

Popular and Mobile: Reflections on Using YouTube as an Archive from an African Studies Perspective

Birgit Englert

Abstract

In this paper I reflect on the characteristics of YouTube as an archive, with a focus on its relevance for African Studies. I discuss the challenges of dealing with the audiovisual sources stored in this archive of popular culture and beyond, given the mobility that characterises the platform and its sources. I explore how to contextualise audiovisual sources found on YouTube and reflect on which ethical aspects need to be considered when using them for research purposes, and how to refer to them in citations.

Introduction

Since its launch in May 2005, YouTube has become by far the most popular platform in the world for audiovisual sources. YouTube has portals/channels in 88 countries¹ and is available in 76 languages², as counted on YouTube at the time of writing (5 April 2016). YouTube itself claims that it has “over a billion users – almost one third of all people on the Internet – and every day people watch hundreds of millions of hours on YouTube and generate billions of views.”³

The “digital *Wunderkammer*”, as Robert Gehl (2009:43, italics in the original) calls it, has become an important tool for exchanging information on all

¹ Including the following 12 African countries (in alphabetical order): Algeria, Egypt, Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, Morocco, Senegal, South Africa, Tanzania, Tunisia, Uganda and Zimbabwe. Cf. <https://www.youtube.com/> (9 April 2016).

² Including the African languages IsiZulu, Kiswahili and Afrikaans, as well as Arabic, English, French, Portuguese and Spanish, which are official languages in African countries. Cf. <https://www.youtube.com/> (9 April 2016).

³ <https://www.youtube.com/yt/press/index.html> (9 April 2016). “The number of hours people spend watching videos (aka watch time) on YouTube is up 60% y/y, the fastest growth we've seen in 2 years.”

kinds of issues, ranging from lifestyle and popular culture to politics and news. The platform has not only come to change the way that billions of people consume video, but has also had an increasing impact on research practices, as will be discussed in this article.

In this paper, I wish to reflect on the special characteristics of YouTube as an archive and its relevance for African Studies, thereby drawing on contributions by scholars from different disciplinary backgrounds. Furthermore, I aim to reflect on how to deal with the audiovisual sources stored in this archive in research processes, given the great diversity of sources and the mobility and multiplicity that characterises them. Many aspects are not specific to African Studies, but in my opinion some of them certainly are. However, I wish to begin by giving a short background on YouTube.

A short background on YouTube

The original intention and *raison d'être* for YouTube was to allow users to “[...] discover, watch and share *originally-created videos*” (italics B.E.).⁴ The platform has helped to launch the “amateur culture” in which anyone with Internet access can post material to be viewed by millions (Jones/Cuthrell 2011: 76, citing Desmet 2009). Many artists/broadcasters would not have achieved popularity without the platform, and quite a number have been able to make money by “monetizing” their videos, as YouTube calls it, though it is clear that many more have not been successful in this respect. Nevertheless, many formats such as tutorials would not have become popular without YouTube.⁵

Apart from videos that have been made for the purpose of being displayed on YouTube in order to reach the broadest possible audience, there are also

⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/yt/about/en-GB/> (9 April 2016).

⁵ Videos with a maximum length of 15 minutes can be uploaded immediately once an account has been created, whereas uploads of longer videos require the user to verify his/her YouTube account with the platform. This process however, barley takes longer and enables the user to upload videos of up to 11 hours in length or 128 GB. <http://www.youtube.com> (9 April 2016).

those videos that - despite not having been produced explicitly for YouTube - would rarely circulate without the platform.

An example of this are so-called “witness videos”, which show acts of violence committed by various actors in conflicts such as the Syrian conflict, which is the focus of analysis by Smit, Heinrich and Broersma (2015). Furthermore, there are those videos that are shared via YouTube more with the intention of reaching a limited group of people, such as the family and friends of a couple that uploads their wedding video to YouTube.

When uploading, it is possible to choose whether the video should be “public”, “unlisted” or “private”, but lots of videos of an apparently “private” nature are in fact accessible to the public and it is not always clear whether users are aware of the possible consequences - such as becoming research objects.⁶

While there are originally-created videos for different purposes and audiences, many videos on YouTube consist of footage that has been produced for other contexts/media and that is only stored and made accessible on YouTube. When individual users upload videos that were produced by third parties, there is often a copyright violation, especially in the case of clips of TV productions, music videos or live concerts. However, many media companies also have their own YouTube channels and use the platform to reach an additional audience. That is especially true of so-called legacy media, i.e. those that existed prior to the emergence of the Internet, although the platform is also used by web-native media that did not exist prior to the emergence of the Internet, and which aims to provide an alternative to legacy media (cf. Smit/Heinrich/Broersma 2015: 9-10).

YouTube is a platform with two main identities, that of a social networking site as “users are able to share video and comment on the work of others” (Jones and Cuthrell 2011: 76), and that of an archive.⁷ Despite the fact that it is run by Google, one of the world’s largest companies, YouTube can be termed a “popular archive” (Smit/Heinrich/Broersma 2015: 1). Not only with regards to the content and format of the sources that it stores, but more

⁶ See the discussion on ethical aspects when working with YouTube in the second part of this article.

⁷ For a discussion of the differing understandings of archive as commonly used and also in a more rigid sense of the word, see e.g. Sonderegger and Pfeffer (2014: 219ff.).

importantly with regards to the actors that contribute to it. As is generally the case with popular culture⁸, entry barriers are relatively low and access to it is not overtly institutionalised (cf. Barber 1987: 43). This certainly applies to this archive, which is built by many contributors who store videos and categorise them by placing them in certain pre-configured categories, as well as by tagging them with certain keywords, thereby making them accessible to other users who search for them.

As Gehl (2009) points out, YouTube is an archive that is actually built on the capitalisation of unpaid labour, as Google, the company that has owned the platform since 2006, makes revenue from selling advertisements. In 2014, the revenue was more than 4 billion dollars, although this did not translate into YouTube being a profitable company (cf. Winkler 2015).

The platform must be seen in the context of other online archives and Do-it-yourself (DIY) institutions more generally, which have boomed in recent years. Many such archives or institutions are run by individuals or associations that are focussed on one particular topic. People who run these institutions tend to derive their motivation from wanting the archived material to be seen/watched and used, thus their satisfaction comes from the fact that items are being made accessible, rather than from the archiving itself (Baker/Huber 2013: 518). While DIY institutions are by far not limited to online formats, as research by Huber and Baker (2013) demonstrates, these formats obviously contribute greatly to achieving the desired increase in accessibility. I would argue that YouTube works primarily because people are motivated to make videos accessible - immediately and to anyone. That this crowd effort works is demonstrated by empirical studies such as the one by Australian film scholar Alan McKee (2011), who found that YouTube offered more reliable access to different film formats than the Australian *National Film and Sound Archive* (NFSA), and that there were fewer broken links in YouTube.

⁸'Popular culture' is a broad term, especially if the meaning of 'culture' is understood as referring to "[...] whatever is distinctive about the 'way of life' of a people, community, nation or social group." (Hall 1997: 2)

YouTube and Africa – power relations replicated

Much has been written and said about the role of YouTube in society more generally, and some have argued that it enables greater participation of people in democratic processes (cf. discussion in Gehl 2009: 44). On the other hand, YouTube is often associated with “trash culture”, precisely because it lacks a central authority that determines what is of value and what is not.

With regards to Africa’s presence on YouTube, Melissa Wall (2009) noted that most content on African countries was provided by people living outside of these countries, mainly by people from the USA. She based her argument on a study that she had conducted in 2007, two years after the launch of the platform, and which consisted of her typing “Ghana” and “Kenya” respectively into the search engine of YouTube and making a typology of the content that came up. It is not surprising to me that a medium that was invented in the USA was first dominated by US-based users and content, and only subsequently gained importance in other parts of the world.

Moreover, it has to be considered that in 2007, rates of Internet access in most African countries were still rather low⁹ and relatively few people owned film-recording devices such as cameras or smartphones.

Almost a decade later, when I typed ‘Tanzania’ into YouTube’s search engine on 14 February 2016, some 951,000 results came up, the first of which was a clip from the *National Geographic* magazine on the Hadza people, “the world’s last full-time hunter-gatherers”, followed by a clip entitled “Visit Tanzania” from the *Africa Travel Channel*, and a report on sex workers in Dar es Salaam on the UK-based *Journeyman Pictures* channel. However, among the videos displayed further down on the first page, there were several relating to popular culture production in Tanzania, such as the country’s “Top 10 music video queens from 2014/2015” and an episode of “Sanda”, described as a Tanzanian comedy. A clip from the *DailyNation* media company/newspaper showing the inauguration of Tanzania’s current

⁹ According to Nyirenda-Jere, Towela and Tesfaye Biru (2015: 3), in “2005, Internet penetration in Europe was almost 20 times that of Africa. By 2014, it was less than 4 times greater.”

president John Pombe Magufuli also had a high ranking. It has to be borne in mind that the algorithm of YouTube provides the user with different results depending on his or her location while searching (as indicated by the IP-address of the device). Any analysis of content stored in the platform has to keep this in mind. The point I want to make with this example though is that YouTube provides access to much of the country's popular culture production, be it music, films or other formats, and a large proportion of it is actually produced in Tanzania.

With regards to the "democratisation aspect", Wall is certainly right to note that, "one of the questions about YouTube videos is whether anyone actually sees them" (Wall 2009: 397). Gehl (2009: 43) emphasises the importance of distinguishing between "curators of storage" and "curators of display", as YouTube is "in the same genealogy as previous archival technologies and techniques" in the sense that as in other archives, "all content is flattened and has equal weight, so it is up to a curatorial authority to present content to audiences." He claims that the curator role is largely taken over by large media companies and entrepreneurs, as they may be able to engage more effectively with YouTube's algorithm than others. As Smit, Heinrich and Broersma (2015: 12) put it: "Curating practices are not descriptive or neutral, but are steered by the professional, political, and ethical motives of uploaders. As a result, tags, titles, and descriptions reflect the purposes the footage serves, what uploaders want to emphasize, how they anticipate search behaviour, and how they try to preconfigure the reception of a video."

In a way, researchers need the same skill but the other way round; they need to anticipate tagging behaviour in order to conduct successful searches for sources on the platform. Therefore, what Sonderegger and Pfeffer (2014: 222, translation B.E.) postulate for archives more generally also needs to be emphasised with regards to YouTube: "The more precise one's understanding of the structures shaping a certain archive, the higher the chances are of conducting a successful search for sources that prove relevant analysing with hindsight to a certain topic."

While clips produced by people from outside Africa may prevail on certain topics – or be ranked highly – images produced by media, artists and other individuals from within Africa are also increasingly finding an audience. As

more people become involved in the production of images - as in theory anyone who owns a smartphone can make a video and whoever has Internet access can upload one – images being circulated of Africa are certainly becoming more diversified.

However, greater diversity must not be confused with “alternative” or “morally superior” to mainstream media. Guo and Harlow (2014), who conducted a study titled “User-Generated Racism: An Analysis of Stereotypes of African Americans, Latinos, and Asians in YouTube Videos”, note that racism in YouTube is widespread. This is again not at all surprising in my opinion, because it cannot be assumed that users of this platform share certain values besides wanting to upload and access videos for free.

YouTube is certainly not a morally better place than mainstream media; it is simply a platform that provides audiovisual sources. The positions taken by users/uploaders may be even more extreme than those found in mainstream media as there is no editorial person/team providing any kind of mediation. The only reference guide comes in the form of YouTube’s community guidelines, which state what kind of material is considered offensive and will therefore be deleted if detected by YouTube staff.¹⁰

In any case, I do not wish to discuss the pros and cons of YouTube as such, but rather its relevance in teaching and research contexts. I agree with Gidal (2008: 212), who notes: “As video becomes ubiquitous online and Google strengthens its global reach, the question for scholars is not whether to use YouTube, but how best to use it.”

Working with YouTube in research and teaching

YouTube has been the focus of a great deal of scholarly analysis over the last few years, especially within communication and media studies and related disciplines. More specifically, with regards to academic contexts,

¹⁰ Cf. the guidelines that are available at <https://www.youtube.com/yt/policyandsafety/de/communityguidelines.html> (9 April 2016).

there are articles on the use of YouTube for teaching, on YouTube as an archive, as well as case studies of certain types of sources, such as the aforementioned “witness videos” (Smit/Heinrich/Broersma 2015). The potential of the audiovisual platform has been reviewed from the perspective of various disciplines. For example, the *Yearbook of Traditional Music* published the review essay “YouTube.com for Ethnomusicology” written by Gidal (2008: 210), who begins his review by noting that “Reviewing YouTube.com is almost as daunting as reviewing the entire Internet.”

Kousha, Thelwall and Abdoli (2012) have made a quantitative analysis of YouTube videos cited in academic publications. They highlight the disciplinary differences in terms of what kinds of YouTube sources are cited:

“Most important, half of the cited videos in the sciences were real-time demonstrations of a particular scientific phenomenon, object, or lab experiment in subjects such as computing, physics, chemistry, and biology. In medicine and health sciences, one third of the cited videos were documentaries with medical or public health themes. In contrast, in the arts and humanities, hardly any videos had a direct scientific theme (1%), and almost half of the cited videos (45%) were related to visual and performing arts (37%) such as music, dance, theater, movie excerpts, and comedies, suggesting that online videos are valuable in some arts and humanities fields where human movement and performances are important and perhaps difficult to fully describe in text. In the social sciences, about 40% of the cited videos related to politics (e.g., news reports and talks by politicians) [...]”¹¹ (Kousha, Thelwall and Abdoli 2012: 1721)

The authors found that the number of articles that cited YouTube videos was equally low in the arts and humanities (0.3%) and the social sciences

¹¹ From the perspective of Kousha, Thelwall and Abdoli (2012: 1721), an unexpected feature of their study was the high number of interdisciplinary citations that came up: “For instance, music, dance, and movie excerpts may be cited by research papers in the hard sciences for scientific reasons.”

(0.2%) (Kousha, Thelwall and Abdoli 2012: 1722). They distinguish between researchers producing YouTube videos themselves and referring to them, and those who refer to videos that they have not made themselves.¹²

However, I find it rather irritating that Kousha, Thelwall and Abdoli (2012: 1722) caution against using YouTube videos as sources because they are not peer-reviewed. I find it obvious that they are not, as is the case with most (also written) sources in the vast majority of archives. In fact, this is what distinguishes archives from libraries; that they usually store a highly diverse range of sources, but not scientific publications as such (cf. Sonderegger/Pfeffer 2014: 219). Furthermore, many scientific publications are not peer-reviewed either. In my opinion, the argument that YouTube sources might be less relevant because they are not peer-reviewed only demonstrates the (rather absurd) extent to which peer reviewing has become a fetish in academia, although that is an entirely different discussion.

What can be claimed, however, is that – with the obvious exception of applied arts – academic discourses and publications are clearly dominated by written output. Also, when it comes to sources that are referred to in written texts, there is a bias towards the written, with audiovisual sources playing a rather subordinate role (cf. Englert 2016). While videos on YouTube might be used for background information, they are rarely cited if they do not constitute the corpus of the study (Katharina Fritsch personal communication, 1 March 2016)¹³. There seems to be a persisting perception across academia that reading is somehow ‘more serious’ than ‘watching’, i.e. that written sources should be taken more seriously than audiovisual ones (cf. Haring 2011).

That “[v]ideo also arouses the senses in ways that other media cannot” (Jones and Cuthrell 2011: 77), is nothing new and it is certainly the main reason why film has been used in teaching for decades, in schools as well as in universities. What is new with YouTube is that it allows a huge number of diverse audiovisual sources to be accessed with ease. In addition to the

¹² This is an important distinction. In this article I am primarily interested in the use of videos that have not been made by researchers themselves. For my reflections on the production of research films in an African Studies context, see Englert (2016).

¹³ This is similar to the use of Wikipedia, I would claim.

purpose of screening diverse audiovisual material in classrooms, teachers and lecturers increasingly upload their filmed lectures to the video platform (Jones and Cuthrell 2011: 78) or stream them via it.

Furthermore, the numerous interviews with scholars and other experts that are available on YouTube could be relevant sources for researchers. Apart from this, the existence of YouTube has led to a spread of courses/tutorials on all kinds of issues, including many that are relevant to African Studies, such as courses on research methods (cf. Chenail 2011: 232f.) or language courses, of which there are plenty (YouTube provided 62,700 results for “Swahili language learning” alone on 6 April 2016).

In addition to courses provided by institutions/publishers, there are numerous clips from native speakers who wish to introduce other users to their languages (and whose videos might constitute an interesting corpus for linguists).

Other than documentaries, reports and news broadcasts, YouTube contains a wealth of popular culture productions in African languages, such as songs (often with transcriptions/translations), movies (from Nollywood to Bongowood), or comedy programs, to highlight just the most obvious. This is far from a complete listing, but provides just a hint at which sources could be of interest to researchers in African Studies in order to encourage readers to take a look themselves. In the following part, I will discuss certain aspects that characterise YouTube as an archive and the audiovisual sources stored therein.

YouTube as an archive – some characteristics

In a way, YouTube can be seen as a “contemporary archive” as it primarily contains sources on issues relating to contemporary society, politics and popular culture. It is obviously less useful for historians focussed on periods in which audiovisual production was non-existent or scarce and who – should they wish to work with audiovisual sources – might find more relevant sources in conventional film archives.

However, this is not necessarily the case, as the above-cited study by McKee (2011) demonstrated, whereby he compared the Australian *National Film and Sound Archive* (NFSA) to YouTube and found that the latter was actually more useful in his research.

This aside, YouTube features channels such as *British Pathé*, which provides more than 80,000 videos of historical footage and prides itself on being the “largest archive of history on YouTube”¹⁴, whilst also maintaining an online archive on another website.¹⁵ YouTube contains a lot of material on contemporary African history, which was difficult to access before this platform came into being. Besides documentaries and reports on historical topics, it also contains footage from events such as independence celebrations or state visits, as well as numerous speeches by African leaders that might be of interest to historians.

Nevertheless, sources on YouTube are in many respects more relevant to people working on more contemporary issues. As the medium is only a decade old – and so is the popularisation of digital cameras able to produce digital audiovisual data - it is not surprising that the majority of audiovisual sources are of a more recent nature. Pietrobruno (2013: 1273), for example, who examined the YouTube presence of the whirling dervish (*Mevlevi Sema*) ceremony of Turkey, notes that YouTube videos of such performances at a certain location “date back no further than 2005 even though this community was established in 1982”¹⁶. Older footage, which was originally shot in non-digital format, is likely to become digitalised eventually as the function of YouTube as an archive gains more importance.

Pietrobruno (2013: 1259), who refers to YouTube as an “archive of intangible heritage”, stresses that it provides a platform for forms of popular culture that are often either not archived, or at least not in a systematic way, in conventional archives run by institutions because they are not perceived as sufficiently relevant. The lack of certain voices – especially those of women

¹⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/user/britishpathe> (9 April 2016). “Follow us through the 20th Century and dive into the good and the bad times of the past. Feel free to explore more than 80,000 videos of filmed history and maybe you'll find stuff no one else has ever seen.”

¹⁵ <http://www.britishpathe.com> (9 April 2016).

¹⁶ Pietrobruno (2013: 1273) notes that a single video of such a performance from the early 1990s circulates instead on DailyMotion, a Paris-based online video platform that essentially works in a similar way to YouTube. <http://www.dailymotion.com> (9 April 2016).

or of marginalised peoples to name just two “groups” - in archives (and museums) has been extensively addressed in research (Spivak 2006, cf. Sonderegger/Pfeffer 2014: 220). Moreover, Pietrobruno highlights this aspect when in reference to her own background in heritage studies, she notes:

“From both within and beyond the borders of Western countries, the social archiving of heritage on YouTube has the potential to problematize dominant narratives in which national heritage privileges male practitioners. YouTube as an archive of intangible heritage can circulate practices of the marginalized and challenge traditional performances of heritage [...]” (Pietrobruno 2013: 1261)

However, the notion of archives as locations of power (Sonderegger/Pfeffer 2014: 218) obviously also applies to YouTube. Power imbalances between different actors are replicated in terms of representation on YouTube, in the sense that it requires awareness of its existence and relevance in the first place, and a camera, computer access, Internet access and a certain technical know-how in the second. Furthermore, it requires a certain level of knowledge regarding the practices of title-giving and tagging, as they actually determine to what extent the item will be found (Smit/Heinrich/Broersma 2015: 5, cf. the discussion on curators of storage above, Gehl 2009).

Moreover, in addition to these material aspects of power, symbolical aspects are also relevant, such as “self-conception” in terms of public representation (Martina Kopf, personal communication, 30 April 2016).

In the case of YouTube, there is no central authority that excludes certain actors from being part of the archive because they are deemed unimportant, as long as the community guidelines are respected, anyone can contribute. In my opinion, with regards to the use of YouTube for research purposes, the problem is less what is missing but rather which subjects might appear on the platform against their will – and in consequence also in any research that draws on those sources.

In principle, this problem applies to conventional archives as well, but I wish to argue that it is even more pressing here, given the multiplicity of individuals who contribute to the collection and the great accessibility of the data stored therein. It has to be kept in mind that subjects who might agree to appear in videos stored in YouTube might nevertheless object to them being used in research processes. In the following part, I will thus address some of the ethical aspects to be considered when envisaging carrying out research using YouTube.

Ethical dimensions of working with sources from YouTube

For many artists and media companies, footage being uploaded against their will is an issue. They complain of a violation of their copyrights, as well as the associated loss of revenue. However, groups of people have also fought against a certain representation on YouTube, as outlined by Gidal (2010: 211):

“In addition to individuals and corporations protecting their rights, communities are grappling with their self-presentation on YouTube. This occurred recently within the transnational Afro-Brazilian religious community when the posting of typically prohibited videos of manifested orixas during ceremonies was hotly debated on the Argentina-based MSN user group, ‘Nacion Cambinda’”¹⁷.

In relation to this, a crucial point is the question of who puts the audiovisual records of these practices online: the actors who practice them, or others, who may even do so against their will? Furthermore, while it is relatively

¹⁷ “MSN Groups was a website part of the MSN network which hosted online communities, and which contained Web pages, hosted images, and contained a message board. MSN Groups was shut down on February 21, 2009 as part of a migration of online applications and services to the Windows Live brand.” https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/MSN_Groups (9 April 2016).

clear when individual actors object to having their practices uploaded to YouTube, the situation becomes more complex when groups of people who are taken to represent a certain 'community' are involved.

What then are the repercussions of using such materials in research? Can everything that is found on YouTube be used for research purposes? Again, this is not a new question as it is relevant to research processes in general: does a researcher have the right to use everything that has been observed or said in an interview in their analysis? What about things that have been said outside of official interviews, once the audio-recording device has been switched off?

These are ethical questions that have been addressed in much of the literature on field research, especially within the spectrum of qualitative methods. As is so often the case, it is difficult to give definite answers without looking at the specific context (see e.g. Englert/Dannecker 2014: 233ff., Scheyvens/Nowak/Scheyvens 2003: 139ff.).

However, I would argue that in cases where an online platform such as YouTube is consulted, such questions require even more attention, for the simple reason that the people who feature in the videos are unlikely to be aware that the researcher is now focussing on them.¹⁸ Similar questions arise, of course, with regards to historical archives, although the difference is that in these cases, people have usually passed away and thus cannot object. This does not necessarily make using them more ethical, as they may have descendants who object. Therefore, how do we deal with the fact that not everything that is available in public spaces is intended for public eyes?

The example of Twarab in Marseilles

I wish to draw on *Twarab* concerts as an example, as they are the focus of research conducted within the framework of the project "Popular Culture in Transnational Spaces", which I am leading.¹⁹

¹⁸ This applies, of course, mainly to videos that have not become part of an official canon. As an example of a video belonging to that official canon, I would count Martin Luther King's famous speech, for instance.

¹⁹ The full title of the project is "Popular Culture in Translocal Spaces: Processes of Diasporisation among Comorians in Marseille and Cape Verdeans in Lisbon" and it takes a comparative perspective on popular culture practices, especially music and dance, in two urban postcolonial

Twarab is a music genre that combines influences from Egypt, the Arabian Peninsula, India and Europe with East African musical practices. It emerged in Zanzibar in the late nineteenth century (cf. Topp Fargion 2014). The presence of *Twarab* in Marseilles, a popular music genre in Eastern Africa and the Comoros, has been strongly related to the history of migration from the Comoros to Marseilles. *Twarab* soirées take place regularly, almost every Saturday night, and are mostly organised by associations. (cf. Englert/Fritsch 2015: 250)

Twarab concerts are usually circulated in the form of YouTube videos, with this constituting an important translocal practice. It is a way of making these concerts available to people who were unable to attend, especially those ascribed to the same locality as those for which the concert was organised, as Katharina Fritsch (personal communication, 1 March 2016) points out.²⁰

Fritsch, who is focussing on *Twarab* concerts within the project, has decided against using YouTube videos of concerts that she did not attend in person. This is due to postcolonial relations, which shape the context in which those events take place and her position with regards to this point. Fritsch argues that she perceives the events, which are available online, as nevertheless embedded in certain community structures and therefore as not simply accessible and free to analyse. She stresses that, “[...] just because a YouTube video is apparently freely accessible, this does not mean that everyone understands it and is able to analyse it. I therefore only refer to those videos that show an event that I attended, in order to access what was said or the performances themselves. The video thus complements the notes I have been taking/my analysis.” (Katharina Fritsch, personal communication, 1 March 2016, translation B.E.²¹)

contexts. The project is funded by the Austrian Science Fund and runs from 2014 to 2018 with the participation of Katharina Fritsch and Hanna Stepanik as pre-doc researchers, Andrés Carvajal, Mounir Hamada Hamza and Ahmad Abdoul-Malik as free-lance researchers and myself as senior researcher.

²⁰ Concerts are usually organised in order to collect funds for a project in a specific locality on the Comoros.

²¹ Personal communication originally written in German: „[...] nur weil ein Youtube-Video angeblich frei zugänglich ist, bedeutet es nicht, dass jede Person dieses versteht, es ihr zugänglich ist und es analysieren kann. d.h. ich greife auf jene Videos zurück, um Zugang zu Gesagtem oder auch Performances zu bekommen, bei denen ich dabei war; das Video stellt somit eine Vervollständigung meiner Analyse dar.“

As this example shows, it not only depends on the source itself, but also on the position of the researcher in relation to it. Fritsch emphasises the need to reflect critically on who analyses whom and from which position of power: “[the fact] that these *Twarab* videos are ‘publicly accessible’ in this case does not mean that I can simply analyse them, as such an analysis also reproduces a *white* gaze on a postcolonial diasporic popular culture practice. In other words, the viewing of such videos needs to be seen in the context of long histories of a “Spectacle of the ‘Other’” (Hall 1997), and the wide selection of apparently openly-accessible popular practices frames this question in yet another light.” (Katharina Fritsch, personal communication, 1 March 2016, translation B.E.²²)

This situation becomes even more complicated with regards to using YouTube footage in research films - which have their own ethical challenges (cf. Englert 2016). In the framework of the same project, Andrés Carvajal and Mounir Hamada Hamza, in cooperation with Katharina Fritsch, are currently working on a research film with the working title “Histories of *Twarab* in Marseille”. In the making of the film, which features numerous interviews with *Twarab* musicians living in Marseilles, Carvajal has decided to use footage taken from YouTube in order to complement the material that he filmed himself. The decision to do so was also influenced by the fact that – for various logistical reasons - it proved difficult to shoot enough footage besides the interviews with artists that form the core material around which the film is structured.

Apart from the obvious advantage of having more diverse footage available for montage, the use of footage taken from YouTube was also conceived as a strategy that would reduce the authority of the filmmaker. In a way, this is, of course, a paradox, as the use of material produced by others in one’s own production is, to a certain extent, an act that establishes authority. However, it can also be regarded as an attempt to reduce the colonial “gaze”, referred

²² Personal communication originally written in German: “[...] d.h. nur weil *Twarab*-Videos in diesem Falle ‚öffentlich zugänglich‘ sind, heißt es nicht, dass ich diese einfach so analysieren kann, da eine solche Analyse ja sehr wohl auch einen *white* gaze gegenüber einer postkolonialen diasporischen populärkulturellen Praktik reproduziert. In anderen Worten, gerade das Anschauen solcher Videos muss auch innerhalb von langen Geschichten eines „Spektakel der ‚Anderen‘“ (Hall 1997) gesehen werden und die breite Auswahl an angeblich öffentlich zugänglichen populärkulturellen Praktiken rückt diese Frage nochmals in ein ganz anderes Licht.“

to by Fritsch above, within the film (cf. personal communication Carvajal, 24 May 2016).

The interviewed artists were asked whether they had any videos of their work that could be incorporated into the film, and in many cases, they referred the filmmakers to YouTube, where their work is stored.

While the interviewed artists thus gave their consent to these videos being used in the film, it proved more difficult to get official approval from the producers of videos that showed artists who were not interviewed in person, but simply referred to in the accounts of others. These requests for consent went largely unanswered, but as the material is only used for citation purposes, it was nevertheless incorporated.

As the film is not finished at the time of writing, it remains to be seen how people in the audience will perceive the film and what effect the use of YouTube videos will have. For now, it can be concluded that these seemingly contradictory positions within the same research project show that there is no strict guideline that can be adhered to. Rather, it is necessary to ask plenty of questions, as what may seem simple at first glance is in fact much more complex.

In technical terms, as long as the credits are inserted, short parts of audiovisual material can be cited in audiovisual productions, just as short excerpts of texts can be cited in other texts, provided they are correctly cited. In this case, Andrés Carvajal has decided to reduce the size of the footage taken from YouTube so that it is surrounded by a black frame and is thus immediately identifiable. A further advantage in reducing the size is that the poor quality of many YouTube videos becomes less visible (cf. personal communication with Andrés Carvajal, 24 May 2016).

If a researcher decides to work with sources on YouTube, the next challenge involves how to do so taking into account that the platform, as well as the audiovisual sources stored in it, are characterised by a high degree of mobility. In the following pages, I will address these questions by providing some examples that show the difficulty of contextualising some of the audiovisual sources found on YouTube, and what this means when it comes to citing them accordingly in texts or in research films.

Practical dimensions of working with YouTube as an archive – paths to saving, contextualising and citing

YouTube must be considered as a ‘mobile archive’ - firstly, because it is increasingly consumed on mobile devices and videos are also increasingly shot on such mobile devices, therefore much of its content is in fact created and consumed ‘on the move’.²³

Secondly and more importantly, the platform is mobile in the sense that it is in a constant process of transformation. Offline archives are not static either, of course, but also grow (or shrink), and they too can move or be reorganised.²⁴ However, these processes occur much more rapidly and to a larger extent in online archives. There is, of course, a type of fragility inherent in YouTube, in the sense that everything that has been uploaded can also be deleted again, either by the uploader themselves or by YouTube (cf. Pietrobruno 2013: 1261). The latter usually deletes content due to the violation of its community guidelines, most notably copyright infringement (cf. Jones/Cuthrell 2011: 83).

Furthermore, the digital objects themselves are more likely to be re-edited, as “digital objects are also *fluid*, rewritable, and arguably less ‘fixed’ or ‘durable’ than their analogue counterparts, meaning that traces are retrievable and also *reconfigurable* in ways that similarly problematize linear models of past and present”. (Hand 2014: 3 cit. in Smit/Heinrich/Broersma 2015: 4)

There are, of course, practical solutions to the issue of videos being deleted for whatever reason. Researchers working with sources on YouTube might use tools that allow YouTube videos to be converted into other formats and then save them onto a flash or hard drive (Jones/Cuthrell 2011: 82). There are many converters available for this, with the majority being freeware. There are also converters that allow the user to download just the audio of a YouTube video and save it as an mp3 file which is obviously mainly of

²³The access rates using mobile devices are impressive according to the company, which writes on its website that “[T]he number of hours people spent watching videos on mobile is up 100% y/y.” <https://www.youtube.com/yt/press/index.html> (9 April 2016).

²⁴Non-digital archives can disappear if they get destroyed or if the institution maintaining it no longer receives funding – and obviously, material can also be lost due to technical reasons.

interest to users who only wish to listen to music (although it might also be useful for language courses or for the analysis of speeches stored on YouTube).

However, while there are technical tools available to cope with the possibility that a source might disappear, the greater challenge for researchers is probably how to deal with the fact that videos might be re-edited and multiple versions may then exist, which makes it difficult to contextualise them and cite them correctly.

For example, popular speeches such as “I have a dream”, given by the American civil rights activist Martin Luther King Jr. during the *March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom* on 28 August 1963, are available on YouTube in numerous different videos; there are videos with subtitles in various languages, children’s versions and different interpretations.²⁵ Besides speeches, it is songs that are primarily available in a number of different versions.

While it can be confusing during the search process to look for “the original” or an appropriate video to cite, refer to or analyse, the multiplicity of audiovisual sources offered by YouTube can also be an advantage, as it can reveal the history of a song (cf. Gidal 2010: 211). Interpretations by the same artist over time can be found but also cover versions by other artists or members of the audience more generally, which can constitute important qualitative data on the reception of a song beyond the comments and the statistical items offered by YouTube (see the last section of this article for more discussion on the potential of YouTube for reception analysis).

Users reconfigure existing video or audio files and combine them with new images – moving or still. A typical example of just such a bricolage is the video titled “Kwame Nkrumah on African Unity” that was uploaded by the user Kwame Yankah.²⁶ The text provided by the uploader states: “Kwame Nkrumah's call for African unity is still relevant”, otherwise no further information is given. The audiovisual piece itself consists of a still image of

²⁵ https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=martin+luther+king+i+have+a+dream (15 March 2016).

²⁶ [Kwame Yankah]. (2014, January 27, duration: 11:41 minutes). Kwame Nkrumah on African Unity. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=67YmKQ_UwYw (9 April 2016). The video has been watched 10,352 times and has received 17 comments.

Kwame Nkrumah that is combined with sound, starting with Bob Marley's song "Africa Unite" from his album "Survival", released in 1979. Then the voice of Kwame Nkrumah is laid over the song, which continues in the background. In fact, several users complained in the comments about the distracting soundtrack in the background and the creator replied that he would try to upload a version without music in the background.²⁷

As there is no indication whatsoever on the YouTube site or in the audiovisual item itself as to when or where Nkrumah gave this speech, extra research is needed to be able to contextualise this audiovisual item.

It is not my aim here to actually try to track down this information, but to emphasise that what is at stake is a critical examination of sources and their contextualisation. This is, of course, true when working with any items found in archives, but again it is precisely due to the fluidity of the items stored in YouTube, their potential multiplicity and the possible divergence between the director of a video and its uploader, that they demand such a rigorous examination.

As Sonderegger and Pfeffer (2014: 223ff.) rightly point out, a distinction between primary sources and secondary sources (or primary texts and secondary texts) only makes sense if thought of as relational. 'Primary' refers to the source that is being analysed, whereas 'secondary' refers to all texts that are being consulted in order to analyse it. In that sense – which is actually the only possible sense – YouTube also contains 'primary' as well as 'secondary' sources, as certain audiovisual items might constitute the object of analysis, whereas others might be used as references that enable the analysis of other sources, be they videos, still images or texts.

Accordingly, both "user-generated videos uploaded on YouTube", as well as videos derived from "mainstream traditional media and commercial advertisement" (Pietrobruno 2013: 1261 citing Burgess and Green 2009: 43f.), can either become part of a corpus to be analysed and thus be considered as primary sources or they can be used as secondary sources as in the sense outlined above.

²⁷ At the time of watching the video for this contribution, only the version with music in the background has been uploaded.

With regards to YouTube, I see a need to distinguish between videos that have actually been authored by the uploader ('raw material') and those whereby the author is not the uploader and therefore a certain modification has taken place ('interpreted material'). While in most cases 'raw material' will have been uploaded by its creator, it may not necessarily be the case – depending also on how the term 'modification' is interpreted. In a way, anyone who uploads an audiovisual piece that they did not author themselves also transforms it, simply by presenting it in a different context. In many cases, the transformation may only consist of the selection of the beginning and end of the clip, whereas in others, additional video footage, images, text, graphics or music may have been added.

While this distinction may work in principle, it is also far from a neat one, and in many cases it will depend again on the analysis perspective as to whether a video is considered as 'raw' or 'interpreted' material. Furthermore, 'interpreted' material may provide access to 'raw' sources, such as in the case of the video titled "Histoire des Comores: Ali Soilih et la jeunesse 1977", which is discussed in more detail below. However, first I briefly wish to look at how to cite a YouTube video in the least complicated case, i.e. when an originally-created source has been uploaded by its creator.

For example, in the APA guidelines "How to Cite a Video on YouTube in APA"²⁸, it is suggested that YouTube videos be cited as follows:

Last name, First Name Middle Name [Username]. (Year, Month Date). Title of the video. [Video File]. Retrieved from URL.

In case a 'Last name' and 'First name' cannot be identified, only the username is given and remains in brackets. In the same way as for text from websites, I also find it useful to indicate the date when the video was last accessed. Furthermore, I consider it useful to give the duration of the clip

²⁸ <http://content.easybib.com/guides/citation-guides/apa-format/youtube-video/#.VuvWYxEZjqc>. email (29 May 2016).

and in case specific quotes are taken, the minute should be indicated. Thus a complete reference could look as follows:

Last name, First Name Middle Name [Username]. (Year, Month Date). Title of the video. [Video File, *duration in minutes*]. Retrieved from URL. *Date when last accessed*.

In order to contextualise a video, it is necessary to find out as much as possible about its producer. This may be difficult, as information provided on the platform itself is often scarce and in many cases, the pseudonym chosen by the uploader is the only indicator available with which to start searching. On the uploader's YouTube profile, it is possible to see which other videos they have uploaded, which playlists they have created and which other channels they recommend. There are often links to other sites where they are present on the Internet, such as personal websites, blogs or Facebook pages.

This process obviously becomes even more complicated when the producer and uploader are not the same person - something that is not always easy to find out in the first place. In such cases, a search for information on both parties must be performed. In many cases, credits may be included in the footage, but in some cases this might also be missing and other routes must be taken in order to obtain the necessary information.

I will refer now to the example of a video that shows "*Nyerere's Official Visit to US 1963*", which was uploaded by the YouTube user M.M Mwanakijiji on 17 June 2011.²⁹ A click on his profile reveals that Mwanakijiji also has his own website/blog where he posts about Tanzanian political issues, and the website is linked to a Facebook account. These sites provide more information on the person behind the YouTube user profile Mwanakijiji. On his cover photo on Facebook, for example, he describes himself as a "Tanzanian author and a Political Columnist", and the second line states, "A man with ideas and the courage to defend them".

²⁹ [M.M Mwanakijiji]. (17 June 2011). *Nyerere's Official Visit to US 1963* [Video File, duration 9:18 minutes]. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aF3CHxwhObE_ (6 April 2016).

In this case, it is quite easy to access additional information, which helps to at least get an idea about the person behind the M.M Mwanakijji user account. This however means that one either trusts the identity being presented online, or that the same critical approach must be applied to these sources as the one applied to the original source that one seeks to contextualise.³⁰

The real title is displayed in the footage, *Visit to the United States of Mwalimu Julius K. Nyerere, President of the Republic of Tanganyika, 15 July 1963*, and when typed into Google quickly reveals that apart from YouTube, the video is also archived in the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, where all the credits are listed and where it can also be accessed online for free.³¹

This shows that, in many cases, YouTube can act as an entry point to other archives, which either provide more complete information, as in the above case, or at least complementary information, as in the next example that I wish to discuss: a video titled *Histoire des Comores: Ali Soilih et la jeunesse 1977*³², which was uploaded by the YouTube user komoria269.³³

In this case also, the title given to the video by the uploader and the title shown at the beginning of the video itself are not identical, the latter being: *Le programme d'Ali Soihili pour la jeunesse comorienne 1975-1978*³⁴, which appears in black letters on a green background, and it quickly becomes clear that it is not part of the original film material but has been added afterwards³⁵, and which is not even identical to the title under which the video is listed on YouTube. The original title, *Laissez Passer pour les Iles Comores*³⁶, subsequently appears at the beginning of the video, where the

³⁰ I thank Martina Kopf for pointing this aspect out to me.

³¹ See <http://www.jfklibrary.org/Asset-Viewer/Archives/JFKWHF-WHN23.aspx> (9 April 2016).

³² "History of the Comoros: Ali Soilih and the youth 1977"

³³ [komoria269]. (14.09.2008) *Histoire des Comores: Ali Soilih et la jeunesse 1977* [Video file, duration 9:26 minutes]. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ohR5RrJuQSI> (6 April 2016). It has been played 27,580 times (by 18 March 2016) and has received 26 "likes" but has not been commented on by the time of writing (April 2016).

³⁴ "The program by Ali Soilih for the Comorian youth 1975-1978", translation B.E.

³⁵ In this case, this is quite obvious as the original footage dates from 1977, as becomes evident in the end credits, and the green background does not match the footage from that time. However, it remains unclear whether it was added by the uploader, komoria269, or by someone else.

³⁶ "Permit (pass) for the Comorian Islands", translation B.E.

director of the film, Daniel Bertolino, is also named. Further information on the people involved is found at the end of the film, where the date of recording is given as 1977.

The video was uploaded on 14 September 2008 in the “Education” category and is accompanied by a short text:

“-Le programme d’Ali [sic !] Soilih pour la jeunesse comorienne 1975-1978
 -Un grand besoin de changement
 -L’espoir de la jeunesse [sic !]
 -Un avenir meilleur?”

“-The programme of Ali Soilih for the young people of the Comoros 1975-1978
 -A huge need for change
 -Hope of the youth
 -A better future?”
 (translation B.E.)

as well as the link, <http://comores-culture.skyrock.com/>, which is no longer working.

Just as at the beginning, the end of the original film from 1977 is framed with a screen that shows black letters on a green background, stating, *L’élan prend fin le 29 mai 1978 Ali Soilih est assassiné...*³⁷. A still picture of Ali Soilih then appears before the video ends and YouTube suggests the next video to view, which is titled, *Le ANDA, Grand Mariage comorien sous Ali Soilih*³⁸, also uploaded by komoria269.

A look at the profile of the uploader, komoria269, reveals that three similar videos, which appear to be part of a series, were uploaded seven years ago, otherwise this user does not appear to have had any further activity on YouTube. The question as to whether the account belongs to an individual or a group cannot be answered. The fact that the channel has only been

³⁷ “The impetus comes to an end on 29 May 1978, Ali Solih is murdered...”, translation B.E.

³⁸ “The ANDA, the Comorian Grand Mariage under Ali Soilih”, translation B.E.

subscribed to by 30 people indicates that it is not highly popular. The numbers 269 were not chosen arbitrarily, as it might seem at first, but are taken from the international telephone code of the Union of Comoros, which is 00269.

While it proves difficult to find out any more about the YouTube user komoria269, a rapid search on Google for “Daniel Bertolino ‘*Laissez-Passer*’” reveals that the filmmaker was born in 1942 in France. According to the film database *Complete Index to World Film* (CITWF)³⁹, Bertolino made *Laissez-Passer* in 1976-1977 together with Francois Floquet, who is also listed as a director. Canada is given as the country of production of what is part of a “short documentary series”. The total oeuvre by Bertolino as listed in the database comprises 24 documentary films or series that were made between 1968 and 1977. While the CITWF website provides this useful information on the director, it does not contain any further links or any way of accessing the films. Access via YouTube seems to be the only way to watch them online, whereas – ironically – a search for Bertolino and the film title on the platform did not produce any relevant results, as the video is not tagged with his name. The information on YouTube and on CITWF is thus complementary; while the footage can be watched only on the former, the background information is only given on the latter.

A search for “Daniel Bertolino” on YouTube without the title of the film at least leads to some other films that were made by him, as well as a video in which he gives an interview about his work. These clips help to further contextualise the audiovisual source of interest, which can only be found on YouTube when searching for certain keywords, such as “Ali Soilih” or “History of the Comoros” in English or French.

In my opinion, this example further complicates the question of how to cite a video accessed via YouTube. I wish to suggest that the way such a source gets cited will actually depend on what you are referring to. If reference is made to the content of the original film, I would propose that it be cited as follows:

³⁹ <http://www.citwf.com/person482471.htm> (9 April 2016).

Bertolino, Daniel (director). 1977. "Laissez Passer pour les Iles Comores" Via Le Monde Inc., accessed via [komoria269]. (14.09.2008) Histoire des Comores: Ali Soilih et la jeunesse 1977 [Video File, duration 9:36 minutes]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ohR5RrJuQSI>, last accessed 6 April 2016.

However, if the specific way in which the original film has been framed by the uploader is the focus of interest, I would stick to the citation guideline as outlined above:

[komoria269]. (14.09.2008) Histoire des Comores: Ali Soilih et la jeunesse 1977 [Video File, duration 9:36 minutes]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ohR5RrJuQSI>, last accessed 6 April 2016.

In the final part of this paper, I wish to take a brief look at some other items that are part of the YouTube portal and that are of special interest with regards to reception analysis.

A quick note on reception analysis

Aside from the audiovisual products themselves and the channels through which they are organised, YouTube contains three important functions that are of interest for an analysis of how a video has been received by its audience.

Firstly, there is the counter, which indicates how many times a video has been watched and thus serves as an indicator of its popularity. Secondly, there is another counter that indicates how many people like or dislike a video, which is of less value, as the numbers are usually very low compared to the number of views. Both indicators have been proven to be subject to

manipulation as “views” as well as “likes” can be bought in large quantities – an issue which was much discussed during the elections 2016 in the USA. These purely quantitative indicators therefore have to be treated with caution as in many cases they are only able to show rather skewed tendencies.

Much more interesting – because it allows for a qualitative analysis - is the comment function, where users can leave comments about the video. Oftentimes a dialogue between various viewers will emerge and again a like/dislike button below the individual comments provides some hints as to what extent other viewers agree with a comment or not.⁴⁰

It has to be borne in mind that all of these items – counter, like/dislike buttons, comments - are even more fluid than the audiovisual products themselves as they are constantly changing. Nevertheless, provided a clear corpus is defined and there is extensive reflection on the characteristics of what is available, they could enable a relevant reception analysis. The upload date must obviously be considered in relation to the views, likes/dislikes and comments in order to allow for a meaningful comparison on a relative scale. It is even more complicated to use absolute numbers in the analysis as there are so many considerations to take into account, such as the fact that music clips tend to be viewed more than once by the same user, whereas this is rather unlikely for news items (unless someone uses them for analysis). To my knowledge, it is not possible to distinguish between “unique users” and “multiple users” without having access to internal data from the YouTube company.⁴¹

⁴⁰ The reception aspect is, for example, the focus of the study by Wotanis and McMillan (2014) “Performing Gender on YouTube”, in which they analyse the comments below the videos of two prominent YouTubers.

⁴¹ I do not wish to go into detail here about how to carry out such a reception analysis, just as I do not provide any instructions on how to analyse audiovisual content found on YouTube, as these are different topics altogether. There are numerous different approaches and which one a researcher chooses is not only related to the methodological or theoretical approaches that guide their work, but it also depends on the purpose for which the video is being used as a source. There is plenty of literature on how to interpret audiovisual data, regardless of where it is accessed.

Concluding remarks

In this article, I have aimed to highlight the exciting possibilities that YouTube provides for researchers through the lense of an African Studies perspective. It allows quick and easy access to sources that could previously only be accessed by investing time and money, such as in the case of digitalised footage stored in conventional archives. It thereby contributes to a democratisation of research practices, at least in principle, as gaps in terms of access to broadband Internet obviously persist. Furthermore, many possible sources simply would not exist without YouTube. Many of them allow for new research questions to be formulated, especially with regards to reception analysis.

As has been discussed in the text, the digital nature of the archive and the lack of direct contact with the actors who store their videos therein or who are featured in such videos does not mean that there are less ethical issues to consider than when consulting 'conventional archives' or doing 'conventional fieldwork'. On the contrary, as direct contact between researchers and the creators or providers of footage stored on YouTube is often missing, it is even more imperative to reflect seriously on ethical issues and not to consider everything that is accessible as available for research purposes.

In this paper, I further aimed to point out the need for rigorous examination of the sources and their creators/uploaders given the mobility of the archive, which not only struggles with absences (just as any archive) and incomplete information (as many archives), but also with the fluidity and multiplicity of many of the items stored in it. As has been pointed out, this not only poses challenges when searching for and contextualising such sources, but also when it comes to citing them.

In the end, all of these challenges aside, I hope that this article has contributed to demonstrating that in the decade of its existence, YouTube has become an invaluable archive for researchers, which deserves to be taken seriously, and the question of how to deal with it needs to be incorporated in the teaching of methodology and methods in African Studies.

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