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User-generated Online Video and the Atlantic Canadian Public Sphere: A YouTube Study

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Abstract

User-generated online video (UGOV) is a dynamic information and communication technology (ICT) that may be a useful tool for enhancing interactive expression and democratic discourse. Our study examines the potential for UGOV to contribute to the virtual public sphere by analyzing both the content of YouTube videos and responses to them by YouTube users. We focus on issues of regional identity, levels of engagement and creativity. The study shows that there is an important connection between geo-political identity and issues of public concern. It also reveals that while there is potential for UGOV to play a part in a creative public sphere, viewer engagement with the content is affected by the style and quality of presentation as well as the content.

Key words and phrases: YouTube, user-generated online video, public sphere, Internet, Atlantic Canada, user, location, creativity, engagement

Introduction

User-generated online video (UGOV) is a dynamic information and communication technology (ICT) that provides a mechanism for interactive expression and democratic discourse. It has allowed hundreds of thousands of audio-visual content creators and gatherers to upload, at no cost, clips and video blogs to video portal sites on the World Wide Web such as YouTube, Revver and Google Video.

At the same time as UGOV provides a creative form of expression for the video-poster, it is a source of entertainment and information for the viewer. Online audio-visual content can be viewed by anyone with adequate computer software, hardware and Internet bandwidth. While the authors note that access to these resources is not universal, the popularity of the online aggregate user-generated video site YouTube has grown steadily since its start-up in February 2005. By the end of 2006, user statistics for YouTube indicated that it was receiving more than 100 million views per day. Video

portals such as YouTube offer the opportunity for communication between video-posters and viewers through textual and video responses as well as video rating systems. This case-study is among the first to examine UGOV as an Internet-based tool with the potential to facilitate public discourse within the virtual public sphere.

Public sphere theory stresses the importance to democracy of a space for open public debate and discourse on political matters. The Internet has often been identified as a potential public sphere for political and social discourse due to its neutral structure, versatility and relative accessibility (Lessig, 2002). Our study examines UGOV as an online tool of the virtual public sphere by analyzing both the content and the responses of YouTube users to YouTube videos focusing on issues of regional identity, levels of engagement, and creativity. This study is distinctive because we focus on the effect of geo-political context in the application of public sphere theory to the specific creative technology of UGOV. This study is confined to the region known as Atlantic Canada, which includes the individual provinces of New Brunswick, Newfoundland and Labrador, Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island. Focusing on Atlantic Canada allows us to assess the relationship between regionalism and a global information medium. The recent launch of nine "national" versions of YouTube in recognition of the diversity of their users, and the relevance of local content (Waters, 2007) is testament to the timeliness of this study.

We conducted an exploratory study of YouTube users living in Atlantic Canada and found that most had posted neither comments nor videos, and there were few differences between those frequent users who had lived in Atlantic Canada their whole lives and those who had not. Our content analysis found that just under half the Atlantic Canadian videos on YouTube and the majority of commentary did not exhibit any obvious connection to Atlantic Canada. While a small proportion did deal with a range of political topics, most videos were oriented toward entertainment, and it was rare for video-posters and viewers to engage in political discourse.

The Internet and the public sphere

The public sphere is described as a site in democratic society that is outside the state, distinct from the economy and free of coercive or directive forces (Fraser, 1996; Habermas, 1989 [1962]), where neither social nor prejudicial factors prevent entry or engagement by equal individuals who debate matters of public concern. When the outcome of this type of citizen debate informs government policies and procedures, a form of direct democracy results (von Rautenfeld, 2005).

Public sphere theory allows the simultaneous existence of multiple, competing public spheres and recognizes that the dominant public sphere excludes some communication processes (Garnham, 1996). The theory has been critiqued for bourgeois elitism that denies the existence of parallel non-bourgeois public spheres (Negt and Kluge, 1993[1972]). Critiques and adaptations of Jürgen Habermas' public sphere theory (1989 [1962]) have explored the impact of such factors as gender (Fraser, 1996), race (Jacobs, 1999), class, communication technologies, economics, and globalization on the location, structure and content of the public sphere. There has also been critique of the ideas of universal access and rational debate toward consensus, arguing that complete resolution of different viewpoints is an idealistic notion that is neither possible nor good for democracy (Mouffe, 2000). A single perception of the "public good" may not be possible, and therefore multiple public spheres (Fraser, 2002) or some configuration of interconnected and overlapping, variously sized public spheres (Keane, 1995) are needed.

Despite its shortcomings, Habermas' public sphere remains a relevant theoretical approach to the critical analysis of the relationship between the media and democracy. The democratic function of a "stand alone" forum for debate and critical analysis illuminates both the integral role media institutions play within politics, and the material aspects of media ownership and control (Garnham, 1996). Habermas warned of the danger of "refeudalization" when powerful interests manage and manipulate genuine items of debate in an artificial public sphere (Thussu, 2000). With the globalization of transportation, trade, politics, culture and communication, what defines the citizenry and politics needs to be expanded beyond the confines of the nation-state to the world (Fraser, 2002). Nanz and Steffek argue that the democratic deficit and non-representative character of global political and economic organizations and their agreements enhance the value of a public sphere (2004).

The concept of the Internet as a public sphere is not new. Many researchers have explored the extent to which the Internet functions both as an online public sphere and as a source of information for the off-line

public sphere. Rather than a 'place' of meeting for debate, the online public sphere is characterized by a fluid exchange where issue-based, rather than interest-based, discourse occurs (Bimber, 1998). Patterns of discourse develop as individuals, who are 'nodes' along a distributed communications network, engage with one another around particular issues (Gochenour, 2006).

The Internet as public sphere has the potential to form a central component of democratic political debate (Gimmler, 2001), but technology is only the starting point. Many factors can hinder political discourse; limitations include the inherent risks in the sheer quantity and range of information available in digital form, the effects of non-simultaneous exchange on discourse and the media literacy of users (Papacharissi, 2002). There is concern that democratic potential will be limited by the online replication of global patterns of corporate capital, social inequality and power structures (Papacharissi, 2002; Salter, 2005). Digital divides still exist between communities and individuals where capacities for access and use of the Internet differ due to geographical, social, cultural, economic and organizational contexts. Historically, Atlantic Canadian provinces have been economically and digitally disadvantaged compared to other regions in Canada. A high percentage of the population is rural and high bandwidth broadband infrastructure is more widely available in Canadian urban centres. For many Atlantic Canadians, use of the Internet and online video content is often constrained by the availability and affordability of appropriate technologies, the level of expertise and aptitude (Rideout, 2000).

There has been some discussion about whether the Internet will exist parallel to, alter or replace current systems of political discourse. Mainstream politicians and party members, such as the candidates for the Democratic leadership in the United States, as well as alternative political interests are uploading unmediated information on key issues to the Internet to reach a wide audience. While it is unlikely that traditional political institutions will disappear or that the social order will change drastically, the Internet (Bimber, 1998, Gimmler, 2001) and by extension YouTube, could be an efficient tool in the enhancement of democratic politics when public discourse receives sufficient political attention.

The potential for the Internet to act as a mechanism of an online public sphere is attributed to the levels of interactivity that are possible between creators and consumers of content, and the opportunities that the medium offers for greater public input. It bears a closer resemblance to live debate than traditional print and broadcast media, which rarely publish anything untouched by professionals, and whose content flow is one-directional through well-entrenched gate-keeping

traditions and interests (Verstraeten, 1996). As all media markets adjust to changes in communication technology, the trend has been convergence rather than elimination, and media history points to a continuation rather than a replacement paradigm for new technologies (Winston, 1986). Most paper, radio and television media continue to print and broadcast in addition to offering web access; at least for now.

The Internet already provides the mechanism for alternative or counter public spheres (Bhandari, 2004; Downey, 2003; Kahn, 2004; O'Donnell, 2001). Journalism has the task of exposing the full spectrum of an issue, but the relative absence of alternative viewpoints in mainstream media suggests that the usual approach is one of "management" rather than revelation (Bennett et. al., 2004). Under-representation in the traditional press has encouraged a "counter-public" sphere to develop online as alternative press capitalizes on the openness of the medium (Downey and Fenton, 2003). Numerous studies of text exchanges on the Internet, in public and private emails lists, blogs and websites have explored the extent to which the online spaces are themselves public spheres and whether the Internet contributes to an expanded public sphere in the off-line world (Dahlberg, 2004; Dahlgren, 2000, 2002, 2005; Downey, 2003; Gimmler, 2001; O'Donnell, 2001, 2004; Papacharissi, 2004; Siapera, 2004). UGOV affords the potential for a level of exchange that is beyond the parameters of text for its immediacy, creativity and its ability to engage the viewer. UGOV is another tool of the Internet that could be used discursively in an expanded vision of the public sphere. The relative freedom on the levels of the Internet transmission and content (Lessig, 2002) allows unprecedented opportunities for users to express themselves in their own unique ways on video. These videos can be seen, heard and responded to either by text or in kind by anyone with the capacity to produce content and navigate the Internet.

Another way that YouTube bears a greater resemblance than traditional media to the public sphere model of discourse lies in its sources and handling of content, as well as the opportunities for direct exchange between video-posters and viewers. YouTubers are members of the public who are not paid to create content, nor do they pay to upload it. The content is not edited by YouTube and is only censored at the request of other YouTube users.

Questions and methods for our study

The discussion of the public sphere and the Internet has highlighted many themes that could be explored in a study of YouTube; we have focused on three, the first of

which is the role of regional and online identity. To what extent do YouTube users living in Atlantic Canada feel a connection to Atlantic Canada and to YouTube? Does having an Atlantic Canada connection relate to engaging with YouTube? What Atlantic Canadian public sphere issues are represented on YouTube?

Our second theme explores the extent to which YouTube users engage in discourse related to Atlantic Canada. The ability of the Internet, in this case UGOV, to facilitate discourse within a virtual public sphere is dependent on the diversity of content, the vigor and the civility of debate (Papacharissi, 2004). We looked at the subjects portrayed in the video, the ways and how clearly these topics were communicated, and whether there was an 'openness' to exchange between the video posters and viewers. We looked for the use of proper grammar and use of profanity as variables to measure both clarity and openness to discourse.

Our final theme is creative expression: Do UGOVs such as those on YouTube offer new ways to creatively engage in the public sphere? People who post their political videos on YouTube have moved away from the traditional conceptualization of the public sphere. The emphasis on rational debate in public sphere literature does not allow for the non-rational, performance element of political expression (Tucker Jr., 2005) that is widely evident in YouTube videos. We considered audio and visual quality, camera technique, and apparent levels of production and post-production in the videos to explore possible correlations between the creativity of the content engagement and generation of discourse.

Our methods included a content analysis of YouTube videos about Atlantic Canada and a study of YouTube users from Atlantic Canada. Sixty YouTube users were recruited from a university in Atlantic Canada to contribute to this and a concurrent YouTube study about YouTube user groups and video blogs (Molyneux et al., 2008). All of the 30 female and 30 male participants had university or college education, and 85.0% spoke English as their first language. Over half of the participants (58.3%) had lived their entire life in Atlantic Canada. At the time of the study, all participants were YouTube users, defined as having visited the YouTube site at least once prior to participating in this study.

Each study participant viewed the same seven YouTube videos; three videos about Atlantic Canada selected for their political content and four video blogs. All videos were sorted randomly and accessed through a Word document. Participants were randomly assigned to either viewing the videos on the actual YouTube site (where they could see viewer comments, ratings, and other information), or independently through a media player. The study participants completed a questionnaire comprised of demographic questions, a section for feedback on the videos, and additional questions such as

whether they felt part of YouTube and Atlantic Canadian communities. Participation took approximately 45 minutes and participants received a small honorarium.

The three videos selected for their political content included a slideshow of images from the first day of the New Brunswick lobster season accompanied by Billy Joel's song *Downeaster Alexa*¹, a rock song with a driving rhythm and lyrics that describe the physical, economic and life-changing challenges faced by fishers and their families as a result of declining stocks; a slideshow of images from a protest against "Atlantica," a largely corporate-driven initiative to amalgamate the Atlantic region into one economic trading unit, which was accompanied by a song by the punk band, NOFX; and an amateur video of part of a speech by one party leader during the New Brunswick provincial election campaign, in which he emphasizes provincial economic development.

We looked for relationships between whether our YouTube users felt like members of Atlantic Canadian or YouTube communities, and factors that might affect their sense of affiliation. These factors included the length of time participants had lived in Atlantic Canada, whether or not they had posted comments or videos to YouTube, how frequently they visited the site, and if the production values affected their levels of engagement with the videos.

For the content analysis, the YouTube website was searched in the last week of October 2006 for all videos with a connection to Atlantic Canada. After eliminating duplicates and videos about like-named dog breeds, the terms *Atlantic Canada, New Brunswick, Newfoundland, Labrador, Newfoundland and Labrador, Nova Scotia, and Prince Edward Island* located a population of 2049 videos. This population represents all videos with an obvious connection to Atlantic Canada as a snapshot of what existed "at that moment" within the funded term of the research project. The time period was not selected for any inherent value and may not predict any long-term or historical trends. A random sample of 100 (Appendix 1) was selected from the population of 2049 videos. This survey has a confidence level of 90 percent with an error level of 8 percent.

A trained researcher conducted the content analysis on two levels, each with its own coding scheme. A Cohen's Kappa inter-rater reliability test that achieved a level of agreement of 90.0% was conducted on the coding schematics using a sample of videos by a second trained researcher. The first round of analysis at the individual video level captured quantitative data about the content of the videos in terms of style, sphere (public or private), participants, the video-poster, and viewer responses. Public sphere content was identified as having "political" characteristics and addressing matters of public concern.

Private sphere content focused on personal interests, hobbies, activities, people or pets.

The second level of analysis examined viewer feedback through 147 comments posted to the 100 videos. Each comment was coded for elements such as whether it solicited engagement, if it was negative, positive or neutral, and if profanity and proper grammar were used. We did not analyze the number of views, the number of times a video was made a favorite, nor the video's ratings by the number of 'stars' awarded; these measures were not clear indicators of other users' approval or engagement since there is no way to determine who did the viewing or rating.

Research Findings

Regional identity

Our first theme explores regional identity. To what extent do YouTube users living in Atlantic Canada feel a connection to Atlantic Canada and to YouTube? Does having an Atlantic Canada connection relate to engaging with YouTube? How are the region and public sphere issues of Atlantic Canada represented on YouTube?

To begin, our study of YouTube users found that over half (58.3%) had lived their entire lives in Atlantic Canada; 41.7% had lived in Atlantic Canada for five years or less. Most (76.7%) felt they were members of an Atlantic Canadian community. The sense of belonging to the Atlantic Canadian community was higher among 91.4% of the participants who had lived their entire lives in Atlantic Canada than among the 56% who had lived in Atlantic Canada for less than their entire lives.

Thirty percent of our YouTube users felt that they belonged to a YouTube community, but 70.0% did not, even though 60.6% were frequent visitors to the site. A high proportion of those who professed no membership in the YouTube community had neither posted anything to the site (80.5%), nor visited frequently (81.5%). A high proportion (73.3%) of all YouTube users believed that posting more comments and videos would make them feel more like members of the YouTube community. 40.0% believed that watching more videos about Atlantic Canada, posted by Atlantic Canadians, would help them connect with the regional community.

We asked the users what they thought the purpose of YouTube should be and none agreed that it should provide public interest content exclusively. Answers to this question included: "*Anything at all*", and "*To allow people to express themselves freely. I may not agree with what people post, but I agree with their right to post it*" to "*let everybody post what they feel is important, but no pornography or content in violence with the constitution (racial discrimination etc.)*". Another user suggested an

archival purpose for the medium, “*To act as a great repository for all moving visual products of human civilization*” (mbv49).

Our content analysis revealed that a majority (79.0%) of the videos appeared to have been produced in Atlantic Canada, and the origins of the rest were unclear. We looked at the location of the video-poster in the user profiles and of the 88.0% who self-identified, 35.0% were residents of Atlantic Canada, 42.0% identified Canada, and 11.0% were located outside Canada. Atlantic Canada was the subject of almost two thirds of the remaining 12.0% of videos, posted by people who did not identify their locations.

While 53.0% of the videos did not mention Atlantic Canada, there was an almost even split between the number of videos that were favorable (21.0%) and neutral (23.0%) about Atlantic Canada, with only 1.0% negative. Most of the favorable videos were about traveling in the region, and had positive soundtracks, distinctive visual elements and sometimes credits. Two videos that stood out were separate music videos by two young men, each rapping about the benefits of their homes and lifestyles in Atlantic Canada (videos 38, 80). Videos were categorized as neutral when neither the soundtrack nor the images gave the impression that the video-poster was rendering any qualitative judgment. The negative video, entitled “*Canada’s Shame-Seal Hunt Video*” (video 82), condemned the annual Harp seal hunt in Newfoundland using images of protests, protesters, blood-soaked snow and white pelts accompanied by a soundtrack of Ozzy Osbourne’s song *Dreamer*².

Most of the videos (93.0%) did not contain public interest or overtly political content. The remaining seven per cent addressed various issues that fall into the Atlantic Canadian public sphere. Three of these seven videos were slide shows accompanied by professionally recorded music that referred to the decline of the Atlantic fisheries. The remaining four videos included the *Demonstrator Arrest In Halifax* video recorded the arrest of an anti-war protester (video 53) and *One Web Day* produced by a video production company for a series about how people use the Internet (video 98). Included also was the previously described Video 82 that protested the Harp seal hunt in Newfoundland. The final video was a home-made advertisement for a municipal electoral candidate (video 94), with the text description “*In 2005, I ran for city council and lost. But with a small digital camera, a computer and a great big ruptured city pipe, I produced this 30-second ad for posting on my website.*”

The content analysis of text comments posted to YouTube videos about Atlantic Canada found that most (83.0%) did not mention Atlantic Canada specifically. Of those that did, there was a close race between neutral (8.2%) and positive (7.5%) comments. Some comments

posted by Atlantic Canadians living outside the region spoke to a sense of belonging, such as “*Nice job man. Makes me long for my home on Cape Breton Island N.S. I can smell the salt water from here*” (video 21) and “*Thanks so much for this. I am a true Newfoundlander despite being miles away. I am listening, dancing around the kitchen while doing my dishes. Just great. There is no where like Newfoundland and no music like ours*” (video 69). The single negative comment was “*being from Halifax i’m glad to see people see the police state taking over, we will prevail.*” in response to the video showing the arrest of the demonstrator (video 53).

Engagement in Discourse

Our second theme explores the extent to which YouTube users from Atlantic Canada engaged in discourse on YouTube, how they responded to YouTube videos from Atlantic Canada and whether viewer engagement was encouraged in videos on YouTube from Atlantic Canada.

We wished to see if there was any correlation between the frequency of visitation and the user’s sense of engagement with the site and the content they found there. Of the YouTube users in our study, more than half (55.0%) visited the site several times a week or more, so we described them as frequent visitors. The remaining 45.0% of users visited the site once a week or less and were described as infrequent visitors. Of those who had lived their entire lives in Atlantic Canada, 45.7% were frequent visitors, compared to 68.0% of those who had lived less than their entire lives in the region.

More than twice the percentage of users in our study had previously posted a comment (26.7%) on YouTube than had posted a video (11.7%). The majority had posted neither videos (88.3%) nor comments (73.3%). Of the frequent visitor group, 78.9% had posted either a comment or a video. One dramatic finding of the YouTube user study was that more than 96% of the users reported talking about videos they had seen on YouTube with other people.

Our questions to the YouTube users included asking if they learned anything, were influenced by or changed their opinion from viewing the *Atlantica Protest* video. Forty-five percent of YouTube users reported learning something, whereas 55.0% did not. While 81.7% of users were unaffected, a minority of users (18.3%) reported being influenced by or changing their opinions.

A full third (33.3%) of users reported learning something from the *Lobstering* video, whereas 66.7% did not. While 71.7% were unaffected, the video had an impact on 28.3% of users who claimed that it influenced or changed their opinions about something. There are degrees of learning and changing opinions as illustrated by users’ comments such as “*This video made me*

appreciate just how hard lobstering really is. I already had this opinion, it just strengthened it”.

Seventy percent of users reported not learning anything from the video about the New Brunswick politician while 30.0% did. Only 13.3% reported being influenced by or changing their opinion about anything from watching the video. Users clarified their views with qualitative comments where they wrote that they had hoped for more specific policy information from the potential premier in addition to a better image and clearer sound.

Our content analysis of YouTube videos about Atlantic Canada found that most (84.0%) did not make overt attempts to engage viewers in discourse. It was unclear in 4% of the videos whether the poster was soliciting engagement with viewers, and it was rare (12.0%) that the video-poster solicited discourse with viewers, whether by inviting or responding to feedback. For the latter, tactics could be quite direct, such as: “*we Hope you like it. leave a Comment please!*” (video 89) in the description of a guitar performance, and the video of a Boxer pup with a text description asking viewers to get in touch if they were interested in dog breeding (video 16).

Only 10% of the YouTube videos about Atlantic Canada appeared to be produced for a specific or intended audience. Some of these videos targeted family members, such as the Mother’s Day tribute featuring a slideshow and young adult brother and sister performing a mimed love message to their mother (video 74). Another intended audience was a high school graduating class and the video featuring a collection of photographs from the year (video 19). Another video, shot through the windshield of a car wending its way up the road at Cape Smokey, Nova Scotia, was dedicated by the narrator: “*For Cape Bretoners abroad who are watching this on YouTube, hopefully this is a memory of home. Cape Smokey*” (video 47).

Sixty-three per cent of videos did not have any text comments or video responses by viewers. Fifteen percent of the videos had a single brief comment with encouragement or praise such as “*Brutal—I was starting to think that everyone on this site sucked. Thanks for saving the day*” (video 67) in response to a band performance, or simply “*loved it*” (video 89). Over half (58.5%) of the comments on the videos were positive, including those that address the video *Canada’s Shame-Seal Hunt Video* (video 82): “*I love this video, you did a great job. I just wish that this type of a video wasn’t needed in this day and age*” and “*Fantastic video. If we keep fighting for them, just maybe dreams will come true...*” Comment exchange occurred between viewers, with responses to each others’ comments, such as “*Dreams come true if we fight to make it happen, & put our hearts into it*”. Viewer comments on some other

videos suggested a preexisting relationship between the video-poster and the viewer.

The analysis found that 20.4% of comments did not directly address the videos, and 10.9% were neutral. Of the remaining comments on videos, 9.5% were either unclear or negative, with more than half of these responding to the *Demonstrator arrested* video (video 53). These comments revealed a range of rancour, from “*dumb socialists*” through to sarcasm: “*its funny that most of these people that are protesting and that claim to be anarchists, are just pissed off at their parents for making them eat broccoli and clean their rooms when they were at home, oh wait, most of them still live with their parents*”; and finally, explicative-peppered text that could be described as “hater” commentary (Lange, 2007).

Creative Expression

Our final theme addresses the role of creativity in the public sphere. Does YouTube offer new ways of creatively engaging in the public sphere? Our findings reveal that about one third of Atlantic Canadian YouTube users in our study are critical viewers of audio-visual media form and content. When asked how the videos could be improved, 87.0% of the written comments suggested that improved creative elements and production standards were needed while only 59.0% cited the subject as the basis for the video rating. The *Lobstering* and *Atlantica Protest* videos, which were slide shows accompanied by professionally recorded tracks of music, were both critiqued for the absence of video footage and for their length. The *Shawn Graham* video was primarily critiqued for camera placement, as well as poor quality image and sound.

The most frequent suggestion for slide shows was to include live video footage, which indicates that viewers expect video-posters to utilize the medium to its full extent. The survey asked users to imagine that they were posting a text reply to the video. We found that comments were not always obviously related to the ranking of the video, so gaining a clear picture of the true opinions of the users could be problematic. For instance, in response to the *Atlantica Protest* video the dismissive comment “*Go to school!!! And get a job!!!*” does not clearly correspond to the ranking by the user at three stars (which means “worth watching”). Some users in the study declined the opportunity to compose comments, while others had no suggestions for improvements and offered no explanation of their ranking.

From the content analysis portion of the study, YouTube videos about Atlantic Canada raise the question of the extent to which video-posters are also video creators. It would appear that while most (89.0%)

of the videos were posted by people who also created the content, 8.0% were videos clearly created by others and simply posted on YouTube. The origins of the remaining 3.0% of videos are unclear. It is not clear whether the company posted the promotional video for the cruise ship which docks in Saint John, New Brunswick, (video 10) or an individual who had taken the cruise. A very blurry screen-shot recording of part of the first episode of the Road to Avonlea - a long-time CBC Television production in the spirit of Anne of Green Gables set in Prince Edward Island - was posted by a self-identified American (video 99).

During the content analysis, we were interested to find that there was a nearly even split between two approaches to production style and values. A very slight majority exhibited a filmic approach to content by employing camera movement, editing, animation or other creative elements. The second group took a more 'textual' approach to video production; with static camera setups, minimal consideration of creative elements such as shot composition, lighting, camera angles, transitions or flow. Eighty-two per cent of the videos had acceptable to excellent quality image, and 87.0% had acceptable to excellent sound. Unacceptable sound was sometimes due simply to microphone placement, making it hard to distinguish parts, such as lyrics (video 11) and dialogue (video 54). Low quality images were characterized by underexposure (video 8), or shot either from too far away (video 70) or too close (video 72); poorly angled (video 18), out of focus (video 65), or shaky (video 77). In one case, low recording resolution meant the image broke down into pixels (video 73). The camera shot of a television resulted in distorted image colour and clarity because the camera did not adjust to changes in exposure in the image, and the audio was both too quiet and not synchronized (video 99).

Music was present in most videos (63.0%) and most often pre-recorded. Fifteen per cent were performers recording themselves playing originals or other artists' work. Live performance ranged from footage of concerts (video 42) to a few guys sitting by a microphone in what appears to be the aisle of a music store (video 97). Of the 22.0% of videos in the Music category with acceptable images and audio, 5.0% were at least semi-professional productions including a CBC report on the reunion of the Wonderful Great Band in Saint John's Newfoundland (video 81), a web-based show with concert footage and interviews with the Monoxides from Moncton, New Brunswick (video 7) and a promotional video of a CD launch at a blues bar in Halifax (video 1). The remaining two were music videos that were not elaborate productions, but did bear the hallmarks of professional production standards for lighting, audio, editing, and characterization (videos 28, 31). Two music videos

(videos 38, 80) of young men rapping about their home towns and hobbies did not exhibit professional production standards, but did emulate them.

YouTube allows non-English functionality, such as multilingual tags, comments and descriptions. French is the first language of about 12.0% of residents in Atlantic Canada (Statistics Canada, 2001, 2002). Despite being one of Canada's two official languages and the first language of many Atlantic Canadians, French appeared in only 1.4% of the comments and in none of the audio. That being said, all of the videos that were analyzed were English videos. Eighty-four percent used English and the remaining 16.0% either had either no sound or no spoken word. The frequency of grammatically correct English was high (almost three quarters of the comments), even when combined with Internet shorthand. Profanity appeared in less than one-tenth of the comments. While 39.5% of comments employed "correct" grammatical forms of English, including sentence structure, capitalization and punctuation such as *"Awesome footage. Do you have any more of this? Was this taken on a digital camera"* (video 50), more comments used Internet shorthand (23.8%) such as "smilies" or a combination of grammatical English and shorthand (27.9%) such as *"Lovely! Well done☺"* (video 89). Two per cent of comments were cryptic enough that their formatting was not apparent, while 5.4% used non-grammatical or vernacular English such as *"Bys your friggen Awesome! Keep posting up videos, you guys kick ass"* (video 97). Profanity, whether in print or symbol, was not used in 90.5% of comments.

Discussion and conclusions

The main question for this research is whether UGOV can function as a mechanism for, or contribute to, a virtual public sphere. In addressing this question we explored the themes of regional identity, engagement in discourse and creativity in public sphere expression.

Our first theme explored the extent to which YouTube users from Atlantic Canada engaged with YouTube and how Atlantic Canada and public sphere issues pertaining to Atlantic Canadians were represented and portrayed on YouTube. Our study found that just under half of the Atlantic Canada videos on YouTube, and the majority of commentary on these videos, did not exhibit any obvious connection to Atlantic Canada. Most videos were oriented towards entertainment and only 7.0% dealt with public interest and political topics.

Our study of users found that 55.0% were frequent visitors, 26.7% had posted a comment and 11.7% had posted a video to YouTube. Most (70.0%) did not feel like a member of a YouTube community. Our study found a sense of Atlantic Canadian identity among

76.7% of the participants, particularly for those who had lived their entire lives in the region, but also by more than half of those who have lived in the region for five years or less. We found no link between a sense of membership in an Atlantic Canadian and a YouTube community. Those who have not lived their entire lives in Atlantic Canada were more likely to be frequent visitors to YouTube, but they were no more likely to post comments or video than those users who had lived in Atlantic Canada their entire lives. The continued importance of the connection between geo-political identity and issues of public concern came through the public sphere issues presented. That YouTube did not create a national interface for Canadian content in its most recent service expansion is a continuation of the long-standing practice of treating Canadians as part of the American domestic media market.

Our second theme, engagement in discourse, explored the extent to which YouTube users from Atlantic Canada engage in discourse on YouTube, and also whether YouTube videos about Atlantic Canada encouraged engagement. There were no video responses, so text commentary was the only site of discourse for analysis. The patterns of discourse either reinforced pre-existing connections, or in others, discussion aligned along issues in a nodal pattern (Gochenour, 2006). Given that YouTube is a popular culture medium, accessible internationally to native and non-native English speakers alike, the high frequency of correct grammar usage was actually a bit surprising. The presence of profanity was minimal, and the majority of the text responses were positive. The presence of profanity was not surprising, since it is widely understood that less formal, more direct language is common in online communications. Results of the YouTube user analysis indicated that a greater level of engagement with the site itself (visiting frequently, posting comments and videos) was linked to a greater sense of membership in the YouTube community.

That some YouTube users in the study learned something or changed their opinions after viewing videos suggests educational potential is possible. Since the ratio of YouTube users who learned something or changed their opinions rose with the production levels of the videos they watch, it is apparent that politically interested parties must have the ability and willingness to exploit the potential of the medium to engage with Atlantic Canadians about pertinent issues. Interesting developments that could foreshadow the increased use of UGOV for the public sphere is YouTube's creation of the "News & Politics" category since this research was begun, and the recent launch of "Citizen Tube" to create videos aimed at interesting young people in political issues and processes.

Our final theme addressed the role of creativity in the public sphere. Does YouTube offer new ways to creatively engage in the public sphere? The much smaller proportion of videos with political content compared to entertainment suggests that while the potential for a creative public sphere for user-generated on-line video exists, the development of that potential depends on the recognition that viewer engagement with the content is affected by the style and quality of presentation, as well as the content. Qualitative comments about the videos made by YouTube users in the study revealed their expectation of full utilization of the creative characteristics of the medium. Just as other research shows an increase in the importance of new media production skills in professional journalism (Fahmy, 2007), our research shows that users expect the full potential of the medium to be used; they tend to be critical of poor organization, inadequate explanation and low production values. While it is possible that some video makers who simply point, shoot and upload with minimal consideration of the 'filmic' qualities may simply be not adept and so chose to present the subject as simply as possible, our research indicates that it is not only the skill level that guides the video creator's production decisions. Whether video posters are engaging with the medium to its full potential or are treating this medium as "text" appears to be due to more than simply a question of skill or comfort with the technology, since there are "filmic" productions of varied levels of quality.

Theoretically, UGOV affords a level of exchange that is immediate, creative, and expands on textual exchanges on the Internet. In this study, the site of discourse was text-based, and attempts to solicit discourse were rare. This raises the question of the extent to which YouTube will facilitate new opportunities for discourse among Atlantic Canadians about political issues in Atlantic Canada. Given that UGOV is not real-time, the new opportunities for discourse consist of asynchronous exchanges between participants, which in some ways, is more alike to letter-writing than to the telephone or online chat-rooms. However, the immediacy and brevity of text responses means that form of exchange does not lend itself to the same contemplative process required by the production process of a video, writing a letter by hand, or even typing an email response. A dichotomy forms between the possibility that the tone, tenor and substance of discourse may in fact be diminished by the form of exchange at the same time as asynchronous communication allows for reflection and re-visitation. There is the potential that the very features of the Internet that contribute to its mass appeal, such as anonymity and accessibility, may in fact limit its democratic potential since democratic rights are partnered with responsibility and accountability.

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Appendix 1

Video#	Video Title	Video URL
1	Bearlys Blues & Ribs	http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VBC40IQNwnM
6	More of Newfoundland	http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p6yYN-7n9Do
7	Sessions Episode 02: The Monoxides	http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YA8Gkoc-b9o
8	welcome to new Brunswick	http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hBjC5NvNRgg
10	The Port of Saint John	http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9pgFBSMyZko
11	All American Rejects	http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SFbaKJZT1BM
16	Boxer Puppy	http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1KYNeMTORmU
18	Kayla Playing and Singing A Thousand Miles	http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=65kzZxuU-5s
19	Grad Class of 2006	http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jhMzhRMmizI
21	Freedom 40/40 from Gloucester, MA to Nova Scotia, Canada	http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YLtWzyBmyPs
23	PHIL BIMPSON	http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IN0RIGz3HIE
28	“Hindsight” - Cess	http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7i4zJ-M6lgo
31	Plumtree – You Just Don’t Exist	http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vNB7nO6uXco
38	Harris Millar Rap – Keep it Real in Liverpool	http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YBmC1bO345g
40	Lobstering Video	http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CrzAva59It8
42	High Voltage – Highway to Hell – Live Digby	http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xEfgNYpgG34
47	Cape Smokey	http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XL9j7g2-E8U
50	Rolling Stones Halifax, NS - 2006	http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LmhgEZypRj4
53	Demonstrator Arrested in Halifax	http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2qN3yOwAh9o
54	Wildman Gary Williams vs Duke MacIsaac – 1 of 2	http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XgGkPXFJRj6U
65	Targa Newfoundland Rally 2005	http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w7WgwgqiUNY
67	Entropy – Screwdriver Trepination	http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=exR1FdtPixE
69	Where fishermen used to be	http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xEKBlfTXhzY
70	Seagulls	http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ADlrehd_OhY
72	Newfie Pizza	http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zZsAqZ-haOE
73	Pond	http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2RfYvL6xtWA
74	A Tribute to my Mother	http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jkTG32Gqo6c
77	Sandy Cove Beach	http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hre65Hd5ni8
80	Scalabrine – Playin’ with	video unavailable

	Passion	
81	WGB Reunion, St. John's, NL June 30, 1997	http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LNyNysr8uKY
82	Canada's Shame – Seal Hunt Video	Flagged as inappropriate: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n_p7_plqqy0
89	Irish Jig – Thousand Tall Ships Set	http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0vWtr1JEp6M
94	Vote Lono	http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=crgvL1_BKhU
97	Ten Dollar Bill	http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TILZ3pO9q4g
98	One Web Day – St. John's Part 1	http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MWOHP_KgIn8
99	Episode #1: The Journey Begins	http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6aKx1DH2Y6U

Endnotes

¹ *Downeaster Alexa* (1989) by Billy Joel, on album Storm Front. Columbia Records, USA.

² *Dreamer* (2001) by Ozzy Osbourne, on album Down to Earth. Epic Records, USA.