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Versatile Camcorders
Looking at the GoPro-Movement

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Foreword

This book concerns the complex interrelations between a camera technology – the GoPro – and its modes of media production, their aesthetics, and the connection to the environment in which it emerged. It is meant as a contribution to a scholarly field that analyzes paradigmatic technological developments in their context, such as, for instance, the Walkman, the synthesizer, the DVD, or the iPhone. The idea to address this topic arose from a longer exchange that began in 2015 at a conference where both of us gave lectures that in part dealt with the GoPro.

The publication was preceded by a workshop with the authors at the Brandenburg Centre for Media Studies on June 21 and 22, 2018.

We would like to thank all those who participated for their enthusiasm and their substantial contributions to a topic that has so far received scant attention. We also thank Daniel Hendrickson for his conscientious translation and careful proofreading of the texts.

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<div style="text-align: right">Winfried Gerling and Florian Krautkrämer</div>

Looking at a Versatile Movement:
An Introduction to the Book and the Camera

Winfried Gerling, Florian Krautkrämer

The GoPro has lastingly changed the conditions for making images by conceiving the body and the device as a jointly acting unit. The device is small, robust, mobile, and can be used in a variety of ways, usually attached to the body or a piece of sports equipment. Hardly any other technology has so thoroughly and effectively staged the connection of media production and its aesthetics to the environment in which it is created. The presumed self-staging of users is therefore always also a staging of technology, which is skillfully utilized by the brand for its distribution purposes.

The development of this device, which is relatively simple in terms of technology but conceptually unique, gave rise, much like the iPhone, to its own culture and aesthetics: a culture that connected making images with action, thus producing a direct relationship between media production, technology, and "life."

Nick Woodman, the CEO of the GoPro Company, became an economic hero of the start-up scene in the Bay Area as the producer of the first small, robust action-cam as a new type of camera. In 2013, at the age of 38, he was one of America's youngest billionaires.[1] Woodman founded GoPro in 2002 after taking a year off when his previous start up had gone insolvent. During this time he pursued his passion for surfing, noticing that it was impossible to take good surfing photos with the amateur equipment available at the time. His experience led to developing the idea of a wristband with a waterproof case, which could hold a very simple, analogue, non-focusable, and easy-to-use viewfinder camera. The name of the company came from the need to produce professional images by easy means under difficult conditions: **go pro**fessional.

A mythology of the typical American self-made man has grown up around the founder. He is supposed to have sold jewelry from out of his VW bus to finance his new business. But what is often not reported in this story is that his father loaned him 200,000 dollars, while his mother

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[1]   "Youngest Billionaires of the 2013 Forbes 400", in: *Forbes* www.forbes.com/pictures/ eimh45igdg/7-nick-woodman/#7288dacae39d (last seen: 12.8.2019). By 2019 his estimated worth had shrunk to 800 million dollars.

gave an additional 35,000 to finance the business, after already having started two non-successful businesses.[2]

Due to the founder's personal experience, the first GoPro was exclusively sold in surf shops starting in 2004, complete with batteries, wrist strap, and a waterproof case. It quickly became clear to users that the camera was also a good choice outside the water to document a wide variety of sports activities where you needed your hands for something other than holding a camera. So even the analog version of the camera was used by a large number of (extreme) sports fans.

The digital GoPro was introduced in 2006 as one of the first cameras to record both videos and still photographs. It became a great economic success. It secured the company the high revenue of $800,000 versus $350,000 in the previous year. By 2007, the revenue had risen to $3.4 million[3] and grew exponentially until the end of 2014. GoPro was the fastest-growing producer of cameras worldwide at the time.

The company went public on the stock market in June 2014. Since then, the stock price has risen from $36 to $90 in 2014 and has steadily dropped further until today at around $4 (Juli, 2020).

2015 was the first hard year for GoPro: The company shipped more cameras than ever, but its revenue dropped 31 percent between the fourth quarter of 2014 and 2015.

And in 2016 the losses were even higher than in the previous year, but in 2017 the losses could be significantly reduced. Nevertheless, GoPro was looking for a buyer with the help of JP Morgan at the beginning of 2018, but since 2019 there no longer seems to be any plan to sell the company. The release of the GoPro Hero 7 in the fall of 2018 made the company profitable again.[4] The GoPro Hero 7 is the GoPro that has had the most sales worldwide.[5] In October 2019 GoPro released the suc-

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[2]   Ryan Mac: "Five Startup Lessons From GoPro Founder And Billionaire Nick Woodman", in: *Forbes*, 13.3.2013, www.forbes.com/sites/ryanmac/2013/03/13/five-startup-lessons-from-gopro-founder-and-billionaire-nick-woodman/#4f10f03c546e (last seen: 12.8.2019).

[3]   "GoPro's revenue Wave," in: *Forbes*, www.forbes.com/pictures/emdh45gfif/gopros-revenue-wave-2/#7a3613fe7a36 (last seen: 12.8. 2019).

[4]   Sean O'Kane: "GoPro turns its first profit since 2017, thanks to the Hero 7," in: *The Verge*, 1.2.2019, www.theverge.com/2019/2/6/18214446/gopro-earnings-profit-hero-7-holiday-season (last seen: 12.8.2019).

[5]   It is notable that sales of simple digital cameras have declined by 84% worldwide since 2010. The reason for this is the constant improvement of the cameras in smartphones. The market for high-quality digital cameras has remained relatively stable since 2010, and the market for action cameras is still growing, although competition has risen significantly. By now there are a great number of providers for these cameras, but no provider other than GoPro has so far managed to establish such a stable community for its product. Felix Richter: "Digital Camera Sales Dropped 84% Since 2010," in: *Statista*, 27.5.2019, www.statista.com/chart/5782/digital-camera-shipments/ (last seen: 12.8.2019). "Unit sales of action cameras worldwide from 2010 to 2017 (in millions)", ibid., https://www.statista.com/statistics/326898/worldwide-unit-sales-action-cams/ (last seen: 12.8.2019).

Fig. 1: Analog GoPro

Fig. 2: First digital GoPro

cessor model, the GoPro Hero 8, which includes both a few technical changes as well as an integrated mount and the possibility of attaching lighting to the side.

The GoPro Hero is a very small, relatively affordable high-tech camera with an interesting concentration of essential features that were – and continue to be – developed and refined with a close eye toward the target community.

Essential to the camera are its three modes of image production (video, single photographs, and time lapse) and its ability to record (stereo) sound.

One essential feature of the camera is the extreme wide-angle lens (fish-eye) with a fixed focal length of about 16mm (in relation to full-frame format).

The first GoPros omit much that has become standard in the digital camera world: no GPS, no zoom lens, no mobile connection, no complex user settings. All of this, however, is to the benefit of the extraordinary mobility and durability of the device. The missing functions and the lack of display (until GoPro Hero 4), just like the lack of connectivity to mobile networks, could be replaced by a smartphone or tablet. The initial limitations of the camera allowed for a meaningful concentration of essential functions, and the device could be kept very small. But this also marked its conceptual difference to conventional cameras. In response to technological developments and the expectations of users, the presumably missing functions have now all been integrated into the small device: displays, GPS, Bluetooth, WiFi, etc.[6]

One important aspect of the marketing of GoPro is that for a long time it was almost entirely unnecessary to spend money on advertising, since the content for advertising clips was produced by the users themselves, or the dissemination of user-generated clips on YouTube and GoPro's own YouTube channel alone were, or are, effective enough already.

> In place of an art director, acting cast, and team of videographers, GoPro simply hands a wearable camera to an amazing athlete and gets back advertising and marketing gold. Regular customers have become advertisers on a smaller scale, shooting high-quality video, loading it onto YouTube and social networks, and advertising the capabilities of the cameras to friends, family, and complete strangers.[7]

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[6] On the technological development of the camera and its consequences, see the article by Winfried Gerling in this volume (pp. 27–43).

[7] Kevin Bobowski: "How GoPro Is Transforming Advertising As We Know It," in: *Fastcompany*, 7.4.2014, https://www.fastcompany.com/3032509/how-gopro-is-transforming-advertising-as-we-know-it (last seen: 12.8.2019)

CAPTURE DIFFERENT

Fig. 3: GoPro commercial 2016

While the net profits from 2010 doubled to 24.6 million dollars in 2011, GoPro only spent 50,000 more on marketing, and in 2013 GoPro once again saw their profits rise to around 28 million dollars and spent only 41,000 dollars more on marketing (total marketing expenses in 2013: approx. $158,000[8]).

Partnerships were entered to mutual benefit with a variety of other brands: for instance with Marriot Hotels (Adventure Traveling), Virgin (Sales and Streaming), Xbox (Streaming), and Red Bull (Content Partner). Furthermore, competitions have frequently been held in the GoPro community at relatively low expense for the best surfing video or the best basketball trick shot, etc.[9] Events are often developed by Red Bull, for instance. These include international wingsuit[10] or mountain bike competitions. There could also be events that drew worldwide attention, such as Felix Baumgartner's spectacular space jump in 2012.[11] Red Bull sponsors the event and GoPro provides the cameras.[12]

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[8] Shanhong Liu: "GoPro's sales and marketing expenditure worldwide from 2012 to 2018", in: *Statista*, 18.2.2019, https://www.statista.com/statistics/451138/gopros-marketing-expenditure-worldwide/ (last seen: 12.8.2019).

[9] Marty Biancuzzo: "Why GoPro is Set for a Strong Wall Street Debut," in: *Wallstreet Daily*, 21.5.2014, www.wallstreetdaily.com/2014/05/21/gopro-ipo (last seen: 31.7.2018).

[10] "Dive into the world's only wingsuit slalom race," in: *RedBull*, https://www.redbull.com/se-en/2016-aces-wingsuit-race-videos (last seen: 12.8.2019).

[11] "Felix Baumgartner – Red Bull Stratos – Complete Space Jump – GoPro," YouTube, 16.10.2012, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hV39QwDY_JQ (last seen: 12.8.2019).

[12] Both companies have an extremely high number of subscribers on YouTube: GoPro 7.6 million/Red Bull 8.7 million, as of: August 2019.

The videos produced from these events are then shared on social media platforms like YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, and they then spur other GoPro users to produce similar or even more spectacular images, each trying to outdo the other. This sometimes puts them at significant danger, which is mentioned in many of the videos and commentary as the actual impetus to carry out these actions. So images are intentionally created by accident, images whose production can or should go out of control. Feeling like one is in the moment and at the same time knowing that this moment is being recording by the attached camera is as important as the action itself.[13] Showing a spectacular action, which is right at the edge of an accident, is the focus of these images.

The voluntary, but in part also existential integration of users into the process of production and marketing is a typical strategy for digital media companies. Martin Lister characterizes this as follows: "Forms of social media […] are now also recognised as ways of 'monetizing' the labour of amateurs and selling it back to them."[14] GoPro manages to do something here that only very few hardware producing companies can achieve: to establish a community that "labours" for them. As a rule, the productive surplus value in this "like economy"[15] tends to become regenerated in contexts of social media companies or in the form of purchasing recommendations like those suggested by Amazon and Google.

After a stagnation in camera sales GoPro produced its first scripted TV ad in 2016 in collaboration with an advertising agency. Its third quarter results were far below Wall Street expectations. Then about a week later GoPro was forced to recall its new drone. The eagerly awaited new product fell from the sky.[16]

For any other brand, this change in marketing would not make a big difference, but for a camera company that built its cult-like following on the back of an extensive catalog of user and brand-generated content from surfing and snowboarding to flying pelicans and kitten-saving firefighters, all shot with its wearable cameras, it represents a significant shift.

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[13]   On the aspect of risk, see Winfried Gerling: "Be a Hero – Self-Shoots at the Edge of the Abyss," in: Julia Eckel, Jens Ruchatz and Sabine Wirth, (eds.): *Exploring the Selfie – Historical Theoretical and Analytical Approaches to Digital Self-Photography*, London 2017, pp. 261–283.

[14]   Martin Lister: "Introduction," in: Martin Lister (ed.): *The Photographic Image in Digital Culture*, London, New York 2013, pp. 1–21, here p. 2.

[15]   See for instance Carolin Gerlitz: "Die Like Economy – Digitaler Raum, Daten und Wertschöpfung," in: *Generation Facebook: Über das Leben im Social Net*, Oliver Leistert and Theo Röhle (eds.), Bielefeld 2011, pp. 101–123.

[16]   On the aesthetics of drone videos, see the essay by Tobias Conradi in this volume (pp. 105–120).