Conflict management in massive polylogues: A case study from YouTube

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to examine how conflict begins, unfolds and ends in a massive, new media polylogue, specifically, a YouTube polylogue. Extant research has looked into how conflict begins, unfolds and/or ends. However, to our knowledge, the models and taxonomies developed so far have not been applied to the analysis of the mediated conflict of massive polylogues. Drawing on the difference between methods of analysis that are natively digital versus those that have been digitized, i.e., they were developed for off-line research and then migrated on-line, one of the goals of this paper is to test whether non-natively digital, extant models and taxonomies, if digitized, would be well equipped to handle massive mediated polylogues. A multilayered methodology was devised and applied to the analysis of a sizeable corpus of comments triggered by a public service announcement on teen homosexuality posted by a Spanish LGBT association. Findings reveal that extant, models and taxonomies of conflict – developed to account mostly for local, synchronic, dyadic conflict –, if solely digitized, would not be well equipped to explain societal, diachronic, massively polylogal conflict such as the one under analysis and that hybrid models that can tackle the affordances of digital technologies need to be developed.
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1. Introduction

A few years ago, a British broadsheet claimed that, ''YouTube has become notorious for hosting to some of the most confrontational and ill-formed comment exchanges on the internet'' (Moore, 2008).[1] Therefore, since we are interested in conflict and how it is digitally mediated, YouTube presents itself as an ideal site for our study.

More specifically, the aim of this paper is to examine how conflict begins, unfolds and ends in a massive, new media polylogue, such as the ones afforded by YouTube's texting facility. Extant research has looked into how conflict begins, unfolds and/or ends (Bousfield, 2007, 2008; Culpeper et al., 2003; Dobs and Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, 2013; Grimshaw, 1990; Jay, 1992; Vuchinich, 1990) and has developed models and taxonomies to account for these three key stages. However, to our knowledge, these models and taxonomies have not been applied to the analysis of the mediated conflict of massive polylogues. Internet theoreticians (Rogers, 2009) establish a difference between methods of analysis that are natively digital versus those that have been digitized, i.e. they were developed for off-line research and then migrated on-line. This is certainly the case with most extant linguistics and communication models, including those devised for the

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study of conflict. One of the goals of the paper is to test whether non-natively digital, extant models and taxonomies are well equipped to handle massive mediated polylogues.

As dictated by the complex nature of polylogues (Marcoccia, 2004), a multilayered methodology was devised and applied to the analysis of a sizeable corpus of comments triggered by a public service announcement on teen homosexuality posted by a Spanish LGBT association. Often, discussions of homosexuality trigger ''moral panics'' (Baker, 2001, 2005). Therefore, we assumed that such a morally charged topic would generate instances of conflict.

Based on the findings of the analysis, we will argue that extant models and taxonomies of conflict – developed to account mostly for local, synchronic, dyadic conflict – are not well equipped to explain societal, diachronic, massively polylogal conflict such as the one under analysis and that hybrid models that can tackle the affordances of digital technologies need to be developed.

The paper is structured as follows. We first review the extensive literature on conflict, with special reference to scholarly work on on-line conflict, the focus of our study. Against this theoretical framework, we formulate the research questions that guide our study and proceed to explain the methodology (data, theoretical framework and procedure) applied to the analysis of the corpus. Results are then presented and discussed, with attention to quantitative and qualitative aspects of the analysis. The last section contains our concluding remarks and suggestions for further research.

2. Background

While hailed for fostering participatory cultural production and democracy (Burgess and Green, 2009) and reviled for the many controversies that emerge on the site (Moore, 2008), YouTube is an extremely popular social website which has attracted increasing attention from the press and from scholars in the social sciences. This is hardly surprising if one considers its vast social influence and the challenge it represents for scholars interested in language and mediated communication for, as Walther and Jang (2012: 2) argue, YouTube is a participatory website of the newest generation, where ''complex communication phenomena'' take place.

Such complex communication phenomena are related to the sharing of video-clips as well as to the textual participation facilitated by YouTube. Generally, users who have previously had no contact with each other, and who often have different worldviews, engage in audiovisual and textual interaction to discuss all sorts of current topics. Thus, much research on YouTube has focused on the role it plays in such diverse areas as politics (Burgess and Green, 2009; Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, 2010, 2012; Garcés-Conejos Blitvich et al., 2013a,b), education (Snelson, 2008), health (Agazio and Buckley, 2009) or entertainment (Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, 2013a,b). These and other scholars have noted that interaction regarding any of these topics often becomes hostile and polarized.

Online conflict has been traditionally referred to as flaming (Herring, 1994; Danet, 2013), a term which has been questioned by scholars for setting online and offline conflict apart, thereby obscuring their similarities and inter-relatedness (Lange, 2006; O'Sullivan and Flanagin, 2003). In this paper, we use the general term conflict in an attempt, on the one hand, to make the interplay between online and offline communication more salient and, on the other, to bring together two different traditions of research on conflictual phenomena: computer-mediated communication and discourse analysis. We view conflict as an *interpreting* – or understanding, in Kádár and Haugh's (2013) term – as not all interactants will necessarily deem the same situation as conflictive. Thus, we see conflict as emergent and co-constructed in interaction, and closely tied to the norms of a given social practice and to the diachronic unfolding of specific relationships among individuals who hold divergent worldviews on a particular issue (Brenneis, 1996; Grimshaw, 1990; Hutchby, 2001; Stewart and Maxwell, 2010).

While the ubiquity of conflict on YouTube is well attested, little is known of the reasons and motivations behind it. Moor et al. (2010) carried out a questionnaire-based study which revealed that most YouTube users perceived conflict as an annoying side effect of freedom of speech. Users also reported that reduced awareness of others' feelings and the safety of hurting others on YouTube, which lacks the repercussions usually attached to aggressive behavior, were important reasons for their use of conflictual talk. Another reason was their reported tendency to respond aggressively to perceived offenses, which is an interesting finding for our study of how conflict unfolds in discourse. Moor et al.'s (2010) findings partly confirm Lange's (2007) ethnographic study which also found that some users view conflict as positive, amusing action (see also Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, 2009 and Pagliai, 2010, on the constitutive outcomes of conflict). Additionally, Lange (2007) underlines the need to distinguish between forms of hostility as these have different outcomes for users who, additionally, have different degrees of tolerance toward conflict.

Computer-mediated communication research has emphasized the role of the medium's technological affordances, and in particular the role of anonymity, in their explanations of conflict. Early studies of online conflict noted that antagonism and hostility were more frequent in online than in face-to-face communication. The pervasiveness of online conflict across computer modes was explained from 'cues-filtered-out' perspectives (Culnan and Markus, 1987), i.e. in terms of the comparatively reduced availability of social cues. That is, the limited contextual information afforded by the