

Ancillary Academia:

Video shorts and the production of university paratexts

Abstract

This article considers the production of media paratexts beyond the bounds of the entertainment industry. Specifically, it examines the development of video content strategy by universities, and the paratextual function that video shorts serve in the construction of institutional identity. Taking a production studies approach, the article expands the scope of paratextual analysis by exploring the development of video content by university marketers, and the role of promotional intermediaries in selling video expertise to the education market.

Keywords

intermediaries, production studies; university paratexts, video content marketing

Among the requirements of the modern academic, a new role seems to be the occasional voluntary participation in short-form videos made to promote university life. Since 2009, I have appeared in three videos for the University of Nottingham, my own institutional home. The first was part of a Faculty series designed to articulate the value of arts and humanities research (combatively titled “what’s the point of studying . . .?”) made by a professional filmmaker and distributed through YouTube and the University’s video platform, MediaSpace. My second appearance was a “talking head” cameo in an instructional video produced internally by the University’s teaching and learning video team to promote the library’s online reading system. Most recently, I took part in a departmental initiative called

“module in a minute,” this time filmed by an undergraduate with an iPad mini as part of a series of videos featuring academics enthusing, trailer-style, about their own taught courses. While raising questions about university promotional rhetoric, this essay uses a production studies focus to highlight the proliferation of institutional videos *as paratextual media*. Specifically, it argues that university paratexts can challenge production studies to consider hidden or unheralded realms of promotional screen work, in this case the people and sub-sector of video agencies that develop screen content for the education market.¹

The study of media paratexts has largely focused on paratextual creativity (trailers, promos, idents, intros, DVD extras, merchandise) as units of entertainment surrounding film and television shows. However, a wide range of organizations - universities, charities, health services, government agencies, the armed forces, corporations of various kinds - have developed paratextual strategies designed to frame and extend their own interpretive “DNA” as institutional bodies. As universities construct themselves as brands in a globally competitive “knowledge economy” (BIS, 2016), higher education institutions have sought more intensively than ever to invest in forms of storytelling about research, learning, community, and student experience. This storytelling is constituted through formal channels of promotional communication around student recruitment, research program fundraising, alumni relations and so forth; it is developed in prospectuses, open days, websites, press releases, newsletters and ad campaigns. However in a world of online video and increased network connectivity, universities are also framed through paratexts that surface on university websites, video platforms and other social media networks. By considering video shorts made for universities, I propose that we extend the scope of paratextual analysis beyond the bounds of the entertainment industry and explore how organizations other than media companies produce screen content to trail, extend or provide “bonus material” on their world. At one level, this invites thinking about the way that paratextual entities like video shorts help

mediate constructions of institutional identity. However, it also draws attention to the range of promotional intermediaries that produce video content in the education sector, and that operate in this emergent paratextual space.

Since the late 2000s, the promotional possibilities of short-form video have been epitomized at my own University by a series of chemistry demonstrations called the “Periodic Table of Videos” (PTOV). Made by a professional filmmaker (Brady Haran), the series features the distinguished chemistry professor Sir Martin Poliakoff and a team of lab chemists performing quirky experiments to present the 118 elements of the periodic table, each element having a separate video. With Poliakoff’s ebullient manner and Einstein-like hair, the video series became a minor YouTube hit when it launched in 2008, viewed 15 million times in its first four years, with the PTOV YouTube channel garnering 44,700 subscribers in more than two hundred countries. Unscripted and occasionally themed (the videos for gold, silver and bronze uploaded to coincide with the 2008 Olympic Games), the videos exploited the affordances of YouTube “to deliver science to the public in new ways” (Haran and Poliakoff, 2011, p.1047). While the official PTOV site carried the University logo, the videos appeared (and continue to appear) as unbranded shorts, each offering a reality-style portrait of life within a chemistry department and with individual presenters even developing personal followings. In paratextual terms, the PTOV videos were akin to webisodes, forms of promotional storytelling that would surround and extend the delivery of chemistry teaching in traditional curricular form. As a form of ancillary content, the PTOV series developed characters and curiosity-driven spectacles that provided their own playful peek into the world of UK (and specifically Nottingham-based) science. Spawning other video series made for departments by Brady Haran - Sixty Symbols (physics), Numberphile (maths), Bibledex (theology), Words of the World (languages) - these digital initiatives functioned as content-promotion hybrids (Gillan, 2015) and led to more coordinated efforts

by the University's marketing division (specifically, its "digital engagement" team) to use online video as a means of communicating with students and a wider public.

The development of video content strategy is revealing of the way that university marketers, following wider trends in the advertising industry, have sought to construct and engage young people (in this case students) as "digital millennials" (Serazio, 2015). Investigating the way that contemporary marketing discourse has characterized the millennial generation as "digitally native," Michael Serazio suggests that marketing and advertising practitioners have tended to render millennials (teens and young adults born in the 1980s or 1990s) as "technologically exotic - a cohort whose very mind-set has apparently been 'rewired' by the digital landscape" (ibid, p. 607). Examining the way that US-based advertising and media industries approach youth markets, Serazio argues that by accepting the social construction of millennials as digitally native, "advertisers are, in turn, developing new strategies to sell through a presumed technological intimacy" (ibid, p. 611). Video is a key component of this new marketing mix. In conceptualizing digital millennials as a generation who exhibit a "networked hypersociality" and a "participatory exhibitionism" (ibid, p. 607), video has become a strategic means of cultivating brand relationships and soliciting self-expression for promotional ends. Given the spectacular rise of YouTube and other video-sharing platforms since the mid-2000s, this move has corresponded with the rise of video content marketing as a sub-sector of the "promotional screen industries" (Grainge and Johnson, 2015). With predictions of web video's exponential growth in the digital media environment - Cisco (2015) estimating that video will make up 80 percent of all consumer-internet traffic by 2019 - specialist agencies have emerged pitching video expertise attuned to the "culture of connectivity" (van Dijck, 2013).

Empirical research by Max Dawson and Chuck Tryon has questioned trade truisms about the habits of students as digital natives, suggesting that "college students' engagements

with media technologies and content are as diverse as they are” (Dawson and Tryon, 2013, p. 229). Within higher education (HE) marketing discourse, however, students are often seen as inherently tech-savvy and inveterate social media users. According to the former head of marketing at my own University, writing a blog for *The Guardian* targeted at higher education marketing professionals, “HE marketing today is 24/7, real-time and global. Lots of us aren't digital natives, but it's obvious when you think about it. Word of mouth has always been one of the strongest features of our marketplace and social media brings that concept right up to date” (Leech, 2014). If, as the blog goes on, “the challenges of digital are significant for universities, which are traditionally more risk-averse than businesses” (ibid), video has become an exploratory front in the way that higher education institutions have sought to communicate the “promise and personality” of university identity. The University of Nottingham outlines three forms of video that staff might consider for communication and marketing purposes - *high-end videos* that require specialist production expertise by the digital engagement team or external suppliers, *campus-cam* videos recorded using iPad minis that capture “real stories” of campus life and that require little experience or training to shoot, and *vlogging* which involves recruiting student vloggers to talk to other students about subjects, themes, and experiences through a user-generated approach.

In different ways, these videos serve a paratextual function in the meaning-making of the modern university. Of course, a university or college is not a “text” in the same way as a film or television show, but higher education institutions nevertheless rely on a host of texts, spaces and performances to bring themselves into being. If, as Jonathan Gray suggests, paratexts “attempt to create interpretive communities and hermeneutic recipes for daily living in a media-saturated world” (2010, p. 36), video content has established itself at my own institution (and others like it) as a way of creating interpretive communities and hermeneutic recipes for campus living. Gray’s distinction between “entryway paratexts” and “in media res

paratexts” can be applied to video content in this regard. Adapting these analytic categories, entryway videos may be seen to control and frame *initial interactions* with the university, while in media res videos inflect and redirect relations with a university *once it has been encountered or entered*. If the former is most obviously figured in video content aimed at prospective students, the latter range from tutorial shorts promoting internal services to more elaborate forms of campaign-based storytelling for students, staff and the wider public. In the world of social media, these forms of storytelling are invariably framed through hashtags and Twitter handles. For example, while #MeantToBe offered student vloggers in 2015 “an opportunity to share memories, achievements, favourite places and proudest moments via Twitter and Instagram” (Nottingham, 2015a), in the same year, #BreastCancerandMe framed a series of professionally-made videos supporting cancer research at the University of Nottingham, released on YouTube, Instagram, Facebook and the University’s website.

While examples like the Periodic Table of Videos have garnered wide appeal, university-produced video shorts are bespoke forms of screen output and often have a limited number of views. The benchmark for successful video content at my own institution is tens of thousands of views. By this count, orientation videos such as those offering a “campus tour” (98,000 views in four years) or “student welcome” (51,000 views in two years) often far exceed the viewing rates of campaign-specific videos. Dispiritingly, my own “what’s the point of studying” video (on the subject of television interstitials) took six years to limp towards 1000 views. Although paid student vlogging has been successful in terms of views and audience retention rates - demonstrating the University’s willingness to solicit “participatory exhibitionism” for marketing ends - their commission and curation by university marketers can also, potentially, dampen the viral effect. Indeed, student vlogs are often less popular than user-generated student videos produced beyond the steer of university marketing teams. For example, a rap video on the student learning experience at the

University of Nottingham, including mocking asides to rival universities and laddish references to female students, received 142,000 views in six years. Designed for spreadability in its use of parody and humour (Jenkins, Ward and Green 2014, p. 204-9), this video appeared adjacent to official material on the University of Nottingham YouTube channel, creating curious juxtapositions of formal and informal meaning-making at the level of institutional identity. If, as Jonathan Gray suggests, “the power to create paratexts is the power to contribute to, augment, and personalize a textual world” (2010, p. 165), universities often generate their own “viewer-created paratexts” that can potentially set or change the terms by which institutions, and particular aspects of campus life, are understood.

These examples invite questions about the representational content of video shorts and their distribution across media platforms. However, they also direct focus to the promotional intermediaries that develop and craft the ancillary media that circulate around universities as (branded) cultural bodies. Aeron Davis suggests that “As promotionally minded individuals and organizations increase their engagement with media, so they shift their cognitive processes, behaviours, relations and practices accordingly. Promotional intermediaries, whether geared to traditional or digital media, greatly facilitate such shifts” (2013, p. 196). Within the context of universities, marketing departments have flourished in their function as promotional intermediaries, digital engagement teams or their named equivalents encouraging staff to think about their own media processes, behaviours, relations and practices. In producing guidance for staff in using video content, for instance, the University of Nottingham provides a list of “considerations” that acknowledge the specificity of video in a media ecology where “viewers’ attention spans are short and videos need to grab their attention very quickly” (Nottingham, 2016, p 1-2). Stressing the need “to hook your viewer’s interest right at the start of your video,” and suggesting a maximum length of 1-2 minutes, the guidelines suggest that staff “think about quirky or different approaches,”

declaring, “A talking head student profile may seem like an easy option but it may not be the best way of capturing a viewer’s attention. Our statistics show that simple talking head videos do not get the views or engagement we need to be aiming for” (ibid). If “engagement” in this context means videos that avoid quick drop-off rates, emphasis has been placed since 2014 on “naturalistic” or “cinema style” videos rather than interview-style videos or digital shorts which cram information in at all costs. Providing a primer on the attention economy of online video, the University’s approach has been to shift staff towards videos which are less posed and less scripted and more impactful in terms of their visuals and the stories they tell.

Within any organizational context, the production of video, like other promotional content, brings with it issues of time and resource. At the time of writing, the University of Nottingham has two video units, one focused on teaching and learning (with four full-time staff) and a smaller marketing unit focused on digital engagement, with two people specializing in video and two specializing in social media. Initiatives such as student vlogging, introduced in 2015, can be seen as a response to the media disposition of digital millennials but also, just as significantly, as a cost-saving measure. Facing constraints in the time and labor needed to produce a regular stream of video content for the University’s digital channels, vlogging provides an opportunity to outsource promotional work, in this case to a team of student freelancers managed, network style, through a Facebook group. More broadly, internal guidelines draw attention to resource issues by stressing the need for staff to consider the longevity of audiovisual content, declaring, “Producing video content is not that easy so in order to make it as cost-effective as possible, do make sure that whatever you are producing can be used for at least a year or two” (Nottingham, 2016, p. 2). The imperatives of regularity/longevity depend on where video content is “surfaced” – whether on a YouTube channel where content needs to be replenished regularly, for example, or on more static sites like a departmental web page. Whatever the context, the acknowledgement that

video production “is not that easy” challenges assumptions about the do-it-yourself nature of the medium. Despite the relatively low barriers of technological know-how required to make and distribute video, promotional intermediaries often stress the challenges of time, planning, storytelling, technical execution, and metrics required to produce and use online video *well*. While these “considerations” are reinforced by marketing teams steering media-promotional practice within their own institutions, they are also rehearsed by freelance filmmakers and video agencies selling expertise to organizations like universities.

The University of Nottingham makes 80 percent of its video content in-house and outsources the other 20 percent to external companies. These companies range from small and medium enterprises specializing in video strategy, production and marketing (providing bespoke production skills in stop-motion, animation, tracking shots, aerial filming, infographics and so on) to fully integrated film and video production agencies with a niche in the education sector. In critical terms, the study of paratextual production has tended to focus on the creative labor of film and television personnel (Mann, 2014) or on specific screen intermediaries that make promotional content for media and consumer brands (Grainge and Johnson, 2015). Video marketing points to a different site, and sector, of paratextual creativity, one more likely to sell video know-how to charities and colleges than to film studios, and more likely to produce digital shorts for “business-to-business” purposes than to meet the transmedia needs of TV networks. The University of Nottingham lists eleven video companies as preferred suppliers, with a significant proportion of its external work carried out by a small Nottingham-based video agency called Skeleton, and a larger film and video production agency in London called Spectrecom. These two companies exemplify the development of promotional video as a site of professional expertise, and both have a core client base in the education market.

With ten staff at the time of writing, Skeleton has produced video content for over thirty universities since 2008, as well as corporate films, explainer videos, product videos and training films for large brands such as Boots, Experian, and Samsung. Skeleton uses the tagline “videos worth sharing” to sell expertise in three key video services - *video strategy* (“content planning, creative storytelling, campaign planning”), *video production* (“creative ideas, live action video, animation, video templates”), and *video marketing* (“video distribution, video advertising, YouTube optimisation”). The guide price for these services ranges from £3000-5000 for strategy, £4,000-50,000 for production, and £3000-100,000+ for marketing, although Skeleton offers all services for each project. Pitching itself as a specialist in the protocols of video as a medium - including the psychology of what, how and where audiences are likely to watch and engage with content - Skeleton suggests that “planning for video is subtly different to planning for other types of content, with its own unique quirks to consider” (Skeleton, 2016). Spectrecom takes a similar stance in professing insight about the place and relation of video to the contemporary media environment. With a staff base of thirty-seven people (including two dedicated account managers for universities), Spectrecom has produced video for over sixty universities since 2006 and is explicit in selling video expertise to the higher education market. Its website proclaims:

We understand the shifting patterns of viewing and content sharing for young people and we will help you to find the right audience with the most relevant video content. Whether it’s producing a cinema advert for a local catchment audience, or using social media to attract international students, we’ll come up with creative film concepts that demand attention (Spectrecom, 2016).²

As intermediaries, Skeleton and Spectrecom position themselves as experts in videographic practice and relate their services to wider developments in digital content marketing. This describes strategy which moves away from interruptive (push) approaches to promotion and towards “the potential of pull or inbound digital marketing in which customers and prospects actively seek out brands that provide engaging and valuable content which is relevant to their needs” (Holliman and Rowley, 2014, p. 269).

The video series that Spectrecom produced for the #BreastCancerandMe campaign is suggestive of the way that video shorts blur the boundaries of promotion and content and serve a paratextual function for universities. Commissioned as part of the University’s flagship “Life Cycle” campaign – an annual fundraising drive to support “life-changing research and student support” – the video series served a particular institutional function promoting the societal “impact” of academic research, the discourse of impact having an increased bearing on the distribution of higher education funding in the UK since the late 2000s (Collini, 2012, pp. 168-177). Comprising a series of ten videos, this project included four ninety-second case studies, shot in black and white, that involved unscripted interviews with women at different stages of breast cancer. The other videos included a conceptual film with a unified monologue, an overview of the University’s research into the early detection of breast cancer, and four behind-the-scenes trailers featuring the interviewees talking about their experience of *being* filmed. Designed to support a University campaign to raise £1 million for breast cancer research, and to underline the particular research impact of the Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences within (and for) a specific community, the shorts were released on different social media and crowd-speaking platforms and were deliberate in telling stories. The behind-the-scenes trailers are perhaps most revealing of the way the series was conceived as content; fifteen-seconds in length, they served their own micro-paratextual function in framing #BreastCancerandMe as an intimate, documentary-style portrait of

what it's like to live with breast cancer, prefiguring the main videos and the fundraising strapline “Real women. Real stories. Real hope.”

The development of video as a hybrid form of content-promotion relates to broader debates about the marketization of higher education. Considering the ethos of market populism that has shaped British higher education policy and thinking in recent decades, Stefan Collini notes the reasoning, evident in successive government reports, that British higher education should be thought of “as a lightly regulated market in which consumer demand, in the form of student choices, is sovereign” (2012, p. 179).³ In a culture of market competition where students are increasingly thought of as consumers and universities act as service providers, promotional logics have been widely incorporated within UK higher education and become systematic within organizational practice. While it is easy to dismiss the intensification of marketing and branding considerations within universities, paratextual critique has encouraged scholars to move beyond default laments of promotional work, and to recognize the complexity involved in the function, and production, of such work. This can include promotional screen content produced for, and within, academia itself. Viewing university video shorts as paratexts recognizes the increasing significance of screen media to the construction of universities as institutional bodies and brands; specifically, it accounts for the way that universities extend stories about their world through ancillary media strategies. Like other organizations/corporations that operate outside the realm of the media industries, universities have placed growing emphasis on the development of entertaining or otherwise useful digital shorts to engage and involve their target audience. As a form of promotional practice, this highlights the importance of multiplatform content strategy beyond the simple domain of film and television. For universities, tapping into the screen life of students has become a preoccupation within higher education marketing, inviting creative production within the digital sphere and in relation to online video specifically.

In taking a production studies focus, this essay argues that university paratexts help expand the boundaries of what constitutes screen studies in the contemporary media and communication environment, illuminating a distinct yet hidden sector of paratextual production. From professionally-made series such as Periodic Table of Videos and #BreastCancerandMe to campus-cam videos and student-generated vlogging, university paratexts not only ask us to think about the status of video as content-promotion, they also point to a range of intermediaries – freelancers, video agencies, digital engagement teams within universities, students – who have marked territory, or otherwise positioned expertise, in the cultural and creative practice of promotional videography.

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Notes

¹ I am not concerned in this essay with debates about digital pedagogy or the relation of videos, podcasts and other forms of interactive media to Moocs and educational platforms like iTunesU. Instead, I focus on video shorts that have a calculated promotional function.

²The conflation of “film” and “video” in this language bears out Michael Newman’s point that, in cultural and semantic terms, video “has grown to encompass television and film and to function as the medium of the moving image” (2014, p. 2).

³ This was expressed in a 2016 government white paper called *Success as a Knowledge Economy* that argued that “competition between providers incentivises them to raise their game, offering consumers a greater choice of innovative and better quality products and services at lower cost. Higher education is no exception” (BIS, 2016, p. 8).