

## **Books, videos and platforms: Exploring the BookTube interface**

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## Books, videos and platforms: Exploring the BookTube interface

The publishing market has gone through deep transformations in the last few years, and the emergence of new media actors like BookTubers has increased the complexity of this system. The article proposes understanding BookTuber practices based on an interface-centered approach that goes beyond the conventional studies of the “graphic user interface”. In the framework employed in the article, the “interface” is considered to be the place where different actors relate to each other and the process between them are carried out. The article also presents a map of the BookTuber interface and its tensions. This interface-centered approach, a work-in-progress, could also be applied to other practices.

Keywords: BookTube, YouTube, interface, publishing, platforms

### Introduction

The acronym *BookTube* (Book + YouTube) first appeared in September 2013 in the title of a video<sup>1</sup> shared on YouTube by Elizabeth Vallish, who started publishing video books review in 2009. Today, both the practice of sharing video book reviews and the terms *BookTube* and *BookTuber* have spread to languages the world over. BookTubers replicate the basic audiovisual practices of YouTubers: they use private spaces for recording (bedrooms or rooms with shelves full of books), explicitly address their followers by looking directly at the camera, and promote interaction through comments on YouTube and other digital platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram, Goodreads and Twitter<sup>2</sup> (Scolari & Fraticelli, 2019; Scolari et al, 2021).

In the case of Spanish-speaking BookTubers, previous research has shown that the majority are women, between twenty and twenty-nine years old, and with a university education. The countries with the most presence of the Booktuber community are Mexico, Spain, and Colombia, followed by Argentina and Peru. BookTube channels increased rapidly

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#### <sup>1</sup>Notes

In this video Elizabeth Vallish reviewed John Green’s *Looking for Alaska*.

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This research was performed in accordance with the principles stated in the Declaration of Helsinki and the ethical protocols established by the Comissió Institucional de Revisió Ètica de Projectes (CIREP-UPF).

between 2013 and 2015. Their production then stabilized and migrated and diversified to different platforms, like Instagram and TikTok, as we will see in this article (Tomasena, 2021).

BookTubers have developed a catalogue of audiovisual genres that go far beyond the classic "video reviews". Most of them are adaptations of the most popular genres on YouTube, and include wrap-ups, BookTags, BookHauls, and BookChallenges (Tomasena, 2022). These different audiovisual genres opened the discourse to certain aspects of books and reading that professional literary criticism does not usually consider. BookTubers, for example, also treat the book as an object of desire and consider its material dimension and the emotional associations of young people surrounding their reading experiences.

Despite the great variety of channels, more than 90% of the views are concentrated in the 20% most popular channels (Tomasena, 2019). This distribution has a "long tail" profile (Anderson 2010) with deep implications for BookTubers: while the majority of them engage in BookTuber practices because they love books – in the sense of "participatory culture" (Jenkins 2006; Jenkins et al. 2009; Jenkins Ito and boyd 2015) – only a minority can take part in the "influencer economy" and establish promotion deals with brands or obtain significant revenue from YouTube's Partners Program (Tomasena, 2019; Cunningham and Craig, 2019, 2021). This situation places BookTubers at the center of a very complex set of relationships and negotiations with different actors from the literary world and the digital ecosystem. In this sense, the use of the interface model (Scolari, 2021) as an analytical approach allows us to obtain a deeper understanding of the complexity of these processes and to learn about new ways of cultural intermediation in one of the most important cultural industries: publishing.

The publishing industry is going through a transition to new formats and circuits of literary circulation (electronic books, audiobooks, self-publishing, independent labels, fanfiction, crowdfunding, etc.) (Philips and Bashkar 2019; Thompson 2021) that constantly antagonize the giants of the international electronics industry, such as Amazon and Google. Traditional literary prescribers, like newspapers, literary supplements, and specialized critic magazines, that dominated much of the 20th century, have lost their influence. In this context, the communication and marketing departments of publishers have embraced BookTubers as a way of promoting their books, especially among young people.

Sorensen and Mara (2013) studied BookTubers as a "networked knowledge community" in which members learn through forms of socialization with shared rules, values,

and hierarchies. From a similar perspective, other authors (Jeffman 2015, Tomasena, 2020) have used the concept of “participatory culture” (Jenkins 2006; Jenkins et al. 2009; Jenkins Ito and boyd 2015) and, importantly, they included scholars who produced the first influential works on YouTube (Burgess and Green 2018; Lluch 2014, 2017; Snickars and Vonderau 2009). For instance, Lluch (2014, 2017) studied BookTubers’ practices in relation to previous deinstitutionalized reading meditations on the internet, like literary blogs, forums, and social networks, apart from families, schools and libraries. Her work emphasizes the possibilities BookTubing has for reading and writing literacies among young people, a trend that has also been explored by other researchers (Rovira-Collado 2017; Torralba Miralles 2018; Vizcaíno-Verdú, Contreras-Pulido and Guzmán-Franco 2019). Other research works have explored BookTubers’ creation of audiovisual genres (Lluch 2017; Ravettino Destefanis 2015; Rovira-Collado 2017; Tomasena, 2022; Scolari et. al, 2021), community pressures (Ehret, Boegel, and Manuel-Nekouei 2018), their relationship with the literary field (Tomasena, 2019) and the relationships between YouTube’s affordances and the social uses (Sued 2016).

The article introduces an interface-centered analysis. It is an approach based on the expansion of the traditional concept of "(user) interface" such that it can be applied to other social and cultural settings (Scolari, 2009, 2021) ; Scolari et al, 2022). It has two main objectives:

- To analyze the BookTuber phenomenon employing an interface-centered approach;
- To test and evaluate the possibilities of this kind of analysis based on the identification of actors, relationships, and processes.

The interface-centered approach, in this context, will be used to identify, describe, and analyze the actors, relationships, and processes of the BookTube ecosystem. This approach has been applied in other cases, including for museums (Rodriguez 2022), cinema (López del Castillo Wilderbeek 2022), streaming platforms (Angulo Granda 2022; Grueso Pascual 2022), online education (Ambrosino 2022), and political institutions (Fernández Pedemonte 2022). It is meant to be a simple, flexible and easy-to-use framework for describing socio-technological assemblages and identifying critical elements in their functioning (Scolari, 2021), as we will see in the section "Analytical Framework".

The interface-centered analysis of BookTubers reveals how emerging digital content producers can acquire a crucial intermediation role even when they are not as "big" as other types of content producers, like lifestyle bloggers or gamers. It also reveals the socio-

technical relationships that BookTubers establish between systems that have long been not connected: on one hand, the digital media ecosystem, with its affordances, actors, and rules; and, on the other hand, a historically important industry in Western societies, the publishing, which has its own set of actors, relationships, and processes.

The article is organized as follows: in the first section the emergence of BookTubers is presented in the context of two broader processes: the long history of reading practices and the contemporary explosion of YouTubers and video streamers. The second section presents the data-gathering (which integrated qualitative and quantitative techniques) and the data-analysis process (the above-mentioned interface-centered approach). The third section identifies and describes the main actors, relationships, and processes of the "BookTube interface". This section finishes with a description of a series of critical situations that emerged during the analysis. Finally, the article concludes with a synthesis of the outcomes and a reflection on the possibilities of an interface-centered approach.

### **The emergence of BookTubers**

To forestall the temptation of explanations based on "technological exceptionalism" (Jenkins 2009), it is important to situate the BookTuber phenomenon on the long arc of the history of reading and reviewing practices. The discipline known as History of Reading has explored the social transformations that the different technological supports and reading practices have brought to social life (Cavallo and Chartier 1998; Chartier 1993; Eisenstein 1979; Martin 1992). In this sense, the activity of BookTubers, along with that of Bookstagramers on Instagram, Booktokers on TikTok, or readers who share and review their readings on Goodreads, are part of this long tradition of reading and reviewing practices. As explained by Jenkins in the Introduction to Burgess and Green's classic book *YouTube : Online Video and Participatory Culture*:

If YouTube seems to have sprung up overnight, it is because so many groups were ready for something like YouTube; they already had communities of practice that supported the production of DIY media, already evolved video genres and built social networks through which such videos could flow (Jenkins 2009, 110).

The emergence of the World Wide Web in the 1990s and the explosion of social media and platforms in the new century increased the number of actors (authors, readers, texts, institutions, technologies) involved and the complexity of the text production,

circulation, and reading processes. The digitization of communication processes has radically transformed the world of reading, including the roles of publishers (Logan 2008), bookstores (Carrión 2013), and, of course, readers.

Digitization has completely altered the way texts are produced and transmitted. Cavallo and Chartier have described this change as “the third reading revolution since the Middle Ages” (1998, 42). This revolution has broken the continuity of the texts in a physical object and replaced it with databases, electronic files, and keywords, thus transforming the context; it has also broken with the materiality of the works, giving the reader control over the ways in which the text is represented; finally, it has transformed the economy of writing since the same text can be produced, transmitted and read simultaneously (Scolari, 2019).

In his work on Anglo-Saxon commercial publishing, Thompson (2013) identified three major transformations that have occurred in the industry in the last twenty years: a) the growth of distributors and sellers, b) the rise of literary super-agents, and c) concentration of ownership. The readers’ role in the book market now goes beyond mere consumption. Bhaskar (2013) detected that in a media ecosystem characterized by abundance, the act of publishing is much more than just printing books, it is also making them visible. In this context, the readers’ activity on social media is increasingly crucial – thereby readers not only contribute to the visibility of books as merchandise, but also participate in debates about their legitimacy.

Therefore, for the publishing field, the emergence of BookTubers and other reading mediators is crucial for understanding how the economic and social capital gained in digital platforms can help not only to make books visible in a media-saturated world, but also to understand how these new actors contribute to producing the meaning and value of the literary work.

### **Analytical framework**

This study brings together two analytical approaches. Firstly, the ethnographic approach was employed in the fieldwork and the general data-gathering and data-analysis processes. This qualitative approach, however, was reinforced in the first stages with quantitative techniques. Secondly, the interface-centered analysis model was used to examine the BookTubers’ network of actors, their relationships, and processes.

### ***BookTube ethnography***

The empirical foundation for this study is based on a three-year digital ethnography project (Ardévol and Gómez-Cruz 2014; Hine 2015; Pink et al. 2016) among Spanish-speaking BookTubers. This included direct observation, auto-ethnography, mediated interactions in digital platforms, semi-structured interviews, semiotic-discursive video analysis, and descriptive statistics. This ethnographic fieldwork develops a “thick description” (Geertz 1973) of the media practice and cultures of a human group, both in online and offline contexts. Ethnography frames the research as an intersubjective process that is always contingent and perfectible; understands the researcher’s subjectivities not as an epistemological obstacle but the basic condition for knowledge; and proposes the researcher’s epistemic vigilance and reflective processes as ways to validate the research outcomes.

The fieldwork among BookTubers took place between 2016 and 2021; it included the following research methods and techniques:

- Autoethnography, using a YouTube Channel that one of the researchers created to publish videos on a weekly basis as a way to engage and obtain an embodied and self-reflective sense of the practices of BookTubers, as proposed by Hine (2015).
- Participant observation in public events, like TubeCon convention (Madrid, February 2017) and Guadalajara’s International Book Fair (Mexico, December, 2017 and 2018), and in some creators’ production spaces to observe their filming process.
- Digital interaction in BookTubers’ platforms, not only on their YouTube channels, but also on other social media sites like Instagram, Twitter, Goodreads, and personal blogs.
- Seventeen semi-structured interviews with different BookTubers from Colombia, Mexico, and Spain. Three were conducted in person and 14 through videoconferences. The topics included their production routines, personal motivations and values, the social bonding with other BookTubers and their followers, and the relationships with YouTube’s ecosystem and with the publishing field (authors, publishers, literary fairs, etc.).
- Descriptive statistics about 464 BookTube channels and videos ( $n=51,322$ ). These data were gathered using digital methods (Rieder 2015) and analyzed to obtain a “wide sense” of the phenomenon (Tomasena, 2021).

Transcriptions of the interviews, along with video transcriptions, fieldnotes, and clippings from online interactions, were coded using NVivo. The coding process was guided by a first rough thematic categorization; the data were further coded inductively looking for a) actors, b) relationships and c) processes, following the interface-centered analysis model that will be explained in the next section.

For a deeper methodological reflection about this particular process, consult Tomasena (2023).

### *Interface analysis*

In the context of the present study the "interface" is not understood as a "tool" but rather as a place of interaction, that is, a place where human, institutional, textual, and technological actors relate to each other. In other words, the interface is a network of actors that interact with each other in a place where they carry out different processes (Scolari, 2019; Scolari et al., 2022). To analyze an interface the researcher must first identify the technological (hardware, software, etc.), human (designers, conts, laws, protocols, etc.) actors that participate in that network. Once the different actors have been mapped, the researcher's next step is to identify the relationships that link them. Different types of relationships can exist in an interface: unidirectional, bidirectional, or multidirectional; asymmetrical or symmetrical; cooperative or competitive, and so on. The interface-centered approach is bottom-up and focused on identifying emerging relationships (and not on the automatic transposing of a previous set of relationships). The researcher continues analysis with the identification of processes, that is, sequences of events or operations that unfold over time. The best way to analyze processes is to follow the flow of data, signs, goods or capitals and to analyze the actors' practices. Other processes may involve other interfaces or their actors, i.e., coevolution processes. The analysis concludes with the identification of critical points, fractures, and tensions in the interface. This is the main contribution of this approach: the identification of frictions between actors or problems inside processes so that, in a second phase, redesign processes can be activated to improve the functioning of the interface (Scolari, 2019; Scolari et al., 2022).).

This interface-centered method is inspired by Human-Computer Interaction approach (Shneiderman et al. 2017), Actor-Network Theory (ANT) (Law 1999; Latour 1999a, 1999b, 2005) and other approaches such as Assemblage Theory (DeLanda 2006, 2016), and complex



thought (García 2006). In the last 15 years HCI has evolved and become increasingly social and interpretative, focusing beyond the traditional user-interface (see the discussion about the different “waves” in HCI research in Bagnara and Pozzi 2016; Bødker 2015; Harrison et al. 2007; Tanenbaum and Tanenbaum 2018). In this context, more than a new “wave” in HCI research, the interface-centered approach proposes a double movement: on one side, moving towards expanding the aperture of the interface concept beyond digital tools, and on the other side, towards opening an intensive interdisciplinary dialogue that involves other research experiences and theoretical constructions.

There is an established tradition in the application of the ANT framework to media and communication (i.e., Couldry 2008; Spöhrer and Ochsne 2017; Ryfe, 2022). ANT is a fundamental interlocutor of an interface-centered approach; however, one of its limitations is the instability of its theoretical discourse (and, consequently, its methodological framework). It is well known that researchers like Law (1999) and Latour (2005) deliberately avoid a solidification of ANT. This strategy, which differentiates ANT from the rest of the theoretical-analytical approaches, can play against it when it comes to developing a basic and simple set of analytical and interventional tools. The interface-centered approach recovers an important part of ANT's contributions but proposes a basic set of categories (“actor”, “relationship”, “process”) that can even be employed by junior researchers without a deep theoretical background. Moreover, like ANT, the interface-centered approach also considers that both human and non-human actors have agency; however, it maintains, at least in the first phase of intervention, a division of actors (“technological”, “individual”, “institutional”, etc.) to facilitate their precise identification and positioning on a map. The intervention of the interface-centered approach goes beyond the (deep) description of technosocial settings proposed by ANT: like in the tradition of HCI research, its final objective is to detect flaws and tension points to facilitate subsequent interventions. Finally, other interdisciplinary references like Assemblage Theory (DeLanda 2006, 2016) propose a solid theoretical and even philosophical approach that lacks a concrete expression in the methodological plane. The interface-centered approach comes to fill that gap through a simple set of categories that facilitate analyzing any interface and detecting critical issues.

The interface-centered approach also complements the scientific work that is currently developing around platformization processes (Nieborg and Poell 2018; Srnicek 2017; van Dijck, Poell, and de Waal 2018;), especially those related to other cultural industries (Duffy, Nieborg and Poell 2019). According to van Dijck, Poell, and de Waal (2018) an online

platform is a “programmable digital architecture design to organize interactions between users – not just end users but also corporate entities and public bodies” (4). The platform-centered approach privileges the analysis of specific architectures from a perspective that, following van Dijck (2013), could be based on six categories: ownership, governance, business model, technology, users/usage, and content. The interface-centered approach proposes a bottom-up intervention, which is much “lighter” and less loaded with analytical categories as it just looks for actors, relationships, and processes. This method mainly focuses on the connections and interactions between all kinds of actors, their frictions and tensions. In this context, the interface-centered approach can be applied to any kind of technosocial phenomenon or assemblage, not just to “platforms”.

## **Analysis**

This section presents the main human, technological, and institutional actors, their relationships, and their processes of the BookTube interface and concludes with a description of the critical points detected during the analysis.

### *Actors*

This subsection presents the main actors that take part in the BookTubers interface. Due to space limitations, it will only show the most significant ones; however, a summarized view of these actors can be found in Table 1.

#### *Human actors*

The main human actors on this interface are BookTubers writ large, i.e., including those posting book review videos on other social platforms. Gabriel<sup>3</sup>, a Mexican BookTuber, started using the family video camera during his holidays when he was a kid and later decided to study audiovisual communication. Aurora had always been interested in language, writing, and orthography; one day, she shared a video on Facebook about *The City of God*, and her high school friends encouraged her initiative and asked for more videos. “I filmed that video because I was bored, not because I planned to become a YouTuber or a BookTuber”. In Spain, some BookTubers came from other online reading spaces, like literary

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<sup>3</sup> To preserve the informant's privacy, this work uses pseudonyms. Other explicit references that might compromise the identity of participants have also been removed.

blogs, an online portal about young-adult literature called *El templo de las mil puertas* (*The Thousand-door Temple*), or the online forums of the writer Laura Gallego (Lluch 2017).

Other human actors are the BookTubers' followers, to which they usually refer to as "the community". These actors can be occasional viewers or loyal fans who have subscribed to the channels and follow them in other social platforms. Alicia, from Mexico, considers that the most fun part of being a BookTuber is the possibility to interact with other people, to really be able to talk about books in the comments section of her videos. "Different ways of reading the same literary work, that's super interesting and super enriching. That's what I really love, to receive this feedback".

The ability to form and manage a community is one of the distinctive elements of a YouTuber (Cunningham and Craig 2017), and measured through the platform's quantitative metrics (number of subscribers, views, likes, dislike, comments, etc.) becomes both the condition for better placement among search engines and algorithms and an expression of social capital that can be transferred, exchanged or sold.

Other human actors identified in the interface are those related to the publishing world, like public relations and communication managers, and also managers of advertising companies and multi-channel networks (enterprises that intermediate between YouTubers, advertisers, and platforms in exchange for a percentage of the creator's income) (Lobato 2016; Vonderau 2016). Even when these relationships have an institutional nature, there is a personal element involved, since the in-depth knowledge of each person's profile and taste is crucial for building trust.

A special case is that of book authors. When asked about her motivations to open her channel, Alicia answered that, apart from building a community, she wanted to meet her favorite author, Rosa Montero. After publishing videos about Montero and tagging her in Twitter and Facebook, the Spanish author responded in a grateful and friendly way. Later on, they exchanged private messages and established a personal relationship. Montero sent her signed books and they were able to meet during Guadalajara's Book Fair, where they filmed a video together. In the comments section, Alicia's followers celebrated that she has been able to "fulfil her dream".

### *Institutional actors*

This category includes private and public institutions, for example, publishers, book fairs, advertising agencies, multi-channel networks, and, obviously, the YouTube/Alphabet corporation. From publishers, BookTubers receive free books, access to authors or invitations to exclusive events like movie premieres. Book fairs and literary festivals include them in their programs in an effort to reach younger followers. For example, every year the Buenos Aires International Book Fair invites very popular international BookTubers to join local creators in a big event, and Guadalajara International Book Fair has not only included them in its program, but also organizes a yearly contest of video-reviews called “Somos BookTubers” (“We are BookTubers”).

At the beginning of the fieldwork for this study, some of the established literary institutions rejected BookTubers due to their lack of academic credentials or their "illegitimate" literary taste (young adult literature, fantasy, horror or sci-fi); however, now, BookTubers are becoming increasingly accepted and incorporated into different organizing activities and roles. Some of them have become community managers for publishing houses or audiobook platforms; others now work as proof-readers and trend-seekers for literary agencies or publishers; and the most popular ones have become authors for the young adult audiences, a strategic way to transform online popularity into book sales (Tomasena, 2019).

Regarding advertising agencies and multi-channel networks, only a small number of BookTubers are popular enough to participate in YouTube’s economy; however, many of them expect to grow their popularity enough so they can gain a profit from this system. Other institutional actors include organizations related to education and culture, like schools and libraries, and museums, which invite BookTubers to give public talks or to organize workshops, and in some cases, part of their followers have institutionalized themselves as fan clubs or squads, like FaFans (fans of Fa Orozco), or Coleccionistas (fans of Sebas G. Mouret).

Finally, a series of protocols (like "grammars" that regulate the functioning of the interface) should also be included among the institutional actors, from guidelines established by book publishers to YouTube’s terms of service. In the case of YouTube, the conditions that regulate what content creators can upload are complex and change constantly. The most important are related to: a) the Partners Program (monetization), b) copyright protection

(ContentID), c) age restrictions, d) inappropriate content (explicit language, sexual and violent content, illegal activities, etc.), and e) advertising (Google Ads). During the research period, several controversies related to these protocols arose, like the changes in the monetization policies in 2017 (known as "Adpocalypse," Kumar 2019), the deindexing of LGBTBI content by automated systems in March 2017, and demonetization of videos for alleged copyright infringement.

### *Technological actors*

The basic technological actors are the set of tools BookTubers use as video producers such as hardware (cameras, lights, microphones, computers, etc.) and software (video and image editing, sound mixing, special effects, etc.). The DIY (Do it Yourself) discourse reinforces the values of participation and authenticity over technical perfection. For example, Juan José, explained that “I started uploading my content with an awful camera, with a horrendous microphone. My first videos are really cringeworthy ... But I said: ‘I don't care, I want to upload my content’”. After 5 years as a BookTuber, Aurora still doesn't care: “I record my videos with my mobile phone”. However, when most BookTubers continue and their channels get some success, they do aim to improve the quality of their videos.

The presence of bookshelves in the background of their videos is almost a sign of distinction among Booktubers. Jeffman (2015) has argued that this presence perpetuates traditional assumptions related to the book as an object that symbolizes intelligence, knowledge, and social status and functions as a vehicle for BookTubers to display their cultural capital to their viewers, something that is also related to the fan and collector cultures. BookTubers have even developed audiovisual genres around the public display of their trophies (i.e., “Bookshelf Tours”). Finally, there are the reading devices. Some of the BookTubers read ebooks and PDFs or on subscription platforms, e.g., Nubico, BookMate, Audible, Storytel. However, most of them prefer to read traditional printed books.

**Table 1.** Main actors of the BookTube interface.

Type	Profile	Examples
Human	Content producers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● BookTubers</li> <li>● Self-published authors</li> <li>● Professional authors</li> </ul>
	Followers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Channel subscribers, occasional viewers, followers on other social media</li> </ul>
	Managers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● PR and communications managers</li> <li>● Advertisers</li> </ul>
	Others	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Family members</li> </ul>
Institutional	Organizations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● YouTube / Alphabet</li> <li>● Multi-channel networks</li> <li>● Publishers</li> <li>● Book fairs</li> <li>● Self-published authors</li> <li>● Multi-channel networks</li> <li>● Advertisers</li> <li>● Libraries</li> <li>● Schools</li> <li>● Fans clubs / squads</li> </ul>
	Protocols	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Publisher's public relations protocols</li> <li>● YouTube's terms of service <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Partners' programs (monetization)</li> <li>○ ContentID (copyright)</li> <li>○ Terms of service for content</li> </ul> </li> <li>● Basic set of rules for users to navigate, visualize content, and comment in a platform</li> </ul>
	Juridical	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Copyright laws</li> <li>● Taxes</li> <li>● Children's Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA)</li> </ul>
Technological	Hardware	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Production equipment (cameras, lights, microphones, computers, etc.)</li> </ul>
	Software	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Production software (editing, mixing, special effects, etc.)</li> <li>● Digital formats (PDF, ePub, etc.)</li> </ul>

	Platforms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● YouTube systems (video upload, ContentID, Analytics, etc.)</li> <li>● Monetization, algorithms and search engines</li> <li>● Subscription systems</li> <li>● Other platforms: Twitter, Instagram, Twitch, TikTok</li> </ul>
	Reading devices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Printed books, e-books</li> </ul>
	Spaces	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Bedrooms, bookshelves</li> </ul>

### ***Relationships***

Regarding the human-technology relationships, there is a basic set of connections between the content producer (the BookTuber), the followers, and the platforms. These exchanges are always multidirectional as both human and technological actors are mutually transformed by the interactions (Scolari, 2021). For example, BookTubers produce and share videos that are analyzed, quantified, and hierarchized by the platform to match the demand according to the algorithms; at the same time, BookTubers interpret the statistical data provided by the platform and produce new videos. This puts them in a contingent situation in relationship with the platform. “You depend a lot on the whims of Google to determine how your video will perform during the first 24 hours, and that determines how it’s going to perform for the rest of its life”, says Bruno, a BookTuber from Mexico.

The datafied systems of YouTube also pressure BookTubers to have “good numbers”, like in the traditional broadcasting systems. “I’d love to keep growing”, answered Betty, from Spain, when she was asked about her expectations. The verb “to grow” is crucial; on the contrary, the expression used to express lack of expectations, saturation or boredom is “to stagnate”: “My channel has stagnated”; “my views stagnated”. These numbers objectify what van Dijck (2013) defined as the popularity principle – “the more contacts you have and make, the more valuable you become” (van Dijck, 2013, 13) and enable the processes of *commerce of connectivity* (see next section).

Regarding the relationships between human actors, BookTubers establish relationships with two sets of actors that are usually not connected: on one hand, authors and publishers; and on the other hand, their audiences (subscribers and followers). They also relate to other BookTubers in two ways: they *compete* for the audience (like in traditional

broadcasting) but, at the same time, sometimes they *cooperate* to reinforce their identity as a specific collective within YouTube. A good example of this cooperation is the B4Tipos collective. This feminist group of BookTubers encourages the followers of all their channels to read a particular book written by a woman every month; the experience concludes with a massive hangout with the participation of the whole collective and, sometimes, the authors of the book themselves (Tomasena, 2019).

The relationship between BookTuber and their followers is the axis of this interface. This connection goes beyond the reproduction of videos or the introduction of comments on YouTube: as they may become micro-celebrities (Marwick 2013, 2015), this situation generates tensions caused by public exposure, i.e., unsolicited comments about their personal appearance (González and Lomelí 2018).

During the research a multidirectional set of relationships between users was detected. Some fans formed "fan clubs" or "squads" around some of the most popular BookTube channels. These groups actively participate in the dissemination of the videos and write comments using different support hashtags. These fans also produce fan-art and write fanfiction, send messages of support, and in some cases, organize meetings, courses, and public readings. It is difficult to know to what extent these groups are a self-organized and "wild" expression, typical of the fan culture developed around popular narrative worlds (Jenkins 2006), or whether the BookTubers have promoted their formation. What is undeniable is that some BookTubers encourage and interact with them.

Regarding the relationships between technological actors, the BookTube interface is based on a network of hardware and software components. These actors are not isolated but have different kinds of multidirectional and cooperative technological relationships. For example, a certain hardware must "fit" with a specific software to work properly. On the other hand, the inclusion of components from platform competitors is permanent, for example when YouTube imported features like short videos from TikTok and Instagram, or live streaming from Twitch.

During the research it was found that BookTubers (human actors) have to navigate through many platform regulations (institutional actors) that are operative through software systems (technological actors). Postigo (2016) studied how the YouTube affordances come together as a socio-technical architecture that transform user's activity into money. A good example is ContentID, a system designed to detect copyright infringements through an



automated system and to mediate between the video uploader and the copyright owner (it can be music, video or photos). Depending on the owners' preference, the content might be erased, silenced or de-monetized. In other words, institutional regulations and surveillance software are mutually interwoven. Without software, YouTube's terms of service would be hollow letters.

The relationships between human and institutional actors include the basic "interaction contract" (Scolari et. al, 2021) between the users and the platform, or the association between the BookTuber and the platform. This relationship is cooperative but, in certain cases, it may be conflictive. A very specific conflictive relationship was identified when content creators published videos against the changes in monetization policies that followed the big drop in advertisers known as "Adpocalypse" (Caplan and Gillespie 2020; Kumar 2019). Sometimes these conflicts may lead to migration of BookTubers and their followers from YouTube to other platforms, like Twitch or Instagram.

There is another set of relationships between BookTubers and publishers. Cooperation between them has increased to such extent that the publishers take BookTubers to be key actors in any publishing strategy, especially when the book is oriented to a younger target. In this context, BookTubers receive free books or get direct access to authors (Tomasena, 2019). This cooperation scales up when BookTubers become authors themselves and involve users, for example, the venture developed by certain Mexican BookTubers: Valentina Trava (*El librero de Valentina*), which developed paid online literary courses and book clubs; Alejandra Arévalo (*Sputnik*) which developed a subscription model, in which every month she selects a "surprise" book written by a woman and sends it through postal mail.

Finally, the most relevant relationship between institutional actors detected during the research is the competition between corporations (YouTube, TikTok, etc.), the so-called "platform wars" (Scolari, 2021). This competition also involves human and technological actors. The following table presents a synthesis of the main relationships detected in the BookTube interface (see Table 2).

**Table 2.** Main relationships of the BookTube interface.

Type	Actors involved	Examples
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Human-Technologies	BookTuber - production technology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Multidirectional relationships with production technologies (cameras, microphones, lights, editing software, etc.)</li> </ul>
	BookTuber - platform (YouTube)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Multidirectional relationships with the back-end of the platform (uploading videos, tagging, positioning tips, use of analytics, etc.)</li> </ul>
	BookTuber - platform (not YouTube)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Multidirectional relationships with other platforms (promoting videos, uploading other personal contents, e.g. photos on Instagram, tweets on Twitter)</li> </ul>
	User - platform	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Multidirectional relationships with the platform to navigate, reproduce, interact with, comment on the videos</li> <li>● Unidirectional data-extracting process from users to platform</li> </ul>
Human-Human	Booktuber - BookTuber(s)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Cooperation/competition relationships between BookTubers</li> </ul>
	BookTuber - user	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Simulation of a bidirectional relationship in a unidirectional setting</li> </ul>
	User - user	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Multidirectional relationships between users (creation of "fan clubs", "squads", etc.)</li> </ul>
Technology-Technology	Hardware - software	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Multidirectional / cooperation relationships between reproduction devices, operative systems, apps, APIs, etc.</li> </ul>
	Platform - platform	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Multidirectional / competitive relationships between YouTube and Instagram, Twitch, Netflix, etc.</li> </ul>
Technology - Institutional	Platform system - YouTube	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Multidirectional relationships between YouTube's institutional guidelines and the platform software system: ContentID (copyright), Partner's program (monetization), Algorithmic moderation systems</li> </ul>

Human- Institutional	BookTubers - publishers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Cooperation with publishers (free books, access to authors, etc.)</li> <li>● BookTubers become authors</li> <li>● Paid book clubs (Valentina, Sputnik)</li> </ul>
	Users - BookTubers - platforms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Videos against YouTube monetization policies (Adpocalypse)</li> <li>● Platform migration or diversification from YouTube to Twitch or Instagram</li> <li>● Tactics to avoid copyright penalization</li> </ul>
Institutional - Institutional	Platform - platform	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Competition relationship between corporations</li> </ul>
	BookTubers - networks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Multi-directional relationships between YouTubers, networks, publishers, and platforms</li> <li>● Cooperation relationships between YouTubers and intermediary companies</li> </ul>

### *Processes*

The first set of processes that emerges from the BookTube interface is the semiotic exchange between human actors. These two-way production and interpretation processes mediated by the platform, like any other semiotic exchange, adopt the form of a double textual conflict: first, between the textual strategy of the original book and the strategies of the BookTuber as reader; second, between the textual translation (in the form of a video) produced by the BookTuber and the viewers' strategies. At the same time, viewers cooperate in the construction of the meaning of the videos.

Antonio states that the most successful videos are the ones about books that viewers have already read, written by popular authors like Stephen King and J. K. Rowling. "It's not that I want you to recommend a book to me, but rather I want to see your video about the same book I have already read. I'll watch your video, check what's your opinion, and then I'll tell you what I think. And this is independent of whether I liked it or not."

There is also another set of processes that are related to content production, distribution, management, and promotion. The most important are: a) producing content

based on group conventions (styles, audiovisual genres, and tones) that modulate their belonging and their followers' expectations; b) determining what the followers' want based on the analytics systems; c) positioning their content in relation to algorithms, search engines, and other automated systems that regulate the platform's terms of service; d) building a community through constant interaction and personal exposure in multiple social platforms; and e) dealing with public exposure and online toxicity – what Marwick has described as “affective labour” (2013).

Through these processes, BookTubers acquire a symbolic prestige through their public performance, based on their literary tastes, point of view, and personality, and build a community of followers around their channels. As we saw earlier, these connections are related to the relationships that content producers establish through the platform data systems and affordances, and are expressed as a quantitative measure (number of views, subscribers, likes) of popularity, which becomes a commodity. Or as van Dijck (2013) has argued, “the more contacts you have and make, the more valuable you become” (13).

Although most BookTubers are not popular enough to make money through traditional revenues of the platform (Partner's Program or contract with third-party advertisers) they benefit from other skills and relationships developed during their participation, especially through their relationships and “collaborations” with different actors of the literary world (publishers, authors, agents, book fairs, etc.) (Tomasena, 2019).

In this sense, BookTubers interconnect two separate worlds (each a different interface with its own actors, protocols, and technologies): on one hand, YouTube and social platforms, with their own rules, advertisers, intermediaries, algorithms, affordances, where they have a marginal role compared with other types of content creators, like gamers, fashion vloggers, and travel vloggers; and, on the other hand, the publishing world, that has its own actors, mediators, and distribution channels and that structurally needs to reach younger readers.

This “commerce of connectivity” is the basis of what content creators do in social platforms, and it can be compared to similar situations between different types of content producers and their relationships with other cultural industries. For example, Ibai Llanos, a popular streamer on Twitch, has transferred his popularity with the gaming, e-sports, and soccer industries to deals with EA Sports, Banco Santander, and La Liga. Or Dulceida, the fashion vlogger who has capitalized her connectivity by developing her own clothing and

perfume brands, a music festival, and her own company to represent other influencers. representation of other influencers.

There are other processes that affect BookTubers, which are not specifically related to them, but are shared with other content creators, not only on YouTube, but in the whole platform ecosystem. There is an on-going process of coevolution of platforms, in which many of them exchange and adopt their functions. If YouTube was the first platform to offer creators part of the money it got from advertisers – opening the possibility to develop a professional career as producers – years later Twitch and Patreon developed a different business model, allowing fans to pay content creators directly through monthly subscriptions.

Many content creators migrated away from YouTube to platforms such as Twitch and Patreon, discontent with its opaque monetization policies, so YouTube reacted by enabling a similar feature for their channels: memberships. Others have moved to or diversified their presence onto Instagram, because it is easier to use, immediate and very popular among young followers. There are other similar hybridizations: Instagram mimicked Snapchat, and recently TikTok, which has contributed to the explosion of vertical videos; and now YouTube has enabled YouTube shorts.

Finally, as we have noted, there is an increasingly complex process of platform regulation, especially related to the moderation of content (protection of under-aged users, prevention of fake news and violent, and hateful discourses). Although this is not related specifically to Booktubers, it forces all content creators to constantly adapt to new features, options, policies, and technical systems that inform their practices.

**Table 3.** Main processes of the BookTube interface.

Processes	Examples
Meaning production and interpretation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Textual interpretation of books by BookTuber</li> <li>● Textual production (BookTuber video)</li> <li>● Textual interpretation by followers</li> <li>● Textual production (followers' comments)</li> </ul>
Content production	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Script writing</li> <li>● Video recording and editing</li> </ul>

Content distribution	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Content spreading on YouTube and other platforms</li> </ul>
Content management and promotion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Learning and adapting BookTubers' audiovisual genres (imitation)</li> <li>● Building an audience of followers</li> <li>● Dealing with YouTube's technological systems and terms of service</li> <li>● Developing and implementing strategies for increasing their audience</li> <li>● Promoting the content in different platforms</li> <li>● Evaluating the impact of BookTube videos and comments to improve the strategy.</li> </ul>
Community management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Interacting with followers</li> <li>● Interacting with other BookTubers and streamers</li> </ul>
Commerce of connectivity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Growing an audience and getting "good numbers" to: improve position in YouTube's algorithms and search engines, increase earnings through YouTube Partner's Program, sell this influence to third parties (advertisers)</li> <li>● Transferring the popularity to the publishing world</li> <li>● Launching their own ventures as "entrepreneurs" (paid reading clubs, publishing ventures)</li> </ul>
Co-evolution	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Hybridizations with other platforms: YouTube Shorts (from TikTok, Instagram), Memberships (from Patreon, Twitch), Livestreaming (Twitch), Superchat, YouTube Premium (Netflix), Audience segmentation (YouTube Kids)</li> </ul>
Migration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Migrating to other platforms which offer better conditions</li> <li>● Diversifying the content production for several platforms and transferring followers between them</li> </ul>
Platform regulation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Adapting to constantly changing platform regulations regarding the content (under-age, fake information, or pornographic content), tax obligations, and monetization</li> </ul>

Figure 1 shows a map of the online BookTuber interface. Since it is impossible to represent all of the actors, relationships, and processes identified during the research in a

single image, the figure only shows the most recurrent ones. In the map it is very clear how BookTubers mediate between two different networks of actors.

### *Tensions and frictions*

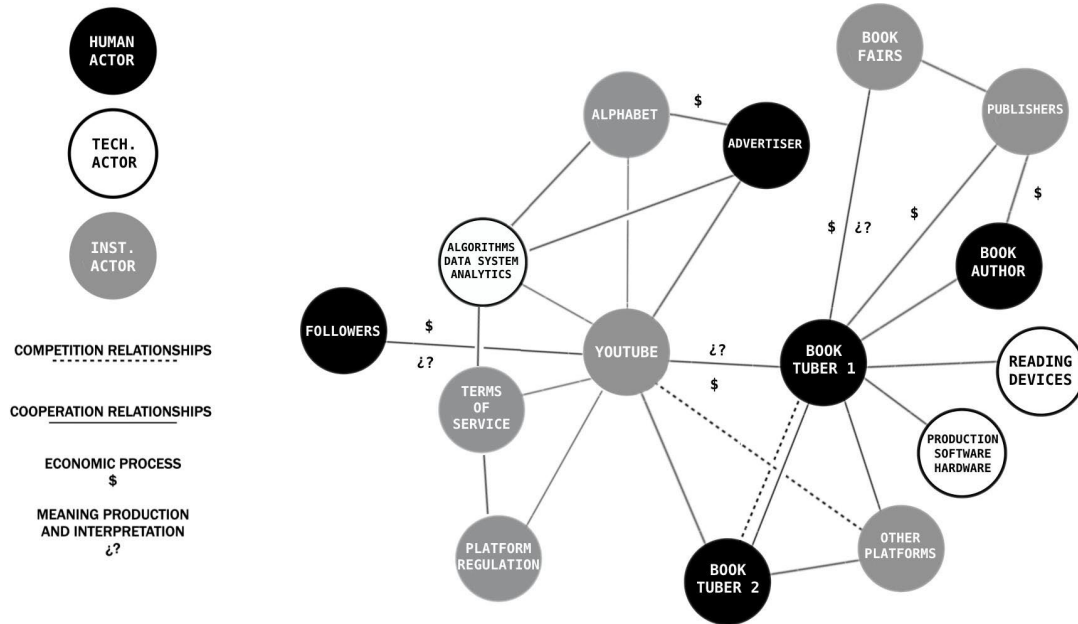
This section describes four critical situations identified during the fieldwork. First, BookTubers provoke a polarizing reaction in the literary world: the more purist pole, represented by established critics and authors, despises them for being “too commercial”; at the same time, publisher’s commercial and public relations departments tend to co-opt them. This is consistent with Bourdieu's (1996) observation about cultural fields, where true artists are those who produce “art for art’s sake” and power and money are considered “suspicious”.

Second, conflict arises when some BookTubers try to reach a wider audience by expanding their content to other YouTube genres. In 2016, Malik, a Mexican BookTuber, uploaded a video criticizing other BookTubers for publishing videos with challenges and games – Para qué leer, “*Calamidad: Booktube a la decadencia*”, April 2, 2016.<sup>4</sup> “If you publish 25 videos, and only one is about books, does that make you feel like a BookTuber? What’s the difference between you and a YouTuber?”, questions Malik in the video. This case shows how the BookTuber interface works on a fragile equilibrium between two worlds. They have to keep their identity anchored to books, but can grow their influence by expanding their social media activities to gaming, fashion, tech or travel vlogging, etc.

**Figure 1.** Map of main actors, relationships, and processes of the BookTube interface.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3TxleEL1TYQ>. Accessed February 10, 2024.



Third, BookTubers (and other YouTubers) and the platform see algorithmic and automated systems moderate content differently. YouTube's monetization policies (Adpocalypse), which we have already discussed is a good example. Another good example is that of Javier Ruescas, a popular Spanish BookTuber and author, who published several tweets in March 2017 with the hashtag #YouTubePartyIsOver complaining that YouTube had de-indexed several of his videos about gay and transsexual characters in literature, among other videos that had LGTBI-related words in their title or descriptions. The platform apologized, arguing that it was a mistake generated by its automated systems. The case opened a big discussion within the LGTBI community. It also raised questions about algorithmic and human moderation systems and spotlighted the problematic relationship between the platform's governance standards about "good language" or "appropriate content for kids".

Finally, migrations of content creators (and their audiences) between platforms. For example, Josu Diamond, a popular Spanish BookTuber, developed an intense following on TikTok, publishing humorous content about book snobs, language teachers, and other related themes. And Fa Orozco, known as "the queen of BookTube", also moved to Twitch, where she streams more diverse content based on art-crafting, K-pop fandom, and of course, books. Other creators have embraced subscription paid book clubs as a way to build professional ventures around their personal brands; some of them, through their own websites, like *El*



*Librero de Valentina* or *Sputnik*, and others through subscription platforms, like Patreon and Ko-fi. In the scenario of ongoing platform competition, it wouldn't be strange for Western corporations to enter into an aggressive competition to attract high profile creators able to transfer their followers with them, which already happens with Chinese livestreamers (*wanghong*) (Cunningham Craig and Lv, 2019).

## Conclusions

When someone says "interface", people usually think of a keyboard, a mouse, and a screen; that is the "graphic user-interface" (GUI), the place where human actors interact with digital devices. In the approach proposed in the present study "interface" is understood from a broader perspective: "scaled" up to analyze more complex situations that involve many other actors and not only those from the digital realm.

Regarding the strengths and weaknesses of the interface-centered method, this approach is a work-in-progress, with only first steps taken so far. As already indicated in the introduction, it has been employed in different settings, from online video gaming to the platform workforce, museums, borderlands, and online education. Among its strengths, flexibility, scalability, and its capacity to develop high-density descriptions stand out. The interface-centered method can be employed at different "levels." For example, in the educational context, it could be employed at the following levels: the school table and the single student as an interface, the classroom as an interface, the school as an interface, the whole educational system as an interface, and so on. What is a single actor at one level can be opened and analyzed at the next level as if it were an interface itself. Therefore, interfaces are fractals or, expressed in other words, the content of an interface is another interface(s) (Scolari, 2021). The weaknesses are those of any scientific work still in progress: the interface-centered method has yet to be fine-tuned (for now researchers tend to work with ethnographic techniques, but these could be expanded to quantitative and computational methods). On a theoretical level, the confusions with the "user (graphic) interface" will continue to be quite common until the new extended conception of "interface" becomes consolidated. Finally, some researchers limit their intervention to just describing the actors, their relationships and processes; however, the final objective of this approach is to identify the tensions and conflicts on the interface.

In this article this framework has been employed to study BookTubers, emerging actors that operate on the borderline of two universes that are not usually connected: the publishing circuit and the world of YouTube and other social platforms. The analysis included the identification of the interface actors, relationships, processes, and the main critical issues and tensions. This interface-centered method, understood as a work-in-progress, would benefit from future comparative studies in two directions: between creators from different platforms (YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, Twitch, etc.) to explore the systemic tensions explored in this article regarding coevolution of platforms, user migrations and diversifications, and content regulation; and between YouTubers from different genres (gaming, travel, fashion, music, etc.) to study how the "commerce of connectivity" operates in relationships with other cultural industries.

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