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(New) participatory framework on YouTube?
Commenter interaction in US political speeches

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Abstract

This article examines the various participant roles adopted by users on YouTube, when watching and commenting on Barack Obama's Inaugural Address (January 2009). Based on the notion that YouTube has become a powerful medium for (re)broadcasting institutional texts and genres, the article argues that text commenting practices allow for the co-creation of distinct participatory roles.

Drawing on a quantitative and qualitative corpus-assisted analysis of the comments to the speech, the article examines how roles are defined and participatory positions delimited through linguistic and non-linguistic means. It addresses the different types of production and reception roles (Goffmann, 1981; Levinson, 1988) exploited by users for communication and how they differ from the traditional ones, 'ratified' and 'unratified' participants in the medium, and the ways in which the YouTube medium affects participation. A reworking of the traditional participatory framework categories is proposed on the basis of the new online environments. Specifically, it proposes a multi-level representation of production, with the original speech and speaker (Obama) seen as the first level of production, and the comments as a secondary level. Both levels entail various reception roles, which are exploited to various degrees by YouTube participants.

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1. Introduction

In the past few years YouTube has become an important medium in the dissemination of institutional texts and genres, such as political speeches (Boyd, 2011, 2014). An example of its successful adoption in politics is represented by Barack Obama, whose team has made wide use of YouTube to disseminate videos of various political genres from his first primaries (2008) into his second term in office (cf. Boyd, 2011; Hanson et al., 2011; Heffernan, 2009; Nagourney, 2008). The high number of views and comments of the videos is a clear sign of the platform's popularity, especially among younger voters who eschew traditional media sources for news and information (Nagourney, 2008). Another factor that has contributed to YouTube's popularity is the medium's ostensible openness, i.e. it allows users to comment freely on videos with no moderator interference. While, at first glance, many of the comments posted may exhibit blatant uses of rude, obscene and even racist language, upon closer examination examples of constructive interactional practices can be uncovered.

Commenters, in fact, express opinions in a variety of ways, adopting various strategies, which, it is argued here, can largely be categorized as either *constructive* or *disruptive* depending on the comment(er)'s apparent desire to engage in and continue conversation. Moreover, the empirical study presented here demonstrates that most comments are part of

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multi-participant, asynchronous 'conversations' with other YouTube users. The main goal of this study, then, is to determine and categorize the different types of YouTube users who participate in the medium through text commenting within the domain of political discourse. In particular, it addresses the ways in which YouTube users define their participatory roles and delimit their positions by linguistic and non-linguistic means. The underlying hypothesis is that these positions are defined not only through discursive practices but also through the participatory practices and the (co-) construction of user roles of commenters. To determine which participant roles are available to and exploited by users, the participation framework (Goffmann, 1981; Levinson, 1988) is considered, and its possible application proposed in light of the empirical data. From a more general perspective, the work is aimed at determining the ways in which the medium of YouTube affects participation, what the main production/reception roles in new media are and how they may differ from the traditional ones. The empirical data are drawn from a sample of comments in a YouTube version of Obama's First Inaugural Address (2009) and are investigated both quantitatively and qualitatively.

In Section 2, the most important theoretical considerations are introduced. In Section 3 the corpus and methodology are discussed, while in Section 4 the data and specific examples from the corpus are analyzed from a theoretical point of view. This section also offers a tentative proposal for user roles on YouTube. Finally, Section 5 offers some preliminary conclusions as well as some considerations about the nature of participatory framework in YouTube and what this could mean for political communication.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. YouTube: from user-generated content to politics

Since its introduction in February 2005 YouTube has since become one of the most popular and influential social networks in what Lister et al. (2009:225) label as "one of the most astonishing and characteristic developments of networked new media". Originally conceived as a seamless way to share user-generated content, the site has expanded to include a wider array of video material including clips from TV shows and films, complete programmes and films, institutional videos such as speeches and policy statements, and video blogs "where users offer opinions regarding current events, politics, and entertainment" (Hess, 2009:413). While a full discussion of YouTube is beyond the scope of this article, I will focus on the areas most pertinent to participation on the medium, namely the roles available to the users and how these roles are defined by observers, scholars and users themselves.

While both registered and non-registered users can watch videos on YouTube, an activity which accounts for most traffic on the site (Chau, 2011:67), logged in users can also access interactive services.[1] As part of this 'registrational activity' (Lister et al., 2009), in that users must be registered (and logged in) to access the services, users can upload and share videos, flag and like/dislike them as well as post comments. Registered users can also customize their profile, create friends and subscriptions lists, send private messages, subscribe to playlists and comment walls, etc. (Chau, 2011:71–72). A tacit result of these features is that static users are transformed into "co-creative participants" (Lister et al., 2009:204; cf. Tolson, 2010).

YouTube is known to create a strong sense of community among some of its core users (also known as 'YouTubers' or 'Tubers'): "YouTubers frequently respond to each others' videos, enacting spoofs of originals or giving commentary to issues brought up by their peers" (Hess, 2009:414). Logged in users often engage in dialogue with other users through text commenting, a practice that Chau (2011:67) sees as being "crucial to the way the community operates". The same author further notes that "[YouTube's] unique technical and social features support the formation of a participatory culture among the members of its community" (2011:67). However, as stated above, most YouTube users remain on the "periphery" as non-interactional *viewers* (Chau, 2011:67), using the medium merely to watch videos without reading or writing comments, which, according to Adami (2009a:382) is also "the least demanding" practice in the communication practices that are generated by a video on YouTube". Since such users do not need to register for an account, the only evidence of their participation on the medium is in the view count, which when considered on its own, however, "is a poor metric for understanding viewing practices" (Lange, 2008:97).

The current discussion's focus on text commenting can provide insight into (new) discursive practices. A small number of studies have focused on YouTube text comments. Jones and Schieffelin (2009:1062) see them as "a valuable source of user-generated metalinguistic data". According to Burgess and Green (2009) the use of comments on YouTube helps to create a "mediated participatory culture", which Jones and Schieffelin (2009) underline as being "inherently dialogic" in nature. Savoie (2009) stresses their potential for text production, while Hess (2009) concludes that the "playful" and negative aspects of commenting overshadow the serious ones. Bou-Franch et al. (2012:502) see comments as a place for

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[1] YouTube terms of services (2010), http://www.youtube.com/static?gl=US&template=terms, last accessed 29 July 2012.