the imagined and the staged have become blurred for at least the past decade. In reality TV, the stage is to a certain degree fictional as for example in the deserted island in *Survivor* or the remote house in *Big Brother*. Running competitions and letting audiences vote is to create a semi-realistic

framework[6] akin to sports and quizzes, although interpersonal conflicts and personal confessions assume very realistic melodramatic qualities that appeal strongly to many viewers because of the aura of authenticity[7].

The same search for authenticity or to paraphrase Claude Levi-Strauss[8], the reverence and preference for the raw rather than for the cooked usually presented by mainstream media corporations, is also to be found online. The ritual sharing, interactive and dialogical structures of tagging, posting and replying to comments have for instance been important formats in personal websites and blogs where writing, commenting and linking are the dominant forms of expression and dominant forms of collaboratively creating meaningful folksonomies.

However, it seems that when it comes to user-generated videos, they are strongly inspired by the visual formats of television and therefore imitate popular culture. Life is imitating art once again and life online will eventually also imitate popular art and even 'poor' popular art such as melodramatic soap-operas and JackAss. Already in the 1970s, John Cawelti was thinking along these lines and postulated the dialectic idea of cultural and artistic interests, arguing that popular artworks are enjoyed by audiences because they articulate conventional themes within the bounds of formulaic structures that appeal to our basic social and psychological makeup[9]. We might however also argue that peoples' basic social and psychological makeup is aesthetically informed through formulaic structures grounded in popular artwork and dramatic conventions. So in a similar vein the dramatist Kenneth Burke suggests that formulaic structures are about "the creation of an appetite in the mind of the auditor, and the adequate satisfying of that appetite"[10].

The motives for creating user-generated videos are not as such based upon indigenous craftsmanship and creativity but are embedded in cultural ideas. This also stems from popular culture which thus helps create an appetite for social action while creating the motives for satisfying the appetite, for instance by creatively generating or alternating popular media texts.

Levi-Strauss' term 'bricolage' comes to mind and his idea of the bricoleur who creates more or less improvised structures by appropriating pre-existing resources which are ready to hand, again seems very important. Michel de Certeau has elaborated this idea even further and talks about an overall strategy where people make do with what is available and create individual tactics that have the potential to subvert institutional strategies[11].

So within the new media system, sites are made available for people to up and download content. The overall strategy is to make people participate, share or create and within this collaborative interactive creativity. Traditional media institutions, professional content providers and also ordinary people have their own tactics and ways of making do. Being online provides a platform for the distribution of content whether you are a broadcaster or a traditional member of the audience. The media texts that are created span from indigenous home videos to an upload of someone's recording of the *Jon Daly Show*. Or as we have seen with the BBC and other traditional media institutions, they make their programs available online to much larger, global audiences that are able to cut, copy and paste content into popular media artwork.

A fruitful way to conceptualize user-generated videos in relation to the conventionalized television programs and the idea of the media text is to understand the texts in terms of John Fiske's work on vertical and horizontal intertextuality. It is possible to develop Fiske's original ideas so that his model incorporates the changing relationship between producers and their audiences, the text generated by mainstream media and the text generated by ordinary people.

Fiske understands the intertextual relations of media texts in two dimensions, the horizontal and the vertical[12]. The point of departure is in the primary text where relations are linked to the genre into which it falls, the characters that are being portrayed, the actors who are performing and the actual content used to convey the primary media text.

On this horizontal level it is fair to ask who can produce primary text? For Fiske in 1987, broadcasting programs and series were the site for primary text. However with distributed network infrastructure online and with genres being supplemented by tagging categorizations through 'folksonomies', the prefixing and organization of a media text on the horizontal level has become more sophisticated since it is not so much the conventional genres that promote and structure the media experience but more the tags that indicate the kind of content that can be found in a given video. Tags create a new sense of both genre and continuity which guide the user through the jungle of UGC sites. When talking about user-generated videos, we therefore need to view media texts from the viewpoint of their original point of production and the way they are embedded in the strategy of a given site for sharing videos such as YouTube or Current TV.

This also brings us to the other dimension in Fiske's work, namely that of intertextual relations on a vertical level. Secondary and tertiary texts arise from primary text. Secondary texts are the publicity and the criticism being produced in other media to refer explicitly to the primary text. Tertiary text is then what viewers create from both the primary and the secondary texts. These can be anything from conversations with neighbors, letters to the press and comments on a blog. In this perspective and keeping the original point of production in mind, UGC should therefore be treated as a tertiary text. In Fiske's original model, texts are separated by different media technologies or by different programs, such as comments on a TV-series in a talk show. Online this distinction and separation has been removed and made an integral part of text consumption on a specific site.

In summary, the intertextual point we are endeavoring to make is that when primary texts are produced elsewhere but are cut up and distributed on a site for sharing, they take on a quite different horizontal intertextuality. Texts are more or less leveled out and become part of a massive maelstrom of all kinds of content organized using tags and folksonomies. UGC is therefore not a

prefixed media text as such but becomes fixed through its use, comments and distribution history online.

**Sociability and interpretation**

The original definition of sociability put forward by George Simmel[13] states that sociability is about being together socially without any other purpose but that of spending a good time in each others' company. The sociability of broadcast TV has some of the same qualities when for example we say that we are watching TV (and not that we are watching a specific program) just for the enjoyment of it and each others' company while we watch. In Paddy Scannell's sociability of TV[14] we also find pleasure in spending a good time with hosts whom we imagine we know rather well and with whom we may even engage in para-social interaction due to the simulated inter-personal communication of oral language and visual (eye) contact.

As for the sociability of user-generated videos, there are several aspects to this. The timing is quite important as sites are very keen on reporting the date and time of both the videos and the comments which gives the impression of actuality and even presence. Sociability is also about sharing and networking. One of the most important resemblances to the blog phenomenon is that users share a good piece of programming with their mates by linking and the sites for sharing and distributing user-generated videos provide very handy tools for doing just that.

If we relate online practices to our points about traditional sociable TV viewing, it is interesting that users self-select the videos for personal network distribution and even comments are virtual and mediated. Websites might still form a social media environment but the sociability is mediated in the sense that you distribute a video to your friends just to make them have a good time watching the clip that YOU sent. The sociable gratification is about providing and sharing good

humor with your mates – even though you are not actually present as in the original definition by George Simmel.

Sociability is also an aspect of the communication distributed on the sites for sharing content itself as it is very easy to make comments to the video clip and uploaded content and thereby create a sense of sharing and community about the content. The comments on the portals are generally in blog format and they tend to have a positive tone and provide good advice for the prod-user about future form and content. Thus, sociability in the form of sharing is an affordance of both blogging and commenting on each others' user-generated videos.

The portals quantify and report both the number of comments, the rating and the ranking of the videos and even this practice of 'judgment' contains elements of sociability because users are guided to the content that most other users tend to watch and like. Hence competition, sharing, community and personal network may all be parts of a post-modern trend of mediated sociability but it is also important to realize that the social media may be a necessary communicative response to an increasingly individualized society and media-use where each piece of content seems to be targeted at very specific audience groups and it is difficult to share experiences with for example your family as used be the case in traditional sociable TV viewing.

**New textual challenges: reception and dialogue**

From questions of sociability and intertextual relations in user-generated videos we now turn to the hermeneutics of Paul Ricoeur in order to try to understand the relationship between production and interpretation from a dialogical point of view. According to reception research, semiotics and a hermeneutical understanding, the viewer/reader is never passive when engaged with the text. In relation to the mass media and especially television, the activity of the viewer/reader is traditionally limited to a mental effort of decoding and making sense of pre-existing text. Stuart Hall's

encoding/decoding model[15] has formed part of the underlying basis of reception studies, whereas Umberto Eco[16] has pointed to the roles of implied authors and readers in texts and the unlimited semiosis of interpretation. In this respect semiotics has been informative in relation to reception theory, as well as reception aesthetics. The hermeneutical understanding of the text/reader relationship, however, has not been so prominent in reception and audience studies. We will therefore discuss the critical hermeneutics of Paul Ricoeur in some detail as we have identified some new possibilities for understanding text/reader/producer relationships in text reception and UGC.

Riceour's hermeneutics is a general theory of understanding seen as a process of interpretation and meaning production. In relation to user-generated videos we are especially interested in the dialogical and ecological aspects of critical hermeneutics. The text/reader relationship is seen as a dialogical investigation in the form of questions and answers from the reader and the implied author forming the interpretation process. The ecology aspect is about the contextual and communicative whole of human interpretation and navigating the meaning of life in its biological, physical and cultural aspects. The meaning of the text is not determined by the author's intentions because the meaning depends on the rhetorical and aesthetical capabilities of the author taken in combination with the capabilities, intentions and pre-understandings of the reader in the light of the present situation[17].

The dialogical aspects of interpretation take place in the so-called second reading of the text. Whereas the first reading is about expectations of genre on the part of the reader, the second reading becomes more distanced as readers recognize that not all of their expectations are being met: There will be empty spaces in the text that have to be populated and uncertainties that need to be resolved. Such mental effort takes the form of dialogue, where readers' questions will have been foreseen and answered by the implied author of the text. This process of implied asking

and answering forms the basic hermeneutical circle that ends when the reader is able to ask the question to which the text is an answer. This leads to the third critical reading of the text which is about the effect of the text on the reader's practice – does the text inform the world in which the reader lives?

According to Riceour[18] texts will be more or less open and more or less structured. It is the same phenomenon that Umberto Eco addresses in *The Role of the Reader*[19] where he outlines the paradox of open text: The more open a text is – the more closed it will be to groups of readers who do not have the same cultural competencies as the author. In contrast, the more closed a text is, the more open it is to different kinds of reader skills and non-intended use.

We also see that the three hermeneutical readings in some sense correspond with Stuart Hall's three types of hypothetical readings[20]; dominant, negotiated and oppositional reading. The hermeneutical method, however, exceeds the semiological and critical method of Stuart Hall with respect to understanding the process of interpretation and meaning production. In the hermeneutical circle, readers work their way through all of the three types of reading (naïve, negotiated and oppositional/critical) in order to meet, understand and make out the meaning of the text in relation to their expectations (genre), dialogue (empty spaces, questions and answers) and the possible effect on their further understanding of their situation, life and actions.

The interactive media have brought with them the concept of 'the user' and the partial control by the user of the distribution of content. The activity of the user lies in the mental effort of meaning production and physically influencing distribution and eventually the text itself [21] especially in the conversational mode of interactivity as for example in e-mail. Recent social and communicative developments have brought about other positions for users themselves to become prod-users of the texts for an online audience.

In relation to UGC and collaboratively produced content, we assume that Ricoeur's second dialogical reading is of special interest because the efforts of the reader expand into physical interactivity and into explicit dialogue (questions and answers) about expectations, empty spaces and the social negotiation of meaning.

**The hermeneutics of user-generated videos and social media**

When we apply Paul Riceour's hermeneutical circle on user-generated videos, we see that much work is done in the distanced second reading where new distribution forms and the immediacy of the blog helps to expand the dialogue: The questions and answers in the mental interpretation as well as the actual readers' and authors' questions and answers to meaning production of the text itself. So we claim that user-generated videos and conversational blogs both expand the second reading phase,  and in relation to the first reading you may say that it is also very much present and asking for comments and communication in order to fulfill itself in the second reading. As for the third critical reading, readers, viewers, users and prod-users seemingly enlighten their world and find some sort of social meaning as they collectively seek to ask the question to which their dialogue is an answer.

As for the motivation, interest and need to express oneself[22], and for engaging in dialogue with others about commenting and producing texts, we would critically suggest that the hermeneutics of Ricoeur should be somewhat revised because the theory of the open/closed text was conceptualized in the modern period where there were 'genuine' open and closed texts, where mass communication was prominent and where there was a strong division between high and low culture. But for the last fifteen years we have seen that commercials have become more open and artistic, for example the advertisements for Bennetton and the fine arts have become easier to understand for a larger audience: There is no modernistic prose such as James Joyce's Ulysses

today and as a middlebrow audience, we are able to make sense out of both super realistic, abstract and post-modern paintings, for instance.

At the same time, the dialogical and hermeneutical affordances in the social media allow people to become both distanced readers and authors in a social and even collective meaning and interpretational process of what life is about. In Anthony Giddens' terms[23], you may say that the social web embeds people in their individual and collective efforts to help each other to make sense of life as it is today, as many people do not have any religion, political ideologies, family traditions or great pieces of art to make sense by anymore. So identity is at stake but with UGC we are witnessing new everyday methods of identity production, interpretation and social meaning making. According to this, social media should not be treated as expressions of exhibitionism and even voyeurism but as expressions of the hermeneutical circle of social interpretation of post-modern life. Many user-generated videos are humorous, ironic, performative and even harmful and unethical. We have not addressed this as a specific problem in the context of this paper. The point is that there are new ways of expression out there - and even the harmful pieces could be seen as hermeneutic and social responses to the globalization and individualization processes of our present time.

We suggest that UGC provides a textual artifact that represents the completion of the basic hermeneutical circle, whereby user-generated videos can be understood as answers to some of the questions posed by Ricoeur's three readings. In turn, we argue that it is an ecology of sociability, derived from the role of television in everyday life and extended to the new platforms that hosts UGC, that motivates and informs the audiences' transformation from viewer/readers to authors and prod-users. Thus we suggest that it is a collective search for identity and meaning, as an expression of the inner dialogue found in Ricoeur's second reading, which motivates people to become prod-users.

In this context and in a society characterized by its lack of traditions and omnipresent risks[24], UGC can be understood as a collaborative effort to navigate and construct a particular meaning of life as regards common cultural practices but also as a moral compass[25], where the sharing of content not only delivers symbolic communicative expressions but becomes a negotiation of what is good and bad in society.

[1] Lars Holmgaard Christensen, *Interaktivt tv, vent venligst* (Aalborg: Aalborg University Press, 2004)

[2] Raymond Williams, *Television, Thechnology and Cultural Form* (London: Routledge, 1975)

[3] John Fiske and John Hartley, *Reading Television* (London: Methuen, 1978)

[4] Paddy Scannell, *Radio, Television and Modern Life* (London: Basil Blackwell, 1996)

[5] Lars Holmgaard Christensen and Tove Arendt Rasmussen, *Fremtidens interaktive tv-forbrugere* (Report InDiMedia, Aalborg University, 2003)

[6] Gregory Bateson, "A Theory of Play and Fantasy", *Psychiatric Research Report*, vol. 2, 1955)

[7] Tove Arendt Rasmussen, "So – That's your life. Authentic forms of television talk," in *The Aesthetics of Television*, ed. Gunhild Agger and Jens F. Jensen (Aalborg: Aalborg University Press, 2001)

[8] Claude Levi-Strauss, *The Raw and the Cooked* (Penguin, 1986)

[9] Ronald C. Kimberling, *Kenneth Burke's Dramatism and Popular Arts* (Ohio: Bowling Green State Univeristy Popular Press, 1982)

[10] Burke in Kimberling 1982:44

[11] Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkely: University of California Press, 1984)

[12] John Fiske, *Television Culture* (London: Routledge, 1987:108)

[13] George Simmel, *Sociability – The Sociology of George Simmel* (Glencoe: Free Press of Glencoe1950)

[14] Paddy Scannell, Radio, *Television and Modern Life* (London: Basil Blackwell, 1996)

[15] Stuart Hall, "Encoding/decoding" in *Culture, Media, Language*, ed. Stuart Hall et al. (London: Huchinnson,1980)

[16] Umberto Eco, *The role of the Reader* (London: Hutchinson, 1979)

[17] Helle Wentzer, "A Communicational Framework for Evaluation Interaction with IT by Analyzing User-Reception of Electronic Texts" (paper presented at the 28th Conference for Information Technology Interfaces, Cavat, Croatia, June 2006)

[18] Paul Riceour, *Time and Narrative* (Chicago: Chicago University Press,1984)

[19] Umberto Eco, *The role of the Reader* (London: Hutchinson, 1979)

[20] Stuart Hall, "Encoding/decoding" in *Culture, Media, Language*, ed. Stuart Hall et al. (London: Huchinnson,1980)

[21] Jens F. Jensen, "The Concept of Interactivity in Interactive Television and Interactive Media" in *Interactive Television – TV of the Future or the Future of TV*, ed. Jens F. Jensen and Cathy Toscan (Aalborg: Aalborg University Press, 1999)

[22] James Lull, *Culture-On-Demand. Communication in a Crisis World* (London: Blackwell Publishing, 2007),

[23] Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity. Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991)

[24] Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society. Towards a new Modernity* (London: Sage, 1997)

[25] James Lull and Stephen Hinerman, *Media Scandals* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1997),