Some methodological reflections about the study of religions on video sharing websites

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Abstract:

This article offers an overview of methodological difficulties that arise in the study of religions on video sharing websites (VSW). We suggest how to put these difficulties in perspective and how to overcome them. A typology lists the various forms of religions represented on this type of website. We will also try to understand why some religious groups have created their own video sharing websites. Finally we will give possible interpretations of this phenomenon and suggest some ways to use this type of material in academic research and teaching about religions.

Résumé:

Cet article propose une vue d'ensemble des difficultés méthodologiques rencontrées dans l'étude des religions sur les sites web de partage de vidéos. Il propose des pistes pour relativiser et surmonter ces difficultés. Une typologie présente les différentes formes sous lesquelles on trouve des religions dans ce type de sites web. Nous tentons aussi de comprendre pourquoi certains groupes religieux ont créé leurs propres sites de partages de vidéos. Enfin, nous donnerons des possibles interprétations du phénomène et suggérerons comment on pourrait utiliser de ce type de matériel dans la recherche et l'enseignement académiques sur les religions.

Introduction

YouTube, GoogleVideo, Dailymotion, and Revver are a few well-known names among the dozens of video sharing websites (VSW) that have been created in the past few years. Religions are among the many subjects, labels, tags and categories found on these websites. Recently, some religious groups have created their own VSW. These have a distinct religious coloration. GodTube, IslamicTube, YouTubeIslam, FaithTube and KrishnaTube are examples of what I will call "religious video sharing websites". As for other studies on religions and the Internet, data may change very quickly and some of these websites may be closed whereas new ones may be created by the time this paper is published. My suggestion is that historians of religions may benefit from studying religions on the VSW despite fluctuations in the material.

This paper intends to discuss some of the methodological difficulties that are encountered while studying religions specifically on VSW, both religious and non-religious. After giving a definition of video sharing websites, I will review the problems encountered by historians of religions who wish to study this topic. I have also tried to give an experimental typology of the representation of religions on VSW. Finally, I will give some general considerations on how the historian of religions could study this topic and how this material could be useful for academic teaching and research on

religions. This paper is only a first glimpse and should benefit from comments of more experimented researchers who have dealt with other types of websites. I do not provide detailed examples or links, or URL to specific videos. I instead encourage interested readers to search on a VSW for themselves by typing related keywords. In very specific cases however, I do give more detailed references.

Definition of VSW

Video sharing websites allow users to watch and share video clips. The "videos" can consist in filmed sequences or in the simple montage of pictures and photos with or without sound. Anyone can post on a VSW, usually for free. I will deal here mainly with user-generated video sharing websites on which individuals share their videos with other individuals. Many sites place restrictions on the file size, the format, the duration and, more interestingly, the subject of the videos.

Religions are an important topic on VSW. Indeed, it has become so important that several religious groups have felt the need to set up their own websites in order to post videos with an explicitly religious content. One of the questions I have tried to answer is why some Muslim, Christian or Hindu groups felt the need to create their own VSW.

I cannot here enter the infinite debate of the definition of the controversial term "religion". I use it in a very large and common sense as a classificatory category that may not adequately describe extra-European phenomenon labeled as "religion". This is justified by the fact that users themselves and the managers of the video sharing websites use this specific term. Whenever VSW users use this term to label a video or to comment on it, then it becomes an emic category and the researcher must take it into account.

Methodological difficulties

Several methodological difficulties arise in the study of religions on video sharing websites. Most are similar to problems encountered in the study of religions and the Internet in general. I will review some of the methodological points that I had to deal with when I began to study this topic. First, I would like to point out that so far, I have adopted a totally non-intrusive external observer's point of view in this study. I did not interfere or interact with the VSW users by posting a video, a comment or a video-response. I have not yet interviewed any users because I want to preserve the invisibility and anonymity granted to users who visit these websites to watch other peoples' videos and not to share their own. Adopting this silent observer's position also has back draws (such as having to wait for interaction between users and not being able to test some claims by asking direct questions). However, at the beginning of this study, it also has greater benefits. Only in this way can I guarantee that religious, non-religious and atheist VSW users would not be affected in any way by their knowledge of being studied. In a second phase of study, I may create my own pseudonym and

enter the discussions in order to ask specific questions, with or without revealing my true identity as an academic researcher. The position of the researcher was the first methodological question I had to face. Should I participate actively in the discussions? If yes, only with a pseudonym and a fake identity or should I reveal my purpose as an academic researcher? Is this also a form of participant observation? These questions may challenge our views on the position of the researcher facing the contemporary (cyber-)field as historians of religions or as anthropologists.

I will now deal with the question of the use of different languages on VSW. The main language of the websites is English. There might however be VSW in other languages that a researcher does not know. The main language of the videos and of the comments on the videos is English, even though many other languages are used (for example Swiss German dialects or Hindi). This represents a first limit for the researcher: there are parts of the material that s/he will be unable to understand and therefore to take account of. It is to be noticed that languages are sometimes used as markers of a cultural and linguistic, and maybe also religious, identity. A video might be in English and some of its comments might switch from English to Hindi. This poses users of non-Latin scripts a serious problem of transliteration. Languages other than English and supposedly known to fewer people[i] are sometimes used to comment videos with a religious content. In surveying the use of Hindi in commenting videos about Islam and Hinduism on YouTube, I have found that some users write in English as well as in Hindi, posting a comment in one language and another comment in the other language, or even changing language in the same comment. The choice of commenting in Hindi is therefore deliberate. I suggest that the language that is less known to other VSW users then works as a kind of "secret" language, creating connivance between users that know the language and excluding other users who do not know the language. This linguistic difference might create a sense of community among users of a particular area or religious affiliation. In one specific case, Hindi-speaking users posted comments about a televized debate on Islam and Hinduism. Some of these comments were insults. The posting of abuse in another langague occurs in discussions on many other videos and subjects where the vehicular language is English What could be the purpose of insulting someone in a language that s/he supposedly does not understand? The message might rather be directed towards other users who support the same worldview, creating a sense of common values (and practices?) between users who probably do not know each other personally.

Other difficulties may arise even if the video and the comments are posted in a language known to the researcher. The language is distorted, quasi-esoteric abbreviations are frequently used but never explained, and there is a lack of grammar and a faulty sense of orthography. Finally, the situation of communication is somewhere on a continuum between text and speech[ii] (more spontaneous). We could wonder whether, when discussing religious matters, some people would still use such crude language and others have such infinite patience if they were really in each other's (physical) presence and not in cyberspace. Several hypotheses have been made about the relation between anonymity and the use of hateful language.[iii]

A methodological difficulty arises from the inaccuracy of the numbers of videos and of viewers, provided by the websites themselves. These numbers increase constantly and are inaccurate. Indeed, the same video sequence, or abbreviated versions of it, can appear several times on the websites under different names and with different tags and labels. Numbers found on the video sharing websites should therefore be considered as indicative and not accurate. We should not try to see in them a proportionality of the activity of different religions on the VSW as constituted or organized groups.

Along with the problems of numbers comes that of the infinite expansion of data. Video sharing websites host more and more videos that are archived and generally kept available. There will always be more material and it is a hard task for the researcher to handle it all. A serious and detailed study of the religions on the video sharing websites should therefore be restricted to the analysis of one website or to the representation of one specific religion on several websites.

In contrast with the ever increasing quantity of data, we face the problem of data being no longer available. Some videos are simply censored by the staff of the websites (such as GodTube which screens all content before it is published on-line). The function "Flag as inappropriate" can also cause a video to disappear. The administrators of the sites decide what is appropriate. Among the banned content we find pornography, racism, apology for crimes and copyrighted videos. The website Dailymotion, which exists in several languages, does not have the same policies in all of its linguistic or national versions. The list of what is inappropriate, or rather illegal, is much more detailed in the English versions of the "Legal" section than in the French web pages about the same issues. In both cases, users can report inappropriate (or illegal) content. The French site labels this "signaler un contenu odieux" whereas the English page calls this "prohibited content" and offers a detailed list of what is not to be posted on the site.[iv] Hate and verbal violence are the real issues with videos that have a religious content. However, not all videos about or against religions display violent or hateful language. Another recurring feature is humor, but this can also lead to angry comments by users of other religions who feel offended. The VSW managers have to moderate all of this. Could this be a job opportunity for historians of religions? Videos on religions, be it on the regular VSW or on their religious versions, are rarely just "informative" and free from bias. They make people think, laugh and, sometimes, hate.

Labels, tags and categories are another source of methodological concern. Users, in particular religious or atheist users of VSW, may not label the video that they post in the same way as you would have done as a researcher. Some videos posted by anti-religious users bear titles that may be deemed offensive to religions ("stupid religion", "crazy preacher", "faith is dumb", etc.). The academic study of religions should refrain from any judgment on the validity of the claims of the religions studied. It should never pass moral comments on the videos watched or on comments left by other users. The terminology used by the scholars is not the same as that used by religious users. They might label "ceremony" what we would call "ritual" or as "Truth" what as researchers we classify as "myth". This is extremely important while searching elements on the video sharing

websites. A wrong or a too narrow keyword might yield no results. In general, the labeling of videos with religious content is far from being systematic and scientific. The classification and labelling of the videos points to the worldview of the users and to the way they consider their own and others' religions.

A final point is that you may not be sure of who is behind a video or a comment. The use of pseudonyms and the absence of identifying information make it difficult to check who is expressing an opinion. Pseudonymity, however, is not equal to anonymity. So far, we do not have to deal with machines or cyber-beings discussing religions but human beings. A person may have a double or multiple identities, creating as many pseudonyms as s/he wishes. On other websites, such as ones supposed to facilitate contacts, people sometimes lie about their real identity: age, gender, marital status, job, income, and even nationality. Would VSW users lie about their religious affiliation just to provoke a debate? How can we be sure about the real opinion of VSW users about religions? We cannot. But nevertheless, we can admit that religious or atheist convictions are something that matters to VSW users who express themselves about or against religions. In this case, the beliefs of the user are part of an identity that is kept and proudly brandished on-line, whereas other aspects might be played down or not mentioned (because they are irrelevant or because that would undermine the ideological claims of the users).

Typology of representation of religions on the video sharing websites

Religions take different forms in the videos posted on the VSW. I have tried to come up with a typology. These categories are not fixed and boundaries are permeable. It is not enough to suggest that the phenomenon of videos with a religious content is simply "religion on cyberspace" or "religion in cyberspace".[v] The categories religion on-line and on-line religion cannot apply as such, indeed each case presented in the typology below could be classified in one or the other category or even in both categories at once. Religions can appear in the following different forms:

(1) News reports, TV reports, information given in the media, interviews;
(2) Movies (fictional or documentaries, entire movie or trailer);
(3) PPP: propaganda, proselytism, polemics;
(4) Moderate criticism, debate, often with the help of humor;
(5) Personal testimony (conversion to a religion, healing, miracles, spiritual biography);
(6) Homage or tribute to someone special (religious teacher, martyr, saint, etc.);
(7) Religious teachings or moral instructions (philosophy, theology, ethics);
(8) Religious interpretations, exegesis, opinions on sacred texts or events;
(9) Religious practices, acts, rituals filmed in reality and then put on-line;
(10) Specific instructions on how to perform a ritual.

Interpretations

Many ideas could be developed in the perspective of the study of religions. I will only share here two issues. The first is a question: why would religious groups create their own religious video sharing websites? The answer can be found in the "mission statement" of the websites, such as the one of GodTube:

> 'GodTube utilizes Web based technology to connect Christians for the purpose of
> encouraging and advancing the Gospel worldwide.'[vi]

You can also find this type of claim on the home page of the website:

> 'Sharing Video about Krishna and His pure devotee
> His Divine Grace A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada
> Founder and Acharya of the Hare Krishna Movement.'[vii]

The purposes may be even more detailed:

> 'We at IslamicTube.Net aim to offer a new route by offering a unique service by which to
> make available Islamic material, allowing all to seek and learn about Islaam in its
> truthfulness minus the culture and bid'aa (innovations). We hope to make clear many of the
> misconceptions about Islaam which has become widespread amongst both the Muslims and
> Non-Muslims. We hope our website will wake up those dead hearts, call the people back to
> the Sunnah and back to Tawheed (believing and worshipping Allah in His Oneness)'.[viii]

Creating a religious VSW can serve several purposes: proselytism, mission, creating and strengthening a sense of community among believing users, spreading information and didactic material. Another strong purpose may be to give an official and "clean" place of representation of a religion. In contrast with non-religious VSW such as YouTube or DailyMotion, there is a stronger moderation of the videos and of the comments on the religious video sharing websites. This results in fewer comments being posted and in a strong control of what is represented. A characteristic of the VSW is that they do not represent the official side of religions or this side only. Therefore "official" platforms for watching and exchanging videos might be needed for some communities that are conscious about their image in the cyber world. This is a challenge for movements that have not one central and decisive authority. Who claims to represent whom? Are the religious VSW approved by any kind of authority? And even if there is disapprobation, would this necessarily threaten the VSW? These are difficult questions that are to be kept in mind while studying religious VSW.

The other issue on interpretation concerns the ritual aspects of posting on VSW. In some cases, the making and posting of videos shares many features with what is commonly referred to as "ritual". This is the case for users that regularly post videos, or post series of videos on the same subject (see for an example on YouTube the videos on religions made by "CapnOAwesome" - www.youtube.com/user/CapnOAwesome). Videos are made in a special location (always the same or sharing the same characteristics), made or posted at a special time (e.g. every Tuesday night, every 13th of the month), the person on the video wears special clothing, s/he uses a special closing

or opening formula or jingle. Another ritual aspect might be that rituals performed outside of cyberspace are filmed, with or without participants and performers knowing that the video will be put on VSW, and then put online (e.g. Wiccan full moon rituals, weddings, baptism, salaat, aarti, etc.). One of the reasons why some of these videos are put online is that the ritual has "gone wrong" (e.g. a priest stumbling when he comes close to the altar or dropping the host in the plunging neckline of the bride attending the mass). Such "ritual failures" sometimes are considered funny by VSW users. The last ritual aspect I will mention here, appears in videos giving detailed instructions on how to perform a ritual, alone or in groups, usually at home (e.g. many Wiccan rituals, how to pray salaat).

Use of VSW in the academic study of religions

VSW might be an occasional and useful tool in the teaching of the study of religions in an academic context. First, some videos might be descriptive and non-polemic enough to introduce students to a specific topic in an illustrative way. Some documentary directors or producers intentionally put part of their work on the VSW as a commercial advertisement (see for example videos by "**isoguruvinod**" on YouTube and on his website[ix]). The whole documentary can then be ordered directly from the producer. In other cases, other people place this type of work on-line, thus violating copyright. This could still be useful to discover recent documentaries that coud be used as part of seminars, for example on Indian traditions. There is no need however for the video to have been made by a professional. Any ritual filmed by a tourist on vacation could be useful to illustrate some specific subject. In the same way, many rituals are filmed and then put on-line. Students might benefit from viewing these images with an adequate commentary from the teacher.

A second way to use VSW in the teaching of the study of religions is to have advanced students analyze the content of a video and the comments made about the videos. Historians of religions are well trained to work on texts. Maybe it is time to train them to analyze new medias that are often not limited to texts but include hypertext, images, videos and sound. The medium should be studied as well as the message.

There is still much to be done by historians of religions. As mentioned above, the vast amount of data makes it impossible to handle it all. Maybe a good way to start a detailed study on or with this material would be to concentrate on one polemic (for example creationism vs. evolutionism discussed by users expressing different religious or atheist points of view), or on one particularly defined trend of a religion, or on one specific religious VSW.

Conclusion

The representation of religions on video sharing websites is a recent and major phenomenon. It should be taken seriously and studied thoroughly because it might influence the perceptions that VSW users have of their own culture and of other religions. However, we should also remember that not all of the videos are about religions, and that more often than not, the tag or label "religion" is mixed in with other artificially created categories. Some websites claim to be explicitly religious, such as GodTube, KrishnaTube or IslamTube, but they are not as popular as the leading website YouTube. They do not feature as many videos and strongly moderate the content of the videos and the comments. Because they allow everyone to post comments, to share and to view videos, all VSW, religious and non-religious, are a new and significant place of encounter between religions, or rather between religious or atheist Internet users. There is no need to be either a believer or a specialist of the study of religions to post comments or to create and share a video.

Video sharing websites reflect our globalized world and its many tensions. They have an impact on the way in which religions are represented, at least in cyberspace and in some parts of the world. VSW have created a new form of communication which is now used and imitated by different religious groups. Even though there are some methodological difficulties, it is worth trying to study it. This material is important and it is relevant to include it in the academic teaching of the study of religion.

Notes:

i.   This means fewer people among the VSW users, not outside of cyberspace. This leads to an important and more general consideration: most Internet users are from countries that have easy and widespread access to the Internet. This is not restrictive, but users are mainly from Europe, North-America, Japan, and Australia… English tends to be the main language, but the situation is evolving. VSW users do not represent the whole world, but only the wealthier parts of the planet which can afford access to the Internet. There is also a gender issue that I have not broached here.

ii. This point was brought up at the 2007 EASR meeting in Bremen by Jesper Petersen who has studied satanic message boards. This idea of a continuum between text and speech can also be applied to VSW.

iii. Lange, Patricia G. *Commenting on Comments: Investigating Responses to Antagonism on YouTube*. Paper presented at: Society for Applied Anthropology Conference, Tampa, Florida. March 31, 2007.

iv. www.dailymotion.com/legal/prohibited Countries' flags lead to the same page in different languages.

v.   Karaflogka, Anastasia. *E-religion. A Critical Appraisal of Religious Discourse on the World Wide Web*. London : Equinox, 2006. For the definition of "religion in cyberspace" and "religion on cyberspace", see p. 14-15.

vi. www.godtube.com/about/ On October 15th 2007, the mission statement of GodTube on this page was such as quoted in this article. On December 26th 2007, the mission statement on the same page reads as follow: "Join World's largest online Christian community. Watch, share upload Christian videos and join the social network for free!". GodTube also recently added new features such as a prayer wall where people can post or comment a prayer in textual, audio or video form. GodTube's virtual Bible allows to watch videos related to the text.

vii. www.KrishnaTube.com

viii. www.islamictube.net/about.php

ix. www.vinodfilms.com

(all websites last accessed on December 26th 2007)

References:

Video sharing websites:

- www.YouTube.com

- www.video.google.com

- www.dailymotion.com

- www.revver.com

- www.faithtube.com

- www.youtubeislam.com

- www.islamictube.net

- www.GodTube.com

- www.KrishnaTube.com

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