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Spontaneous Reactions to an Anti-piracy Initiative: A Youtube Clip Micro Analysis

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Abstract

In this case study we analyzed the traces of spontaneous reactions of Youtube users when confronted with the short clip 'You wouldn't Steal a Car', that was used by the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) to influence people not to download copyrighted material from the Internet. This film has become an important cultural icon, which to a certain degree has shaped a whole generation of film viewers. The aim of this study was to provide an example of how anti piracy initiatives are received and understood by the receivers of the message. This was performed by collecting and analyzing the users spontaneous reactions as entered as comments on the Youtube page for the clip by qualitatively categorizing the contents using a bottom up approach. The results suggest that people practicing Internet-based culture consumption (IBCC) do this in more nuanced ways than is assumed in the film, where they are polarized as either "common thieves" or "good citizens".

Keywords: Internet-based culture consumption, spontaneous reactions, anti-piracy, Internet

Introduction

The MPAA is a U.S. trade organization for six major Hollywood Studios, promoting their business interests. As part of that it has taken a strict stance on copyright infringements fighting the sharing of copyrighted material on the Internet, focusing on efforts involving influencing the practices of young people. The clip featured in this study was part of an advertisement campaign introduced in 2004. It appeared as a pre-movie advertisement in theaters, or included in DVDs without the possibility to skip before program content. This clip has been discussed in scholarly literature in relation to the legal use of the term 'theft' in intellectual property discourse (Loughlan, 2008) and as an example of both the "confuzzling" arguments used by stakeholders, (Yu, 2011) as well as the strategies used by representatives of record companies and artists in the struggle of defining stakes in the controversy of file sharing. (Martin, Moore & Salter, 2010) Youtube comments in general was studied by Lange (2007) however, viewers' actual reactions to this specific clip have not been discussed other than in general terms, often by the researchers themselves when reflecting on the paradox that the clip is only shown to viewers paying for a DVD or a ticket to the movie, and seldom included on movies that have been pirated from the original source.

The goal of this ongoing study is to capture and characterize these reactions and contribute to the emerging field of research about IBCC practices (Nolin, 2010) that avoids taking the usual clichés of polarization into legal or illegal, or, good or bad, conveyed by the anti-piracy organizations for granted. This work is part of a larger research project in which we aim for a symmetrical view towards the various forms of sharing of media, including both legal and illegal use.

Methods

This study focuses on viewers' reactions to this clip as expressed in the comments on its Youtube page. We argue that studying comments in a web forum or other web media in reaction to a specific event (in this case a video clip) provides methodological possibilities to identify situational and immediate reactions of users that would otherwise have been hard to capture. These "micro scripts" or "nano texts" (Cronin, 2012) produced by the viewers, seldom contain more than a few words or sentences, yet they provide us with what seems to be rather instantaneous reactions of a kind that is hard to acquire by using more conventional methods. Additionally, traditional methods of analyzing reactions as those identified above entail methodological challenges, including questions about representativity, and, the infamous "researcher effect", which although challenging to distinguish from other influences presents itself as one of the methodological horrors of social science. (Woolgar, 1988) Here, only viewers that were logged in to the Youtube site were able to comment on the clip.

Our data consists of all the posted comments and pertain mostly to direct reactions to the film's content or the producers of it, and exhibits low networking level in terms of discussions and interactions between people. Therefore we chose a straightforward content analysis (e.g. Neuendorf, 2001) using two sets of data. First, the metadata information regarding the clip and comments received on the Youtube page was collected. This includes viewer statistics and usage data that functions as quantitative traces of the viewers' actions. Second, we conducted a qualitative content analysis, focusing on the contents of the comments using a bottom up approach where the coding scheme emerged during the analysis. The coding was done in two steps: first we identified three general categories corresponding to judicial, emotional, or content-based issues; followed by a secondary categorization to classify additional nuances within the code categories.

The Movie Clip: You Wouldn't Steal a Car

This section presents a general description of visual characteristics, content, and structure of the movie clip. The clip is cut fast, using suggestive imagery depicting various illegal actions accompanied by very aggressive music. Visually, it is presented in a "silent movie" style, interfoliating imagery and text. This resembles the narrative technique of Sergei Eisenstein, with a structure including thesis – antithesis resulting in a synthesis (Figure 1.). The narrative consists of:

YOU WOULDN'T STEAL A CAR
YOU WOULDN'T STEAL A HANDBAG YOU WOULDN'T STEAL A MOVIE. DOWNLOADING
PIRATED FILMS IS STEALING, PIRACY IT'S A CRIME.
REPORT IT.
1 800 251 996
WWW.MOVIEPIRACY.ORG.AU

The crimes used to depict unlawful behavior are largely simple crimes, ranging from stealing a car and a handbag—actions that are easy to call illegal—to stealing a DVD, with the aim to demonstrate how downloading a film is a similar act of crime. The clip also contains cultural references to other media and films that are known to the target audience of the campaign. For example, the text is seemingly modeled after the film *Se7en*, which used the shaky haphazardly shown text to provide a sense of haste, urgency and aggressiveness.



Figure 1. Screenshot storyboard

Results

Audience Details

The clip is available in many Youtube versions. We chose 'Movie Piracy - It's a crime, by the Australian government'¹, based on it having the highest viewer count (228.051 views as of May 24, 2012) and being the oldest version available on the site, uploaded in May 2006.² In all 1283 comments have been added to the Youtube page that were used as a source for the analysis. The primary visiting audience is males in the age interval 18-44. Fig. 2 illustrates viewers' geographical distribution and relative popularity (darker: more popular, lighter: less):

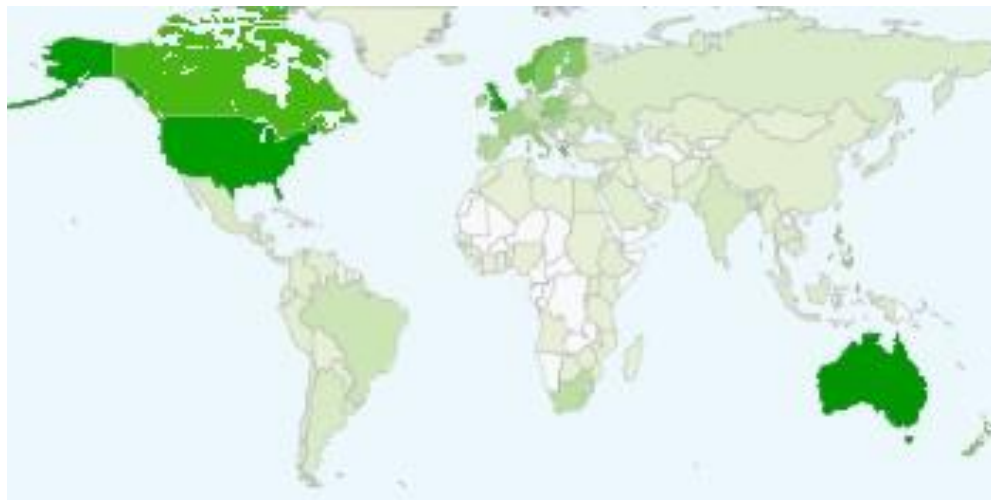


Figure 2. Viewers' geographical distribution

Audience Reactions

The audience reactions pertained to judicial, emotional and content related issues. This section presents some illustrating examples of our findings. Many comments argued that there was a difference between stealing a physical object and a digital copy, because the digital original would still be available to the owner. One of the most frequent comments simply stated that:

"I would if I could"

Counter assertions were given in various degrees of meaningfulness:

"you wouldn't download 'a car'/'a hand bag'/'a bear'/'...'/'a girl'/'CHUCK NORRIS'"

On the other hand, a large part of the comments stated in various degrees of certainty that they would commit all of the crimes depicted.

Emotional comments ranged from meaningless slander to mere personal statements. In other cases commenters argued for how and why they download:

"I download games & movies to test that they are worth of buying. I prefer to support developers if the game I downloaded (or movie) is good"

¹ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I5SmrHNWhak>

² The "Australian Federation Against Copyright Theft" produced this version. Music and imagery is largely the same as in the American version, except that one film section is cut and some of the imagery is even faster paced. In the end, a banner referring to AFA©T, The Australian Federation Against Copyright Theft is shown. The referred web page is inactive, but accessible via Wayback Machine™: [<http://web.archive.org/web/20090207211004/http://www.moviepiracy.org.au/>], where it was archived 2004-2009. This sets some time frame limits for the campaign.

A large share of the comments was directed towards the content. These ranged from issues regarding various technologies used in the film, the fast Internet connection the girl seemingly had, or specific elements used in the film, e.g. text effects and fonts. The music attracted a great deal of comments, mostly favorable to the sound, requests where to “get” it, and who the artist was. Many stated that the artist was the band Prodigy, while concerns regarding the copyright status of the music were raised, e.g.:

“No Man Army by the Prodigy, wonder if they got permission or just knocked it off”

Another stated that it

“would be funny if whoever made this advert didn't have the rights to use this song”

Interestingly, the music was allegedly used by the MPAA without permission. On December 1, 2011, the site Torrent Freak published an article describing how the Netherlands composer Melchior Rietvelt, who composed the music for a local film festival, had found his music used in the clip by MPAA in a setting allegedly not covered by the licence it was originally agreed. (Ernesto, 2012)

Conclusion

The methodological claim of this study is that comments on a Youtube clip can be viewed as spontaneous reactions to an event that provides access to peoples’ reactions, which to some degree was illustrated by the results.

The results provide resources for arguing that people practicing IBCC do this in more nuanced ways than is assumed in the film, where the MPAA tries to polarize users as either “common thieves” or “good citizens”. Especially, we found that downloading of copyrighted material by itself is not stated to preclude users to purchasing the same or other material.

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