

Online Civic Cultures: Debating Climate Change Activism on YouTube

JULIE ULDAM
Copenhagen Business School

TINA ASKANIUS
Lund University

This article explores the potential of video activism on YouTube to form a communicative space for deliberation and dissent. It asks how commenting on activist videos can help sustain civic cultures that allow for both antagonism and inclusive political debate. Drawing on a case study of online debates spurred by the video War on Capitalism, which called for protest against the 15th United Nations Climate Change Conference, the article offers an empirical analysis that operationalizes the framework of civic cultures. In so doing, it investigates the ways in which activist videos are received by potentially transnational publics and how online modes of debate engage notions of the public sphere in contemporary online environments.

Introduction

In reality, the act of civil disobedience is the easy bit. It is the ensuing conversation that we are aiming for.

—Kerry-Anne Mendoza, "We sympathize with your cause, but . . ."

In December 2009, the 15th Conference of the Parties (COP15) to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change saw transnational networks of activists mobilize in Copenhagen to protest against policy makers' inadequate measures for alleviating climate change and call for immediate action and radical change.

In this article, we explore the potential of video activism on YouTube to facilitate a politics of climate justice. We do this through a case study of the activist network Never Trust a COP (NTAC) and the heated debates that the network's online mobilization video generated in the prelude to the COP15 protests. Analyzing these online debates, we explore YouTube's role in potentially extending the political involvement mobilized around protest events and ask how commenting on activist videos can help foster civic cultures in ways that allow for both antagonism and inclusive political debate.

Julie Uldam: ju.ikl@cbs.dk

Tina Askanius: Tina.Askanius@kom.lu.se

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To this end, we draw on Dahlgren's framework of civic cultures (2000, 2005, 2009; see also Dahlgren & Olsson, 2007) as a starting point from which to assess the democratic potential of the online debates spurred by calls to action against a political event such as COP15, providing insights generally into the significance of noninstitutional politics for an inclusive public sphere and specifically into the role of social media in political activism. This article offers an empirical contribution that operationalizes the framework of civic cultures in the context of anticapitalist protests against climate change so as to examine online debates that emerged around a particular transnational protest event. Albeit most prominent in the Danish context, the turmoil and debate stirred by the NTAC network's online mobilization video—not least on YouTube—offer an opportunity to investigate how user-generated content is received by potentially transnational publics and how online debates conjures up notions of the public sphere in contemporary online environments.

Recent debates about social media and political activism have focused on events in the Arab world, with the uprisings in Iran, Tunisia, and Egypt interchangeably labeled Twitter or Facebook revolutions (e.g., El-Nawawy & Khamis, 2012; Hänska-Ahy & Shapour, 2012). Many of these discussions have been marked by optimistic discourses on the ubiquity of video technologies and the use of YouTube to disseminate videos calling for demonstrations and documenting human rights violations, police brutality, and state repression. While it is tempting to connect catchphrases such as "YouTube revolutions" or the "YouTubification of dissent" to such current political phenomena, it is important to remember that media have always played a central role in bringing about social change. Indeed, the relationship between media and social movements has preoccupied scholars for the greater part of five decades. Their studies demonstrate how each technological media landmark—from the printing press to radio, television, and html codes—comes with an undercurrent of practices that appropriate dominant systems of media production and consumption for alternative purposes (Atton, 2003; Baines, 2012; Castells, 2001; Downing, 2001).

Within this broader debate about social media and contentious politics, we propose a critical, contextualized study of the role of YouTube in the context of a specific mobilization case. Our aim is not to assert the actual impact of media technologies on the mobilizations that took place in Copenhagen. Rather, we explore the dimensions that premise political action and engagement, focusing on YouTube's role in forming communicative spaces for dialogue, and consider such spaces as important prerequisites for the emergence of civic cultures. In this manner, the study proposes an understanding of video commenting as a mode of political engagement (Dahlgren, 2009). We demonstrate how YouTube was used as a space for dialogue with the potential to translate into civic cultures, and that these uses were limited to a particular local context in terms of both the issues raised and the users who participated. This article, then, proposes two interrelated arguments concerning the role of YouTube in civic cultures. First, by providing a space in which activists and local residents of differing political orientations interacted and debated issues of global justice and climate change, YouTube facilitated a reinforcement of political identities and thus civic cultures. Second, we argue that because it was mainly local activists and residents who took this opportunity to interact and debate, the possibilities YouTube offered for fostering civic cultures around the COP15 failed to extend the communicative space of the COP15.

The Case Study: Debating *War on Capitalism* on YouTube

Over the history of environmental activism, recurring debates have addressed the politicization of a wide range of environmental issues, from nuclear disarmament to recycling (e.g., Chatterton, Featherstone, & Routledge, 2012; Doyle, 2007; Giddens, 2009). In these debates, reformist groups in the environmental movement have approached climate change as an array of technical issues to be handled within the current structures of governance, such as the Green New Deal (Müller & Passadakis, 2009). In contrast, groups at the radical end of the environmental movement spectrum have concerned themselves with the root causes and political interconnections of climate change issues. The momentum sparked by UN climate conferences has yielded a reconfiguration of these struggles, presenting an opportunity to construct a politics of climate justice in opposition to narrowly conceived environmentalist approaches to climate change as an isolated, apolitical (or post-political), and essentially scientific problem reduced to questions of carbon emissions (Uldam, 2013). The traditional mass media have played a central role in pushing climate change up the media agenda in several countries, thus opening up opportunities for civil society to debate and circulate understandings of climate change and what needs to be done to alleviate it (Boykoff, 2011; Kunelius & Eide, 2012). The discourse of climate justice, which characterizes climate change as a result of global inequalities and the underlying logics of pro-growth capitalism, has developed into a call for action and a political agenda centered on recurring UN conferences on climate issues.¹ In the run-up to the COP15 climate summit in Copenhagen, the Climate Justice Action (CJA) network promoted a politics of climate justice by calling for "system change, not climate change" and civil disobedience actions. But some radical factions held that mainstream civil disobedience tactics would not sufficiently condemn the summit as a forum for profit-driven responses to climate change. It was from these factions that NTAC emerged, calling for a conflictual approach involving street riots and confrontational actions. As part of this campaign, it uploaded a mobilization video to YouTube calling for activists to come to Copenhagen "to show a dead system how to die." The video's discourse of violence caused a stir within the activist community in Northern Europe, leading to internal struggles over protest tactics within the movement (Reitan, 2011). Beyond activist circles, the actions advocated by NTAC received considerable coverage in the Danish mainstream press, as the Danish intelligence services announced their intention to crack down on the activists behind the *War on Capitalism* video. Outside Denmark, however, such attention mostly remained negligible. The comments on the *War on Capitalism* video can therefore help illustrate the extent to which YouTube (failed to) facilitated civic cultures transnationally, beyond national media systems.

Methodology: Analyzing YouTube Comments

Focusing on the anticapitalist factions of the climate justice movement that came together in the NTAC network, this article uses the network's mobilization video as an empirical entry point. The study analyzes comments that were posted to the video on YouTube in response to the network's call for confrontational direct action in Copenhagen. We use this case to demonstrate how the architecture of

¹ E.g., in the context of the Bali Principles of Climate Justice at the UN Earth Summit in 2002 and the formation of the Climate Justice Network in 2007 during the UN climate conference COP14, as well as localized initiatives such as Climate Camp in the UK in 2009.

participation on YouTube can facilitate performances of achieved citizenship (Dahlgren, 2009; Isin & Nielsen, 2008) and to show how the platform came to house exchanges of views that, though they resemble the mass-mediated debate in some regards², are unique to YouTube's mash-up cultures and peer-to-peer discussions. In terms of theory, our study builds on the framework of civic cultures as developed by Dahlgren (2005, 2009). To operationalize his framework at an analytical level, we draw on the analytical approach that van Zoonen et al. have proposed for studying popular modes of engaging with politics in the "video sphere." This enables us to probe issues of visibility and reach in relation to video responses and the posting of comments to online forums (van Zoonen, 2007; van Zoonen et al., 2007; van Zoonen, Vis, & Mihelj, 2010). From this perspective, an analysis of YouTube as a platform for political debate needs initially to address overarching questions of whose voices are speaking, what they are speaking of, when they are speaking, and who is listening. Our coding frame thus comprised two dimensions: (1) categories related to comment posters and (2) categories related to the content of comments. The first dimension included both socio-demographic categories (date of upload, gender, age and country of origin as registered by the user). The second dimension included categories based on five processes of the civic cultures circuit: values (inclusivity and legitimacy of the enemy), affinity (commitment to an anticapitalist perspective and explicit affinities), identities,³ knowledge (demonstration of knowledge about protest tactics and the media specifically, and about societal organization and democracy generally), and practices (interaction, dialogue, and abusive commenting).

Our adaptation of Dahlgren's civic cultures framework to include five analytical categories is informed by an ethnographic case study conducted in the winter of 2009/2010. During this period we participated in the Klimaforum09 alternative climate conference and the main protests against the UN climate summit. Further, we conducted interviews with activists and alternative media practitioners in the months following the summit protests. For security reasons, field notes and interviews are anonymized.

Data Selection

Despite a plethora of grassroots media attempting to challenge YouTube's position and provide a nonprofit alternative, the corporate platform is currently about the only site where videos are debated from a range of divergent political positions and reach a substantial number of viewers. Rather than an a priori selection of platforms or channels, our starting point was to trace the *War on Capitalism* video as it appears in different online spaces. On all other platforms where the video is featured, users are redirected to YouTube. Few or no comments have been posted to any of these sites. Our interest was the debate occurring around the video, so these are consequently not included in the data set. Explicitly stating his affiliation with NTAC, YouTube user CivilSpan uploaded the video in October 2009. In November 2009, the video was added to the VisionOnTv channel. Whereas CivilSpan is an individual channel of a Sweden-based user, VisionOnTv is registered to the UK-based, grassroots media organization Undercurrents, which produces and promotes video for social change. The two channels chosen for detailed analysis thus

² See Carpentier (2011) for a critical discussion of audience participation in relation to traditional mass media.

³ In Dahlgren's (2005) framework, identity refers the subjective side of citizenship, that is, people's sense of belonging to groups or cultures as well as their sense of agency (their sense of being "potential participants with efficacy in social and political entities" (pp. 158–159).

demonstrate how YouTube attracts diverse users, both individuals and organizations, cutting across and connecting networks and actors of the COP15 action space (Bennett & Segerberg, 2011). A content analysis was conducted of a total of 391 comments posted to the two channels. An intercoder reliability test was carried out on the entire data set, with a reliability score of between 86% and 100% across categories. Although YouTube allows for other forms of user responses, such as video responses, only text-based comments were included in the final data set. Based on the content analysis, representative examples of comments are presented. The original spelling, text format, and punctuation are included unchanged to represent the authentic voices of the users. Although content analysis may lack analytical sensibility toward the particularity of the empirical material, it allows us to systematically organize and analyze key descriptive measures in these particular kinds of online discussion threads that are otherwise difficult to capture.

Civic Cultures: Theoretical Horizons and Analytical Entry Points

The proliferation of online political sites and debate forums has stimulated a renewed scholarly interest in notions of political engagement and citizenship, generating calls for theoretical reconsideration of political debate within the public sphere (see, e.g., Brundidge, 2010; Dahlberg 2001; Dahlgren 2005, 2009; Freelon, 2010; Papacharissi, 2004). Most of these contributions rest on a long-standing axiom of political theory, underwritten by the (Habermasian) model of deliberative democracy, that the engaged *conversation* on matters of public concern between empowered citizens is an essential prerequisite for a vital, functioning democracy (Habermas, 1962/1989). Dahlgren (2009) maintains that it is imperative not to lose sight of the classic idea that democracy resides, ultimately, with citizens who engage in *talk* with one another (p. 149). Nonetheless, while asserting the significance of informed political debates between citizens to the democratic process, and of the various ways these debates manifest themselves online, Dahlgren also points to the limits of the model of deliberative democracy for understanding the affective and culturally embedded dimensions of politics and citizenship. Habermas (2006) has more recently revised his conceptualization of the public sphere to recognize alternative public spheres' potential to influence discourse in the dominant, mainstream public sphere, but his conceptualization remains anchored in presuppositions of rationality, thus delegitimizing passionate expression and debate of conflictual views. This elimination of passion from political debate is problematic because it does not acknowledge the role that this very passion plays in motivating engagement in noninstitutional politics (Carpentier & Cammaerts, 2006; Juris, 2008).

In similar critiques of Habermas' unitary public sphere, scholars interested in the interrelations between media and democracy have underscored the importance of passion and irrationality, and even antagonism, to political practice (Cammaerts, 2007; Dahlgren, 2005; Downey & Fenton, 2003; Fenton, 2008; Kavada, 2009; Mouffe, 2005). From this vantage point, politics is always "a struggle between opposing hegemonic projects, which can never be reconciled rationally or through consensus" (Mouffe, 2005, p. 21). However, Mouffe (2005) affirms the importance of turning enemies into adversaries: an adversary is a "friendly enemy" whose right to defend contested ideas is acknowledged.

The civic cultures framework aims to specify empirical entry points into the study of citizens' engagement in politics and the contestation of dominant societal projects. Conceptually, it is molded

around a circuit of six overlapping and closely intertwined dimensions that can both hinder and promote engagement: “knowledge, values, trust, spaces, practices and identities” (Dahlgren, 2009, p. 108). These dimensions should be understood as multidimensional cultural *road markers* for patterns that offer resources relevant to civic engagement and may impact our political horizons (p. 103). When understanding politics from this vantage point, what may not initially appear to be of great import can form a springboard for public participation, and different kinds of everyday “chitchat”—in this case, comments posted to YouTube—can begin to take on political connotations or even “morph into civic talk” (Dahlgren, 2009, p. 90). Leaning on Dahlgren’s framework, then, entails acknowledging both antagonisms and the messiness of everyday engagement as part of being political. Thus, underlying this study is a commitment to taking everyday political discourses seriously by treating them as significant sources in research on the opinions of what appear to be “forgotten publics” (Hauser, 1999). In this perspective, online commenting is considered a mundane yet important aspect of political engagement in climate change politics.

For all its useful qualities as a nondeterministic framework for analyzing modes of political engagement, the civic cultures model leaves a number of important issues unresolved. Methodologically, abstract concepts such as identity and spaces do not easily translate into analytical categories, just as the model in itself does not provide tools for organizing or interrelating the various elements within the framework. Seeking to operationalize all six dimensions of the civic cultures circuit, we have collapsed the dimensions of affinity and identity into one category, because in new social movements identity is closely linked to the group(s) that citizens belong to (Uldam, 2010). Moreover, in YouTube commenting, expressions of identity are best captured in expressions of affinity. To explore the dimensions of values, affinity, identity, and practices, we also draw on Mouffe’s (2005) notion of agonistic pluralism. In the visions of radical and deliberative democracy, Dahlgren (2007) sees a common, shared commitment to democratic norms and ideals that he calls a “generalised civic identity” (Dahlgren, 2007, p. 61). Applied to the study of YouTube commenting, such a synthesized perspective offers an analytical sensibility regarding different modes of civic talk that is at once committed both to democratic values and “the rules of the game,” and to the importance of difference, anger, and conflict as an intrinsic part of deliberation (Dahlgren, 2007, p. 61). This article explores the six dimensions of Dahlgren’s civic cultures framework as follows: First, it investigates the dimension of spaces in the section “YouTube: A Communicative Space in the Civic Cultures Circuit.” Second, the dimension of values is examined in the section “Values: The Anticapitalist Deadlock?” Affinity and identity are explored in a third section, “Affinity and Identities: Intra-Movement Belongings.” Fourth, knowledge is explored in the section “Knowledge: Media-savvy Reflections on Mass Media Logics.” Finally, the section “Practices: Dialogue and Abusive Commenting” looks at the dimension of practices.

YouTube: A Communicative Space in the Civic Cultures Circuit

In the civic cultures framework, the concept of communicative spaces refers to “the accessibility of viable public spheres in the life-world of citizens” (Dahlgren, 2009, p. 115). In this article, YouTube is conceptualized as one such space, in which alternative viewpoints have potential to circulate and be negotiated among transnational publics.

A growing body of literature addresses YouTube as a site of politics and political engagement, emphasizing the significant role it has acquired in institutional politics (Burgess & Green, 2008a; Carlson & Strandberg, 2008; Heidiger, 2008; Strangelove, 2010) and in noninstitutional politics (Antony & Thomas, 2010; Askanius & Uldam, 2011; Kavada, 2009; van Zoonen et al., 2010). Grassroots organizations that have traditionally been relegated to the remote margins of the Internet (McChesney, 2007) are finding their way to mainstream social media and now are increasingly present, promoting alternative politics in popular online spaces such as YouTube. However, as social movement organizations and political activists increasingly seek to gain visibility in social media, a number of empirical questions arise. Just how visible or public are the calls for action they issue on these platforms? Who is actually listening—and responding? What constitutes political and cultural participation in the particular context of YouTube?

YouTube Commenting: Political Debate or Fragmented Conversational Cultures?

When assessing whether YouTube is a site of political communication, skeptics have often raised the questions of *actual reach* and of whether posting comments and debating online can be said to constitute public participation. YouTube is a platform in which technology may provide a space where even marginalized publics can have a voice, although no one is necessarily paying any attention in this space. Skeptics assume this voice is meaningful only if a substantial number of people are listening (Couldry, 2010). Leaning on the notion of achieved citizenship (Dahlgren, 2009), we suggest that comments and video responses, however insignificant in terms of ranks and views, should be assessed and interrogated as meaningful performances through which people construct their political selves (van Zoonen, 2007). Approaching commentary as a performance of achieved citizenship allows us to consider not only how many are listening, but also who is participating and how.

Though YouTube is often hailed for its political potential, it has also been a target of severe criticism. Some studies comparing mainstream representations of politics to the “video sphere” suggest that in some cases, YouTube contributes to a diversified and pluralistic public sphere, introducing a diversity of voices, genres, and themes that enrich and nuance political debate (Anthony & Thomas, 2010; van Zoonen et al., 2010). Others gesture toward a conclusion that has been suggested ever since the emergence of the first online bulletin boards: that opportunities for user participation in online debate forums are most commonly used to demonstrate opinions in a unidirectional manner rather than to engage in dialogue (Dahlberg, 2001; van Zoonen et al., 2010). Moreover, hate spam is continuously stressed as a problem in online political discussion (Lange, 2007; Strangelove, 2010).

Addressing YouTube’s comment features specifically, Juhasz (2008) contends that commenting does not provide actors with the resources to gain a collective intellectual momentum that can translate viewing into action or commenting into deliberation. Juhasz (2008) ascribes these challenges to YouTube’s word count restriction, which limits users’ capacity for complex communication on political matters. Further, she argues, uploading videos to YouTube rather than, for example, an online activist platform strips the videos of their political contexts. YouTube videos and responses occur in “an anarchistic and privately motivated environment that disallows the unification of these oddly assorted, if free, demands, images, styles, or viewers” (Juhasz, 2008, p. 305). In a similar vein, Gregory (2010) argues that the key problem activists face in uploading a video to YouTube is that it is depoliticized by being taken from its

(institutional or noninstitutional) political context and put into a hybrid media space. Removed from its original location, the video loses an essential dimension of agency. Insofar as a mobilization video is defined by its intent to turn viewing into action, most activist videos on YouTube fail to provide viewers with directions for action in response to what is witnessed, “unless options for actions to take are built into the video itself” (Gregory, as cited in Jenkins, 2008).

We concede that the technology behind YouTube commentary builds on profit-driven rather than democratic logics. However, the techno-determinism that underpins Juhász’s (2008) and Gregory’s (2010) arguments backgrounds the role of *media practices*—what people actually do with technology (Couldry, 2004). Rather than taking for granted the possibilities YouTube affords for engaging with noninstitutional politics, this article explores empirically how users navigate YouTube’s architecture of participation and the extent to which this facilitates civic cultures in an online, networked, profit-driven platform.

Analysis: Commenting on *War on Capitalism*

Against the backdrop of the framework outlined above, the following content analysis first attends to the visibility and reach of comments on the *War on Capitalism* video. It then explores the potentialities of the comments as practices of civic cultures in an inclusive public sphere by focusing on the dimensions of values, affinity and identity, knowledge, and, finally, dialogue and abusive commenting as political practices.

Visibility and Reach: Who Speaks, and Who Is Listening?

To assess the contribution YouTube comments make to an inclusive public sphere, we need to first ask who speaks and who is listening. These questions are key in an online sphere characterized by fragmentation, which often merely connects like-minded users without challenging their presumptions (Cammaerts, 2007; Dahlgren, 2000). Answers to these questions may include gender, age, and country of origin as registered by the commenter (van Zoonen et al., 2010).

Users listing Denmark as their “Country” account for 55% of the comments ($N = 217$) made on the *War on Capitalism* video on YouTube. This overrepresentation of commenters from Denmark reflects the location of COP15 in Copenhagen in two ways: (a) local activists played a key role in handling tensions between conflictual and more moderate protests against COP15 and therefore had a stake in the debate that unfolded on YouTube; and (b) residents of Copenhagen understood the video—and mass media interpretations of the video—as calling for random vandalism and even violence in their local neighborhood. They therefore posted comments objecting to disruptive actions in their city and threatening, “. . . if you start rioting, looting and burning things off in the streets of Copenhagen, we are a lot of people who won’t just stand and look at you doing it . . .” (YouTube commenter, December 2009).

The other countries represented in the comments on the *War on Capitalism* video reflect the transnational constellation of the NTAC and CJA networks. Controlling for multiple comments by single users, the other countries that figure prominently in the comments are Germany and the UK. Both NTAC and CJA activists are mainly from Denmark, Germany, and the UK.

Male were significantly overrepresented among the commenters. Many of the commenters who do not state a gender could very well be female, since female bloggers and vloggers tend to experience more flaming when they reveal their gender (Burgess & Green, 2008b). Whereas this does not imply that women are not active in the online video sphere, it does indicate that they are underrepresented in the YouTube discussions about NTAC's mobilization efforts. Despite the skewed representation of commenters in terms of gender and nationality, the comments on the *War on Capitalism* video do suggest that the debate reaches beyond NTAC affinity groups. The comments represent a debate between different groups engaging beyond a "cosy circle of likeminded sympathizers" and challenging presumptions held by differing movement factions and wider publics alike (Cammaerts, 2007, p. 220).

Values: The Anticapitalist Deadlock?

Dahlgren (2005) argues that civic cultures must be anchored in democratic values. The pluralism that this framework of civic cultures hinges on echoes Mouffe's (2005) notion of radical democracy. From this perspective, democratic values entail political engagement that allows for conflict and disagreement. The comments on the *War on Capitalism* video are underpinned by values grounded in a wish for a democratic society. However, they vary crucially in their understanding of what a democratic society is and how it can be brought about, that is, whether capitalism can be the basis of a democratic society or is inherently undemocratic. Only 19% of the comments construe capitalism as an illegitimate enemy, while 76% ($N = 297$) take an agonistic approach, construing capitalism as an adversary to be influenced through protest rather than eliminated (Figure 1). Though activists at the anticapitalist end of the climate justice movement spectrum want ideally to end capitalism and introduce alternative ways of organizing society, not all radical activists see this aim as a reason to forgo influencing a policy process that, like COP15, represents the capitalist system. In this regard, the comments refute the opinion that the radical end of the climate justice movement spectrum is a homogeneous group of individuals who all unambiguously construe COP15 as an enemy rather than an adversary. This heterogeneity of radicalism is captured by two comments that both express a belief in direct action as a necessary mode of protest against capitalism:

normally i am absolutely for direct action . . . but please think about the people who travelled from all over the world just to protest. you will fuck their protest up . . . so think about what you are going to do. shut cop15 down! . . . (Commenter, December 2009)

But another radical activist takes a more antagonistic line:

nooo we are going to fuck them well up, show our anger that this cop15 is just bullshit. . . FIGHT BACK. (Commenter, December 2009)

In contrast, the 57% ($N = 223$) of comments that articulate radical activists as an enemy do so on the basis of denunciation, construing radical activists as an enemy to be eliminated. The majority of these comments are abusive, often much more so than in the following example:

Fuck why did this have to happen in my country? If you touch any property that is not ur own I will kill you.! (Commenter, November 2009)

Thus, commenters who articulate capitalism as the enemy express agonistic values of inclusion more often than do commenters who articulate radical activists as the enemy, with the latter opting oftener for abusive comments. However, some commenters who see radical activists as the enemy also engage in dialogue and attempt to explain their position:

How will burning down Copenhagen help the world? NTAC is a dying breed and your solution is to take the rest of the world with you in a sea of flames? Cut the crap and let the politicians do there [sic] work without meaningless violence and destruction (Commenter, November 2009).

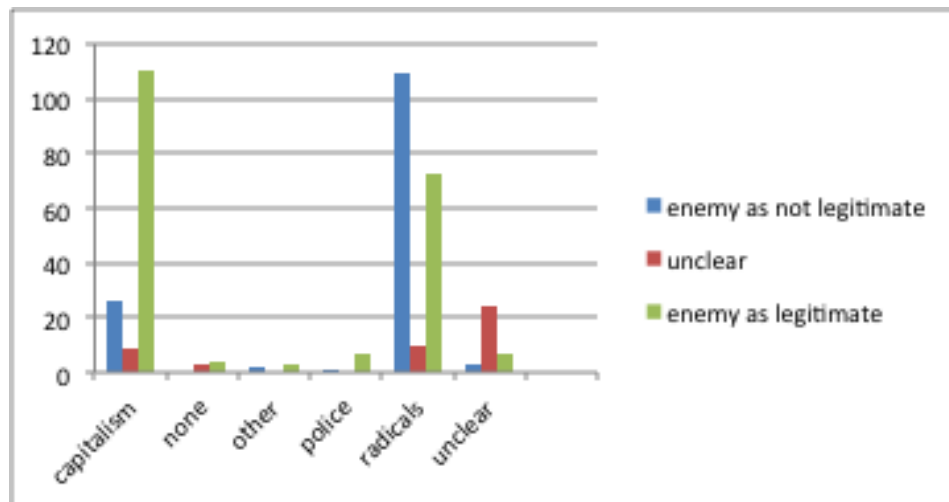


Figure 1: Agonistic values: The enemy as legitimate.

The construction of COP15 as either an enemy or an adversary feeds into activists' preferred modes of action. Insofar as the enemy is perceived as undemocratic and thus illegitimate, protest requires disruptive actions; an orderly mass march calling for policy changes would be seen as legitimizing the enemy's position, that is, the non-inclusive process of the COP15. Disruptive actions, however, most often lead to activists' being portrayed and marginalized as violent mobs (McCurdy, 2011). This tension between disruptive modes of action and achievement of popular resonance feeds into intra-movement disagreements. In the case of COP15, anticapitalist protesters were divided in their preferred modes of action: on a radical-reformist spectrum, the main non-NGO organizer of protests, CJA, occupied a central position favoring civil disobedience and disruption of the conference, whereas NTAC placed itself at the radical end of the spectrum by calling for property damage. The comments reflect these differing perspectives on direct action, and the gray zones they comprise.

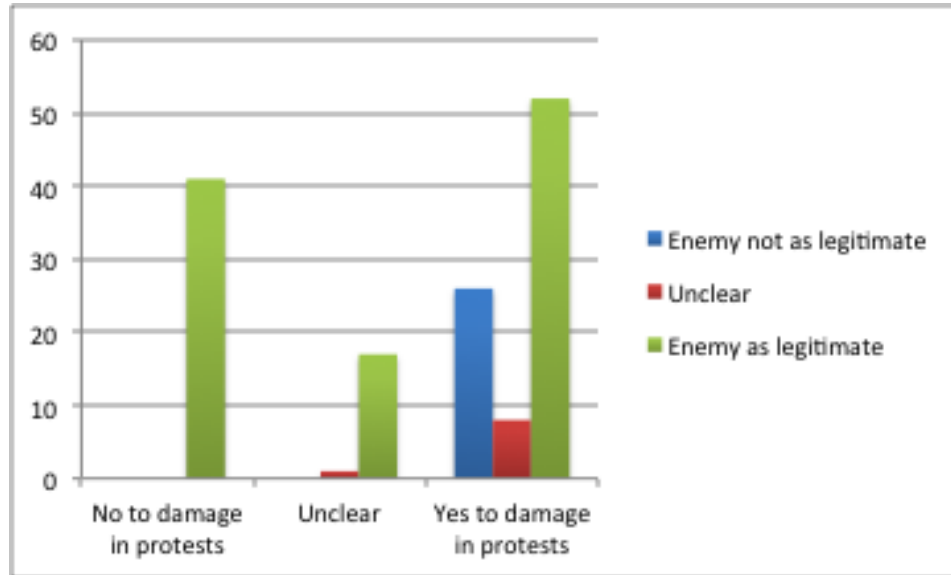


Figure 2. Distribution of comments that construe capitalism as the enemy.

Among the comments that construe capitalism as the opponent, only commenters who see COP15 as an illegitimate enemy favor basing protests against COP15 on a logic of damage (see Figure 2). This supports the correlation between denunciation of the enemy as illegitimate and a preference for actions driven by a logic of damage. However, reflecting the diversity of groups involved in the protests against COP15 and in the climate justice movement more generally, anticapitalist commenters who construe COP15 as a legitimate adversary are divided in their views on damage caused by direct action, with 36% ($N = 141$) prioritizing the importance of damage in protests and 28% ($N = 109$) arguing for civil disobedience without causing damage. These intra-movement frontiers are captured by the following comment:

Im a climate activist, and a supporter of the civil disobedient Climate Justice Action - and I think this video was really stupid. Never Trust A Cop network is not the same as Climate Justice Action. Just so you guys know. (Commenter, November 2009)

Overall, comments on the video are anchored in democratic values. However, they vary in their understanding of how to extend possibilities for engagement in a democratic society. While some argue for the importance of allowing for conflict in order to contest the hegemony of capitalism, others stress the importance of eliminating conflict so as to gain resonance among wider publics. However, the tendency of some locals to focus on protection of their everyday spheres rather than engagement with a bigger political picture is grounded in self-interest rather than democratic values. In some cases, this perspective led to fierce retaliation from activist commenters; in others, it prompted activist commenters to try to

explain their rationales. These dynamics of dialogue and flaming are discussed in the section on practices below.

Affinity and Identities: Intra-movement Belongings

A civic culture cannot thrive unless its members possess a sense of belonging (Dahlgren, 2005, 2009). The climate justice movement provides an overarching point of identification (Doherty, 2002), but different intra-movement constellations of affinities are at play as myriad networks and groups of varying permanence within the movement take different issues, and sometimes different modes of direct action, as their focus. These differences are central to affinities and identities in everyday activist practices. With the production and circulation of the *War on Capitalism* video, the NTAC network emerged out of CJA, the broad anticapitalist coalition that was mobilizing for COP15 demonstrations.

The NTAC network then assumed a radical, conflictual position within the protests, whereas CJA came to represent a more moderate position. Importantly, these positions on the COP15 protest spectrum related to modes of action, not political standpoints. Moreover, the formation of NTAC as a separate affinity group did not constitute a rupture, since CJA supported the new network's actions and some CJA members helped organize and participate in them. Nonetheless, it illustrates the importance of a sense of belonging among those with shared views on the underlying causes of climate change and the actions required to tackle them. The comments on the *War on Capitalism* video reflect the inter-network differences that connect issues of protest tactics to issues of belonging. However, they refer to differences in the approach to protest tactics, rather than to group affinities. In fact, 97% ($N = 379$) of the comments do not explicitly mention any affinities.

Only rarely do commenters state their affinity with groups. When they do, they often do so subtly, as does this commenter, who only implicitly acknowledges affiliation with NTAC:

War in Copenhagen War in Copenhagen. You know who we are, and you know our name. (Commenter, November 2009, our translation)

The absence of affinity references could suggest that commenters represent and identify with the broader climate justice movement and not just the networks mobilized for the COP15 protests. More significantly, it reveals activists' concerns about security. Generally, radical activists face state repression (Hintz & Milan, 2010). Following the circulation of the *War on Capitalism* video on YouTube, the Danish police announced that they were *initiating an investigation* of the activists behind the video (Askanius & Uldam, 2011). CJA activists faced harsh police repression, including unlawful mass arrests, searches of their homes, and pepper-spraying of activists held in cages (Chatterton et al., in press). The severely repressive policing and juridical structures confronting activists made them cautious in their communicative practices, thus hindering expression of affinity in online spaces. Acutely aware that the social media were monitored by the police, activists saw them as appropriate only for disseminating non-sensitive information. The Danish authorities' intensive search for CJA and NTAC members, and the extreme monitoring of climate justice activists in general, curtailed activists' possibilities for openly organizing and debating acts of political contestation.

Knowledge: Media-savvy Reflections on Mass Media Logics

Knowledge is another key prerequisite for the formation and flourishing of civic cultures. Some comments posted on the video demonstrate a reflexive understanding of mass media logics (McCurdy, 2011), as well as knowledge of the interplay between online and traditional mass media. Moving beyond knowledge understood in terms of media savviness or lay theories of mass media logics, comments on the video testify to a high level of background knowledge of the COP process and its historical trajectory as a target of protest politics.

Numerous comments cluster around the recurring theme of the traditional mass media's gatekeeper role in reporting and framing news of political activism for wider publics. Within this overarching debate on the role of the mainstream media in contentious politics, a thread of comments articulates activists' experiences of how getting the attention of mass media often requires spectacular events, and how violence is paramount for immediate attention. Reflecting perceptions of hierarchies of news values (favoring conflictual over peaceful protests) and a wish to directly impact the opponent by stopping the conference proceedings, one user comments:

Without the violence, media wouldn't care anyway, they can just go on with their daily business by writing their biased shit. (Commenter, November 2009)

Countering these arguments, others point out the unintended consequences of causing damage through direct action:

you are doing the capitalists a great favor if you take the focus from the cop15 meeting and give the media pictures of burning streets ! - and you get to fight the cops - not the politicians or the capitalists . . . so be smart. Think. We are fighting for the environment, not against the police. (Commenter, November 2009)

As previously discussed in the section on visibility and reach, mainly male commenters from Denmark dominate the conversations. Comments posted by individual citizens and disgruntled locals—apparently drawn into the debate on climate change activism because the protests were scheduled to take place in their neighborhood—reflect how political knowledge is integrated and appropriated into a personal frame of reference. In this sense many comments, 25% ($N = 98$), echo a mundane, subjective knowledge used to make sense of politics. In this context, subjective knowledge can be understood as the particular types of personal knowledge and life stories with which people confront and understand politics (van Zoonen et al., 2007, p. 336). Reflecting the way in which an epistemology rooted in the subjectivity of everyday experience is used to make sense of politics, commenters complain about how the protests will affect their everyday lives as peaceful, law-abiding citizens. They often do so with reference to the

inconveniences experienced during the Youth House riots,⁴ which unfolded over a period of some three years, prior to the climate change protests. In contrast, others welcome protest activities but encourage activists to refrain from any form of violence or material damage to their city. These mundane perspectives highlight notions of achieved citizenship and the subjective experience of what it means to exercise informal modes of citizenship.

By the same token, YouTube participation cuts across different forms of political engagement, putting various actors on display as they engage in the politics of climate change. Activists who use YouTube as one among other platforms in their communication and organization repertoire (Segeberg & Bennett, 2011), and who debate with opponents and fellow adherents about uploaded content, exemplify one type of political engagement. Meanwhile, individual citizens who engage by reacting against or showing support for the climate protests in their city or country represent yet another entry point into the conversation and another way of performing citizenship. Thus the video triggered an important debate about a major protest event in the climate justice movement, and at the same time it rearticulated long-standing tensions between different civil society groups.

Practices: Dialogue and Abusive Commenting

To be sure, many challenges burden claims that online commenting translates into bottom-up participation and interaction between knowledgeable citizens. In debates on how YouTube might be seen to provide an infrastructure for participatory cultures, skeptical perspectives question how commenting could in any way reinvigorate the political conversation between citizens that is so often envisioned as the core of an inclusive public sphere (Dahlberg, 2001; Dahlgren, 2009). Doubts have also been raised regarding how YouTube could realize visions of an uncensored and accessible visual media connected to the goals and dreams of political movements (Juhász, 2008). From this vantage point, scholars argue that although YouTube's corporate architecture of participation increases video makers' and activists' possibilities for visibility, it fails to take further steps to provide viewers with the larger political context and history that enable understanding of each video (Fenton & Barassi, 2011; Gregory 2010). From this perspective, YouTube essentially offers storage capacity, visibility, and access to video activists and engaged citizens, but it lacks a sense of history, community, or knowledge vis-à-vis viewers (Juhász, 2008).

Most users leave only one or two comments on the video, posting short statements or exclamations such as "Morrns [sic]", "LOL," or "Fuck the system!" In total, only 24% of users left more than two comments on the video, and even when they did, their comments were not necessarily clearly motivated by a drive to achieve consensus, improve understanding, or merely listen to different viewpoints:

⁴ As of 1982, the Youth House, a squatted social center in Copenhagen, functioned as a cultural and political hub for Copenhagen's Left. In 2007, following the eviction of occupants and destruction of the Youth House, thousands of protesters took to the streets, building barricades, setting cars on fire, and throwing cobblestones at the police (Karpantschov & Mikkelsen 2008).

I really don't care what you think about the movement, you obviously don't have any hope for the future. I apologize for caring about people and the health of our planet enough to actually believe that acting against the wrongdoers is the right thing to do. Fuck you. (Commenter, December 2009)

This comment illustrates how a wish to silence or provoke others can sometimes eclipse attempts to engage in a political discussion. Some comments are merely declarations of political standpoints, left by actors seemingly uninterested in whether or how the statement is received. These examples demonstrate the kind of debate climate that renders comments "talk without consequence" (van Zoonen, 2007, p. 251).

While the analysis shows that people generally leave just one comment, which usually is short, our analysis does single out examples of actors engaging in long, often complex discussions on the politics of climate change. By dividing their comments into several postings, they actively bypass YouTube's space limitations and enable themselves to engage in lengthy discussions of politics, neoliberal governance, or Marxist ideologies. Reflecting openness and attempts to engage in dialogue, some actors indulge in passionate and elaborate discussion, just as some threads capture the responsiveness so often missing from online political talk (Papacharissi, 2004). This is done by, for example, opening a sentence with a recognition of the previous comment before laying out a counterargument, or urging people to elaborate on their thoughts:

I think you raise a GOOD question. Burning cars won't help, organised protests bring changes, I think. Forcing the government to hear what the population has to say in open debate might be a way. Why not invite the leaders in those protests. . . . Every protest should have an immediate answer, everytime. What do you think? (Commenter, December 2009)

Thus, Juhasz's (2008) argument that a technological structure built on isolated comments will breed a shallow and generally conventionalizing debate culture is only partly true of the conversations taking place on YouTube. Approximately 30% ($N = 118$) of the comments are isolated (and often abusive) utterances such as "fuck capitalism" or "I hope you fucking die! I hope the police shoot you like dogs!" From the perspective of practices of civic cultures, the considerable proportion of short, offensive posts diminishes the democratic potential of the comments on *War on Capitalism*. However, the rest of the comments either directly respond to a comment or discussion thread or engage with the debate more generally by asking questions or arguing a viewpoint. Also, in hostile exchanges there do emerge interactions in which some actors seem to strive for reciprocity and dialogue. Although the discussions rarely take on the ideal form of Habermasian deliberation, one should not dismiss the value of these modes of political discourse, but rather acknowledge that even hostile comments can lead to reciprocity

Recurring reports of hostile and often racist or sexist behavior online have rendered some scholars skeptical of the potential of online debate for political engagement (for empirical examples see, e.g., Lange, 2007; van Zoonen, 2007). Lange (2007) argues that the communicative practices of "haters" have become normalized on YouTube (p. 70). Her ethnographic studies show that users regard hating,

defined as the practice of posting excessively negative and hostile comments, as a major problem for the community, and that mean-spirited comments are seen as degrading the quality of YouTube participation.

Hate speech is a recurring feature in the comments on the *War on Capitalism* video. Out of the total number of comments, 20% ($N = 78$) were coded as abusive. Although users have marked only a few comments as "spam," many commenters took time to comment on the tone of the debate, accusing others of threatening the democratic tenor of the conversation. This suggests that social control and the policing of values of democratic speech are widespread among users on the platform (Lange, 2007). Echoing the findings in the section above on values, it indicates that most commenters have an interest in turning antagonism into agonism, that is, respecting the viewpoints of opponents and engaging with them, even when they are hostile.

Conclusions

This article has explored the potential of YouTube's architecture of participation to provide a communicative space for the dialogue that is prerequisite for citizens' engagement in politics. Our analysis revealed an online political discourse generally characterized by passionate engagement with the issues raised by the COP15 UN climate conference. However, it also problematized certain conditions under which public expression operates on YouTube. YouTube's potential for fostering civic cultures is significantly impeded by security issues. Notably, climate justice activists are aware that use of online spaces for organization and debate can pose threats to their safety. This curtails possibilities for the expression of radical political affinities on a platform such as YouTube. In addition to these conditions, the commenting practices on YouTube further impede the emergence of civic cultures because comments frequently are characterized by hostility and do not invite dialogue.

Nonetheless, by providing a space for discussions on the politics of climate change, the debates on YouTube did extend the discursive opportunities opened up by the COP15 climate conference in 2009, facilitating debate between otherwise disparate publics. The video triggered reactions to various issues ranging from police repression to the legitimacy of using damage as a symbolic resource for political expression. The discursive zone that emerged around the video brought out and re-invoked two long-standing tensions and discussions between different publics: (1) conflicts between activists based in Copenhagen and "ordinary" citizens, and (2) intra-movement disagreements between radical and reformist factions of the environmental movement. This illustrated how going beyond alternative media in attempts to reach wider publics may result in conflictual debate. Dahlgren's (2000) notion of civic cultures provided a useful framework for analyzing some of these discursive interactions and tensions. Complementing this framework with Mouffe's (2005) distinction between antagonism and agonism enabled us to capture the specifics of the dimensions of values and practices that were difficult to pin down, given the civic cultures framework's high level of abstraction. Together with van Zoonen et al.'s (2010) analysis of YouTube video responses, this combination of the notions of civic cultures and agonism helped us propose an analytical framework for analyzing YouTube comments. This article thus offers an analytical framework that can serve as a starting point for empirical studies of YouTube commenting in relation to politics and political engagement.

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