

Position Paper for Viral Videos and Political Participation Roundtable

Online video and the viral sharing culture it has allowed to develop do constitute a potentially democratizing cultural forum that may well indicate an expanded public sphere of sort, but to most effectively understand the political dimensions of the phenomena, we must resist the impulse to focus exclusively on those texts and networks that have an overtly political valence. Conversely, we must also resist counting the majority of seemingly apolitical viral videos as simplistic indications of a morally and/or intellectually bankrupt culture. Rather than dismissing either category, we need to pursue the politics of the purile and stupid – the politics of the parody and comedy that dominate viral video. Whether it is a clip capturing a snarkily-toned outtake from a pundit who thinks s/he is off the air or a cheaply produced novelty song without any seemingly direct political motives, all viral comedy is a potent site for interactive political discourse, and it is important that we recognize it as operative in its fullest sense.

These videos are emerging as important mechanisms of communication available to ever increasing circles of users/viewers. Built into most video sharing interfaces are counters displaying numbers of views or hits as well as written comment boards and areas to post video responses. This imbues most every video that circulates online with a democratic and pluralistic dimension that allows for agreement, dissent, and varied other responses falling somewhere between to take root. The element of anonymity afforded by screen names often results in extreme, aggressive, and sometimes violent opinions and stances to be voiced, which causes many observers and critics to dismiss these forums as debased and unworthy of serious consideration. However, there is something to be gained from them in their naked portrayal of some of the deepest-seated fissures in the social landscape.

Not bound by nationalist or partisan affiliations, the discussions that arise from all viral videos are a portal into a type of discourse that was previously available only by proxy. Across a globalized mediascape, video hosting sites are providing potential nexus points for debate to arise on topics as wide-ranging as women's rights, global food consumption patterns, military operations, sexual identities, etc. Although there may be prevailing demographics that dominate online video sharing culture, the barriers to entry are becoming increasingly minimal. Thus, these discussions, whether based around a snippet of a politician's speech or a mashed up television advertisement, become visible sites of assertion, contestation, and refutation. No matter what the preferred definition of democracy is, such debate exists at its core, and video hosting sites have made it a persistent element of their architectures and, resultingly, a significant piece of viral video textuality. Consensus is almost never reached regarding the issues raised in relation to viral clips, and this increased visibility of ongoing debate has far-reaching impacts.

This common failure to reach consensus is actually one of the deepest insights offered from viral video's ascendancy. It tends to inescapably reveal democracy's worst kept secrets – the need to tolerate (nearly) all opinions and to recognize the enduring disagreements that persist in a democratic society. While oftentimes paved over by utopian rhetoric that accompanies talk of democracy's desirability, what viral video and

their responsive clusters represent in the most naked form is the reality that a panoply of voices does not nicely congeal into a singular, directed vision for our world. While opinions can and do change in open forums, often they remain resolute and potentially strengthened by the very act of displaying them publicly. A user/viewer posting a racist diatribe in response to a video with little discernible intention to provoke such a discussion may not only open this view to others, but it is also often met with both support and attack. Such positions have always been available, but now the formal aesthetics of these videos (and their paratexts) open these readings to wider audiences with no promises of easy resolution.

So when considering the role that viral video is playing in terms of defining democracy, it can be said that there is little actual change in the contours in democracy's ideal philosophical nature, yet there is a potentially substantive impact to our perspective on that nature. More forthrightly revealing the dark underbelly of inherent conflict underpinning this generally valorized form of government, viral video culture asks us to come to terms with democracy in all its ramifications – for better or worse. Expanding access to and scope of public debate is undoubtedly a furtherance of free speech. For some, this result may be seen as making visible the aspects of democratic society that would better be left obscured. For others, it may open pathways to a richer understanding of how democracy has been working all along.

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