

***ANALYZING THE POTENTIAL OF YOUTUBE TO FACILITATE  
GRASS-ROOT POLITICAL COMMUNICATION: A THREE STEP  
APPROACH***

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**Abstract:** In this article I attempt to discuss whether YouTube can represent an adequate medium for grass-root political communication. After discussing the existing literature on this issue, I have taken a three step approach in assessing the website's potential to promote the objectives of grass-root organizations. Step one involves analyzing the factors that contributed to the success of YouTube's home grown celebrities. In step two, I outline some opinions regarding the potential of YouTube to act as an educator. Finally, in Step three I bring into discussion some case studies that will allow me to assess what conclusions from the previous two steps apply. In the end, I argue that YouTube has a lot of potential for mobilizing grass-root activists.

**Keywords:** YouTube, grass- roots political communication, YouTube celebrities.

### ***1.1. Introduction***

Grass-Root level mobilization has been outlined as an important part of politics for a vast number of reasons. It is important in campaigns for mobilizing voters<sup>94</sup> or raising funds<sup>95</sup>, and also for improving the everyday lives of citizens by reinvigorating of public communication<sup>96</sup>, improving the dialogue between the government and the population, reduce alienation or

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<sup>94</sup> D.E. Bergan et al., 'Grassroots mobilization and voter turnout in 2004', *Public Opinion Quarterly*. Vol. 69, Issue 5, 2005, pp. 760-777

<sup>95</sup> Paul Allen Beck, Russell J. Dalton, Audrey A. Haynes, Robert Huckfeldt, 'Presidential Campaigning at the Grass Roots'. *The Journal of Politics*, Vol. 59, Issue 4, 1997, pp. 1264-1275

<sup>96</sup> Dipankar, Sinha, 'Public Communication in Information Age: Time for a Requiem?'. *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 32, Issue 37, 1997, pp. 2326-2329

making citizens improve their communities<sup>97</sup>. Considering the attested importance of grass-root communication, I want to focus on how the emergence of the Web 2.0, and more particularly on YouTube, can open up new spaces for this practice.

The communicative power of YouTube is difficult to overestimate. Vassia Gueorguieva points out that ‘The ability of campaigns to access voters through YouTube is potentially unlimited’<sup>98</sup>. Indeed if we look at the sheer number of videos that are viewed through YouTube it is easy to see why this remark is fairly accurate. The Telegraph writes that ‘More than 200 million videos are watched every day on the site and 10 hours of new content posted on it every minute’<sup>99</sup>. Comscore reported on the 28<sup>th</sup> of September 2009 that YouTube has surpassed 10 billion videos viewed and 120 million viewers in August in the United States alone. Even more impressive, Miguel Helft writes in *The New York Times* that YouTube claims it has around 30 billion views worldwide (although the writer says a fairer estimate is about 20 billion). Furthermore, the demographics of YouTube users tell a very interesting story. Vassia Gueorguieva mentions several studies which have concluded that between 48% and 65% of YouTube users were 35 to 64 years old<sup>100</sup>. Although she does outline that their accuracy is dependent on the honesty of the users, there are few stimuli for them to lie about their age. This data shows that most of YouTube’s users are of voting age and are part of the most politically active age group.

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<sup>97</sup> S Vasoo, ‘Grass-root Mobilisation and Citizen Participation: Issues and Challenges’. *Community Development Journal*, Vol. 26, Issue 1, 1991, p. 1-7

<sup>98</sup> Vassia Gueorguieva, ‘Voters, MySpace, and YouTube: The Impact of Alternative Communication Channels on the 2006 Election Cycle and Beyond’, *Social Science Computer Review*, Vol. 26, Issue 3, 2008, pp.288-300, p. 292

<sup>99</sup> Richard Alleyne, ‘YouTube: Overnight success has sparked a backlash’, *The Telegraph*, July 31, 2008, [online], <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/2480280/YouTube-Overnight-success-has-sparked-a-backlash.html>> [Accessed December 5, 2009]

<sup>100</sup> Gueorguieva, op.cit., p. 291

The websites influence on the political sphere was made obvious less than a year after its launch. Jim Webb's victory over the much more popular incumbent, George Allen in the 2006 senatorial elections is largely attributed to an event that was filmed and posted on YouTube afterwards (see Hediger and/or Gueorguieva). The film shows the former senator addressing a worker for Jim Webb's campaign using the racial slur "macaca". This video caught the attention of the mainstream media and George Allen went from a double digit lead, to a close second place (Jim Webb won the election by less than 15.000 votes). Of course no account of the influence that Web 2.0 can have would be complete without mentioning the Obama campaign. The extensive use of the internet in his campaign prompted Samuel Greengard to name Barack Obama 'America's first Internet president'<sup>101</sup>. His YouTube channel has 181,300 subscribers and over 22 million views. His campaign videos have also attracted a huge number of viewers. Hediger mentions 7.5 million views for the Philadelphia speech (a huge number considering that it's 30 minutes long) and the will.i.am "Yes we can" video which in spring 2009 had over 24 million views<sup>102</sup>. These numbers clearly show that something is happening. The problem is they don't do much more than that<sup>103</sup>. It is very problematic to appreciate the impact that videos have on people. For example, going back to the will.i.am video, Hediger outlines that *roughly one third of the 24.1 million views actually came after November 4, which seems to indicate that viewing this video has a ritual and celebratory aspect that does not directly translate into any measurable action.*<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> Samuel Greengard, 'The First Internet President'. *Communications of the ACM*, Vol. 52, Issue 2, 2009 [Accessed December 2, 2009]

<sup>102</sup> Vinzez Hediger, 'YouTube and the Aesthetics of Political Accountability', in Pelle Snickars and Patrick Vonderau (eds.) *The YouTube Reader*, National Library of Sweden, Stockholm, 2009, pp. 252 – 266, p. 255

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid*, p. 257

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid*, p. 255

Correlating the number of views with electoral behaviour can also be misleading. Ron Paul a Republican candidate for the presidential nomination in 2008 can be given as an example in this case. Although he managed to generate significant social network support, being ranked second on Facebook and MySpace and first on YouTube, his vote share was low (10% in Iowa and 8% in New Hampshire) and he was placed third among the preferences of 18-29 year olds in both states<sup>105</sup>.

Despite the fact that we can't get very accurate measurements of the impacts that social network sites have on elections, its existence is hard to deny. Samuel Greengard and David Talbot both outline the contribution of social networks to raising funds for the Obama campaign. Christine B. Williams and Girish J. Gulati outline the fact that Facebook at least might be an indicator of how well candidates have organized at the grass root level<sup>106</sup>. V. Hediger and Linda Feldmann draw attention to the fact that YouTube has made politicians more disciplined and more reluctant to let their guard down 'That pesky constituent following you all the way to your campaign bus may be wielding a recording device, and it's best to remain polite'<sup>107</sup>. The mechanisms that have made these impacts possible are probably more interesting to look at and that is what I will be doing in the next part of my work, focusing only on YouTube.

A tempting way in which to attempt this is to look at the campaign videos and channels on YouTube. This approach has however an obvious limit. It is impossible to separate YouTube from all the other factors that have led to a particular outcome. Referring again to George Allen's defeat, although it is clear that YouTube was a clear contributor, the popularity of the

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<sup>105</sup> Christine B. Williams, Girish J. Gulati, 'The Political Impact of Facebook: Evidence from the 2006 Midterm Elections and 2008 Nomination Contest', in Institute for Politics, Democracy & the Internet, *Politics and Technology Review*, 2008, pp. 11-25, p. 20

<sup>106</sup> Christine B. Williams, , Girish J. Gulati, op.cit, p. 20

<sup>107</sup> Linda Feldmann, 'Politics beware: You live in YouTube's world', *Christian Science Monitor*, August 18, 2006, p. 2

video is largely due to the fact that the mainstream media picked up and discussed the subject. Also, the results from the war in Iraq, the incompetence of the Bush administration or in the case of Virginia, the fact that it had gone through a demographic shift are other possible reasons for which the republican candidate could have lost popularity<sup>108</sup>. The media attention that all high stakes elections receive (especially presidential elections) clearly amplifies the result of a video on YouTube. Thus I will not use campaign videos and channels in drawing any conclusions about YouTube.

A much more reliable approach I believe would be to take a three step process. First of all to look at You Tube's one home grown celebrities. These people achieved the not so easy task of being known and viewed by hundreds of thousands (probably millions) of people without any sort of help from the traditional media and usually with very few resources. The method in which they have achieved their success might also be used by activists, NGO's, governments or political parties in order to facilitate communication and gather support from the grass roots. The second thing I will look at is the ability of You Tube to educate people and encourage them to have a reciprocal dialogue. YouTube's potential for sharing information and views can lead to a learning process that different from that of formal education. User led innovation has already manifested itself on YouTube, especially when it comes to ways of achieving collective participation (a feature for which YouTube was not particularly designed)<sup>109</sup>. Users acquire knowledge from each other through a participatory dialogue, learning and innovating features by applying them and then sharing it with other people. It is important to identify the ways in which this potential is manifested in order to see

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<sup>108</sup> Hediger, op. cit

<sup>109</sup> J. E. Burgess, and J. B. Green, 'Agency and Controversy in the YouTube Community' in *Proceedings IR 9.0: Rethinking Communities, Rethinking Place - Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR) conference Copenhagen, October 15-18, 2008*, <<http://eprints.qut.edu.au/15383/1/15383.pdf>> [Accessed December 2, 2009]

whether it can be adapted to fit within the methods used by YouTube celebrities. Also I will take into account the limits of YouTube's empowerment. As Kellner and Kim outline, 'the majority of discussion participants in YouTube forums are not aware of YouTube's liberating potential for social change'<sup>110</sup>. To this they add that YouTube's contents usually express the values of 'the dominant capitalist society' (narcissism, consumerism, materialism), the risks brought by corporate involvement or the possibility that it will just reflect the existing offline power structures instead. All these issues will need to be discussed if any sort of valid assumption is to be made about the value that YouTube could have for grass root political communication. Finally I will search for examples of YouTube video and channels that have managed either to have an educational value, promote discussions and deliberations or initiate group action and that have a presence only on YouTube. By that I mean I want channels that have promoted themselves only through YouTube, that haven't resorted to traditional media in order to make their voices heard and which exist only on YouTube. After this process, and after taking into account the observations I will make regarding the YouTube channels and the existing literature on the subject, I will argue why YouTube's potential for improving grass-root political communication is actually quite strong.

## **1.2. *YouTube Stars***

A new sort of celebrity has appeared at this turn of the decade: the YouTube (YT) celebrity. What it means is pretty intuitive. Wisegeek.com defines it as 'a person, and in some cases, an animal, who has gained

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<sup>110</sup> K Douglas and K Gooyong, '*YouTube, Critical Pedagogy, and Media Activism: An Articulation*'. 2009, <[http://www.gseis.ucla.edu/faculty/kellner/essays/2009\\_Kellner-Kim\\_UT\\_Politics%20and%20PedagogyFINAL%20April%202009.pdf](http://www.gseis.ucla.edu/faculty/kellner/essays/2009_Kellner-Kim_UT_Politics%20and%20PedagogyFINAL%20April%202009.pdf)> [Accessed December 4, 2009], p. 28

widespread recognition on the Internet and beyond by appearing in a video featured on YouTube.com'<sup>111</sup>. An example of one such celebrity is Marina Orlova. Making videos in which she explains the origins of English words, the blonde sexy Russian has made a very huge fan base. Her channel currently has 280,705 subscribers and over 16 million views. On the 1<sup>st</sup> of November 2009 she announced on her website that her video views on YouTube had reached 250 million (and now they have grown to over 258). She was voted as one of the sexiest geeks by the readers of *Weird* magazine, has had appearances on television and has even published a book. Michael Buckley is another such example. He is host/writer/producer of the weekly YT show "What the Buck". His channel has over 620.000 subscribers and his videos have been viewed over 180 million times. Burgess and Green mention that his success has brought him to the attention of HBO executives that have offered him the chance to work on one of their projects<sup>112</sup>.

But to what do they owe their success? Burgess and Green study this issue and consider engagement and participation in the YT community as being essential. Looking at the case of Marina Orlova, they conclude that her success is 'only partly due to her visual appeal'<sup>113</sup>. She has collaborations with other more or less prominent YouTubers. She asks viewers to comment or leave suggestions. She gives them "homework" (such as guessing a definition for a word), responds to certain questions or comments, gives credit to her collaborators, invites viewers to join in and send words and of course invites them to subscribe. All these have increased her visibility within the community and also attracted the attention of mainstream media<sup>114</sup>.

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<sup>111</sup> Wisegeek, 'What is a YouTube Celebrity?'. *Wisegeek*, 2009, <<http://www.wisegeek.com/what-is-a-youtube-celebrity.htm>> [Accessed December 2, 2009]

<sup>112</sup> J Burgess and J Green, 'The Entrepreneurial Vlogger: Participatory Culture Beyond the Professional – Amateur Divide' in Pelle Snickars and Patrick Vonderau (eds.) *The YouTube Reader*, National Library of Sweden, Stockholm, 2009, pp. 89-108, p. 99

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid*, p. 98

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid*

Michael Buckley also follows a similar pattern in terms of his relationship with his viewers. His show, “What the Buck” delivers news and commentaries regarding celebrities, gossip, pop-culture and sometimes politics. Although the format of the show is completely different from Orlova’s, his program also responds to reader comments, invites viewer participation and discusses disputes and controversies that take place in the YT community<sup>115</sup>.

Both these entrepreneurs, considered ‘representatives for YouTube itself’ by Burges and Green, outline the need for direct and ongoing participation within this community. The importance of the community within YouTube has also been mentioned by other authors (Hartley; Burgess and Green; Kellner and Kim) and while this interaction alone cannot guarantee the success of a grass root mobilization campaign, its absence will most likely turn it into a failure. This assumption might seem to bold considering the limited number of examples I have brought. A better way to strengthen my claim is to look at one of YouTube’s failures: Oprah. Her channel has a little over 65.000 subscribers. This is about a fourth of the ones Orlova has and only about a tenth of Buckley’s subscribers. Although it might seem surprising that such a popular brand couldn’t manage to replicate at least a fraction of its success in the mainstream media on to YouTube, a simple answer to this is that it lacked any interaction with her audience. Jean Burgess and Joshua Green discuss Oprah’s appearance on YouTube in two of their works and make note of the ‘flurry of protest videos’ that have followed her channel’s launch. The users felt like these influential media players were ignoring the cultural norms developed within the network and taking advantage of the work made by the authentic participants. Also, the fact that

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<sup>115</sup> *Ibid*, p. 99



Oprah's channel doesn't allow users to say their mind annoyed You Tubers who were against this "one-way conversation" approach.

What we learn from these channels is that any attempt to improve grass root communication through YouTube must take into account that there is a community out there which will want to interact. Other works also back up this assumption. Patricia G. Lange shows in her study that profile linkage is not the main way social networks are supported on YouTube. Posting comments and videos was a practice much more popular among the interviewed subjects<sup>116</sup>. Her work outlines the fact that discussions and interactions were essential for the development of social networks on YouTube. If we use YouTube only to facilitate a one-way flow of information, instead of a two-way flow then it is likely that any attempt to mobilize or draw attention will fail.

### ***1.3. YouTube as an Educator***

The idea that YouTube can act as an educator might seem opposed to its main usage. Indeed, if we look at some statistics regarding the use of YouTube, we clearly see that people probably don't have education in mind when they access the site. According to the work of Xu Cheng, Cameron Dale and Jiangchuan Liu, most videos on YouTube fall under the category Music (22,9%), Entertainment (17,8%) and Comedy (12,1%). News and politics falls into 8<sup>th</sup> place with just 4,4%<sup>117</sup>. Since then three more categories have been added: Education, Science & Technology and Nonprofits & Activism. However it is reasonable to assume that these new categories have not

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<sup>116</sup> P. G. Lange, 'Publicly private and privately public: Social networking on YouTube.' *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, Vol. 13, Issue 1, 2007

<sup>117</sup> X Cheng, D Cameron and L Jiangchuan, 'Statistics and Social Network of YouTube Videos' in *Quality of Service, 2008. IWQoS 2008. 16th International Workshop on*, 2008 pp. 229-238, p. 231

radically changed the distribution of videos and that the same categories still encompass most videos.

Furthermore, as John Hartley observes, the rise in Information and communication technologies was not complemented by an investment into education in order to promote its usage and to promote them as new means to express creativity. Unlike the rise in print literacy, the ‘scaling up of digital literacy is left largely to entertainment providers seeking eyeballs for advertisers, and those who want consumers for their proprietary software applications; in other words, to the market’<sup>118</sup>. Schools have contributed very little to this rise in digital literacy, in some cases even prohibiting access to digital environments<sup>119 120</sup>. So how can we be optimistic about the chances of using YouTube in order to educate people and make them more civically active?

Most authors that support the claim that YouTube can be an educator are mentioning it only as a potential. Chareen Snelson says right from the abstract that video-sharing sites usually don’t have education in mind. He goes on to say however that videos have successfully been used for educational purposes and that some video sharing sites, like [www.scivee.tv](http://www.scivee.tv) or [www.bigthink.com](http://www.bigthink.com) are exclusively dedicated to academic purposes<sup>121</sup>. YouTube can also act in this sense, and Diane J. Skiba offers some example of videos regarding health care and nursing education (some of them posted by Universities). The existing ones can also be used for educational purposes. Rick Prelinger argues why YouTube can be seen as one of the most popular

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<sup>118</sup> J Hartley, ‘YouTube, digital literacy and the growth of knowledge’ in *Media, Communication and Humanity Conference 2008 at LSE*, 21-23 September, London, <<http://eprints.qut.edu.au/18013/1/c18013.pdf>> [Accessed December 2, 2009]

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>120</sup> S Chareen, ‘Web-Based Video in Education: Possibilities and Pitfalls’, TCC Worldwide Online Conference. 2008, <<http://etec.hawaii.edu/proceedings/2008/Snelson2008.pdf>> [Accessed December 6, 2009]

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid*

and accessible archives. Snelson gives an example of YouTube videos being used in a virtual tour of Italian cities and more recently, Google Earth provides links to YouTube videos to show cities or landscapes.

These examples of how YouTube can be useful for education, are more or less obvious and don't exactly tell us much about the mobilizing or communication potential that this site offers. The arguments brought up by Douglas Kellner & Gooyong Kim and by John Hartley are of a different nature however. They argue that the web can break monopolies on information provision or education and that it can open up public discourse. Hartley claims that daydreaming and mischief are processes of identity formation and has been the target of the entertainment industry 'from time immemorial'<sup>122</sup>. They lead to a need for self expression and communication among the young and up until recently, 'creative self-expression has been provided rather than produced; offered for a price on a take-it-or-leave-it basis by experts and corporations with little input by the consumers themselves'<sup>123</sup>. But now, the internet gives the ability for users to publish their own creative content, and YouTube is a feature that offers a lot of space for this. He also takes up a point brought up by a blogger, Anil Dash who complains about the massive reduction of information providers, from thousands in the early years of the last century, to a few big media companies<sup>124</sup>. Hartley argues that innovations like YouTube, which provide massive inputs of information, opinions and make human interaction easy,

add to the credibility, richness and critical value of a web-published document, which emerges not as a linear performance of the authorial self but as a concurrent performance of connectedness, collective intelligence, and oral modes of storytelling<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> Hartley, op.cit, p. 5

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid*, p.11

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid*

Making a comparison with the ancient story-telling traditions of humanity, he claims that these human interactions on the web can be seen as a contributor to the growth of knowledge.

Douglas Kellner and Gooyong Kim add to this debate claiming that ‘the internet can reclaim education as a space for self-fulfilment and personal autonomy without any restrictions of institutional control and standardized curricula’<sup>126</sup> and that YouTube can contribute to this. The website is already having a significant cultural, political and social impact. It has created celebrities, was used in campaigns and was a means for different institutions, ranging from churches to universities or police stations to promote messages<sup>127</sup>. Also they argue that users posting clips are not only learning how to use YouTube. They are also learning how to communicate, narrate and interact via YouTube. This learning by doing process has a versatile potential for education and for social transformation. Users reflect on what they post, interact with other users (learning from others as well as from their action) and the already mentioned process of learning by doing is interconnected with the notion of learning as a lifetime process.

YouTube provides opportunities for debate, social change and empowerment of the oppressed<sup>128</sup>, resistance to indoctrination<sup>129</sup> or emancipation from constraints or from manipulation. However, the authors themselves identify the main problem for their arguments ‘the majority of discussion participants in YouTube forums are not aware of YouTube’s liberating potential for social change’<sup>130</sup>. Since viewers are free to use YouTube however they want, most of them use it ‘within the paradigm of individual functionalist/instrumental rationality as the dominant ideology of a

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<sup>126</sup> D Kellner and G Kim, op.cit, p. 4

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid*, p.7

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid*, p.25

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid*, p.20

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid*, p.28

liberal/individualist society'<sup>131</sup>. The majority of YouTube content expresses the dominant values of the capitalist society (consumerism, individualism, materialism) and the video categories are based on those of corporate media productions<sup>132</sup>. So, they argue, what we might see is actually a preservation of the cultural hegemony of corporate media.

In the last part of their work, they give a very uncertain response regarding the future use of YouTube. While there are some examples of debate, and they mention one between a 16 year old anti-Iraq protester and a pro-war soldier<sup>133</sup>, certain limits are outlined. Guidance is sometimes needed and if people don't establish responsible and progressive uses for YouTube, than it can easily degenerate into another form of entertainment. Other problems they notice is that existing power structures seem to be reflected on YouTube (the discussions were dominated by white English speaking males), the need for YouTube to become more profitable and censorship because of copyright restrictions or clashes of interest with either states or Corporations<sup>134</sup>. Their conclusion can be summed up quite effectively by this sentence:

Depending upon the form of its use and how a performative/critical pedagogy of the new media is implemented, YouTube can be either a reservoir of true enlightenment or another play-pen in the capitalist fun house.<sup>135</sup>

One final author I will mention is Aaron Hess who has a much clearer cut position regarding the democratic and deliberative value of YouTube: it is very limited. He looked at the reactions caused by some anti-drug videos posted by United States' Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP) and found that the vast majority were negative. Responses ranged from

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<sup>131</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid*, p.29

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid*, p.31

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid*, p.33

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid*, p. 34

accusations of hypocrisy, mockery, critiques regarding the inefficiency of drug policies, accusations of wasting public money on drug wars or just the parodying the videos. Although the author mentions some mistakes on the side of the ONDCP (like the fact that they didn't interact with YouTube users or that they decided to disable ratings and comments) he outlines that YouTube itself is not an appropriate medium for encouraging deliberation. First of all it operates as a business and not as a promoter of free speech. It is profoundly influenced by the need for profits, a fact also outlined by Mark Andrejevic, and by copyright laws. This poses problems for YouTubers that want use traditional media sources to answer the ONDCP (in order to claim it a source of authority). For example, Hess points out those videos which originally aired on the CNN were removed because of copyright violations<sup>136</sup>. The biggest problem according to the author is however the fact that YouTube's playful and dismissive structure is not suitable for supporting deliberation. The site is seen primarily as a means for entertainment and when people actually engage into discussion about the issue, the users resort to swearing and name calling<sup>137</sup>. Hess concludes that future research on YouTube and other similar Web 2.0 environments is needed but that YouTube is most likely ineffective in assisting deliberation. Furthermore, the assumption that this medium operates as a site of free speech is dangerous, and may even work against exercising free speech offline<sup>138</sup>.

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<sup>136</sup> A Hess, 'Resistance Up in Smoke: Analyzing the Limitations of Deliberation on YouTube', *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, Vol.26, Issue 5, 2009, pp. 411-434, p.426

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid*, p.428

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid*, p.430

#### ***1.4. Case Studies***

Because of the different views regarding YouTube's ability to promote or contribute to education or deliberation I have decided to look into the matter myself and have searched for channels which make education and discussion their objective. This approach will not only allow me to see the extent to which the theory applies but also to get a more up to date view on a site that is constantly evolving. So after clicking on the YouTube's top of most subscribed channels on education, I was impressed by the number of channels that appeared. On closer inspection though I found that lots of them were not really relevant for what I was looking for. I wanted to see if somebody that can claim a certain type of scientific authority opened up a channel that encouraged deliberation and discussion of opinions. A lot of channels did not fit these criteria. They were sometimes devoted to teaching arts, like music (Justin Sandercoe's Channel contains videos where he teaches people to play the guitar) or just simply didn't have any connection whatsoever with education (gogreen18's Channel). The channels that I found most relevant for my work were hosted by Thunderf00t, potholer54 and How The World Works. However I will first discuss only the latter two because I was lucky enough to land right in the middle of an argument between the two users. The argument is about global warming, whether it is demonstrated or not. First a brief description of the users:

The first, potholer54 claims that he is 55 years old, was a journalist for 20 years, 14 of which he spend as a science correspondent. He says he possesses a degree in geology but also tackled other fields while working for a science magazine and several science programs<sup>139</sup>. This information is what

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<sup>139</sup> Potholer54, *potholer54's Channel*, YouTube channel, 2009,

<<http://www.youtube.com/user/potholer54#p/f/4/jwywMP4Sxgo>> [Accessed December 7, 2009]

he provided on his channel and since he gives no other contact details or links I couldn't check any of it. In terms of subscribers, he is the more popular of the two, having 446,102 channel views, 1,911,321 total video views and 24,041 subscribers. The How The World Works channel (which from now on shall be referred to as HTWW), is owned by Lee Doren. He currently has 574,685 channel views, 2,465,393 total video views and 13,847 subscribers<sup>140</sup>. Since he has given out his name I managed to get more information about mister Doren. He is a member of the Competitive Enterprise Institute (CEI) which 'is a public interest group dedicated to free enterprise and limited government'<sup>141</sup>. His email address was available there and I have contacted him in order to get more information about his channel and his work. He was kind enough to reply. He told me that he works on several projects there, but that his official title is the Director, AKA "Crasher-in-Chief" of Bureau crash and mentioned that his YouTube channel is his own and completely separate from CEI. His personal page on the CEI website mentions that he got a B.A. in Communications from the University of Michigan, a J.D. from Chicago-Kent College of Law and that he is currently licensed to practice law in Illinois.

So we have two people, with university training that have set up channels in which to talk about and sometimes explain political issues, scientific facts, debates etc. In this sense it is important to mention that potholer54 focuses more on science, having a lot of series about the origins of life and the universe (for example the series History of the Universe made easy) while HTWW is more focused on political issues. So the debate that is going on right now stands at an interesting intersection between the two. Another interesting thing about these two channels (and is also available for

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<sup>140</sup> HowTheWorldWorks, *HowTheWorldWorks's Channel*, YouTube channel, 2009, <<http://www.youtube.com/user/HowTheWorldWorks>> [Accessed December 7, 2009]

<sup>141</sup> Competitive Enterprise Institute, *The CEI website*, 2009, <<http://cei.org/>> [Accessed December 6, 2009]



Thunderf00t's channel) is that they are very similar to the entertainment channels mentioned before in terms of interacting with their audience. It can be argued that potholer54 is a less visible than the other two because he never shows himself in videos. However they all interact with users, collaborate with other people, post videos other than their own if they want to support someone's point of view and all of them have videos where they respond to viewer's request or to counterarguments from other YouTubers. Both users claim they want to start debates and call for opinions. I want to note though that Lee Doran was accused of artificially enlarging his subscriber list and deleting some comments<sup>142</sup>. However, at least with regard to the video he makes about climate change there were a lot of negative comments. Potholer54 has only two restrictions regarding comments on his channel: no advertising and no plagiarism. I believe these examples strongly support my earlier claim that a two-way flow of information is critical if somebody wants to draw attention or gather support using YouTube.

The debate was sparked mainly by the news that hundreds of private emails exchanged between climate scientists during the past 13 years were stolen by hackers and leaked online. The arguments brought up by the two, while interesting, are not the focus of this paper. I looked at the reactions YouTubers had to these and wanted to see if there was a real debate going on regarding this issue. The comments on both channels were usually supportive. They encouraged the two users to keep up the good work and affirmed their support. There were some comments that encouraged the owner of the channel to respond to his adversary's videos and prove them wrong. The term which they use is "debunk". Since the last videos with regard to this debate was posted by HTWW, comments on his channel were congratulating him on debunking potholer54, while comments on the other channel were

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<sup>142</sup> Potholer54, op.cit

encouraging potholer54 to respond (like a comment by bamzey: ‘hey potholer54 Debunk that bitch HTWW’) or even offering their help in this sense (bubbamickmac: ‘potholer54 and co. I uploaded a video that attempt to debunk htww's attack against potholer54's good video. come check it out if you like thanks and cheers;’). There were also some negative comments on the channels but they were surprisingly polite and rarely regressed to swearing. For example, one user on potholer54’s channel leaves the comment: ‘one word: Howtheworldworks’.

The comments on the videos were however more critical but didn’t resemble at all the comments on the videos posted by ONDCP described by Aaron Hess. Potholer54’s video regarding global warming “Climate Change -- Those hacked e-mails” had 118,565 views, 3742 ratings and 2837 comments. HTWW’s response, “Potholer54 is a Denier of Scientific Corruption” has far fewer views: 9574, 10,72 ratings and 669 comments. Although the number of views differ enormously, the ratings and comments are still significant. Also, we have to take into account that HTWW also posted other videos regarding Global Warming so he might have spread his views in this way. Looking at the comments, I saw that a lot of those criticizing the videos did not do so in an ironic, rude or playful manner as the one described by Aron Hess. There were of course some that resorted to rude words, name callings or other juvenile tactics. A lot of them however tried to show flaws, bring other opinions of authority into discussion or point out things that the makers of the video missed. For example a comment from Saukko3:

Still in denial, bot, I see. Do you have anything to counter the observations? Glaciers retreating, polar ice losing mass, 10 hottest years on record occurring 1997-2008. Even if some scientists did wrong, there will be an independent inquiry, how it would affect direct observations form multiple sources. Did Piltown man disprove

evolution? Of course it would be nice to listen the "sceptics", and fall to sleep. We need to act.<sup>143</sup>

Although the comments are more mature, how do we know if these people are actually deliberating or just routing for their favourite. For example, eagleeye1975 a user with a relatively small channel of only 176 subscribers got into the debate and posted a video "Re: Climate Change -- Those hacked e-mails" in which he disagreed with potholer54. In the same day he posted another video in which he claims that the people who support potholer54 are not listening to any of the arguments brought up against his claims. They are just taking for granted the opinions that support their world views. He also complains about the fact that a lot of potholder54's subscribers will come onto his channel and downgrade his videos in order to make him loose credibility.

So to what extent are people's opinions changed by watching these debates. Obviously I can't measure that but I did want to know if it is plausible to suspect that it does. Thus I send eagleeye1975 a message in which I asked him if he thinks that people on YouTube are looking for deliberation, or just for people who support their beliefs. He did not answer back, but he does mention in one of his videos "Re: Re: Climate Change -- Those hacked e-mails" that he had changed his mind about global warming two times before being convinced that it is fake. As I mentioned before, Lee Doren (the owner of HTWW) did reply to my email, where I also asked him to comment on this subject. I asked him if he ever managed to convince someone who was either uncertain or opposed to something being supported on his channel or if someone else ever convinced him of a matter he disagreed with. In his reply he told me that he received hundreds of emails from people he managed to convince. Regarding whether or not he was persuaded by people he disagreed

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<sup>143</sup> Saukko31 [Alias], Comment in *Climate Change - Those hacked e-mails*  
<<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7nnVQ2fROOg>> [Accessed December 7, 2009]

with, he said only in part and gave me an example when a user greenman3610 explained why an argument against global warming is flawed. Lee Doren took this into account when making his case and noted that it was indeed a questionable argument (the argument he was referring to was about the Medieval Warm Period. A reference is made to it in the video "Hiding the "Hide the Decline," featuring Greenman3610").

This debate poses a lot of problems for Aaron Hess's argument that YouTube's playful and dismissive structure is not suitable for supporting deliberation. The people that got involved in this debate brought up all sorts of arguments in order to support their views. While some rude language or ironies were encountered in the comments, they were not dominating the discussions. Furthermore, looking at the videos, the comments on the channels and the response that Lee Doren gave me, I believe it is plausible to assume that there are people which are open to other points of view. From what I have observed, the channels I have looked at provide a space that is separate from the rest of YouTube. Around these channels a community is formed and within this community, other values prevail; values which are completely different from that of the vast majority of YouTube users. While Aaron Hess may be right when saying that 'Much of the content found on YouTube is dismissive of serious discussion'<sup>144</sup>, he fails to take into account the possibility of forming an entirely separate space within YouTube through channels. Thus his conclusion that YouTube is not a viable location for democratic deliberation simply doesn't hold water. It seems that the conclusion Kellner and Kim reached was much more accurate. Depending on its uses, YouTube can be a place for many things.

So far I have concluded that you can get a lot of attention on YouTube with relatively few resources as long as you interact and become part of the

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<sup>144</sup> Hess, *op.cit.*, p.429

community and that it is also a place where education, deliberation and serious discussions can take place. These features show that YouTube has a lot of potential to be used by different organizations in order to mobilize and gain support from the grass roots. This potential is also outlined in some of the works I have mentioned before (Kellner & Kim; Hartley). Still, the uncertainty surrounding the issue prevents me from making a stronger claim in this sense. Thus, for a final case study, I needed to find out if there were cases when people actually took some action after viewing videos on YouTube or taking part in a debate. Again electoral campaigns are not of any value here due to all the other factors involved. Also, a lot of popular channels categorized as Non-profit & Activism belong to influential organizations (like Red Cross or UNICEF) or have support from celebrities or politicians. Thus we have the same problem as with electoral campaigns: too many factors involved.

So I returned to the educational channels, and saw that some of the discussions actually led to offline actions. The most interesting example I found was a video posted by Thunderf00t. First I have to give a little background information. Thunderf00t is an atheist and has uploaded a series of videos on his channel entitled “Why do people laugh at creationists” (is has 31 parts so far and the first has been uploaded 2 years ago)<sup>145</sup>. In them he argued against the creationist theory and brought evidence to support the theory of evolution. These videos have sparked a lot of criticisms from the creationist community and he has had a lot of debates with its members (one of the most famous being with Venomfangx which actually ended in a legal action against the latter because of abusing the copyright act). Apparently, some supporters of the creationist theory started to launch votebot attacks,

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<sup>145</sup> Thunderf00t, *Science and Education for the win! Thunderf00t's Channel*, YouTube channel, 2009,

<<http://www.youtube.com/user/Thunderf00t#p/u/88/H6KWOWR9rqw>>[Accessed December 7, 2009]

spamming or false flagging campaigns. Therefore, Thunderf00t made some complaints to YouTube, but received no response. Now the video that caught my attention was the first in a series of three, YouTube vs The Users part 1, 2 and 3. In a nutshell Thunderf00t made a video (part 1) in which he criticizes YouTube for not answering his complaints regarding votebot attacks, spamming or false flagging campaigns. He urges users to add the big channels as friends so when a votebot attack or something similar happens they can alert more users and the users in turn can write complaints using YouTube's Brand Channel. He argued that this was their advertising channel which they needed to look at and make it easy to use (adverts are YouTube's Achilles heel). Twelve hours later his video was taken down, invoking community guidelines violation but YouTuber's copied the video and posted it on other channels. The second video encouraged further action from YouTubers and outlined that although Big channels were under threat from YouTube (because a lot of time and effort went in to making them and they can easily be shut down), if a large small channels protests and writes to YouTube, they can't afford the time to shut them all down (and even if they did the loss wouldn't be so great). After this video was posted it seems that Thunderf00t's Channel was temporarily suspended. In the third video, Thunderf00t announced that YouTube has dropped the community guidelines violation accusations and reinstated the Thunderf00t account. It advises users to stop sending messages to YouTube, saying that YouTube probably made note of their concerns. He further goes on to encourage people to sign up to certain big users (with which he collaborates) so that the message that a user is under attack by votebots a rapid response can be initiated and the video will receive top ratings. Well what Thunderf00t did was actually initiate a group action via YouTube. It might have been an online group action but it still had effects. YouTube reinstated the videos, put Thunderf00t and now a large community of users was created that is willing to act together to put pressure on YouTube.

## *Conclusion*

In this paper I have tried to answer the question of whether or not YouTube has potential for improving grass root political communication and if it does in what way. The conclusion Kellner and Kim draw regarding this issue, that depending on how it's used YouTube has the possibility to offer mechanisms for social change, is very similar to the one I am about to make. However I will go a step further and say that YouTube probably does open up new spaces for grass root political communication and it just needs more time in order for NGO's or other organizations to make full use of it. An important note I have to make is that this conclusions stands only if YouTube's structure and design will not change dramatically due to the need to make profits which I outlined in my work. Supposing it stays the same though, YouTube opens up a lot of new possibilities. This is especially true in the case of smaller organizations which have time, passion but lack funds. For them, YouTube can prove to be a very effective way spread their message and recruit supporters with relatively few funds. Of course this involves more than just posting videos.

As we saw, interactivity within the community is vital for a campaign's success on YouTube. YouTube celebrities, as well as the educational sites, are part of the community and that is crucial for their success on YouTube. Thus the first step any organization will have to take in order to gain support through this medium is interact and take part in the community. Afterwards you have to react to the users that rate your videos and to their comments. Try and argue your cause and never block opinions (even if they are damming to your cause). If you manage to gain support, and convince people of your cause, that there is a good chance that you can get them mobilized. Of course this process can be speeded up if the organization has funds in order to access advertisements or spread their message through

other means. A big difference on YouTube is that you can now do that with only time, commitment and almost no money.

As I have argued, earlier, Aaron Hess's conclusion that YouTube's playful structure is not suitable for deliberation is problematic since he doesn't take into account the fact that channels can provide a space separate from the rest of YouTube. This medium can be a very efficient in promoting deliberation and discussions about an issue. Hartley also comes to the same conclusion, though through a very different approach. Thus the opportunity to open up spaces for grass-root political communication is very big and it is up to organizations to make full use of it. So far very few look at YouTube as a social network. They prefer getting their message out through other social networking sites like Facebook or MySpace and regard YouTube only as an extension where videos are uploaded (one such example is a campaign by the Ms. Foundation for Women: Outrageous acts for simple justice. More information about it is available at <http://outrageousacts.org/>).

Despite the fact that the process of gathering support on YouTube can be long, it does pay off in the end. As we saw in Thunderf00t's case, he managed to get enough support to actually put pressure on YouTube Inc. This is by no means a small achievement. He has been on the network for some time though (on his channel page he doesn't mention when he joined but he has videos dating back 2 years). Still in two years he and other users, like HTWW or potholer54 have managed to recruit a very large fan base that is not only there for entertainment, but also for contributing to discussions, and as we saw, even willing to take action if need be. This speaks a lot in favour of the communication opportunities YouTube offers. I believe, it is not a matter of "if" but a matter of "when" we shall see more campaigns for grass-root mobilization that take place on sites like YouTube.



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### ***Exchanged e-mails***

1. XXX xxx@gmail.com, A request[*email*] Message to Lee Doren (ldoren@cei.org), Sent December 09, 2009 (my email and name is included in the other manuscript)