Chapter 4
YouTube Politics

ABSTRACT

"With the shift of television to digital format in the next decade, it will become virtually interchangeable with the internet. Hence, those firms that come to dominate digital television may well be poised to play a major role in the age of the internet" (McChesney, 1999, p. 167). The previous quote, written long before YouTube existed, is somewhat prescient. YouTube is a website of influence and power for traditional media conglomerates. Even early in scholarly literature about mass media, Todd Gitlin suggested that human experience, as it relates to mass media, has become a commodity. According to Gitlin (1980), the only way to solve that problem is to "demolish the media and to create a movement as an alternative source of values, network of relations and standard of authenticity" (p. 255). His politically charged language frames well what it means to be political in YouTube. That said, being "political" in YouTube is different for everyone and all of the definitions resonate with traditional ideas of political activity in terms of demonstrations and the exercise of democratic and free speech. For many, the 2008 presidential campaign is a watershed moment for YouTube, as it is credited with helping candidates gain supporters and increase political activism, specifically among younger voters. While this technologically deterministic view is limited, YouTube provides an inexpensive and socioculturally relevant platform for political messages from politicians and the people. International politics, in particular the Arab Spring and the spate of horrific murders committed in the name of fundamentalist political and religious fervor by Isis and others, have found a worldwide audience in YouTube who comment, post, and repost videos and generally provide thoughtful criticism about what's happening. This is an obvious contradiction of what many in the popular press see as YouTube's raison d'être. YouTube is also a place for local political activity, although not as prevalent as national politics nor used as efficiently. In terms of political activity, user-generated videos uploaded by "citizen journalists" have been credited for motivating change in countries around the world, no doubt related to YouTube's worldwide audience.

INTRODUCTION

Political activity in YouTube is an important source of video, text, and near-real-time communication about world events for which there is no other source of information available to the general public. Political activity and international events that take the political center stage often garner the most attention, especially in local and national news, and in particular when Presidential campaigns are under way in the United States.

The past 10 years have seen a pronounced increase in the number of videos and amount of communication on YouTube that is political in nature. It is no coincidence that recent political uprisings and human rights violations around the globe and political campaigns in the United States shape the focus of this chapter. The Presidential campaign in 2008 is of particular importance, as well as YouTube's part in the democratic and participatory side of political campaigns. The phrase *YouTube politics* refers to individual and small groups who are "political" in that they seek change that stems from a strong personal and often philosophical view of what's fair, what's right, and or what's moral.

These political narratives take many forms in YouTube: as video and textual responses to uploaded videos, commercial film and television content mashups, YouTube forums that create a public space for airing grievances or providing what is called immaterial or virtual labor for Google and YouTube, and finally messages carefully crafted by politicians' campaign managers.

This chapter analyzes and critiques some of the latest political activity, such as the *Arab Spring*, which stands as a testament to the speed and influence that international YouTubers have on cultural discourse and their contributions to the most significant national and international cultural repository of video and audio content in the world.

It is appropriate to consider the larger question of what it means to be "political," as a subset of the term *politics*. This chapter considers who and what is political, how American and international politics manifest in YouTube, and precisely what several types of political activity looks like.

For example, satire and parody are examples of political activity used quite extensively in YouTube in the form of user-generated and professionally produced content from shows such as "The Daily Show with John Stewart" and the "Colbert Report." Many YouTube channels are categorized as *political,* and YouTubers' comments litter those spaces and shed light on how people feel—their behaviors and certainly their attitudes about issues that are related directly to politics and issues about which they are very passionate.

Governments and politicians all over the world have taken advantage of YouTube's "free" speech space or, as in the case of the Turkish and Chinese governments, have even blocked YouTube and its activities in the hope of quelling dissent and protecting their own hegemonic speech.

The main objectives of this chapter are to clarify precisely how political activity of all kinds operates in YouTube and through this analysis gain perspective and knowledge about how YouTubers who are political think about themselves, each other, government, and the world's political stage.

BEING POLITICAL

What does it mean for a YouTuber to be *political?* This is a difficult question made even more complex because of how the word has taken on a variety of connotations, depending on one's generation, location in the world, and cultural and ethnic background. Blitvich, Bou-Franch, and Lorenzo-Dus discussed politics on YouTube from a cultural-ethnic perspective.

A "YouTubification" of politics certainly occurred during the 2008 US presidential elections (May 2008; Garcés-Conejos Blitvich 2010) with citizens enthusiastically submitting postings and commenting on others' postings in response to YouTube video-clips about the elections. One of these postings featured a video-clip made up of a collage of images of, principally, Barack Obama campaigning in front of, or interacting with, Latino groups in the US. (Blitvich, Bou-Franch, & Lorenzo-Dus, 2013, p. 564)

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