

We produced 1,000 videos in one year and this is what I learned:

In order to succeed we had to create a “social video handbook” that I would like to share with you

I have always been hooked on videos. Since the time when I spent my days watching MTV, until I had the chance to work for them, to the moment when social networks and YouTube converted everything into videos, and the obsession became an occupation. In the past year, though, I have been assisting a major Italian broadcaster to formulate a digital video strategy. This required an increased commitment in order to diversify production, due to the potential volume of viewers but mainly because the volume of required ideas, procedures and solutions were of a magnitude never faced before.

In order to succeed in this job I watched hundreds, perhaps thousands of videos online, produced by me, or my colleagues, and by many other Italian and international media. It was a case of trial and error in which I developed theories, designed schemes and carried out analyses that enabled me to create a “theory of online videos” to create and streamline a flow of content that required a “user manual” in order not to become confusing.

I do not believe in professional secrecy, actually I think it is essential to share the theory and practice of videos and productions created by our team in the last 12 months with everybody. Our goal is to collect remarks, comments and reports to further improve the quality of the content and the ideas supporting it.

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What then is the format of an editor's digital video content? And specifically those of a television editor?

What is the difference between video and textual content? The question might seem unnecessary, but it is not. With journalism, as with content creation, for years we have been used to discussing "articles", so much so that today it is counterintuitive to think of a video as something completely different.

However, a video is not really based on one piece of information, nor on a complex plot. When compared to an article, the added value of a video lies in its ability to depict an action or a movement, even if as a statement made by the characters themselves.

We will only be able to manage this sort of content by understanding this basic voyeuristic feature. What we all seek in a video are its "pornographic" element, in a broad, or even literal sense of the word; the exceptional content that justifies the video's very existence and relevance. An online video is created when it is possible to isolate an action that we are likely to witness, maybe alone, watching on our phone screen.

This [**must-read NYT article**](#) reports it well:

"Some viewing habits of social video also recall Edison's Kinetoscope, one of the earliest film-watching contraptions, which invited single viewers to view short clips through a peephole, offering a voyeuristic look at everything from Annie Oakley shooting to some guy sneezing. Mobile video has again returned us to a cinematic form that's screened for an audience of one".

We can classify all online videos into two main types

Social Videos: micro content, usually made by re-edits or existing footage or archive material.

Productions: original formats, almost exclusively shot in a micro-studio (more rarely outdoors) in which the archive footage is ancillary, or at least only a small part of the final product.

Social Videos: online videos are watched alone, in silence

Here we will discuss so-called "videos with text", those with 16:9 or, more frequently, square format that almost all broadcasters have started producing and distributing in the last few months. Such videos last from 30 to 90 seconds and all feature a prominent written component comprising text in the video or captions. It is essential that such clips can be enjoyed without audio: according to the video content analysis company [Tubular Labs](#), 46% of all videos that producers post directly on Facebook have no audio or just some basic background music. We see those videos everywhere: in the underground, in the doctor's waiting room or during a lunch break. They are the ultimate filler content.

Their natural placement is in a social network feed, either Facebook, Instagram or Twitter: and because they are "endlessly scrolling", they must be able to catch our attention in a split second. If the basic rule of every video is that it be based on an action, the second is that the most important item must be placed at the very beginning. Only after capturing the spectator's

attention will we be able to debate, explain and give some context to the content, a follow-up that is even more necessary when the topic debated resembles a “strange but true” factoid rather than a traditional piece of news.

The rule of revealing the crucial point of the plot in the first seconds of an online video is so common that it has contaminated formats produced before the digital era or before social networks. Just think of recent online movie trailers. In the very first seconds of these clips the movie is micro-summarised, made even more exciting and dramatic, then proceeds to the standard film trailer.

We must bear in mind that this type of “social video” is conceived and whose reason for existence is nearly always an event or action that forms its backbone. This is why the visual element must take priority over the text. People who click “play” want to watch something before reading the information explaining the details. Our biggest mistake is to cover our assets (the images) with useful but not-always-essential information: “show, don’t tell”.

Types of Social Video: are you a piece of news or a list?

By watching hundreds or even thousands of social videos produced by a wide range of Italian or world publishers, I realised that any content of this type can be reduced to a short list of categories:

News: information or footage of public interest from Italy or from the world, ranging from images of the Thai boys rescued from the cave to Ronaldo’s incredible bicycle kick goal.

Curiosity: the so-called “viral videos” constituting most of the social content we consume every day. That cat with a funny face or the crying gorilla both belong to this category.

Statements: often such videos consist of short abstracts of emotional or news-worthy statements. The well-known speech that Steve Jobs gave in Stanford is the most famous example of this kind, but other good examples are the many acceptance speeches given by celebrities at prize awards.

The profile: that could belong to a famous star or an up-and-coming performer and often the occasion is the birthday of a star. For example, you might wish happy birthday to Francesco Totti [Italian soccer player], or produce a portrait of an emerging politician.

The evolution: this is similar to a profile page, but it focusses more on the changes that a personality (or less frequently, an object) has experienced with time, stressing the differences between a certain time and a later time.

Something you don’t know/that you should know: this format was made popular by BuzzFeed, though statistics show that it is more appreciated by editors than by readers; it has become a standard in the media industry.

6 different streams. Too many, if we have to decide which one to use dozens of times a day, depending on the context or content. Luckily, if we look a bit closer, we realise that the **six categories can easily be reduced to two basic groups**. Two simpler and exemplary structures that can embody any existing type of social video.

Viral videos: news, curiosities or statements

Whether the video deals with **news, a curiosity or a statement**, all these types are strongly based on an action. In all three cases, the basic element is hinted at, then titled and then its origin is revealed and is finally contextualised in a wider manner.

Lists: profile, evolution, things to know

What are **a character's profile, his evolution, or a video based on a list of things you should know**, if not a list of items placed in a particular order, either by date or by relevance? Often, in the following additional three cases there is no basic action to hint at for the viewer, who is attracted by the title (and by the preview image, but more of this later) followed by a list that can be explicit (numbered) or implicit (the phases of someone's life); obviously the added value is the study that we will carry out for each and every phase.

Platforms: fishing in a river or in the sea?

Regarding online videos, we must not forget to package the end result with a suitable preview image. The choice of the latter is linked to the platform that we choose for uploading the content. Until now, we have assumed that we upload the videos we are dealing with as "native" within a social network but many major Italian publishers are founding their own businesses on the market for pre-roll

advertising and hence it is paramount to be able to attract viewers to their own proprietary platforms.

It is not just a matter of getting past the 30 or 60-seconds of advertisements; there is a world of difference between playing a video on Facebook and the need to log on to a dedicated site with the two additional clicks that this latter choice entails. The different logic systems are reflected in how we design and create video content, depending on the platform it will be uploaded onto.

Social Platform: A video uploaded directly onto a social network has the enormous advantage of being immediately accessible, often coming into accidental contact with viewers. Hence, it is essential to capture the viewer's attention within a few seconds and it is equally important to maintain a high level of attention to prevent scrolling that would leave the video to its fate. If watched till the end, the content enjoys a much greater chance of being shared, increasing its penetration exponentially.

Videos "native" to a social platform must be edited carefully, and must be rich in information and artwork from the beginning to the end, so that they can be exchanged and debated. The preview image is important but not paramount. Social platforms often operate auto-play so that as soon as we discover a video it starts, involving us in the story.

Besides traditional viral videos, other content suitable for social platforms includes explainers, insights with data and statistics or editorial profiles with an original cut.

Proprietary platform: Holding the viewer's hand to guide them out of their own timeline to visit a website is a completely different task. Such a leap often involves a curiosity factor

that is almost “pornographic”. We mentioned it at the beginning but, in this type of content inserted into proprietary sites and players, this can often become exasperating. We are not speaking of clickbait here, but rather focussing on the most attention-grabbing features of a video: comedy, irony, voyeurism or even violence on which daily video news consumption is based, especially away from social networks.

In this type of extra-social video, the preview image is paramount because it is the only tangible promise (other than the content of the title) that we can make to the viewer about the uniqueness of the content they will find in the article. Accidents, controversial advertising campaigns, acts of violence and extreme climatic phenomena are classic examples of content for which we are ready to abandon the comfort of our timeline.

Golden Area: There is also a small interface between two different systems, formed of all the video content that works well in both situations: in a social network, as well as in proprietary platforms with pre-rolls.

This could include world news, or birthdays and anniversaries of major celebrities, if executed in a suitable way.

Productions: an idea and a colourful background

After the long section dedicated to “social videos” (according to the Tubular Labs agency, 25% of the videos posted on Facebook belong to this category) let us deal with actual productions. These formats are not a reinterpretation of archive or agency video

footage, but produce something new from scratch, though always with a limited budget.

For this more complex category of videos there is some consistency of language, shared between the most successful global media both from a visual viewpoint and in the structure of the formats. The setting is always the same: one or more characters depicted in a basic background, often in white or pastel colours.

Similar mechanisms rarely apply outdoors, such formats being designed for major productions where the use of a studio offers a better output with a lower production effort. The length of such products runs from two to six minutes and they occupy a position in the editorial market immediately after social videos, due to their length.

As their setting is identical most of the time, **this kind of production can be divided into three categories**, based on the only variable feature, or the character we would like to include.

VIP Interviews: The main feature of this model is the presence of a celebrity. It does not matter if they have to reply to a series of questions, or explain their tattoos or perform tasks. The format essentially remains a more or less traditional interview, carried out according to journalistic or simple entertainment principles; the action is a visual condiment for the conversation with the main character.

Explainer Talent: In this case, the format is not centred on the character showing their face, but around the editorial, graphic or information value of the content to be staged. The objective of the talent (a famous personality, an influential person such as a journalist) is a vertical in-depth analysis of a topic posing a question, facing complexity from an original viewpoint thereby producing a video that is

useful, or can trigger a debate that can be shared. The famous, ever more popular online “video essays” retain the same format, without appearing to be conducted.

Reaction: In this type of video, the main characters are usually ordinary people subjected to unexpected or exceptional events to which they must react. Eating foreign food, meeting a former partner, performing a brilliant task, are excuses like many others to design an exceptional, in-vitro, supervised event.

What will happen tomorrow? A third level

The future of online videos will be ever more associated with social platforms and mobile devices. Not only YouTube, but mainly new emerging platforms like the Facebook video Watch extension and Instagram IGTV, both aiming to undermine the territory of longer, more complex and expensive productions which, to date, feature more traditional television formats.

It is reasonable to believe that in the future we will have to update this article by adding a new and more sophisticated level of formats. Videos that will hybridise the language of social videos with that of real shows, designed for this new kind of distribution, moving seamlessly to smartphones and smart TVs. **Netflix itself admits** that although registration with the service and the first steps on its platform are made by computer or smartphone, the format then evolves naturally into a television-like formula.

Editors will then be able to keep the first two production levels, ie. social and production videos, in order to promote their own brand and increase their audience, while devoting the third level, premium serialised content, to different and greater profitability (sale of rights, sponsorship, product placement, etc.) in addition to an increased brand value and to the possibility of various editorial insights.

Although TV may survive and evolve to become something different, the first thoughts of the creators of digital video content must still focus on smartphones. As **analyst Benedict Evans said:**

“The smartphone is the sun and everything else orbits it. Internet advertising will be bigger than TV advertising this year, and Apple’s revenue is larger than the entire global pay TV industry”.