

WIKTOR WERNER, ADRIAN TRZOSS, DAWID GRALIK *

History and YouTube. Historical narrative in the age of Web 2.0

Research problem, methods, discussion

This article resulted from the research on the resources of the YouTube multimedia platform in Polish. Its authors were most interested in the video resources which met the following criteria:

- their theme is historical, pertaining to historical events, characters, and artefacts; moreover, presenting this (historical) subject matter is the main purpose for running the channel and not a contingent theme;
- their basic area of operation is YouTube; this means that, in this article, the authors refrain from examining channels¹ generated by the institutions whose core activities take place elsewhere (museums, television programmes, magazines);
- they have a noticeable on-line presence, that is, they have reached a significant number of views and subscriptions (100 thousand and 10 thousand respectively).

Bearing in mind the dynamic variability of network resources, the article does not pretend to be a “guide” to YouTube, not even its Polish-speaking assets. The Authors were more interested in the peculiarities of the structuring, presentation, and use of historical information that could be seen in the studied videos than in creating a comprehensive catalogue of YouTube content, which would quickly go out of date².

* Prof. dr hab. Wiktor Werner (werner@amu.edu.pl), Adrian Trzoss (adrian.trzoss@amu.edu.pl), Dawid Gralik – Wydział Historii UAM

¹ Channels were chosen as the research material due to their structured form and regularity of operations within the scope subjected to study.

² What the authors have observed while preparing this manuscript was that during the 6 weeks following the archiving, the order of the two most popular videos was reversed. The episode about German experiments in the concentrations camps was replaced by a video dedicated to the sexuality in the Middle Ages, which gained almost 60k views (most interestingly, the video was published in September 2016). Since the statistics showing the increase of the number of views in time are not publicly available, the authors decided to investigate it based on their previously archived databases. The viewership stats for the “Seks w średniowieczu” video on

YouTube is a particularly interesting medium due to its broad technical capabilities combining audio and visual messages. It can also be considered a natural extension of the transmission of history in the form of stories. One can find similarities between YouTube and a school lesson, a guided tour, a narrated museum exposition, or a tale told by earlier generations [Trzoss A., 2018; Huizinga J., 1949].

In 2019 the authors carried out a survey on a group of 2233 respondents which showed that for 76% of participants YouTube was an important source of historical knowledge. This gave YouTube the first place among the possible answers, outclassing Internet search engines (68%), books and press (67%), as well as cultural institutions and school (50% and 53% respectively)³. In the survey, the authors stressed both the reasons for the popularity of digital media and their significance for the formation of historical knowledge, particularly in the context of previous research [Werner W., Gralik D., Trzoss A., 2019].

The survey carried out by the authors involved a combined quantitative analysis of the collected source material and its subsequent interpretation under the qualitative approach. Individual work flow steps can be organised as follows according to the knowledge discovery in databases (KDD) rules [Fayyad U., Haussler D., Stolorz P.E., 1996]:

- collection of the source material,
- formatting, selection, and purification of data,
- tagging (assigning qualitative categories to individual videos),
- application of algorithms and statistical calculations,
- identification of relationships and interpretation of obtained results.

To collect the source material from the YouTube portal, the authors used an original program written in Python⁴, which connected to the portal API servers querying for preconfigured data (i.e., the list of videos from each given channel in the studied period along with such metadata as statistics and titles). The data were transformed to JSON (to highlight the structure) and then compiled into a database. As the next step, already within the database, the videos which were in line with the (historical) theme of their channels were selected, whereas all videos containing technical information, self-promotional or casual content were removed from the database. Subsequently,

the channel *Historia bez cenzury*: Feb. 2017 – 700 839; Apr. 2017 – 896 409; Feb. 2018 – 1 649 951; Oct. 2018 – 2 100 740; Mar. 2020 – 2 865 290; May 2020 – 2 919 805 (alas, the authors do not have figures for 2019 in their collections); <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2bwp2lOK4xc> [date of access: 9 May 2020].

³ The question offered multiple choice.

⁴ Here we would like to thank Cyprian Kleist, MSc, a doctoral student at the Department of Physical Chemistry at the Gdansk University of Technology, for the aid he provided in developing the software to obtain and process data from social media sites. <https://chem.pg.edu.pl/kbm/ludzie> [date of access: 5 May 2020].

qualitative categories (tags) were assigned to all videos using a set of analytical categories prepared in advance. Each record received 4 tags according to its content. These were: era, topic (political, social, economic, military, or cultural issues), ontic reference of the video (that is, the kind of phenomenon presented as the focus of the video: person, event, historical process, or artefact), and the distinction between the history of Poland and world history. After such preparation of data, the authors began analysing them quantitatively using clustering algorithms, performed statistical analysis (calculating sums, means and medians, standard deviations, and identifying the most popular videos), and also compared their results across individual categories.

In the qualitative part of the study, the videos were analysed for the following content and formal components:

- focus on specific historical facts,
- specificity and nature of used metaphors and symbols related to popular culture as well as the form of such symbols (memes and gifs, or dynamic images),
- specificity of situational references to events or persons,
- form and style of the video (lecture, talk, show, use of graphical elements),
- host (visibility in the cadre, appearance, and establishing contact with the audience),
- use of historicising elements such as props, exhibits, or shooting at historical locations (such as museums or castles).

The relationships and patterns (such as thematic trends) identified this way were subjected to qualitative interpretation, which involved an attempt to indicate the causes, context, and meaning of the observed phenomena.

This study serves to support the reflection on the importance of historical narration for the contemporary Polish society and the specificity of its historical awareness.

The relationship between historical narrative and the processes of social, ethnic, state, and finally national integration has been very thoroughly studied and described as a phenomenon in relation to the overcoming of entropy in modern states and the transformation of indifferent subjects easily passed from the rule of one sovereign under the power of another into loyal and involved citizens, taxpayers, and soldiers [Gellner E., 1983: 63–94; Anderson B., 2006: 37–46]. Historical narrative is an important component of this process, fulfilling the functions previously reserved for origin myths: explains the current reality and its origins, not only meeting cognitive needs but also inspiring emotional engagement [Lorenz C., 2008: 35–55; Rösen J., 2012: 519–536; Werner W., 2004: 10–32]. Obviously, the relationship between historical narrative and origin myths does not mean they are the same. As a matter of fact, it applies to one of the roles played by historical narration (though not necessarily by the scientific historiography) in the general social perception: it indicates the power and awareness-building potential of historical thinking and historical tales realised in

a broad range of forms, from scientific papers to school textbooks, to literary fiction as well as painting, film, and the present-day phenomena of digitised mass culture: video games and new electronic media [Anderson S., 2001 s.19–36; Fogu C., 2009: 103–121; Werner W., 2016: 13–29; Werner W., 2009: 199–205; Thorp R., 2014].

The authors' interest in the particular medium that is a video channel in a media and community portal (namely YouTube as a meta-medium), stems from the reflection on the growing importance of new – digital – media in the formation of social and cultural phenomena, and thus historical awareness and identity as well [Reed T.V., 2018; Jackson S.J., 2018; Fuchs C., 2018; Werner W., Trzoss A., 2019: 147–169].

The question of the influence Web 2.0 exerts on individual aspects of social life has already been covered quite broadly in the scientific discourse [for its summary, regarding its significance for this article, see: Werner W., Trzoss A., 2019; Werner W., Gralik D., Trzoss A., 2019; Maciejak K., 2018; Burgess J., Green J., 2009; Nichols T., 2017; Litwic-Kaminska K., 2011]. The components to which we would like to give particular consideration, from the perspective of the research problem in question, are related to the redistribution of accents in media participation and the creation of media representations in social media users. The first component is participation. It involves not only co-creation of content but also commenting on and “liking” the content and thus creating a community of recipients (fans of a channel). It is important not only from the viewpoint of community formation but also due to the Web 2.0 “economy”, that is, feeding the positioning and recommendation algorithms: the more user reactions under any given material, the greater the chance that a broader audience will see it.⁵ It may seem trivial to say that a broad audience is what creators care for. Nonetheless, should we start from this premise, we begin to notice why some materials and episode titles take the form and style they do⁶ [Zannettou S., Chatzis S., Papadamou K., Sirivianos M. 2018]. Attracting viewers through the visual aspect can be derived from striving for leadership in a medium such as YouTube (and, to some extent, in other social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram) [Sartori G., 2005; Litwic-Kamińska K. 2011; Bolter J.D., Grusin R., 2000; Manovich L., 2013]. What can be observed here is a combination of concepts advanced by Giovanni Sartori

⁵ Clearly the topic of algorithms in social media is much more complicated. Since they are undergoing constant modifications, an attempt to describe their significance for a particular study is not only a risky task but also one that later becomes unfalsifiable. Nonetheless, the metadata – comments, “likes”, and views remain the main vector of popularity and creating reach.

⁶ Of course, this is the clickbait phenomenon. Marcin Wilkowski carried out an interesting analysis of it in the context of Polish historically-themed portals, see: Wilkowski M., “Histmag vs Ciekawostki Historyczne: clickbait i pisanie o przeszłości”, <https://wilkowski.org/notka/1267> [date of access: 06.05.2020].

as well as Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, who pointed out how the “viewing” person type was shaped by the television (which indeed accentuates the visual) and, on the other hand, how by the way of remediation this process crossed over to the “new new media”. The unusual increase in the popularity of one picture-based platform after another (counting both static and motion pictures), also among the youngest generation, may be a fact in support of this premise⁷. Therefore, there are two factors which, in their base form, determine the popularity of materials on YouTube: the first is attracting the viewer, the second retaining them (so that the material can be tagged as viewed⁸) and encouraging to interact and view more material.

Surely, the passage above discusses, at a fairly general level, topics that are universal regardless of the profile of the channel, its theme etc. The analysis of particular thematic areas, such as the historical narration analysed in this article, is a much more complex matter.⁹ Being a meta-medium, YouTube combines in itself a range of technical and audiovisual capacities, such as the use of animation (memes, gifs), remixing, camera work, as well as more contextual ones like background, outdoor locations, or close-ups. What is more, in contrast to more “traditional” methods of popularising knowledge which mostly rely on one-way transfer, participating in a medium changes the nature of involvement and, consequently, its efficacy [Anikina O.V., Yakimenko E.V., 2015; Steffes E.M., Duverger P., 2012]. This concept, known as “edutainment”, involves the popularisation of knowledge through entertainment, thus assuming from the onset its more casual and engaging nature [Trzoss A., 2018]. This has two fundamental consequences. On the one hand, when considered as entertainment, the historical narration will be presented (and received) in a shallow, simplified way, sometimes not entirely matching academic knowledge. Each time it raises the questions of deciding on the balance between the entertainment and scientific strata and of separating

⁷ The figures for the user count and its growth come from the *Statista* portal. It is worth noting the quick increase in popularity of Tik-Tok, winning the attention of the youngest viewers: “Most popular social networks worldwide as of April 2020, ranked by number of active users”, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/272014/global-social-networks-ranked-by-number-of-users/> [date of access: 6 May 2020].

⁸ Which still is, partially, a problematic and changing issue: the “How video views are counted” article on the YouTube tech support website, <https://support.google.com/youtube/answer/2991785?hl=en> [date of access: 6 May 2020].

⁹ Tomasz Okoń, the producer of *Historia bez Cenzury*, spoke on why YouTube may be a form of consuming historical narrative that is more “attractive” to recipients; see: Marszałec J., “Nie istnieje coś takiego jak jedna, prawdziwa historia’ – wywiad z Wojtkiem Drewniakiem”, <https://historia.org.pl/2015/09/01/nie-istnieje-cos-takiego-jak-jedna-prawdziwa-historia-wywiad-z-wojtkiem-drewniakiem/> and the interview for Program 4 Polskiego Radia as part of the series *Tędy po trendy*, Jasieński K., “Historia bez cenzury’: mamy się czym chwalić (Czwórka)”, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sD3r_E5pwWg [date of access: 6 May 2020].

reliable knowledge of the “decorations” accompanying it [Michniuk A., 2014: 37–43]. On the other hand, there is no knowing to what extent such a model can appropriate the imagination of history by reducing it to the visual. Also, the question of the means used to achieve the goal of popularisation of history on YouTube still remains. How likely is a situation where history will be “consumed” the same as any other show or seen as a story? Then, what about the issue of historical narration outside of the edutainment area? While the academic and professional historiography enjoy hardly any interest in social media, alternative “sources” of narration gain importance also in the socio-political field. The problem of deprofessionalisation and the rise of alternative “sources of knowledge” in the age of Web 2.0 was discussed by Andrew Keen [Keen A., 2007] and Tom Nichols [Nichols T., 2017], among others. Situations where a “YouTube guy” becomes an alternative “authority” and “source of knowledge” may lead to extreme outcomes: even conscious manipulation and misleading are possible [Werner W., Trzoss A., 2019; Wójcik A., 2019]¹⁰. It is not our role as authors to adjudicate on the positive and negative aspects of individual channels or to make value judgement on them. However, in this case study we would like to present how historical narratives function at a detailed level, for which the above observations are necessary.

Polish-speaking history-themed YouTube channels. Description, specificity, operation

The Polish-speaking YouTube offers a broad range of channels fully or partially dedicated to history. These include small channels, often devoted to niche topics¹¹, as well as substantially larger channels attracting a broader audience. By performing an initial analysis of the content specificity of these channels, the authors identified three main groups.

The first group comprises of channels associated with political camps and the media related to them (both digital and non-digital). In the case of YouTube, the (highly politicised) channels of this kind are mainly right-wing, which is reflected by the historical events, characters, and processes they discuss. Examples of these channels

¹⁰ One such example, extreme yet stimulating for historians, can be the so-called Great Lechia conspiracy theory. Quasi-historical, political examples are discussed in later paragraphs.

¹¹ Examples of such channels include SG Silva Rerum, devoted to phaleristics, and Projekt Kampania dealing with armoured warfare; see: SG Silva Rerum – Home Page, https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCVG_qrhgXPMaE0rugk6ddFw, [date of access: 1 May 2020]; Projekt Kampania – Home Page, <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCIFnhKVrIkpuwfeYMHNd8Q> [dostęp online: 1 May 2020].

include the profile of Radosław Patlewicz¹², associated with the circle of Grzegorz Braun, and the partially historically-themed channel CEPolska¹³, tied to Centrum Edukacyjne Powiśle. The profiles created and maintained by distinctly leftist circles have significantly less subscriptions and smaller scopes. Two of these channels are Historia Czerwona¹⁴ and Kolektyw Filmowy¹⁵. The AleHistoria¹⁶ channel, associated with *Gazeta Wyborcza*, the digital counterpart of same-name supplement to that newspaper, can boast of more subscribers. The channel itself, however, has been inactive for about 2 years. While these channels are historical (content-wise), they treat historical topics rather as a vehicle justifying the political content than as their main purpose.

The second group includes channels which are extensions of previous (non-digital) historical initiatives. Even though a YouTube channel is not their primary environment, it may serve as a way to popularise their activities or just fit the profile of any such initiative. One such example can be the profile belonging to the members of the historical reenactment group of the German 73rd Infantry Regiment (GRH Inf.-Reg. 73)¹⁷. Channels connected to state institutions and publicly-funded channels, whose purpose is to fulfil the so-called mission activities, such as IPNtv, the channel of the Instytut Pamięci Narodowej [Institute of National Remembrance]¹⁸ or the channel Świadkowie Epoki, created and run by the staff of the Instytut Solidarności i Męstwa im. Witolda Pileckiego [Pilecki Institute]¹⁹ can also be included in this group.

The third group, which was the main study group for the authors of this article, consisted of educational and popularising historical channels that depend on YouTube as the original broadcast platform and whose core message is historical narrative. We decided to subject to quantitative and qualitative analysis six most popular channels from the latter group, different with regard to the offered content profiles. The basic inclusion criteria were: dates of operation within the range 2013–2019, ongoing activity

¹² Radosław Patlewicz – Home Page, <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCrvm9-f207nKoh0w4XYpSg> [date of access: 1 May 2020].

¹³ CEPolska – Home Page, <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC2zVBLNyr0pIF9vZq73eMoA> [date of access: 1 May 2020].

¹⁴ Historia Czerwona – Home Page, <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCztCNvmWjwctIVDRzhBt6oQ/featured> [date of access: 1 May 2020].

¹⁵ Kolektyw Filmowy – Home Page, https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCetxq4gJcqEwKbH_t5E7bNg [date of access: 1 May 2020].

¹⁶ AleHistoria – Home Page, <https://www.youtube.com/user/AleHistoriaWideo> [date of access: 1 May 2020].

¹⁷ GRH Inf.-Reg 73 – Home Page, <https://www.youtube.com/user/regiment73> [date of access: 1 May 2020].

¹⁸ IPNtv – Home Page, <https://www.youtube.com/user/IPNtvPL> [date of access: 1 May 2020].

¹⁹ Świadkowie Epoki – Home Page, <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCwJJZ385JQqrxCnMGJaE08g/featured> [date of access: 1 May 2020].

(suspended channels such as AleHistoria mentioned above were excluded), historical topics featured as the main content axis of the channel, and channel size and reach.

We included channels which had at least a dozen or so videos with an average number of views in excess of 100k and more than 10k subscribers.

These are, in alphabetical order: ciekawehistorie (259k subscribers)²⁰, Historia bez cenzury (1.18 million)²¹, Historia w 5 minut (143k)²², IrytującyHistoryk (166k)²³, Oblicza XX Wieku (70.3k)²⁴, and ThrashingMadPL (89.2k)²⁵.

It is worth mentioning that creators, from both larger and smaller channels, expand their presence beyond YouTube, trying to broaden the circle of their viewers on the one hand, and to gain enough financial benefits to at least partially cover the costs of operating a channel or make it a regular source of income on the other. That is to say, it has become common among youtubers in the recent years to create profiles in other social media, especially Facebook, as well as in crowdfunding sites such as Patronite. Some authors expand their operations beyond the virtual world, which often takes on a commercial turn. For instance, the host of Historia bez cenzury has already published four books, whereas IrytującyHistoryk runs a small business that, at least to some extent, uses the popularity of the channel as a driving force.

The first place, as popularity is concerned, surely belongs to the channel Historia bez cenzury. Founded in late 2013 on the initiative of producer Tomasz Okoń, it is run by a team of four people in cooperation with various groups, including re-enactment groups. The other three members of the team are the host, Wojciech Drewniak, who holds a master's degree in history, video editor Kamil Pankanin, and Paweł Chilczuk, MA, who runs research²⁶. The creators of the channel claim the well-known popularizer of history in Poland, Bogusław Wołoszański, as one of their inspirations, along with their own experiences²⁷. Concept-wise, the channel combines a frontrunner-centred

²⁰ ciekawehistorie – Home Page, <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCO8czxzBx4PxuTeolCBmq2w> [date of access: 1 May 2020]. The number of subscribers for all channels as on 1 May 2020.

²¹ Historia bez cenzury – Home Page <https://www.youtube.com/user/HistoriaBezCenzuryMB> [date of access: 1 May 2020].

²² Historia w 5 minut – Home Page, <https://www.youtube.com/user/historyapl> [date of access: 1 May 2020].

²³ IrytującyHistoryk – Home Page, <https://www.youtube.com/user/IrytujacyHistoryk> [date of access: 1 May 2020].

²⁴ Oblicza XX Wieku – Home Page, <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCcgaO0y7vJVf16xsAEA6Mog> [date of access: 1 May 2020].

²⁵ ThrashingMadPL – Home Page, <https://www.youtube.com/user/ThrashingMadPL> [date of access: 1 May 2020].

²⁶ Marszałec J., op. cit.

²⁷ Ibidem.

show with added piquancy in the form of very specific selection of facts and presenting them in a controversial way. The authors focus on “sex, murders, and money”²⁸, putting the anecdotal allure before the educational matters in their popular science perspective. Such controversial, downright tabloid-like takes are set against a rich visual background. A significant majority of episodes (of which 167 were analysed) contains memes and gifs, which either remix commonly known works of culture or contain references to current events. The authors of this channel, like other creators described here (with the exception of the ThrashingMadPL channel, as explained below) use archive materials, mostly pictures, which are shown in the background. The central place belongs to the host of the show, whose charisma is the source of the channel’s popularity. Drewniak uses both his style and language to shorten the distance and directly engage with the audience [Maciejak K., 2018]. Older videos often included historical artefacts and reenactment components, costumes, armour, etc., or were filmed in “historical” sites or cultural locations such as the Wilanów Palace²⁹. Reenactment groups were also sometimes invited as guests, adding to the immersion [McMahan A., 2003]. The channel turned out to be so popular that it left the confines of Web 2.0 to find its place on book store shelves, four times so far. *Historia bez cenzury* is an interesting example of using academically correct facts set against a background contrasting with them. As a result, regardless of the substantive layer, the perspective adopted when presenting historical events and processes seems at least disputable. It seems to bring high viewing figures nonetheless – with the average number of 1.125 million views per video – with their most frequently viewed production already reaching almost 3 million views³⁰.

As already mentioned, the key feature of this channel is its particular form of expression characterised by the directness of communication, casual and vivid language of its message, visual variety, focusing on controversial content (both politically and socially), combined with an assortment of topics, chronologies, and diverse perspectives (related to all sorts of described phenomena: people, events, processes, and artefacts).

²⁸ Wojtek Drewniak’s presentation during a *TEDx Talks Lublin* meeting, “Dlaczego warto uczyć się historii? | Wojtek Drewniak | TEDxLublin”, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H-UWU-Uv3Qw> [date of access: 5 May 2020].

²⁹ The creators of *Historia bez cenzury* are the only ones described here who produced historical materials for third parties, e.g. for the Wilanów Palace mentioned above; see the channel of the Muzeum Pałacu Króla Jana III w Wilanowie [Museum of King Jan III’s Palace at Wilanów], “Odnowiona rezydencja wilanowska”, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kROVWLRf3Ls&t=1s> [date of access: 6 May 2020].

³⁰ The most frequently viewed episode of *Historia bez cenzury* (2.9 million views), “Seks w średniowieczu”. *Historia Bez Cenzury* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2bwp2lOK4xc> [date of access: 5 May 2020].

The second of the studied channels, ciekawehistorie (Ciekawe Historie) was created on 9 January 2018. Its founder and only host is Tomasz Czukiewski. Most interestingly, he followed the footsteps of his brother, who hosts a popular travel channel, Bez Planu³¹. The author describes the profile of his channel as educational³². Its theme focuses on recent history and the history of the 20th century. The adoption of such a channel profile was largely motivated by the chosen formula for making videos, which consist of assembled photographic and video materials (including archival documentaries, in Polish or in one of the three foreign languages most likely well-known to the author: English, German, and Russian) with added original commentary, which, even though it varies in length and importance to the presented narrative, should usually be considered as limited commentary.

By the end of 2019, 50 videos appeared on the channel, gaining a total of 28 883 326 views (the average was 576 666). As mentioned above, the channel focuses chronologically on recent history and the history of the 20th century: 10 videos (with a total of 6 694 469 views, 669 446 on average) are dedicated to the former, understood as events from 1991 on, while the other videos handle the 20th century history (22 138 857 total views, 553 471 on average). With respect to the assumed division of themes, political history (29 videos, 19 133 390 views) and social history (12 videos, 4 252 190 views) predominate. The next criterion used to describe studied videos was the ontic reference of described phenomena: events, persons, historical processes, or artefacts (things). For the currently discussed channel, the most popular references are events (18 videos, 8 549 004 views) and persons (16 videos, 9 743 732 views). Territory-wise, as many as 43 videos were devoted to world history, with only 7 videos on the history of Poland.

The relationship between the thematic specificity and the specificity of references to the character of the era indicates the predominance of political topics in the case of the videos on recent history and greater diversity of topics among videos on the history of the 20th century with a similar distribution of views. The data to be found in the chart below includes the distribution of views (the violin-shaped graphs along the Y-axis), distribution of topics separately for each video (colours of the dots), and the breakdown of videos between two era categories (X-axis).

³¹ ciekawehistorie – About, <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCO8czxzBx4PxuTEolCBmq2w/about> [date of access: 1 May 2020].

³² Ciekawe Historie – Wizytówka, <https://patronite.pl/Ciekawehistorie/description> [Date of access: 1 May 2020].

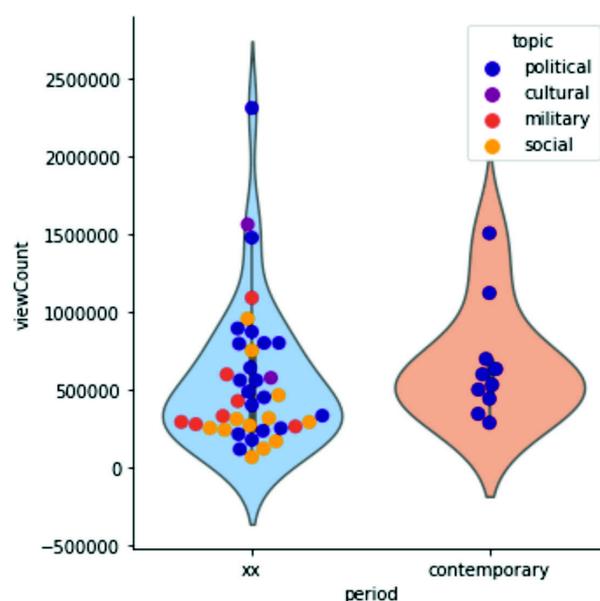


Chart 1. Distribution by tags of videos and views for ciekawehistorie³³

The next analysed channel is IrytującyHistoryk, created on 30 May 2013. Its host is a historian by education named Jakub, who used to be a small trader in antiques and belonged to paramilitary defensive formations³⁴. The author himself describes the profile he runs as a “channel about history from a historian”³⁵. Due to the background and preferences of the author, who calls himself a military historian³⁶, his channel deals primarily with topics related to the military and broadly understood technology, from small items such as watches to larger, usually in the form of various motor vehicles presented either as part of episodes dedicated to them or by showing appropriate audio-visual materials if the host of the channel cannot present the vehicle live. The videos posted to the channels usually take the form of talks, during which the person

³³ Chart 1. Original work by the authors.

³⁴ Irytujący Historyk – Wizytówka, <https://patronite.pl/IrytujacyHistoryk/description> [date of access: 1 May 2020].

³⁵ IrytującyHistoryk – About, <https://www.youtube.com/user/IrytujacyHistoryk/about> [date of access: 1 May 2020].

³⁶ In his profile on the Patronite website he says: *As a military historian, I have always paid most attention to the history of wars and everything associated with wars. (...) Sometimes I try to talk about something else but, in the end, I always get back to war – for it has always been the opus magnum of each epoch.* Irytujący Historyk – Wizytówka, <https://patronite.pl/IrytujacyHistoryk/description> [date of access: 1 May 2020].

of the host is the main component of the frame, supplemented by various kinds of video and photographic materials, sometimes humorous, or representations of the vehicles, weapon replicas, and uniforms serving as episode subjects.

From the foundation of the channel until the end of 2019, Irytujący Historyk uploaded to his channel 182 historically-themed videos³⁷, which gained a total of 32 961 431 views (181 106 on average). In the chronological scope, the most popular era is definitely the 20th century, having as many as 144 videos devoted to it (with a total of 27 207 259 views, 188 939 on average). Next in line are cross-sectional videos dedicated to more than one era (16 videos, 2 469 648 total views, 154 353 on average) and recent history (15 videos, 2 174 510 total views, 144 967 on average). In the thematic scope, the predominance of military history, covered by 128 videos (26 816 645 views, 209 505 on average), as clear as in the case of chronological division, is no surprise. Significantly fewer productions were dedicated to social and economic history (13 videos for each, with respectively 1 993 457 and 1 614 849 views, and the respective averages of 153 342 and 124 219 views per video). The ontic reference category, too, is dominated by items, such as collector artefacts: 118 videos (22 939 973 total views, 194 406 on average). The next tag, processes, received 29 videos (3 962 130 views, 136 625 on average). The territorial breakdown, in turn, is much more equal, with 106 videos dedicated to the history of Poland (13 931 157 total views, 131 426 on average) and 76 to world history (19,030,274 total views, 250,398 on average).

Oblicza XX Wieku is a channel with a single dominant component, chronological in this case. The channel, created on 28 September 2017, initially operated under the name MiędzywojennaTv³⁸. Its founder and the only host is Bartosz Borkowski: a historian by education (he graduated from the University of Warsaw), an archivist and a teacher by occupation. As he tells us, “the aim of creating a YouTube channel was to share my passion with the people who are interested in the 20th century or wish to know it better”³⁹. True to its name, the channel is dedicated to the history of the 20th century, though it has to be said that in the recent months (not included in this article), there were attempts to go beyond the so-called short 20th century (1914–1991) scope adopted for this period here⁴⁰. To some extent, the author’s education and current

³⁷ Some of the videos posted during the described period were related to the channel’s activities or were not historically-themed as defined by the authors.

³⁸ As seen in the name of the channel's email address. Oblicza XX Wieku – About, <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCcgaO0y7vJVF16xsAEA6Mog/about> [date of access: 2 May 2020].

³⁹ Oblicza XX Wieku – Wizytówka, <https://patronite.pl/obliczaxxwieku/description> [date of access: 2 May 2020].

⁴⁰ See the video about the genocide in the Belgian Congo: “Największy koszmar w Kongo – wszystkie zbrodnie króla Belgów”, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dHjYx-3AKY> [date of access: 2 May 2020].

occupation determine the form of the episodes, which devote relatively much space to adding quotations from sources: documents, memoirs, newspapers, as well as historiography, which has to be seen as an exception among the described channels, predominantly recently written (the author himself stresses the wide scope of research done for each episode). The quoted sources and works are accompanied by graphic material and archival footage.

As the channel was created relatively recently, by the end of 2019 there were 44 uploaded videos with a total of 5 011 112 views and the average of 113 888 views per video. Considering the name of the channel, it is not surprising that it only tackles the chronological period of the 20th century. The thematic range is dominated by political history (23 videos, 2 913 838 total views, 126 688 on average) and social history (11 videos, 1 126 229 total views, 102 384 on average). The subjects of the videos are usually events (17 videos, 2 178 202 total views, 128 129 on average) and processes (15 videos, 1 389 477 total views, 92 631 on average). Territory-wise, 18 videos were dedicated to the history of Poland (2 925 639 total views, 162 535 on average), and 26 to world history (2 085 473 total views, 80 210 on average).

The ThrashingMadPL channel, run by Arkadiusz Michalski, initially used the common Let's Play format, where its author usually presented historical and quasi-historical strategy games⁴¹. Its author currently is not a professional youtuber. He underlines that running the channel is his passion: the current profits from his YouTube operations are not sufficient to make it a regular job⁴² (Michalski has a Patreon page, where his supporters send him donations for new computer hardware). As mentioned above, initially the channel was not educational. From February 2013 and November 2014, the author mostly presented video games, which changed once he published the first educational material about the origins of the Polish state⁴³. One series hosted by Michalski, *Historia na Szybko*, is a collection of short videos based on original simple animation with added voice commentary. As he says himself, the production of each material follows a thorough query of both Polish- and English-speaking literature, with sporadic assistance from professionals⁴⁴. The series contain three types of material: the

⁴¹ Interview with the channel's author in the Histmat.org portal, Leszkowicz T., "Thrashing MadPL: 'Historia na Szybko' szczegółowo i dogłębnie", <https://histmag.org/ThrashingMadPL-Historia-na-Szybko-szczegolowo-i-doglebnie-15616> [date of access: 5 May 2020].

⁴² ThrashingMadPL's Patreon donations page, <https://www.patreon.com/ThrashingMadPL> [date of access: 5 May 2020].

⁴³ It is also the most popular video on the channel, with 657k views. "Historia Na Szybko – Początki Państwa Polskiego (Historia Polski #1)", <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=apMIgj0pi-U> [date of access: 5 May 2020].

⁴⁴ As he admits in the cited interview, he was helped by an employee of Muzeum Wojska Polskiego [Polish Army Museum], among others.

serialised history of Poland, the history of national borders, as well as various questions from world history. While the first type enjoys a variable but high popularity (and contains very detailed discussions for a simple populariser, definitely exceeding the school education level), the other types depend on many other factors. It seems nonetheless that important factors in the case of the history of national borders include the characteristic drawing style and the potential of motion and animation, which makes it more attractive than static school maps. Moreover, these videos lead to discussions in the comments sections, where the viewers debate on the historical affiliation of territories to the states in question and the validity of the presented historical narration. As already mentioned, the history of Poland presented in the series *Historia na Szybko* is characterised by in-depth narration, where the author combines facts with intricate contexts and aspects of historical processes. This series, however, follows the classic pattern of school education, where the narration is driven by the figures of successive rulers on Polish soil. The fruit of that strategy is that the middle ages predominant era in the channel, since after almost 100 episodes of the series the author has begun discussing the rule of Władysław II Jagiełło at the time of the Battle of Grunwald⁴⁵. To sum up, in the *ThrashingMadPL* channel Arkadiusz Michalski combines traditional, fact-focused narration with visual features attractive to viewers, all framed by a narration “about the process”, into short materials generating an average of 103k views per video. A detailed analysis of the statistics can be found below.

Two distinct relationships between categories could be observed. In one (the relation between the subject and the ontic reference), almost all videos centred on historical subjects referred to persons, as in the chart below.

In the other relationship, almost all videos about the history of Poland were devoted to political subjects, as in the chart below.

Historia w 5 minut is a channel operating since January 2016, connected to the *historya.pl* website⁴⁶. On his channel, the author presents himself as a “graduate of British universities from the Russell Group”. He remarks, that the sources of information for his videos are the works “of the Oxford University, Cambridge University, and other renowned scientific institutions from the UK, USA, and Poland”. The author defined his goal as “showing the information as it was scientifically demonstrated”⁴⁷. Some of the videos on the history of the 20th century are archival footage, usually interviews

⁴⁵ State as of 7 May 2020.

⁴⁶ The *historya.pl* website. Interestingly, according to this site, it was the original name of the channel, <https://historya.pl/> [date of access: 6 May 2020].

⁴⁷ The channel’s official Facebook fanpage, <https://www.facebook.com/pg/historiaw5minut/about/> [date of access: 5 May 2020].

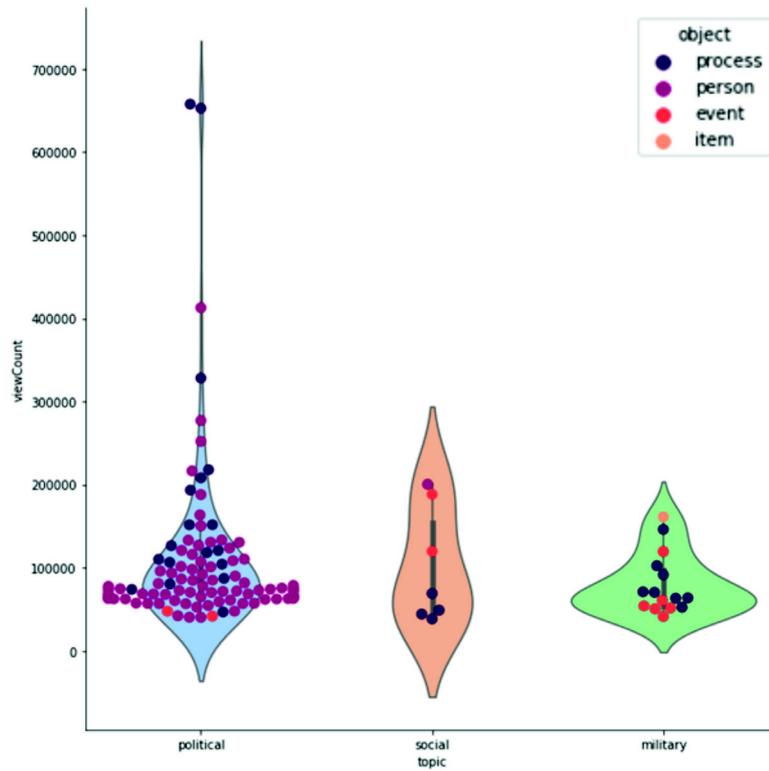


Chart 2. Distribution by tags of videos and views for ThrashingMadPL⁴⁸

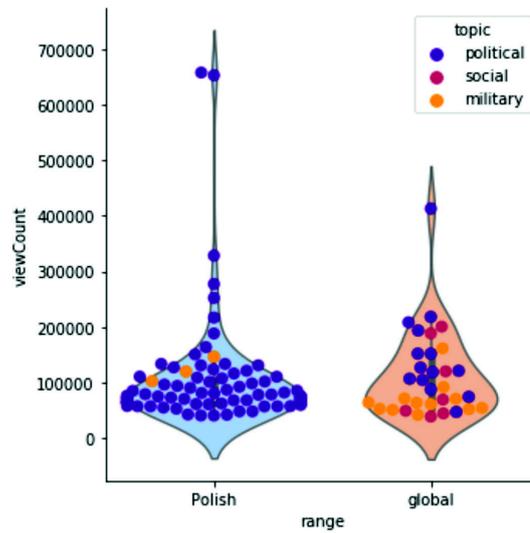


Chart 3. Distribution by tags of videos and views for ThrashingMadPL⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Original work by the authors.

⁴⁹ Original work by the authors.

with added Polish subtitles, without any added commentary or treatment. Apart from sharing archival material, the channel hosts its titular *5-minute history* series, where the author briefly presents a chosen event based on subject literature, and some *10+ minutes* history series about the history of selected states. While the channel has generated a fairly impressive average number of views per video (237k), it has to be said it is influenced by two factors: a small number of videos (65) and having 3 videos with about 1 million views each. It should also be added that the channel has its own fan page on Facebook, where the materials appear with a slightly higher frequency.

Conclusions

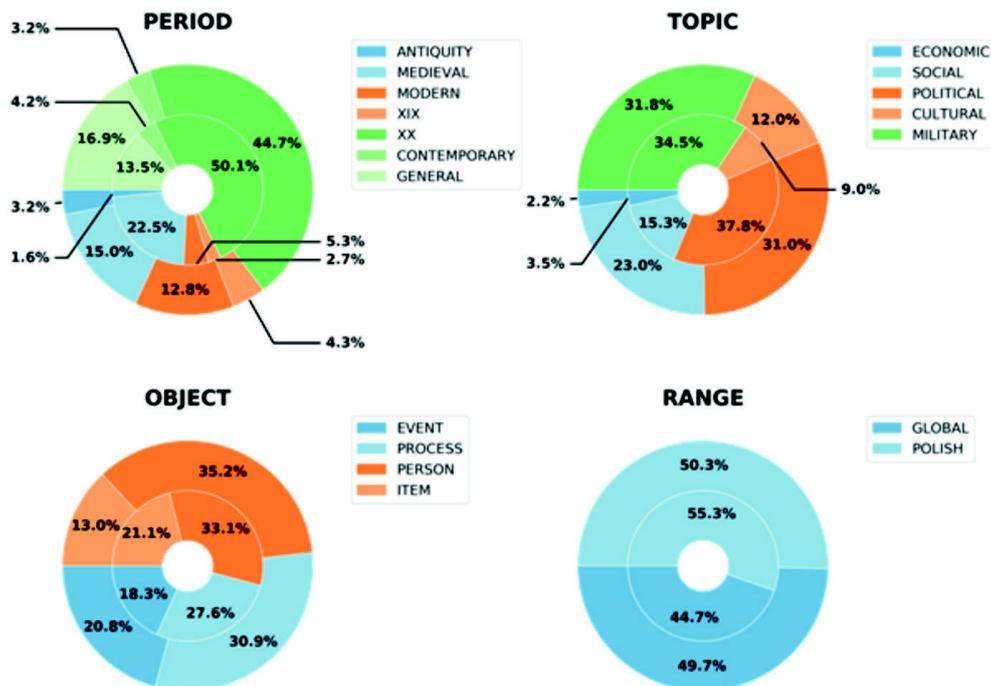


Chart 4. Aggregated percentile scores for the numbers of views (outer circles) and videos (inner circles) for all analysed channels by categories⁵⁰

While attempting a general evaluation of the specificity of historical narration in the YouTube portal we would like to point out that we are dealing with a highly dynamic reality: a popular channel may become inactive virtually overnight and fairly quickly

⁵⁰ Original work by the authors.

lose both its subscribers and active viewers (who “like” and comment on published videos), which will inevitably be reflected in its visibility in the portal, which strongly depends on the number of permanent and active viewers⁵¹. While sudden explosions of popularity of new channels are possible, they are definitely less frequent, in particular in this thematic segment where the “brand” of a channel is built over a long time, requiring considerable skill as well as much knowledge and effort⁵². The word which can be used to describe all analysed channels selected from the assets of the Polish-speaking YouTube⁵³, is diversity. For each of the analysed channels some components can be found that are characteristic solely of it, adding to its unique character which distinguished it from among its competitors on the viewers market. Namely, for Ciekawe Historie it is the extensive use of archival audio-visual materials, for Historia bez cenzury its charismatic host and the editing of episodes in the manner of a show, for Historia w 5 minut its short and distilled form of episodes, for Irytujący Historyk the peculiar topic along with the presentation of old technology, for Oblicza XX Wieku the frequent references to sources and historical writing, and for ThrashingMadPL, finally, his original animations and the long and quite systematic film series about the history of Poland.

Thanks to this diversity, these channels considered together as a group of Polish-speaking YouTube channels can reach different groups of viewers, with regard to both age and level of education. Simultaneously, the choice of topics for the presented videos as well as of perspective (the references to particular historical phenomena) are quite diverse, even though there is a noticeable incline towards political and military history (at the expense of culture and economic history), as well as slightly lesser, though still visible, favouritism towards persons and events (at the expense of processes) in the perspective of seeing historical reality.

⁵¹ It has to be stressed that within the Polish-speaking YouTube one can find a range of channels that would fit all three groups defined by the authors but have become inactive and, sometimes, have lost all their content. Examples of such channels include Historia Wojny Nieznanej, which was the Polish edition of The Great War channel, and Tylko Historia, which, quite interestingly, was the result of the merger of two also defunct channels: Co za Historia and Hardkor History; see: Historia Wojny Nieznanej – About, <https://www.youtube.com/user/WojnaNieznana/about> [date of access: 7 May 2020]; Tylko Historia – About, <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCui1FNByj0e9FLgb0cvzd2w/about> [date of access: 7 May 2020].

⁵² II Wojna Światowa is an example of a channel that gained relatively much popularity but then went inactive relatively quickly (just after 4 videos). II Wojna Światowa – Home Page, https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC7sxJM6H_xAX5Ma_myyxnHw/featured [date of access: 7 May 2020].

⁵³ As it was stated at the beginning of the article, we rejected low visibility channels and those where historical topics were accidental. Inactive channels were not taken into consideration either.

The above comparisons of the popularity of topics and eras show the prevalent interest in the political and military history with regard to the former, and the history of the 20th century regarding the latter.

One might seek the reasons for this state of affairs in the fact that youtubers are not a distinct group of Internet users but a part of the society, and as such express a general tendency in how the Polish historical consciousness functions.

A similar emphasis on the presentation of political and military history can also be seen in the effort undertaken by the Polish state. The anniversaries celebrated in Poland, the organisation of space (street naming, placement of statues and memorial plaques), and even the content of school textbooks clearly suggest that it is in the spheres of politics and war that history becomes real (not in economy or culture). The school education being profiled as it is also affects the viewership of individual videos in the YouTube portal, as its content follows up the school education, expands it, and sometimes even becomes a replacement for it.

With regard to military history, it is also worth to mention the traditional esteem bestowed on the military in Poland, which, according to some researchers, may also stem from the long Polish tradition of self-identification as *homini militares* among other things [Olejnik K., 2019; Bylewska D., 2017; Złotkowska K., 2005].

In the present-day world, besides various kinds of digital initiatives⁵⁴, it is reflected in the undying popularity of historical reconstruction and re-enactment in Poland, for one thing, primarily focused on re-enacting military history.

The influence of other cultural components belonging to the so-called visual culture – films, shows, video games, which also affect the building of historical consciousness and interest in historical topics – should not be forgotten [Werner W., Gralik D., Trzoss A., 2019: 221]. Following the trends present in these components, one can observe convergent thematic distribution and, consequently, a growing interest among the recipients in political and military history, and the history of the 20th century [Gralik D., 2019: 115–116; Werner W., Gralik D., Trzoss A., 2019: 226–228].

The above assertion does not mean, however, that the Polish-speaking historically-themed YouTube has no original traits to distinguish it from other media or from the traditional areas of culture where historical knowledge is cultivated. Besides the peculiar form of presenting historical questions, there is a strong, discernible trend to

⁵⁴ It is worth adding that, apart from the channel IrytuącyHistoryk analysed in this article, there is a whole range of channels about military history (like Hetman Polny Galdor or Na Bitewnym Szlaku), which seems the most popular branch of history among thematic channels. See: Hetman Polny Galdor – Home Page, https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCFWUVmaS_fmNG5gzhv6NTqw [date of access: 9 May 2020]; Na bitewnym szlaku – Home Page, <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCPGZrVWVGXixtpwkO4wPytw> [date of access: 9 May 2020].

showcase not some abstract “medieval people” or “Enlightenment men” but rather living, flesh-and-blood people. Consequently, video creators no longer have to avoid topics concerned with sensuality.

Videos devoted to social issues, usually every-day life and customs, ranked third among the thematic categories. To a large extent, customs are the very reason why this category ranked so high, containing such videos as “Seks w średniowieczu” [Sex in the Middle Ages] (2.9 million views) and “Totalny odlot – historia narkotyków” [Total high – history of recreational drugs] (1.5 million views). In general, it is worth mentioning that it is characteristic of the videos uploaded to YouTube that their authors quite frequently seek controversial people and phenomena, or tackle subjects related to the intimate life of historical figures: it meets the needs of users, apparently insufficiently satisfied in this regard by the historical narration available in other media.

The above factors lead to a conclusion that the activity observed in the YouTube portal affects the widespread historical awareness, not by changing it but rather by strengthening previously existing trends. This does not change the fact, however, that YouTube as a medium has a large and growing impact on the historical consciousness of Poles.

References

- Anderson B., 2006, *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*, Verso, Londyn-Nowy York.
- Anderson S., 2001, *History TV and Popular Memory* [in:] *Television histories: Shaping collective memory in the media age*, pod red. Edgerton G.R., Rollins P.C., University Press of Kentucky, pp. 19–36.
- Burgess J., Green J., 2009, *YouTube. Online Video and Participatory Culture*, Polity Press.
- Bylewska D., 2017, *Między duchem walki a duchowością wojny. Wzór rycerza prawego w zwierciadle Szymona Starowolskiego* [in:] *Ethos rycerski w kulturze. Tradycje i kontynuacje. T. II: Ethos sarmacki i jego tradycje*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, pp. 33–57.
- Fayyad U.M. Haussler D., Stolorz P.E., 1996, *KDD for Science Data Analysis: Issues and Examples* [in:] *KDD'96: Proceedings of the Second International Conference on Knowledge Discovery and Data Mining*, pp. 50–56.
- Fogu C., 2009, *Digitalizing historical consciousness* [in:] „History and Theory”, vol. 48, no. 2, pp. 103–121.
- Fuchs C., 2018, *Propaganda 2.0: Herman and Chomsky's Propaganda Model in the Age of the Internet, Big Data and Social Media* [in:] *The Propaganda Model Today: Filtering Perception and Awareness*, ed. Pedro-Carañana J., University of Westminster Press, Londyn, pp. 71–92.
- Gellner E., 1983, *Nations and nationalism*, Cornell University Press.
- Gralik D., 2019, *Ku nowej pamięci historycznej? Kreowanie wizji przeszłości w popkulturze na przykładzie II wojny światowej*, „Sensus Historiae”, XXXVI, pp. 101–118.

- Huizinga J., 1949, *Homo Ludens: a study of the play-element in culture*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, Londyn.
- Jackson S.J., 2018, *Progressive Social Movements and the Internet* [in:] *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Communication and Critical Studies*, Oxford University Press.
- Litwic-Kaminska K., 2011, *Kultura obrazkowa w dydaktyce – szanse i zagrożenia*, „Forum Dydaktyczne”, 7–8, pp. 177–188.
- Lorenz C., 2008, *Drawing the line: ‘scientific’ history between myth-making and myth-breaking* [in:] *Narrating the nation: Representations in history, media and the arts*, Berghahn, Nowy York-Oxford, pp. 35–56.
- Maciejak K., 2018, *YouTube w edukacji. Strategie nadawcze wideoblogerów*, Kraków.
- Michniuk A., 2014, YouTube–YouLearn. Nauka przez Youtube, „E-mentor”, 4 (56), pp. 37–43.
- Nichols T., 2017, *The Death of Expertise*, Oxford University Press, USA.
- Olejnik K., 2019, *Polak-wojownik. Wzorzec polskiego mężczyzny – mit czy rzeczywistość?*, „Acta Universitatis Lodzianis Folia Historica”, no. 103, pp. 13–26.
- Reed T.V., *Digitized lives: Culture, power and social change in the internet era*, Routledge.
- Rüsen, J., 2012, *Forming historical consciousness – Towards a humanistic history didactics*, „Antíteses”, vol. 5, no. 10, pp. 519–536.
- Thorp R., 2014, *Historical consciousness and historical media – A history didactical approach to educational media* [in:] „Education Inquiry”, vol. 5, pp. 4, 24282.
- Trzoss A., 2018, *Cyfrowy Homo Ludens. Historia jako element obszaru rozrywki na portalu społecznościowym Youtube* [w:] *Popularyzacja nauk historycznych – teoria i praktyka. Zbiór studiów*, red. Gołaszewska-Rusinowska D., Mielewska M., Sińczak T., Toruń, pp. 193–209.
- Werner W., 2004, *Kult początków: historyczne zmagania z czasem, religią i genezą: szkice z historii historiografii polskiej i obcej*, Wydawnictwo Poznańskie, Poznań.
- Werner W., 2009, *Historyczność kultury. W poszukiwaniu myślowego fundamentu współczesnej historiografii*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM, Poznań.
- Werner W., 2016, *Land, History And Imagination, Or Remarks On The Foundations Of The New Patriotism* [w:] „Historia@Teoria”, vol. 1, no. 2, pp. 13–29.
- Werner W., Gralik D., Trzoss A., 2019, *Media społecznościowe a funkcjonowanie wiedzy historycznej w Polsce. Raport z badań* [w:] „Przegląd Archiwalno-Historyczny” vol. 6, pp. 211–235.
- Werner W., Trzoss A., 2019, *Czy cyfrowe media wywołują społeczną paranoję? Dwugłos w sprawie obecności teorii spiskowych w mediach społecznościowych i kulturze masowej*, „Nauka”, no. 3, pp. 147–169.
- Zannettou S., Chatzis S., Papadamou K., Sirivianos M., 2018, *The Good, the Bad and the Bait: Detecting and Characterizing Clickbait on YouTube* [w:] 2018 *IEEE Security and Privacy Workshops (SPW)*, San Francisco, pp. 63–69.
- Złotkowska K., 2005, *Ślady krwawej Bellony w twórczości Wacława Potockiego*, „Słupskie Prace Filologiczne”, Seria Filologia Polska 4, pp. 55–76.

History and YouTube. Historical narrative in the age of Web 2.0

The following paper, in its sense, is a summary of the broad qualitative and quantitative authorial research on the historically-themed materials from the social media video platform YouTube. The main research problem dealt with the matter of the meaning of the historical narrative for the contemporary Polish society and

the specificity of its historical consciousness. 635 videos from 6 channels since 2013 till 2019 were analyzed. Authors point out the relation between the quantitative analysis of the videos' topics with the current trends of interests in history present in the society. Functioning of the most popular videos' trends were emphasized and its connection with their qualitative layer of the historical narrative. Further research on the hypothesis on the ethnocentric interest in history was conducted. Slightly advantage of the political and military narrative was observed and a little less advantage of the factographical and processual perspective in history which is the matter for the further analysis. Conducted research showed that interest in history on the YouTube platform confirms the special status of the XX century and II World War narrations in the historical consciousness of the Polish society.

Key words: YouTube, historical narrative, Web 2.0, entertainment, history