User-Generated Online Video: The Next Public Sphere?

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Abstract

In this exploratory paper we examine the potential as well as the limitations of user-generated online video (UGOV) to facilitate political discourse between citizens within a 'virtual' public sphere. The potential of UGOV lies in the opportunities it presents to citizens for online self-expression and exchange that is open, accessible, compelling, unconstrained and unmediated. The limitations mirror those of the public sphere itself; they are closely related to the technological, socio-economic, geographic, ethnic, and age-related constraints on accessibility, as well as digital divides that have limited the democratic potential of the Internet as a whole.

1. Introduction

User-generated online video (UGOV) may have a greater capacity to facilitate democratic discourse in the tradition of the *public sphere* than older media formats. The virtual or online public sphere allows interactive communication between citizens who generate online content, including video. In this paper we explore the potential, and the limitations, of UGOV for enabling political discourse between citizens in the 'virtual' public sphere [1]. The potential of UGOV lies in the opportunities it presents to citizens for self-expression and exchange that is open, accessible, compelling, unconstrained and unmediated within the forum of the Internet [2]. The limitations of the medium mirror those of the public sphere itself [3]. These restrictions are closely related to the technological, socio-economic, geographic, ethnic, and age-related challenges of accessibility and the digital divides that have constrained the democratic potential of the Internet as a whole.

2. Theories and critiques of the public sphere

There are other theoretical explanations of discursive process that could address the role of UGOV in greater depth. This short paper is an initial exploration of the possibilities, potential, and limitations of UGOV for playing a role in democratic discourse, based on its capacity for facilitating the private production, and consumption, of opinion in a publicly accessible forum. The public sphere is an inclusive social or institutional space where citizens form collective public opinion through unfettered, un-coerced discourse [4]. Habermas' normative model of the public sphere was based on bourgeois interactions that occurred in eighteenth century coffee houses (1989 [1962]). During this period, the traditional controls of the church and state were declining and emerging governance models were based on constitutional law and democratic principles.

The public sphere model has been critiqued for its exclusions and omissions. Membership in European coffee houses was restricted by class, gender and ethnicity within a historically specific time frame. As open as discourse can be, there is equal likelihood that bias or incomplete information can interfere with the rationality. There is also the real possibility that consensus or even resolution of different viewpoints is not always possible or even good for democracy [5]. A specific geo-political context can produce a parochial vision of the world that affects the issue under discussion. The effectiveness of the model also depends on its ability to maintain an egalitarian discursive exchange; the size, location, proximity of members and the composition of the assembly can create different visions of what the public sphere is intended to accomplish [6], and whether there should be multiple [7] or parallel public spheres [8].

Habermas identified discourse as the process of working toward consensus through analysis, comparison, discussion and argument [9]. Forums for discourse are important to democracy because they provide opportunities for public conversation about social issues and activism [10]. Cultural integration can be strengthened through the process of opinion formation on a public scale, even if the end result is not consensus. An important part of informed discourse within the public sphere has been the provision of equal and widespread access to information about issues of public concern. One

of the key providers within democratic nations has been the critical free press in its role of public champion, with legally protected rights and freedoms.

Habermas warned of the 'manipulated public sphere' in which public opinion is a social, economic and psychological force to be manipulated by political or economic entities [11]. Whether due to ideological or economic forces, production and dissemination patterns have severely restricted the democratic potential of broadcast media. The media industry tends towards oligopoly structures that impose tight controls over editorial content and production mechanisms. Citizens are denied opportunities for expression by their exclusion from the production process [11, 12]. The sources of information used by the media tend to be a relatively small group of experts, and typically, minority and alternative viewpoints are underrepresented. None of the commercial, non-profit or publicly funded models [13] of broadcast mass media can guarantee a fully informed populace since there are service level disparities between citizens in different locations.

3. User-generated online video and the public sphere

By granting individual citizens the ability to produce audio-visual content and share it with a global audience, UGOV has expanded the definition of the public sphere beyond both communicative and geographic limitations of textual and personal interaction. Online video content can be taken from other sources, or recorded by citizens from their own perspectives, or footage of themselves. Once that content is uploaded to online "storage," the level of participation and engagement is up to the individual viewer, and the reach by both producers and audience members is global. Citizens interact on-line, meeting virtually at a central "location" for discourse with a choice of textual or video response formats. It is possible that some challenges associated with intercultural communications and literacy might be overcome by the use of Internet short form language, online translation engines for text, or the verbal communication of personal blog-style recording.

UGOV has effectively subverted the unidirectional model of mass media broadcast technologies such as radio and television. While UGOV does not provide real-time interaction and so does not comply with the traditional model of live discourse in the public sphere, it at least provides the possibility of a two-way exchange. As individuals upload videos in record numbers to unmediated, relatively unconstrained aggregate sites such as YouTube, Google Video and Revver, the opinions they express are their own in whatever style and format they choose.

The democratic potential for UGOV may be greater than it is for other media and text communication on the Internet with its ability to connect images to emotional responses [14]. It may be that the asynchronous nature of recorded online video can enhance reasoned discourse by providing opportunities for reflection and re-visitation. A 'virtual' presence of the content creator(s) may help overcome the issues of trust that arise with anonymity in text communications on the Internet [15]. However, for a forum to be truly democratic, it must be universally accessible to the citizenry. Like the limited membership permitted to enter and debate in Habermas coffeehouses, there are constraints on access to the Internet and UGOV. Usage patterns reveal that the technological and social barriers to access that have limited the democratic potential of the Internet as a whole may also limit the capacity of user generated video to create the 'online public sphere.' Neither Internet service nor the breadth of bandwidth required for streamed UGOV review are equally or universally available. For example, rural and small town Canadians are less likely to use the Internet than their urban counterparts, because of age, educational, socio-economic conditions or service differences [16].

4. Research on user-generated online video and the public sphere

We conducted two studies that suggest UGOV can encourage the expression and exchange of multiple viewpoints. In this way UGOV counters the central problem of communication within large or dispersed groups, which tends to devolve to the format of a single speaker and many listeners. However, the expression of multiple viewpoints can be an indication of greater engagement only if the outcome is clearer understanding, rather than greater confusion or mere repetition of the same material.

Our YouTube study analyzed the content and online responses to Atlantic Canadian videos. The study also analyzed the responses from 60 YouTube users in Atlantic Canada to three videos selected for their political content. Our second study, Virtual Classroom, focused on the usability and effectiveness of user-generated online video for engagement among more than 500 Canadian high-school students on topical issues.

Our YouTube research found that there continues to be an important connection between geo-political identity and issues of public concern. This study found that the site of discourse was text-based, and attempts to solicit discourse were rare. This suggests that videos act more as catalysts for discourse rather than actual mechanisms of

discussion [17]. Our Virtual Classroom research showed that new technologies offer enablers as well as constraints for different individuals and groups for communication, based on access and effective use [18]. The capacity for user-generated video to enhance large group participatory communication relies on all participants having equal or at least similar opportunities to participate in both sides of the communication process: production and consumption. The central challenges we observed were both organizational and technical, including the time allotted for both producing and viewing videos, the clarity and quality of video and audio, the equality of access and the sufficiency of bandwidth for all participants.

5. Conclusion

While there is a possibility that UGOV has more potential than text exchange on the Internet or any previous media format to facilitate discourse within a democratic public sphere, both organizational and technological design issues must be addressed. UGOV is effective as a discursive tool when organizational and technical structures allow all participants to both present their views and to review those of other participants. There must also be opportunities for unstructured and unscripted debate and discussion between sites. For UGOV to act as a truly democratic mechanism, well-entrenched barriers to equal access and use must also be overcome.

6. References

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