Social Commentary YouTube: Performance of civic agency in the 21st Century

Abstract

In the wake of summer 2020, the internet saw multiple movements, for instance, Black Lives Matter as well as #FreeBritney gain momentum. This paper asserts Social Commentary YouTube scene as a contemporary force for civic engagements and analyses its role in supporting social change relative to those movements. There is a definite growth of popularity for this genre with YouTubers such as D'Angelo Wallace, being regarded as respected and genuine commentators who employ thorough research methods to deliver critical content. Consequently, this essay breaks down the dynamics that make this YouTube genre an active medium for collective change with regards to moderation, affective publics and the power given to the networked self. The research paper, henceforth, established the acts of citizen journalism present in the community as well as moderation and coveillance in relation to novel sousveillance techniques; it also explores the cornerstone that dispersed affective publics are for this genre and the ability of social commentators to centralize dissipated crowds into singular channels. In doing so, it also amplifies self-presentation and augments the collective identity to prompt users to change. In turn, this genre provides a mirror for online masses to reflect on digitally discussed issues and has emancipated individuals to act in real life.

Keywords: #onlinenetworks, #onlineactivism, #Youtube, #SocialCommentary, #community

Introduction

The summer of 2020 was one of digital protest in the United States (Rosenblatt, 2020) as the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement surged digital spaces and masses organised online activities to support their counterparts who protested in the streets. Nonetheless, fighting social injustices predates the internet but given the wide-spanning reach of the internet, dispersed voices struggle to be heard. In the wake of the 21st Century, a younger, educated and increasingly technophile demographic (Raby, Caron, Théwissen-LeBlanc, Prioletta & Mitchell, 2017) seeks societal change with the tools it is equipped with. Consequently, Social Commentary channels are increasingly popular and respected among Generation Z wherein content creators exhibit their personal takes on pop-culture and societal headlines. Social commentary as a genre operates as an educational vehicle vis-a-vis a youthful audience yearning for civic engagement (Raby et al., 2017). There is, therefore, an absolute sense of coveillance as content creators as well as audiences become critical watchdogs amongst online and offline communities acting as invisible moderators (Matias, 2019), a definite impel by affective publics (Papacharissi, 2015) who are emotionally enmeshed with the cause they engage with acting as the backbone of those movements and the performance of a fundamentally imagined community (Anderson, 1991, as cited by Kavoura, 2014) as a networked public that is more confident in supporting causes, even when offline. This paper situates itself in the Online Networks and Social Change stream as it defends the Social Commentary genre on YouTube as a vector for societal change and it explores the dynamics of the community as well as dissects its catalytic role in pushing actions against injustices and thus, rightfully explores one aspect of Online Network i.e. Social Commentary YouTube and its direct correlation to Social Change through the instruments it provides for civic engagement. The Social Commentary scene on YouTube is a post-modernist agency of social change with an active and collective agenda, operating as socially aware moderators and amplifying the

voice of dispersed affective publics, spurring heightened social activism campaigns online in imagined communities.

Moderation and Commentary

A substantial aspect of the YouTube commentary scene that determines its agency is the moderation particularity it represents. The internet encompasses an extensive ecosystem of applications and networks where individuals are incessantly creating, sharing, and remixing content (Asur and Huberman, 2010). Intensified consumption of digital media re-introduced the internet as a virtual third place (Soukup, 2006). With an extensive array of digital tools available, users re-designed online platforms as extensions of community-building and expression. Henceforth, due to the heightened social awareness of their audience, social commentators fulfill the role of social moderators online which transpires as "volunteer civic labour" (Matias, 2019, p.1) on this third space. This not only ties to civic duty but exposes the postmodernist agenda as users take it upon themselves to moderate. Moderation, as clarified by Gieryn (1983, as cited by Matias, 2019) is the daily implementation of "boundary work" (p.2) by volunteer individuals where boundary work is flows in accordance with the nuances of the internet but remains aligned with authoritative guidelines (Gieryn, 1983, as cited by Matias, 2019), in online terms, one speaks of community guidelines. However, with regards to supposedly present authority on virtual platforms, these agents fail to identify and counter malevolent content while inoffensive media gets taken down. The performance of postmodernist moderation comes into play as it increasingly doubts said authoritative reason and acts upon its own subjectivity (Fitzhugh & Leckie, Jr., 2001). Users become growingly sceptical of community guidelines' viability and the safety net it claims to provide. Commentators, on the other hand, have awareness of the context and are trusted into making researched and truly objective claims with appropriate background. It must be acknowledged nonetheless that authoritative figures solely detain power to remove content and have to be alerted eventually. In turn,

social commentators, and their audience regularly scrutinize the internet and recurringly, attempt to alarm authoritative figures online and offline. With an established platform, social commentary YouTubers can amplify and centralised those diffused opinions. This is very much relevant to predatory behaviours where in seemingly normal instances, viewers became increasingly wary of certain abusive behaviours and soon thereafter, social commentators picked up on the topic.

Consequently, this exemplifies the notion of coveillance (Palmas, 2015) where both creators and viewers engage in peer-to-peer gazing and voluntarily take the responsibility as invisible moderators to gaze within their communities. As postmodernist creators and audiences are increasingly educated, they are not only aware of themselves but also mindful of their surroundings. Reporting of events is predominantly done through new sousveillance techniques (Mann, 2004, as cited by Ceccato, 2019) such as screenshots and screen-recordings. As creators and users are already participating in digital dialogues and consume digital media, they infiltrate and put on record suspicious happenings while retaining their anonymity; this is also relevant to offline circumstances where the eyewitnesses customarily record unusual occurring. This displays the postmodernist dynamics of moving from subservience to agency (Fitzhugh & Leckie, Jr., 2001). Recording and sharing is an effectual act of civic duty. This once again uncovers the mistrust for authority, this time offline, which is widely believed to be driven by disguised ideologies and leads to systemic oppression. Hence, sousveillance is received favourably as compared to surveillance (Ceccato, 2019) as it places all individuals on the same wavelength where the individual recording is not above the one being recorded and henceforth, is justified through its propagation. Sousveillance can be understood as the postmodernist response to surveillance as it illustrates the intersectionality (Hutcheon, 2013) of 'traditional' surveillance's gaze with a modern peer-to-peer approach; it is community work for the collective. An observation of this sousveillance aspect is the George Floyd case where Floyd's murder was caught

on tape by onlookers which went viral; leading to widespread dissemination of incident which were increasingly commented on and led to massive protests amid pandemic restrictions.

Parasocial Interactions and online activism

A second strand that justifies the Social Commentary scene on YouTube as a mechanism of civic engagement online is the nature of its dialogues. It sheds light on a parasocial dynamic (Giles, 2002). Parasocial interaction theory informs that viewers design an approachable persona in their mind through engagement with media, mirroring physical interpersonal relationships which are only sustained throughout the constant consumption of said media (Ballantine & Martin, 2005); the perceived bond is only heightened if one continuously consumes media as the relationship is inherently one-sided. The seemingly unilateral exchange, however, leaves space for more insightful debates and the information occupies the space of discussion. Social Commentary ultimately breaks down the sentiment of affective audience analytically and discusses how valid their audiences' emotional reactions are, rationalising and amplifying them. Papacharissi (2015, as cited by Lünenborg, 2019) identifies affective publics as "small, fragile and fluids" which are outcomes of the interweaving relationship between technology and human behaviour. On this statement, one must also acknowledge the fallacies of human behaviour and as commentators convey their viewpoint on issues, the audience can discuss the intricacies of their own thought-process. The behaviour relative to online social change is deeply rooted into the post-modernist practice of relativism (Tilley, 2001). Audiences are not only set into the relativist practice of doubting of 'traditional' institutions' ideologies and the harmful moral judgements that hurt vulnerable groups but take time to question their own opinions. Despite the insightful take on discussions, urgency to act remains important and affective publics have immediate and compelling emotional responses which are embodied in different manners from

online petitions on change.org to educational fundraising livestreams on YouTube as was the case for BLM protests.

Another essential point alludes to the collaborative nature of storytelling within Social commentary as a medium. It is common for audiences to tag content creators in posts or send them Instagram posts for example, to provide material for commentary. Thus, with Social Commentary, audience are actively participating in this storytelling process to bring about change as a collective. According to Papacharissi (2015), storytelling is the undeviating method of originating engagement and sharing stories of individuals humanizes their messages instantly. Consequently, audiences will share experiences and input which made a difference for trans rights activists. Vivienne (2011) unravels the initial lack of visibility for trans rights activism and the inability for transgender individuals to share their stories but with participatory culture, their narratives find their way on public spaces and are distinguishable. It needs to be recognized that any movement advances for the creation of safer society and commentators will discuss an array of issues, irrespective of whether they identify with it as part of the agenda towards a safer environment. The #MeToo movement and the trans rights movement, despite their differences, inherently want to rid society of silencing and oppressive systems. A parallel can be found in terms of citizen journalism (Antony & Thomas, 2010), on both content creators' and viewers' sides that is observed here but noticeably, commentators are subjective speakers; not only do they deliver information and educate, but they affirm their stance and actively seek solutions as they participate in the public dialogues which is meant to serves towards societal ameliorations (Antony & Thomas, 2010). This is relativist practice as commentators give their take on issues, informed by their experiences but ties it with research and investigation. They subsequently inform and correct their opinions before delivery and are not absolute in nature. This connection is relevant as it informs on the case of the #FreeBritney movement where fans of American entertainer, Britney Spears became increasingly concerned and garnered numerous accounts of the

performers' obstacles due her father's long-spanning conservatorship (Spanos, 2021). Eventually, the matter was picked up on by social commentary youtubers such as D'Angelo Wallace and SL04N who operate with thorough research and insightful subjective judgement. According to fans, her behaviour became increasingly suspicious as fans realised the limits imposed on her such as her inability to drive her own car (Spanos, 2021). Through the early 2000s, audiences were in favour of the conservatorship due Spears' erratic behaviour, but the internet became growingly wary as Spears slowly disappeared from the public eye and cancelled much awaited shows of hers.

Self-presentation in response to civic engagement

A third element substantiates social commentary YouTube is the multiplicity it allows for the self-presentation in response to civic engagement and the transition it enables from an imagined community (Phillips, 2002) to very real actions and protests. Yang (2009) identifies cultural activism as "concern over values, morality, lifestyles, and identities" (p.33) which are inherently collective; movements advance for something bigger than individuals and focus on fashioning a better future. Henceforth, social commentary YouTube grants viewers with a space to acknowledge the saliency of their own identities relative to social advocacy; distinguishing and asserting the collective identity which in turn heightens the need for social change. Saliency is compartmentalisation of multiple versions of the self that are expressed under specific circumstances (Morris, 2013) and in turn, the YouTube commentary community asserts the needs for collective change and in turn, raises the communal self in this hierarchy. Individuals forget their initial inhibitions and get involved publicly despite oppositions from their circle due to the controversial nature of civic engagement. Consequently, the audience moves from their initial imagined cocoon to a much real setting for protests, from hashtags to actual banners as the BLM and #FreeBritney movement monopolised both the internet and the physical crowds. Community members who were willing to take actions were

given alternative methods of protesting and supporting those present in pacific protest; there was an ascent in fundraiser livestreams on YouTube which served as support for protesters but also for victims to voice out and an educational vehicle for the public to understand the movement as well as their goal. The most recent account of those activities was in the wake of mass awareness against Asian-American discriminatory crimes and provides visibility for those affected.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper affirms the role of Social Commentary YouTubers and in turn, their community as a powerful medium for social advocacy online and offline. Taking on its role as an omniscient figure of digital moderation equipped with the relevant tools to collect evidence and accordingly report occurrences and its significance relative to affective publics whose voices are amplified their concerns and amplified as a collective. The final reasoning is its ability to focus on the collective identity and shift self-presentation towards acting for the greater good in the public sphere. The analysis undertaken throughout the above discussion has potential limitations. This exhibit takes on broad research databases on YouTube and users' performance on the video-sharing platform with respect to identity and online activism but there is a definite lack of scholarly analysis on the dynamics of Social Commentary content as it is a genre in expansion, gaining massive popularity among a young and socially aware demographic. Consequently, this constitutes an area for further research to explore the relevance of this genre relative to its audience as well as the actions it prompts viewers, online and offline. Social commentary YouTube channels as mediums of citizen journalism is also a prospective area for further research as it is embedded into informed subjective delivery. Thus, research on the demand for divulgation of one's attitude toward a specific cause might be a subject for potential research

Reference List

Antony, M. G. & Thomas, R. J. (2010). 'This is citizen journalism at its finest':
    YouTube and the public sphere in the Oscar Grant shooting incident. *New
    Media & Society, 12(*8), 1280-1296.
    https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444810362492

Asur, S. & Huberman, B. A. (2010, August 31). *Predicting the Future With Social
    Media.* 2010 IEEE/WIC/ACM International Conference on Web
    Intelligence and Intelligent Agent Technology. Toronto, Canada.
    https://arxiv.org/pdf/1003.5699.pdf

Ballantine, P. W. & Martin, B.A.S. (2005). Forming parasocial relationships in
    online communities. *Advances in consumer research, 32*, 197-201.
    https://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/v32/acr_vol32_83.pdf

Ceccato, V. (2019). Eyes and Apps on the Streets: From Surveillance to
    Sousveillance Using Smartphones. *Criminal Justice Review, 44*, 24-41.
    https://doi.org/10.1177/0734016818818696

Fitzhugh, M. L. & Leckie, Jr, W. H. (2001). Agency, Postmodernism, and the
    Causes of Change. *History and Theory, 40*(4), 59-81.
    https://doi.org/10.1111/0018-2656.00182

Giles, D. C. (2002). Parasocial Interaction: A Review of the Literature and a
    Model for Future Research. *Media Psychology, 4*(3), 279-305.
    https://www-tandfonline-
    com.dbgw.lis.curtin.edu.au/doi/abs/10.1207/S1532785XMEP0403_04\

Hutcheon, L. (2013). Postmodernism. In S. Malpas & P. Wake (Eds.), *The
    Routledge Companion To Critical Theory* (1 eds., pp. 115-126).

Routledge. https://ap01-
a.alma.exlibrisgroup.com/view/delivery/61CUR_INST/1218329299000195
1

Kavoura, A. (2014, September 5-9). *Social media, online imagined communities
and communication research*. 3rd International Conference on Integrated
Information (IC-ININFO), Prague, Czech Republic.
http://history.icininfo.net/2013/

Lünenborg, M. (2019). Affective Publics. In J. Siaby & C. von Scheve (Ed.),
Affective Societies - Key Concepts (pp. 319-329). Routledge.
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/336321545_Affective_Publics

Matias, J. N. (2019). The Civic Labor of Volunteer Moderators Online. *Social
Media + Society, 5*(2), 1-12. https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305119836778

Morris, R. C. (2013). Identity Salience and Identity Importance in Identity Theory.
Current Research in Social Psychology, 21(8), 23-36.
https://crisp.org.uiowa.edu/sites/crisp.org.uiowa.edu/files/2020-04/21.8.pdf

Palmas, K. (2015). Inauthentically Intense: Coveillance and Consumer Culture
among Speedsurfers. *Surveillance & Society, 13*(3/4), 487-496.
https://doi.org/10.24908/ss.v13i3/4.5424

Papacharissi, Z. (2015). Affective publics and structures of storytelling:
sentiment, events and mediality. *Information, Communication &
Society,19*(3), 307-324. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2015.1109697

Phillips, T. (2002). Imagined Communities and Self-Identity: An Exploratory
Quantitative Analysis. *Sociology, 36*(3), 597-617. https://www-jstor-

org.dbgw.lis.curtin.edu.au/stable/42856431?sid=primo#metadata_info_tab
_contents

Raby, R., Caron, C., Théwissen-LeBlanc, S., Prioletta, I. & Mitchell, C. (2018).
Vlogging on YouTube: the online, political engagement of young
Canadians advocating for social change. *Journal of Youth Studies, 21*(4),
495-512. https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2017.1394995

Rosenblatt, K. (2020, September). A summer of digital protest: How 2020
became the summer of activism both online and offline. *NBC News*.
https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/summer-digital-protest-how-
2020-became-summer-activism-both-online-n1241001

Soukup, C. (2006). Computer-mediated communication as a virtual third place:
building Oldenburg's great good places on the world wide web. *New
Media & Society, 8*(3), 421-440.
https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444806061953

Spanos, B. (2021, February 8). #FreeBritney: Understanding the Fan-led Britney
Spears Movement. *Rolling Stone*.
https://www.rollingstone.com/feature/freebritney-britney-spears-legal-
829246/

Tilley, J. J. (2001). Cultural Relativism. Human Rights Quarterly 22(2), 501–47.
https://philarchive.org/archive/TILCR

Vivienne, S. (2011). Trans Digital Storytelling: Everyday Activism, Mutable
Identity and the Problem of Visibility. *Gay and Lesbian Issues and
Psychology Review, 7*(1), 43-54.
https://dspace2.flinders.edu.au/xmlui/bitstream/handle/2328/36186/Vivien
ne_Trans_AM2011.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=

Yang, G. (2009). Online activism. *Journal of Democracy, 20*(3), 33-36.

    https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.0.0094