PERIPHERIES OF CIVIL DISSENT: YOUTUBE'S CIVIC CULTURES AND PLURALISTIC MICROPUBLICS

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Abstract

This paper examines a marginal YouTube channel of civil dissidence based around anarchist principles of anti-state protest and videos of challenges to police and security personnel in public/private spaces. The channel offers a useful site for considering the emergence and trajectories of pluralistic and antagonistic micropublics. The qualitative analysis focuses on a) spaces and communicative access, b) social media practices, and c) identity and affiliation. Each of these are problematised by the pluralistic and contested nature of engagement with the channel, qualifying our understanding of the civic cultures enabled and the way micropublics emerge and endure or intensify around issues of protest.

Keywords

Digital protest, micro-publics, peripheral voices, YouTube channel, video, comments

This paper examines peripheral channels of protest, or more specifically the use of YouTube vlogs to garner large numbers of subscribers around acts of civil dissidence and dissident beliefs. The study considers the kinds of pluralistic and contested 'micropublics' that form in relation to activities within a YouTube channel. Much emphasis has been placed on large-scale, highly visible social media- enhanced protest, the so called Twitter and Facebook revolutions across the Middle East and Northern Africa and the distributed protests of the Occupy movement (Hands, 2011). Use of social media in grassroots mainstream political mobilisation has also been widely studied (Howard, 2005). Far less attention has been paid to the more prolific, more marginal and less visible nodes of dissent that populate platforms such as YouTube. These peripheral nodes of dissent may reveal more about how such platforms generate, replicate or constrain, rather than simply aid or extend, civic cultures and political activism.

Recent research has targeted the role of video and the uses of YouTube in protest movements. In this vein a central and unique role has been identified in the use of the vlog format as an emerging form of self-expression and civic performance (Griffith and Papacharissi, 2010; Banaji, 2013). Video functions within YouTube as a point of intersection, between located spaces of protest and online publics as a means of generating affinity, but also as a mode of provocation or witness (van Zoonen etal., 2011). Research examining YouTube as platform for emergent civic cultures has begun to illustrate the pluralistic, contested and agonistic qualities of those publics (Uldam and Akanius, 2013; Neumayer, 2012; McCosker, 2014).

Aims and Methods

My focus is on the construction, maintenance and contestation of YouTube channels for activism at the margins. As a case study I examine the channel of Charles Veitch, an anarchist who has been active on YouTube since 2007 with over 88,500 subscribers and 19,500,000 video views. In the UK and US, a number of channels have built large subscriber bases around philosophical or investigative provocations, activism and 'alternative' civic cultures; some popular examples include the channel of Stefan Molyneux – the voice of popular web-based Freedomain Radio – or Mark Dice and his secondary channel The Resistance, and the many 'chapters' of the WeAreChange channel. The channel of anarchist Charles Veitch presents in this context wide ranging expressions of dissent and long standing practices of public agitation that centre on regular, location specific vlogs, megaphone- enhanced confrontations and public dialogue.

Through Veitch's videos I identify some patterns of activity that grant broader insights into the processes of emergence and contestation at play within YouTube's myriad micropublics. Specifically, the research asks: How do videos, comments and other channel features operate in relation to user and moderator activity to facilitate civic cultures and active micropublics?

The study employed a digital ethnographic approach to examine the channel's history, external links, playlists, videos and interaction within the video comments field. This involved observations of activity over a 12 month period (January 2013 to January 2014), qualitative analysis of videos posted (n = 625), and analysis of comments for a selection of four videos (n = 1457 total comments). The videos and comments were examined through open and axial coding to adjust identified themes in relation to the theoretical framework. The research applies and adapts Dahlgren's dimensions of civic engagement and civic cultures (2007), which aims to identify factors that promote or impede political participation and civic engagement, with a specific focus on the dimensions of (a) spaces and platforms for dissent, (b) social media practices, (c) identity and affinity.

Findings

In terms of the subject matter covered within the videos (see Figure 1), as well as playlists and other interface features, the YouTube channel offers a rich space for dissident expression and subsequent communicative access. These are the conditioning elements for the expressive events that constitute the channel's mircopublics. Videos and comments exhibit extensive reference to, and detailed discussion of, both the offline and online spaces of protest made available through video practices, and the intersections bebetween them as a contest over Veitch's 'right to film' and protest in 'public' spaces (themselves contested). Veitch's videos most often take the form of street based vlogs and deliberate confrontations with police or security. He refers to this as 'sensitivity capture' where the aggressive responses of police in public/private spaces become the subject matter for online protest. A high proportion of the comments engage further with the subjects of protest, and with the idea of the right to protest. And strong emphasis is placed on providing a platform for others' protests – for example during the 2011 England riots, or 2012 student protests, and recent protests against mining companies' fracking practices.

The channel's role in providing communicative access and platforms for protest can be weighed against often competing aspects of *channel maintenance practices,* funding appeals and other requests for support that appear regularly throughout. In addition, commenting is disabled for 106 videos, which often provokes consternation among users. Comment practices can also be described as fragmented and inconsistent when examined across videos. Despite heavy activity within videos, none of the top 15 commenters commented on more than one of the four selected videos. This is not to say this did not take place, but indicates that where publics form in relation to the videos, they are episodic or ephemeral.
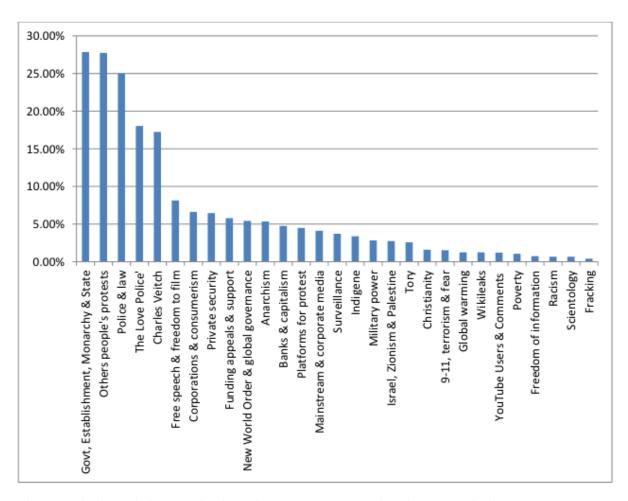
Figure 1. Charles Veitch YouTube channel, 2007-2014: Categories of protest and advocacy

A wide range of topics are covered in the 625 videos analysed, but particular emphasis is placed on subject matter central to the anarchist ideals and the producers' identity and beliefs (Figure 1). Despite the coherence of these themes, the analysis of video comments reveals a far greater contestation over identity and affinity or affiliation than might be expected by the high subscriber numbers and as a factor of effective civic cultures in Dahlgren's framework. There is consistent antagonism and contest, indicating the pluralistic character of the dissident publics that form. Coding of comments revealed that more than half of comments within the sample videos expressing anti-Veitch sentiment (126 anti- Veitch vs 99 pro-Veitch).

Govt, Establishment, Monarchy & State Others people's protests Police & law The Love Police' Charles Veitch Free speech & freedom to film Corporations & consumerism Private security Funding appeals & support New World Order & global governance Anarchism Banks & capitalism Platforms for protest Mainstream & corporate media Surveillance Indigene Military power Israel, Zionism & Palestine Tory Christianity 9-11, terrorism & fear Global warming Wikileaks

YouTube Users & Comments Poverty Freedom of information Racism Scientology Fracking

Many anti-Veitch comments express differences of belief or affinity highlighting, for instance, Veitch's revised opinion on the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the US as an 'inside job', a perspective Veitch held and promoted but later rescinded after appearing on a BBC documentary exploring conspiracy theory. Others express simple forms of vitriolic disagreement, and there is often extensive discussion from commenters about why they agree or disagree with Veitch, other commenters, and the channel as a whole. These observations indicate a strong sense of contestation across the site. However these kinds of passionate activity also help to sustain and intensify civic engagement and draw attention to dissident activities over time.

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