Peer Comment: Films, digs and death: a review of the Project Eliseg videos

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Abstract
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In this review I evaluate the article by Tong et al. on the use of video of archaeological fieldwork during the Project Eliseg excavations. To understand the context of this study, I briefly survey how video is discussed by archaeologists in blog posts, conference presentations and scholarly articles. I then assess the aims, structure, content and technique of the videos produced by Project Eliseg. Finally, I analyse the strengths and weaknesses of their use of video using a model of public engagement.

1. Uses of Video in Archaeology

To situate the Project Eliseg video project in the context of past uses of video by archaeologists, I used distant reading methods (Jockers 2013; 2014; Moretti 2013) to examine three different venues where archaeologists discuss their work. The three venues include blog posts on the Day of Archaeology blog from 2012 and 2013 (601 blog posts, 186,927 words), abstracts of the last ten years of meetings of the Society of American Archaeology (18,441 abstracts, 1,636,634 words), and the full text of five scholarly archaeology journals hosted on JSTOR (World Archaeology, American Antiquity, Journal of Archaeological Research, Journal of World Prehistory, Journal of Field Archaeology, 5688 articles, 16,358,383 words). These three datasets represent a much wider range of archaeologists and their work than a traditional literature review and allow insights into archaeological activities that are infrequently represented in the scholarly literature. The R code and data to reproduce the results presented here are openly available online. Since a full exploration of this rich dataset is beyond the scope of this review, the open availability of the code and data allows anyone to explore further without any restrictions.
These three corpora are located along a spectrum from informal, public-facing writings on the day of archaeology blog, to short-lived but more professionally focused writing in the conference abstracts, to the enduring scholarly literature written for a specialist audience. In Figure 1 we see that the relative frequency of the word 'video' is substantially higher in the blog posts compared to conference abstracts and journal articles. Looking at words that are strongly correlated with 'video', in Table 1, we see that the blog posts are mostly concerned with practical details of field activities while the abstracts are mostly about professional film and television productions. The highly correlated words in the journal articles are difficult to interpret, probably because most of them are garbled from imperfect optical character recognition of PDF files. To work around this, a k-means clustering method on the journal articles containing the word 'video' revealed four clusters of 38 articles. Two of the clusters contain articles about the use of video for imaging and data collection. The topic of the third cluster is unclear, and the fourth cluster, with only four articles, relates to community heritage management topics. The general impression here is that discussions of video by archaeologists most frequently occur in informal, public-facing writing such as the Day of Archaeology blog, and when they occur in that corpus they are often about fieldwork. At the other end of the spectrum, in the scholarly literature video is mostly discussed as a data collection method, and rarely as a mode of public outreach. These data indicate that the scholarly report on the Project Eliseg video project is unusual and a rare type of contribution to professional archaeological literature.

Table 1: Words highly correlated with 'video' in the three corpora

|        | blog | abstracts | articles |
|--------|------|-----------|----------|
| word   | correlation | word | correlation | word | correlation |
| quarter | 0.56  | anemone | 0.32  | subfiles | 0.45  |
| sections     | 0.56 | barbareño | 0.32 | subfile | 0.45 |
|-------------|------|----------|------|---------|------|
| acres       | 0.56 | cinematographer | 0.32 | hnoisie | 0.45 |
| alberta     | 0.56 | erlend    | 0.32 | ccxntrol| 0.45 |
| artefacts   | 0.56 | filmmaking| 0.32 | anel    | 0.45 |
| bifacial    | 0.56 | monterrey | 0.32 | naidway | 0.45 |
| Bites       | 0.56 | runnerup  | 0.32 | orionoftg| 0.45 |
| bonnet      | 0.56 | ygnaciode | 0.32 | tirte   | 0.45 |
| boulders    | 0.56 | film      | 0.31 | commorl | 0.45 |
| clothes     | 0.56 | television| 0.27 | photograph| 0.45 |
| consulting  | 0.56 | covert    | 0.24 | mappingand| 0.45 |
| difficult   | 0.56 | streaming | 0.24 | ramtek  | 0.45 |
| edmonton    | 0.56 | atomicage | 0.22 | north-east| 0.45 |
| extends     | 0.56 | audio     | 0.22 | lcatiomn| 0.45 |
| eyeprotection| 0.56 | bren      | 0.22 | stepenoff| 0.45 |
| Eyes        | 0.56 | cafés     | 0.22 | arget   | 0.45 |
| find        | 0.56 | detonations| 0.22 | conditionas| 0.45 |
| gaiters     | 0.56 | dinnerware| 0.22 | fromx   | 0.45 |
| gauge       | 0.56 | documentaries| 0.22 | clonamon| 0.45 |
| harness     | 0.56 | ernestine | 0.22 | tachpong| 0.45 |

Figure 2: Frequency of the word 'video' over time in SAA abstracts
We can get a chronological perspective on discussions of video from the SAA abstracts and the journal articles. In Figure 2 we see that video has been mentioned since 2004, when the PDF files of abstracts first became available, and peak in 2009 when there was a session titled 'It must be true, I saw it in a video', which aimed to examine popular online video and television series to discover and evaluate the messages about archaeology that they transmit to the public. By comparison, blogging only appears in the abstracts for the first time in 2010. In 2014 video was discussed as a tool for data collection during fieldwork, as a technology for archiving field data, and as a method for communication, both to the public via websites and to the professional audience via videos shown during the conference presentations. Among the scholarly articles we see the first mentions of video in the early 1960s, with a slight upward trend towards the present (Figure 3). In Figures 4 and 5 we get an impression of how scholarly discussion of video has changed through time, as the correlation with 'film' decreases while the correlation with 'community' increases over time. This suggests that while scholarly discussions such as that by Tong et al. on the use of film to engage with the wider community are uncommon, they may be becoming increasingly relevant and valued in scholarly publication.

Figure 3: Frequency of the word 'video' over time in journal articles
Figure 4: Correlations of the word ‘video’ with ‘film’ over time in journal articles

Figure 5: Correlations of the word ‘video’ with ‘community’ over time in journal articles

2. The Aims, the Structure, Content and Technique of the Videos

The 30 videos created by or for Project Eliseg represent an excellent effort to go beyond the common methods of public engagement and create an enduring, engaging and visceral record of the field work. The videos complement a diverse outreach platform that includes site visits by...
school groups, museum displays and talks, media articles, longform blog posts and micro-blogging via Twitter. Such a comprehensive outreach strategy is remarkable and an excellent model for projects of any scale. The substantive archaeological goal of the fieldwork is to investigate the life-history of a medieval stone monument located on a mound in Denbighshire, Wales. The excavations were focused on identifying activity at three specific periods: testing for possible prehistoric origins of the monument, identifying early medieval reuse of the monument in mortuary and commemorative contexts, and identifying traces antiquarian excavations.

The excavation was filmed for two specific reasons. First, to communicate the details of the fieldwork to people who are unable to travel to the location and visit the excavation in person, and second, to capture the field workers' initial and changing interpretations of the archaeological evidence during the moments they encounter it. It is not clear at what point the value of the second aim is extracted. Is the value generated by focusing one's thoughts to speak coherently to a camera, or is the value generated by reviewing the field work video during the post-excavation analysis phase? Perhaps both are implied, but there is no clear strategy for how the videos will be used as an interpretative aid beyond the moment of their creation. Tong et al note that 'Perhaps the greatest benefit was to summarise the end of each field season', suggesting that the process of self-reflection leading up to speaking to the camera was especially valued. This also raises the question whether the post-excavation analysis activities will similarly be recorded by video, which is not addressed here.

The twin purposes of creating the videos indicate two distinct intended audiences: an audience of interested members of the public with little or no specialised knowledge of archaeology, and an audience of archaeologists, perhaps even the same archaeologists who are conducting the excavations. Most of the videos are clearly directed at the public audience, but the videos sometimes switch between these two audiences uneasily. On the one hand, there is some engaging and entertaining general details about the field work that is well suited for public consumption in the Season 3: day 5 video (indeed, this reviewer had hoped that Tong would be in front of the camera more often in the later videos). Similarly, in Season 3: day 9 there is a well-constructed commentary by Kirton on the recording of a cist. This video is confidently narrated and leads the non-expert viewer at a comfortable pace, clearly illustrating the technique of quarter-sectioning and describing the finds of cremated bone and the context of these finds. In the Season 3: day 11 and 12 videos, Robinson similarly gives an accessible description of cist excavation, taking care to define technical terms, with his narration elegantly accompanied by illustrative still images and video.

On the other hand, in the Season 3: day 14 video there is a regrettably short dismissal of the interpretation of a bone pin as a high-status object by Williams. Williams presumes that his viewers may have been misled by unnamed popular television programs to understand the bone pin as a status symbol, an interpretation he rejects without explanation. While this might be a valuable record of the interpretative process for later review by the team, the viewer among the general public is left wondering what the preferred alternative explanation actually is, and an opportunity for a positive and constructive engagement with public understanding of archaeology seems to have been missed. Williams has a complex screen presence, his narrations of the field work are the most substantial and lengthy, and his delivery is highly animated, engaging and well
suited for public consumption. One element of his complexity is his use of humour, which is occasionally problematic because although this was intended as a gently mocking reference to popular television programs about archaeology, it may be mistaken for professorial condescension, especially by viewers who are not familiar with popular depictions of archaeological fieldwork on British television. The challenges and risks of using humour in public speaking are well documented, and self-effacing humour, infrequently used by Williams, is regarded as the safest strategy because it creates conversational rapport, makes the speaker seem more approachable, and has no implied superiority of the speaker over the audience (Attardo 2014).

One of the challenges in fulfilling these dual purposes of making the videos is the rapid pace of production. A distinctive characteristic of vlogging, compared to other forms of video capture and production such as documentary making, is that videos are recorded, produced and released on a regular and short schedule. In this case nearly all the videos were captured, edited and uploaded to YouTube within a day. This represents a substantial investment of time, and a remarkable accomplishment for the project videographer, an undergraduate archaeology student who was also working on the project as an archaeologist. This rapid production gives a feeling of real-time reporting and is an impressive fulfilment of the goals of shortening the distance between the excavation location and anyone who wants to learn more about the fieldwork. A wide variety of cinematic techniques are employed in the videos, including subtitles, overlays and annotations, pans, zooms, and varied scene composition and transitions. The effective use of these techniques adds visual interest and appeal to the videos and keeps the viewer engaged. The quality of sound recording is impressive given the basic equipment used and the challenging conditions of high winds and road noise.

A universal limitation of any video is the difficulty of searching for content within a clip. In this case a brief description of each video helps to orient the viewer, but the notes are very brief indeed, and the automatically generated captions on YouTube are comically inaccurate, so the contents of the videos are effectively unsearchable. This could be overcome by a more detailed description for each video, which was presumably prevented by time constraints. The structure of the videos varies widely, with most videos opening with a short introduction, but some do not, and most lack a satisfying conclusion. Given the rapid production schedule, these structural inconsistencies are understandable, but it is worth making a constructive observation that effective video is like effective writing, in that it has an obvious structure, audience and purpose (Hampe 2007). A recurring video structure of a clear introduction, main body (perhaps including something like ‘artefact of the day’) and clear conclusion would have given more unity to the video collection, and helped generate engagement and recurring viewers.

The authors offer a balanced assessment of the reach and engagement that the videos achieved, noting the mixed reactions recorded during ethnographic interviews with local residents to the videos, and the low level of engagement (comments, likes and shares) on the videos on the YouTube website. At the time of writing there were a total of 8,799 views of the entire video collection. Interpreting this value is difficult because YouTube are notoriously secretive about how the views are counted (there is no way to tell the difference between one person watching a video 100 times or if a hundred people are watching the first five seconds of the same single video). In any case, the median view count of 172 supports the claim that the videos were a 'a moderate
success' in reaching an audience in a different way to an in-person site visit (there is no information about whether site visitors were not also viewers of the videos). The authors note the wide distribution of view counts on YouTube, with the 35 minute 'Season Two, Pillar of Eliseg Archaeological Excavation' end-of-season video being viewed ten times more than most of the daily videos that are less than five minutes long. While the video analytics have limited interpretative potential and suggest relatively low engagement, there is an interesting relationship between view count and video duration. In Figure 6 we see a positive correlation between view count and video duration, but only up to videos around 250 seconds long (roughly four minutes). For videos longer than four minutes, the relationship disappears, suggesting the constructive observation that this might be the optimum duration for a daily video log of an activity like excavation. These data are consistent with previous findings (Biel and Gatica-Perez 2011; Biel et al. 2011) that four minutes is an ideal time for video blogs.

![Figure 6: Relationship of video views to video duration](http://intarch.ac.uk/journal/issue39/3/comms.cfm)

### 3. A Model of Public Engagement

Implicit in any strategy of public engagement is a model of how the public understand archaeology, and to interpret the use of video by Project Eliseg I turn to a tripartite model of archaeological understanding based on Abbott's (2004) updating of Charles Morris' (1946) classic theory of semiotic relations (Marwick et al. 2013). The three components are syntactic archaeology, semantic archaeology and pragmatic archaeology. Syntactic archaeology refers to the presentation of archaeology as a set of abstract arguments about prehistoric human life with little tractable value to the public, perhaps uncharitably described by the public as an ivory tower game. Semantic archaeology is a more positive understanding of archaeology as a transposing activity, where a question about the past is moved into the common-sense world of the immediate where it becomes immediately comprehensible. Pragmatic archaeology is archaeology that results in
intervention on a current issue of public importance. Because archaeological research rarely encounters a narrow neck of causality (Abbott 2004, 9), the public rarely understand archaeology as a pragmatic activity.

The Project Eliseg videos convey to the public the understanding of syntactic and semantic archaeology. The focus on excavation technique in many of the videos establishes the team as diligent and careful, but represents syntactic archaeology because of the prominence of technical details of the archaeological process. On the other hand, the focus on the cists at the site and the discussion of funerary behaviours and antiquarian excavations in many of the videos conveys a semantic understanding of archaeology. The prehistoric treatment of the dead, and the antiquarian fascination with this are themes prominent in Williams’ contributions to the videos, and help to transpose the details of the archaeological record to tractable issues about how the dead were treated and the social meaning of the monument. Tong et al. note that the videos discussing the mortuary contexts were among the most viewed, demonstrating the intensity of public engagement with semantic archaeological understanding.

A pragmatic understanding of archaeology did not appear to be successfully conveyed, with Tong et al. describing apparent indifference from local residents towards the excavation. The authors find evidence that ‘death sells’ in their videos focused on mortuary dimension having high view counts, but that they were limited in their ability to engage with this theme owing to ethical concerns and the conditions of their Ministry of Justice licence that prevented human remains from appearing on the videos. Given the prominence of death as a research theme for Project Eliseg, a few options for how the videos might have conveyed a more pragmatic understanding of archaeology might be constructively suggested. For example, an interesting addition would have been brief video interviews of the archaeologists reflecting on their personal views on death and treatment of dead bodies, in light of the cists and antiquarian disturbance at the pillar. Going further, visitors to the site might have been filmed in discussion with archaeologists talking about their reactions to seeing how dead people were treated in the past, and invited to make comparisons with modern mortuary practices and places (e.g. active cemeteries). Drawing on connections between observations of the archaeology, which might be unfamiliar to many visitors, and personal reflections on themes relating to death, which is a universal experience, could have been a productive method for engaging the public and potentially changing their thinking about themselves or the landscape of the pillar.

4. Summary

Tong et al. have provided a revealing and balanced report on their use of video for Project Eliseg. They note the ‘happenstance’ origins of the video project, and this shows in the inconsistent structure of the videos and their honest assessment of their uncertain success with fulfilling the goals of the video project. As they note, their video blog project is one of the first to be reported from an archaeological excavation, so the combination of their videos and their report will become essential source materials for others using this method of documenting their work and communicating with the public. They have shown that archaeologists can self-produce video blogs with relatively simple equipment and under typical field conditions. In this review I have
established the rarity of this type of work, critically examined the aims, structure, content and technique of the videos, and made some constructive observations to benefit future archaeological videographers.

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