User-generated video and the online public sphere: Will YouTube facilitate digital freedom of expression in Atlantic Canada?

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Keywords: *public sphere, Internet, YouTube, freedom of expression, user-generated online video, regionalism, community membership, engagement, Atlantic Canada*

Democracy relies on freedom of expression and the opportunity for citizens to exchange views and form public opinion about issues of social concern. User-generated online video (UGOV) has allowed hundreds of thousands of audiovisual content creators and gatherers to upload clips and video blogs to video portal sites such as YouTube, where they can be accessed by anyone with adequate computer hardware, software and Internet bandwidth. Video-posters and viewers can communicate through textual and video commentaries as well as video rating systems. To assess the opportunities and limitations on the freedom offered by this new type of expression, our study surveyed YouTube users in Atlantic Canada as well as Atlantic Canadian UGOVs on YouTube to assess whether and how UGOV is contributing to the online public sphere.

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Introduction

Forums for debating political viewpoints on film and on television are under the control of professional media organizations, and their formats often restrict public input. Very recently, user-generated online video (UGOV) has emerged as a dynamic information and communication audiovisual technologies (ICTs) that individual citizens can use to evocatively express and then exchange their ideas, thoughts and concerns. UGOV has allowed hundreds of thousands of audiovisual content creators and gatherers to upload clips and video blogs to video portal sites such as *YouTube*, *Revver* and *Google Video*. These videos can be accessed by anyone with adequate computer hardware, software and Internet bandwidth, and video-posters and viewers can communicate through textual and video commentaries as well as video rating systems. Since its beginnings in February 2005, *YouTube* has become the most popular video portal online, and in the top ten most popular websites accessed globally (Alexa.com, 2008).

To assess the opportunities and limits of this new type of freedom of expression, our study surveyed *YouTube* users in Atlantic Canada as well as Atlantic Canadian UGOVs that had been uploaded to *YouTube* to assess whether and how UGOV is contributing to the online public sphere. This study was among the first to analyze both the content and the responses of *YouTube* users to *YouTube* videos as tools for public discourse. The results showed that although some people were using UGOV to raise issues of public concern on the global medium of *YouTube*, the issues had a regional focus. There was some discursive interaction between video posters and viewers, but in this study video acted as a catalyst rather than the means of discourse, which was all textual.

Public Sphere

Democracy relies on freedom of expression and the opportunity for citizens to exchange views in order to formulate public opinion about issues of social concern. Jürgen Habermas' public sphere theory stresses the importance to democracy of a place in society that is outside the state, distinct from the economy and free of coercive or directive forces, where the public can freely engage in discourse about political matters (Fraser, 1996; Habermas, 1989 [1962]). Neither social nor prejudicial factors prevent entry or engagement by equal individuals who debate matters of public concern. A form of direct democracy results when the outcome of this type of citizen debate informs government policies and procedures (von Rautenfeld, 2005).

Critiques of Habermas' public sphere theory have shown it has not accounted for structural and organizational restrictions to access and expression. The theory has been challenged with the charge of bourgeois elitism that denies the existence of parallel non-bourgeois public spheres (Negt & Kluge, 1993[1972]). Insufficient consideration has been accorded to the barriers of race (Jacobs, 1999) and gender (Fraser, 1996) that have limited access to the public sphere. The idea that a single "public good" can be achieved through the process of discourse may not be good for democracy, since the acceptance of one vision necessarily stifles others (Mouffe, 2000). The emphasis on rational debate in public sphere theory does not allow for the non-rational, performance element of political expression (Tucker Jr., 2005) that is evident in much online content, including UGOV.

Rather than one public sphere for the formation of public opinion, perhaps multiple public spheres (Fraser, 2002), or some configuration of interconnected and overlapping public spheres (Keane, 1995) may be necessary to ensure the openness of debate at the core of democratic freedom.

Despite these limitations, public sphere theory is a relevant theoretical approach to the critical analysis of the role commercial media (Garnham, 1996) and the many other political, social and economic forces that have an impact on freedom of expression and public discourse in democracy (Boeder, 2005). Habermas warned of the threat to democratic freedom of "refeudalization", when powerful interests manage and manipulate genuine items of debate in an artificial public sphere (Thussu, 2000); an example of which is the practice of stealth advertising on *YouTube*[1]. Nanz and Steffeck argue that the democratic deficit and non-representative character of global political and economic organizations and their agreements increase the necessity for a genuine public sphere (Nanz & Steffek, 2004). The original conceptualization of the public sphere was within the nation-state, but Fraser argues that those notions of "citizenry" and "politics" need to be redefined in accordance with a global world-view due to the globalization of economics, politics, culture and communication (Fraser, 2002).

UGOV and the online public sphere
Despite some of the challenges new media technologies pose to traditional political culture and practices (Jenkins & Thorburn, 2004), there is potential for an online public sphere to enhance democratic politics when public discourse receives sufficient political attention (Bimber, 1998; Gimmler, 2001). Different technological tools offer a variety of ways that citizens can contribute their viewpoints and engage in political discourse in the online public sphere, as well as provide information for the off-line public sphere. Numerous studies of text exchanges on the Internet, in public and private emails lists, blogs and websites have explored the extent to which the online spaces are themselves public spheres and whether the Internet contributes to an expanded public sphere in the off-line world (Dahlberg, 2004; Dahlgren, 2000, 2002, 2005; Downey & Fenton, 2003; Gimmler, 2001; Author, 2001a, 2001b, 2004; Papacharissi, 2004). Other work includes applications of a variety of new media technologies in the public sphere and democratic politics[2]. We were interested to discover whether there were public sphere applications of UGOV online, and if so, the topics of the discourse.

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[1] See Goodman, Ellen P.,Stealth Marketing and Editorial Integrity. Texas Law Review, Vol. 85, p. 83, 2006. Abstract available at SSRN: http://ssrn.com/abstract=896239.
[2] Such as:
Boler, M. (Ed.). (2008). Digital Media and Democracy: Tactics in Hard Times. Cambridge, MA: MIT press.
Bruns, A. (2008). Life beyond the public sphere: Towards a networked model for political deliberation. Information Polity: The International Journal of Government & Democracy in the Information Age, 13(1/2), 65-79.
Coleman, S. (2008). The political subject of blogs. Information Polity: The International Journal of Government & Democracy in the Information Age, 13(1/2), 51-63.
Westling, Mike (May 2007). Online paper: Expanding the Public Sphere: The Impact of Facebook on Political Comunication. Accessed online July 31/2008:
http://www.thenewvernacular.com/projects/facebook_and_political_communication.pdf

According to public sphere theory, the role of the 'free' media is to ensure that the populace is informed, so public opinion will be the result of a process of educated rational debate, often through the press. However, the relative absence of alternative viewpoints presented in mainstream media suggests that the usual approach has been one of issue "management" rather than the revelation of options (Bennett et. al., 2004). The Internet already provides a home for many alternative or counter public spheres (Bhandari, 2004; Downey & Fenton, 2003; Kahn & Kellner, 2004; Author, 2001a). YouTube as a commercial web site bears a greater resemblance to the model of discourse in public sphere theory than traditional media organizations for its multiple sources of content, the opportunities for exchange between video-posters and viewers, and for the ability of members to upload content without paying or being paid. The YouTube site also claims that content is neither edited nor censored, except at the request of other users or for violating terms of use (http://www.youtube.com/t/terms).

Another powerful influence on the public sphere potential of the Internet is how people interact with each other online. Engagement necessitates a diversity of content and vigorous, but civil, debate (Papacharissi, 2004). The online public sphere has been characterized as a fluid exchange, where issue-based discourse (Bimber, 1998), as well as interest-based discourse can occur. Rather than a 'place' of meeting for debate, patterns of discourse develop as individuals who are 'nodes' along a distributed communications network, engage with one another around particular issues (Gochenour, 2006).

Barriers to the freedom presented by new technologies like UGOV include the risk of users being overwhelmed by the sheer quantity and range of digital information, the potentially deleterious effects of non-simultaneous exchange on discursive exchange and varying degrees of media literacy (Papacharissi, 2002). Democratic potential could also be limited by the online replication of global patterns of corporate capital, social inequality and power structures (Papacharissi, 2002; Salter, 2005). Multiple digital divides still exist, where capacities for access and use of the Internet differ due to geographic, social, cultural, economic and organizational contexts. For many Atlantic Canadians, use of the Internet and online video content is constrained by the availability and affordability of appropriate technologies, the level of expertise and aptitude (Rideout, 2000). Historically, Atlantic Canadian provinces have been economically and digitally disadvantaged compared to other regions in Canada since a high percentage of the population is rural and high bandwidth broadband infrastructure is more widely available in Canadian urban centres (Statistics Canada, 2008).

We conducted our study to find out if issues of relevance to the public sphere in Atlantic Canada were appearing on *YouTube*, how they were being presented and how they were being received. We focused our study on Atlantic Canada for both practical purposes (the authors are based there) and research purposes (we needed a defined geographical region for our study). We designed the study to assess both what was present on *YouTube* and to gather responses from *YouTube* users to some of those videos. We wanted to know if *YouTube* users living in Atlantic Canada felt a connection to the Atlantic Canadian region and the *YouTube* community, what factors contributed to that sense of connection, and if there was any correlation between the sense of connection to

either community and the level of engagement with the videos. We were also interested in exploring the kinds of exchange occurring between *YouTube* users online. All these areas of interest are directly relevant to the extent to which *YouTube* can facilitate freedom of expression in the public sphere.

Research study

We analyzed the responses to three videos, selected for their public sphere content, by 60 YouTube users recruited from the student population of an Atlantic Canadian university. This study was approved by the research ethics review board of our institute. In addition, we conducted a content analysis of videos about and from the Atlantic Canada region, as well as the associated comments, that were on the *YouTube* site the last week of October 2006.

The 60 *YouTube* users were recruited to contribute to both this and a concurrent *YouTube* study about video blogs (Author, 2008). All study participants had visited the *YouTube* site at least once prior to participating in this study and so were considered *YouTube* users. The 30 female and 30 male participants had university or college education, 85.0% spoke English as their first language, and 58.3% had lived their entire life in Atlantic Canada. Each participant viewed the same three videos about Atlantic Canada selected for their public sphere content, sorted randomly and accessed through a Word document. Participants were randomly assigned to view the videos through a media player or on the actual *YouTube* site where they could see viewer comments, ratings, and other information. The study participants completed a questionnaire that provided descriptive statistics for this work.

The three videos for the user study were selected because the content analysis of *YouTube* videos identified them as having content relevant to Atlantic Canada and the public sphere. They were: a slideshow of images from the first day of the New Brunswick lobster season accompanied by Billy Joel's song *Downeaster Alexa*[1] in which the lyrics describe the challenges faced by fishers due to declining stocks (video 40); a slideshow of images from a protest against "Atlantica," a largely corporate-driven initiative to amalgamate the Atlantic region into one economic trading unit, accompanied by the song "Idiots Are Taking Over" by the band NOFX with lyrics decrying the establishment; and an amateur video of a segment of a speech by a political party leader during the New Brunswick provincial election campaign in which he speaks about provincial economic development.

For the content analysis, we searched the *YouTube* site in the last week of October 2006 using the names of each province in Atlantic Canada (New Brunswick, Newfoundland and Labrador, Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island) as well as the term "Atlantic Canada" itself. After eliminating duplications and videos about like-named dog breeds, we had a population of 2,049 videos. This population represents a snapshot of what existed "in the moment" and may not predict any long-term or historical trends. A random sample of 100 videos (Appendix 1) was selected for analysis. The survey has a confidence level of 90% with an error level of 8%.

The content analysis was conducted on two levels, each with its own coding scheme, and a Cohen's Kappa inter-rater reliability test achieved an outstanding level of agreement at 90.0%. The first round of analysis at the individual video level captured quantitative data about the content of the videos in terms of style, sphere (public or private), participants, the video-poster and viewer responses. Style refers to whether the videos were slideshows, narrative productions, documentary style and so on. Public sphere content had political characteristics that addressed matters of public concern, in contrast to private sphere content that focused on personal interests, hobbies, activities, people or pets.

The second level of analysis examined viewer feedback through all the 147 comments posted to the 100 videos. Each comment was coded for whether it directly solicited engagement, if it was negative, positive or neutral, and if profanity and proper grammar were used. We did not analyze the number of views nor times it was made a favorite, nor the number of 'stars' awarded; these measures were not clear indicators of approval or engagement since there was no way to determine who did the viewing or rating.

Findings

The content analysis of *YouTube* videos about Atlantic Canada found that almost all of the videos (93.0%) did not include public interest or political content. Of the seven videos that did have public sphere content, three were slide shows accompanied by professionally recorded music that referred to the decline of the Atlantic fisheries (videos 6, 40 and 69). The remaining four videos addressed a range of issues including video 53, the arrest of an anti-war protester; video 98, produced by a video production company for a series about how people use the Internet; video 82 protesting the Harp seal hunt in Newfoundland; and a home-made advertisement for a municipal electoral candidate (video 94).

The content analysis found that the majority (84%) of posters of videos about Atlantic Canada did not overtly or directly solicit engagement with viewers either through the text descriptions or by responding to comments posted by viewers. Ten percent of the *YouTube* videos about Atlantic Canada appeared to be produced for a specific audience such as family members, as in the Mother's Day tribute (video 74) and a high school graduating class (video 19). Another video, shot through the windshield of a car driving up Cape Smokey, Nova Scotia, was dedicated by the narrator as: "*For Cape Bretoners abroad who are watching this on YouTube, hopefully this is a memory of home. Cape Smokey*" (video 47).

Sixty-three per cent of videos did not have any text comments by viewers, and there were no video responses. Over half (58.5%) of the comments by viewers about the *YouTube* videos were positive. In the few videos with more than one comment, the site of exchange was between viewers with responses to each others' comments as often as with the video poster, occasionally suggesting a preexisting relationship between the video-poster and the viewer. One-fifth (20.4%) of viewer comments did not directly address the

videos, 10.9% were neutral, and of the remaining comments, 9.5% were either unclear or negative.

About 75% of the comments were written in grammatically correct English, sometimes combined with Internet shorthand. While 39.5% of comments employed "correct" grammatical forms of English, including sentence structure, capitalization and punctuation, more comments used Internet shorthand (23.8%) such as "smilies" or a combination of grammatical English and shorthand (27.9%) such as *"Lovely! Well done ☺"* (video 89). 5.4% used non-grammatical or vernacular English such as *"Bys your friggen Awesome! Keep posting up videos, you guys kick ass"* (video 97). Profanity, whether in print or symbol, was not used in 90.5% of comments.

From our study of *YouTube* users in Atlantic Canada, we learned that more than half (55.0%) were frequent visitors who visited the *YouTube* site several times a week or more. The remaining 45.0% were identified as infrequent visitors who went to the site once a week or less. Of the frequent visitor group, 78.9% had posted either a comment or a video previously to *YouTube*. More than twice the percentage of *YouTube* users in our study had previously posted a comment (26.7%) compared to a video (11.7%).

Sixty-eight percent of the study participants had lived less than their entire lives in Atlantic Canada, and had posted neither videos (88.3%) nor comments (73.3%). Of those who had lived their entire lives in Atlantic Canada, only 45.7% were frequent YouTube visitors, compared to 68% of those who have not lived their entire lives in Atlantic Canada.

The sense of belonging to the Atlantic Canadian community was higher among participants who had lived their entire lives in Atlantic Canada (91.4%) than among those who had lived in Atlantic Canada for less than their entire lives (56.0%). We also asked our participants if they felt like they belonged to a *YouTube* community; 70.0% did not, of whom most (80.5%) had never posted anything to the site.

To assess whether the *YouTube* users had engaged with the content of the three videos they viewed in our study, we asked if they learned anything, were influenced by or changed their opinion from viewing each of the videos. Forty-five percent of them reported learning something from the Atlantica Protest video. Only a minority (18.3%) reported being influenced by the Atlantica Protest video or changing their opinions about something from viewing it. A third (33.3%) reported learning something from the Lobstering video, and 28.3% claimed that it influenced or changed their opinions. Seventy percent of users reported not learning anything from the politician video, and only 13.3% reported being influenced by or changing their opinion about anything from watching the video.

Of the *YouTube* users who had neither posted comments nor uploaded videos, 24.4% reported being influenced by or changing their opinion about Atlantica, and 36.6% reporting being affected by the Lobstering video. Users who had previously posted comments or uploaded videos to *YouTube* reported being influence by or changing their

opinions from watching the Lobstering video at a rate of 10.5%, and 5.3% for the Atlantica video.

Forty percent of the *YouTube* users believed that watching more videos about Atlantic Canada, posted by Atlantic Canadians would help them feel more like a member of an Atlantic Canadian community. A high proportion (73.3%) believed that greater interaction with the site such as posting comments and videos would make them feel more like members of the *YouTube* community. Almost all the *YouTube* users (96.7%) reported talking about videos they had seen on *YouTube* with other people.

Conclusions

Our study reveals that while the potential exists to use UGOV as a tool for expression and exchange about issues of public concern in Atlantic Canada, most videos on *YouTube* about Atlantic Canada are not about issues of public concern. But, they are present.

Our survey asked whether our *YouTube* users had learned something from, been influenced by or changed their opinion about a topic after having seen the video. That some *YouTube* users in the study learned something or changed their opinions after viewing the videos suggests that UGOV may be useful as a discursive tool and contribute to an online public sphere. There was a difference between the overall responses and the responses of those users who had previously posted videos or comments to *YouTube*. Users who had neither posted comments nor uploaded videos seemed to be more impressionable. Interesting developments that could foreshadow the increased use of UGOV for the public sphere is *YouTube*'s creation of the "News & Politics" category since this research was begun, and the launch of "Citizen Tube" to create videos aimed at interesting young people in political issues and processes.

This study was completed before *YouTube* launched nine "national" versions of the site in June 2007. An additional 10 sites, including one for Canada, have been added since, and plans for more are based on a recognition of the relevance of local content (Waters, 2007) as well as the need to adapt to differences between local mobile technologies for market expansion (Kiss & Wray, 2007). The Canadian *YouTube* site offers options to post videos marked as political content, which the previous site did not.

The extent to which a citizen can and would freely engage in discourse in the public sphere would be affected by his or her sense of belonging to the community affected by the outcome. The number of *YouTube* users in our study who felt a sense of membership in the Atlantic Canadian community was higher among people who had lived in the region their entire lives. Among the group, there was a lesser sense of membership in the YouTube community, especially among those who had never uploaded a video or commented. Our *YouTube* users speculated that more exposure to content about the region would make them feel more a part of it, and that more interaction with the site would make them feel a greater connection to the *YouTube* community.

Only a minority of video posters directly encouraged responses from viewers either by soliciting comments or responding to text comments. The site of discourse was text-based, which suggests that videos act more as catalysts than as mechanisms for discourse in both an on- and off-line public sphere. Most online comments were positive and there was an overall sense of openness to interaction between the commentator and the video poster as well as other viewers. In some cases, pre-existing connections were remade between online commentators and the video-posters, and in others, nodal communities aligned along issues (Gochenour, 2006).

UGOV offers opportunities to citizens to freely and express themselves in the performative public sphere (Tucker Jr., 2005), as long as they have access to the technology as well as the technological aptitude and resources. Whether the opportunity will result in an alternative form of discourse in the online public sphere is not a conclusion this study can make; although videos were catalysts for exchange, the main tool for actual exchange was text.

It is clear, however, that the *YouTube* site is offering a new opportunity for public debate, especially about regional concerns, which took precedence over other public sphere content. As long as mechanisms of exchange exist, UGOV does have potential to act as a tool for expression of views about issues of public concern and stimulating discourse in both on and off-line public spheres. Potential threats to the freedom UGOV offers that warrant further research includes online commercialization in general and the "refeudalization" Habermas warned us about (Thussu, 2000) with the creation of artificial public spheres using techniques as stealth and viral marketing.

Appendix 1
(Dear Editor: please note that this appendix can be removed and the links embedded in the text if that is preferred)

Video#	Video Title	Video URL
1	Bearlys Blues & Ribs	http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VBC40IQNwnM
6	More of Newfoundland	http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p6yYN-7n9Do
7	Sessions Episode 02: The Monoxides	http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YA8Gkoc-b9o
8	welcome to new brunswick	http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hBjC5NvNRqg
10	The Port of Saint John	video has been removed by the user
11	All American Rejects	http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SFbaKJZTlBM
16	Boxer Puppy	http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1KYNcMTORmU
18	Kayla Playing and	http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=65kzZxuU-5s

	Singing A Thousand Miles	
19	Grad Class of 2006	http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jhMzhRMmizI
21	Freedom 40/40 from Gloucester, MA to Nova Scotia, Canada	http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YLtWzyBmyPs
23	PHIL BIMPSON	http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lN0RIGz3HlE
28	"Hindsight" - Cess	video has been removed by the user
31	Plumtree – You Just Don't Exist	video has been removed due to terms of use violation
38	Harris Millar Rap – Keep it Real in Liverpool	http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YBmC1bO345g
40	Lobstering Video	http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CrzAva59It8
42	High Voltage – Highway to Hell – Live Digby	http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xEfgNYpgG34
47	Cape Smokey	http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XL9j7g2-E8U
50	Rolling Stones Halifax, NS - 2006	http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LmhgEZypRj4
53	Demonstrator Arrested in Halifax	http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2qN3yOwAh9o
54	Wildman Gary Williams vs Duke MacIsaac – 1 of 2	http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XgGkPXFRj6U
65	Targa Newfoundland Rally 2005	http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w7WgwgqjUNY
67	Entropy – Screwdriver Trephination	http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=exR1FdtPixE
69	Where fishermen used to be	http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xEKBlfTXhzY
70	Seagulls	http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ADlrehd_OhY
72	Newfie Pizza	http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zZsAqZ-haOE
73	Pond	http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2RfYvL6xtWA
74	A Tribute to my Mother	http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jkTG32Gqo6c

77	Sandy Cove Beach	http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hre65Hd5ni8
80	Scalabrine – Playin' with Passion	video has been removed by the user
81	WGB Reunion, St. John's, NL June 30, 1997	http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LNyNysr8uKY
82	Canada's Shame – Seal Hunt Video	http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n_p7_plqqy0 (flagged as inappropriate)
89	Irish Jig – Thousand Tall Ships Set	video has been removed by the user
94	Vote Lono	http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=crgvL1_BKhU
97	Ten Dollar Bill	http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TlLZ3pO9q4g
98	One Web Day – St. John's Part 1	http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MWOHP_KgIn8
99	Episode #1: The Journey Begins	http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6aKx1DH2Y6U

Notes

[1] *Downeaster Alexa* (1989) by Billy Joel, on album Storm Front. Columbia Records, USA.

[2] *Dreamer* (2001) by Ozzy Osbourne, on album Down to Earth. Epic Records, USA.

[3] "Idiots Are Taking Over" by the band NOFX

[4] *Where Fishermen Used to Be* (1995) by Buddy Wasisname and the Other Fellers, on album Salt Beef Junkie. Independent, Newfoundland, Canada.

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