

YouTube's Potential as a Model for Democracy

Exploring Citizentube for "Thick" Democratic Content

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YOUTUBE, A WEBSITE that allows any user to upload videos of themselves and to view and comment on the uploaded videos of others, presents for educators a unique possibility for a model of democratic behavior. While this website may be viewed as inherently democratic because anyone with computer access can participate in the uploading and downloading of videos, the processes involved in democracy include more than simply access; the question is whether YouTube can be used as a tool to strengthen thick democracy, rather than merely promoting voyeurism parading as democracy. In order to explore this question, democracy must be clearly defined so that one can systematically determine whether the videos and discussions present on YouTube offer opportunities for educators to explore complex conceptions of democracy. Because so much of the content on YouTube is clearly intended for entertainment purposes (the most visited websites of all time contain almost exclusively music videos and comedy videos), rather than for either educational or civic purposes, this research project focuses on a particular YouTube channel called Citizentube. The purpose of this article is to examine whether and in what ways the medium of YouTube (and in particular the Citizentube channel) can model a thick conception of democracy and to examine what limitations exist for democracy to be modeled and enacted in this medium.

This article will begin by presenting a particular definition of democracy and explaining the phenomenon of YouTube and the particular channel of interest, called Citizentube. Following this section is a description of the research conducted to determine how YouTube might be used to model democracy. Finally, this paper concludes by explaining the limitations and promises of YouTube for educators interested in exploring democracy.

Definition of Democracy

The word “democracy” has a remarkably simple Greek translation: “rule by the people.” The troublesome part is unpacking the contentious meanings behind each of the key terms: What exactly is meant by saying that the people “rule?”; Who are these “people” that are doing the

ruling?; and How does a society decide whom to include? In *Models of Democracy*, David Held (1996; quoting Lively, 1975) pointed out that there is a continuum of potential positions regarding what democracy means ranging from, “That all should govern, in the sense that all should be involved in legislating, in deciding on general policy, in applying laws, and in governmental administration,” to the weakest form of democracy, “that rulers should act in the interests of the ruled” (p. 3). The scope of the democratic project at each level of the continuum differs enormously; it is difficult to even decide exactly where a country that calls itself democratic (such as the United States) would fall on the continuum since the position of democracy seems to dip and rise continuously depending on contextual factors, including economic and social conditions.

Along with the extensive range of positions regarding how much the people should rule, there is a continuum regarding “the people” who should be allowed a say in the ruling. In Ancient Greece, “citizens” were given this right; a citizen being “a male of known genealogy, a patriarch, a warrior, and the master of the labor of others (normally slaves)” (Pocock, 1998). Although in modern times the question of who should be considered a citizen has expanded, the Greek conception of “citizen” still lingers in public conceptions of citizenship. Critiques of modern citizenship have pointed out the gendered nature of the very concept of citizenship (Jones, 1998), the insistence on individual rights in a multicultural society where groups rights might be more democratic (Kymlicka, 1998), and the questionable applicability of national conceptions of citizenship in a global society (Soysal, 1998).

Given these complications of pinpointing what is meant by a democracy, I argue that democracy in its purest form is a government in which all of the people do all of the ruling and that since this ideal has not yet been achieved by any society, democracy is a continually expanding and ever-shifting target many modern societies strive to attain. The notion of a democracy as a goal or a path is also espoused by Dewey (1927) and Parker (2003). If democracy is a goal to be attained, the important question shifts from what democracy is to how members of a society can act to form a more democratic community. While there are many legitimate answers to this question, I have been most persuaded by three ideas that can broaden and deepen democratic tendencies: active participation by citizens, pursuing social justice, and engaging in democratic dialogue.

In defining his notion of civic republicanism, Oldfield (1998) comments, “citizenship is an activity or a practice, and not simply a status, so that not to engage in the practice is, in important sense, not to be a citizen” (p. 79). Active participation does not mean simply voting in general elections and serving on juries, although those are important ways that people are active citizens. What I refer to as active citizenship, Parker (2003) speaks of as *political engagement*, which he defines as “the action or participatory domain of citizenship. Included are political behaviors from voting or contacting public officials to deliberating public problems, campaigning, and engaging in civil disobedience, boycotts, strikes, rebellions, and other forms of direct action,” (p. 33). Not only active participation by citizens but also the willingness to engage in action mark a citizenry that is advancing democratic ideals. Active citizenship is the framework that all other concepts key to improving democracy rest upon and, therefore, is a vital component of democratic communities.

The second major concept I consider instrumental in deepening democracy is the pursuing of social justice goals. From its inception, America has been tainted with hypocrisy as a country that proclaims to have democratic ideals while a significant portion of the population is disaffected or unable to be full participants in the American Dream. Social justice is simply the

term used to describe raising consciousness about the “social, political, and economic structures” (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004) that create inequalities for different groups within our pluralistic society. Advocates for social justice argue that to achieve true democracy, it is necessary to “consider collective strategies for change that challenge injustice and, when possible, address the root causes of problems” (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004, p. 243). Proponents of social justice necessarily argue for conceptions of “thick” or “advanced” (Parker, 2003) democracy, which embrace pluralism and suggest that societies are richer when they include than when they exclude. For this reason, social justice ideals are tied to concepts of reframing not only citizenship (Kymlicka, 1998) but also the extent of active participation in which citizens should be encouraged to participate. Civil disobedience can be an effective measure for gaining social justice, as demonstrated by Martin Luther King during the Civil Rights Movement, but it is also a dangerous path that alienates certain members of the population. Other forms of active participation that can lead to consciousness-raising are rooted in dialogue. Dialogue thus becomes another key component and tool that citizens can use as they strive for democracy.

The role of dialogue in perusing social justice goals can be demonstrated using the example of Souto-Manning (2007), who explains how Freirean culture circles in Brazil were effective “in the promotion of literacy and active democratic citizenship...peasants were questioning their positions in society and engaging in social action to change their conditions” (p. 121). Given the opportunity to dialogue with each other under the auspices of literacy training, peasants gained new understandings of the limitations imposed upon them by Brazilian society and took steps to alleviate their own problems with the help of the group. Dialogue in this article simply refers to a back-and-forth conversation wherein participants attempt to understand one another and make themselves understood. Hallmarks of dialogue include a variety of indicators that participants are not speaking to themselves; for example, they talk directly to other participants, they debate, and they try to clarify their points.

Democratic dialogue adds to this definition of limitations on the topic of conversation; specifically, limiting potential topics to public issues. Democratic dialogue is therefore more specific than dialogue and less specific than deliberation. Parker (2003) pointed out how democracy entails that “[citizens] strive to communicate across their differences, recognizing them and joining them with deliberation...specifically to create policy decisions about how we will be with one another and what problems we will solve together and how” (p. 11). Deliberation is a powerful tool for citizenship, and teaching the skills of deliberation can provide a way to “teach students how to engage together in respectful discussions in which they strive to understand, appreciate, and if possible, resolve political disagreements that are partly rooted in cultural differences” (Gutmann, 1996, p. 160). Deliberation therefore attempts to either solve public issues or resolve public differences, while democratic dialogue simply requires that such issues be in play.

The Phenomenon of YouTube and its place in discourse about democracy

YouTube effectively burst on the national scene in 2006, the year *Time* magazine proclaimed “You” as its “Person of the Year” (Grossman, 2006). By November 2006, YouTube had 25.5 million visitors, up from 900,000 visitors in November of 2005, an increase of 2,720% (Kornblum, 2006). The effect of all of these viewers converging in one place, many people concluded, was that the advertising possibilities were endless; *Advertising Age* magazine also in

effect named “You” as the person of the year for 2006 (Bloom & Wheaton, 2006). As a result, a flurry of magazine and newspaper articles were written about YouTube as a vehicle for consumerism (Poniewozik, 2007). Others pointed out that YouTube had “political implications” in the sense that American politicians were often seen embarrassing themselves on YouTube videos (Carr, 2006; Wells, 2007). Since then, of course, then-presidential nominee Barack Obama proved that YouTube could also be used as a powerful political tool for engaging potential voters and encouraging people to participate in politics (Hall, 2009).

When the democratic potential of YouTube is addressed in the popular media, it is usually in the negative sense of the word as used by Aristotle: the people as vicious tyrants. In Grossberg's *Time* cover article citing “You” as the Person of the Year, he pointed out, “some of the comments on YouTube make you weep for the future of humanity just for the spelling alone, never mind the obscenity and the naked hatred,” (Grossman, 2006). In a secondary article in the same issue called “The Beast with a Billion Eyes,” the author demonstrates the power of people to catch any and every mistake made by politicians, celebrities, and people in authority, and to broadcast these mistakes to the world. He sums up with a dire warning, “In Washington and Hollywood, the days when you could expect your bad decisions to disappear into the mists of time are disappearing. Somebody's watching,” (Poniewozik & Tumulty, 2006). A similar theme is pointing out the bad behavior of those uploading such mistakes, some of whom stoop to manipulating situations where they can catch people in authority acting indecorously. One case involved two ninth grade students goading their high school teacher into losing his temper so they could record and post the event (Austen, 2006). What is clear from these depictions is that the “democratic” (in the sense of accessible to all with a computer) nature of YouTube is as much to be feared as embraced. The impression one gets is that many YouTube users are angry adolescents or adolescent-like adults, heady with their new-found power and aiming it indiscriminately to unmask the weaknesses of the guilty and innocent alike.

The question of the democratic potential of the internet in general has a vibrant and constantly growing literature. Van der Graft and Svensson (2006) even use the term “eDemocracy” to refer to “the usage of information and communication technology in the democratic process” (p. 123). They list four levels of potential eDemocracy: 1. “new technologies can be used to inform the citizen” on government, programs, laws, current events, etc; 2. new technologies can “collect, regularly or ad hoc, information from the citizen” including public opinion polls; 3. new technologies provide “opportunities for on-line deliberation and discussion...via discussion lists and so-called on-line chats”; and 4. new technologies make possible electronic voting (van der Graft & Svensson, 2006, p. 123). The definition of democracy used in this study is largely concerned with the third level of eDemocracy, as YouTube provides users with videos that spark deliberation and discussion in the comments section. These discussions can be analyzed to help determine whether YouTube can provide a space for genuine democracy despite the proliferation of angry and hateful speech that Grossberg (2006) rightly noted.

Eli Noam's (2005) opinion piece, “Why the Internet is Bad for Democracy” is illustrative in pointing out how a website, like YouTube, that appears democratic in its very nature can be anything but democratic in practice. Noam's language and arguments, although predating the explosion of YouTube onto the national scene, would sound familiar to most of the critics of YouTube. Opposing the claim “The Internet will facilitate political participatory action,” Noam (2005) argues, “If everybody speaks, who will be listened to?” (p. 58). He is referring here to political parties, who will continually engage in one-upmanship to expose the other as the more

pathetic, but his concern is easy to apply to the YouTube community as a whole. When you allow everyone to speak, how will the voices that should be heard rise above the rest?

Other scholars are more interested in the issue of minority access to the new technologies and their inclusion in the conversations that are a part of the new medium. This concern aligns with one of my aspects of democracy: social justice. Albrecht (2006), for example, challenges claims that online participation is democratic because of a number of factors. One is the “so-called digital divide: access to the internet is not distributed equally but follows well-known factors of inequality, such as income, education, gender, age, and race” (p. 64), as well as by “other forms of inequality,” such as the popularity of one’s political party or message. Albrecht cited a case study that showed under-representation in an on-line discussion for women, the elderly, and the young, and over-representation for 27-40 year old males; interestingly, Albrecht did not consider race in this study, perhaps because it took place in Hamburg (Albrecht, 2006, p. 73). Siapera (2005) did study minority involvement on the internet, but specifically looked at minority websites discussing the “debate on asylum and immigration” in Britain (p. 500). In these very particular spaces, minorities were able to influence public opinion and raise awareness of the concerns of particular refugee groups. This study points to the possibility of seeing some social justice-oriented work assisted by internet technologies. The popularity and massive numbers associated with YouTube have the capability of sustaining social justice discourse and action—in theory, at least.

In April 2007, the YouTube editors announced the launch of Citizentube, a channel designed to provide a platform for people to discuss questions such as “What issue matters most to you? What do you think about the politics of your neighborhood, your district, your state, your province, your country...your world? And what are you going to do about it?” (Introducing Citizentube, 2007). Citizentube was conceived as a place where people’s opinions, especially political opinions, could be seen and heard; but it was also conceived as a place to try to change the world. The videos showcased on this channel are intended to stimulate action and deliberation, and the creators of the channel are very proud of the role Citizentube played in the 2008 Presidential election (e.g., James Kotecki Year in Politics YouTube Live, 2008). The mission of Citizentube makes it an especially strong candidate as a model for thick democracy. This particular study analyzes videos and discussions posted on the Citizentube channel for evidence of the three elements of democracy presented in the previous section.

Methodology

The most challenging aspect of this study was selecting a sample of videos to watch in order to determine the potential of YouTube and, in particular, Citizentube to model thick democracy. There are many thousands of videos posted on Citizentube, reflecting a broad range of topics and many levels of popularity. The first major limiting factor I chose was location; videos that were easiest to find would also most likely have the greatest impact. On Citizentube’s homepage, there is a “favorites” tab where it is easy to find hundreds of videos uploaded onto YouTube and selected to be featured on Citizentube. On the day the sample videos were selected, there were 489 videos featured under the “favorites” tab. The breakdown of these videos into viewership is shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Viewership ranges of Citizentube favorites as of June 27, 2009

Range of views	Number of videos
1-1,000	147
1,000-5,000	136
5,000-10,000	48
10,000-20,000	34
20,000-40,000	23
40,000-100,000	29
100,000-	72

The large number of videos in the lower viewership range reflects the many videos posted that were individual replies to other, more popular videos; many of these had a viewership of 100 or less. The dip in numbers of videos that takes place in the middle range reflects the disparity in the types of videos generally posted on Citizentube. Most of the videos posted on Citizentube were either those posted by or about large organizations (including political parties, candidates, and volunteer organizations) or reactions to these videos by individuals. For the purposes of this study, the question was whether thick democracy was more likely to be modeled by the individual videos or the videos likely to be produced and distributed by larger organizations. I decided to limit the videos in this study to those that had at least 20,000 views for two reasons; first because so many of the videos in the lower viewership range were responding to videos with larger viewership, and second because of my belief that videos with a larger viewership were thereby demonstrating a greater potential for democratic impact. Further limiting factors included the following: only videos in English were included, and private videos requiring an invitation were excluded from the study.

The next step was to determine the fit of each of these videos with the three predefined characteristics of thick democracy: active participation, pursuing of social justice, and encouraging democratic dialogue. I watched each of the videos, read the discussions following each video, and determined whether the video represented one or more of the three elements of thick democracy used for this project.

In order to make these determinations, the following guides were used: 1. To label a video as modeling active participation, a video needed to attempt to persuade people to do something, regardless of the complexity of the action called for. I looked for videos that incited large numbers of people to act, with the expectation that fomenting action even in small ways had the potential of creating a more active citizenship overall. 2. To label a video as modeling social justice, a video needed to draw attention to various injustices around the world and in the US. 3. To label a video as modeling democratic dialogue, I looked for videos that generated thoughtful responses about a relevant issue (where conversations only centered around pro and con opinions of a particular *person*, rather than *issues* proposed by that person, the video was not considered to fall into this category). These videos were included even when the conversations were disrupted by hateful, racist, homophobic, and ignorant opinions of users who were uninterested in genuine discussion. A video could model multiple aspects of democracy, and therefore be represented in multiple categories.

The resulting data was summarized and prepared for analysis using descriptive statistics for categorical data following Fraenkel and Wallen (1993). The data was presented in tabular form (Table 2); finally, I was able to draw conclusions based on the data regarding the use of YouTube as a model for democracy.

Table 2: Summary of Results

Element of Thick Democracy	Percentage* of total videos	Reasons why videos fit into category
Active Participation	26%	Asks users to <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create and post a video (68% of videos in this category) • Volunteer or contribute to a volunteer organization (14%) • Sign various forms of petitions (14%)
Social Justice	5%	Drawing attention to <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Atrocities in Africa (3 videos) • Guantanamo Bay injustices • Inviting users to submit videos about injustices
Deliberation	25%	Comments have some deliberation regarding <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nature of government and different government types (3 videos) • Election '08 issues (3 videos) • The Iraq War (3 videos) • Immigration (3 videos) • The fair tax (2 videos) • Homosexuality/gay rights (2 videos) • Global warming (2 videos) • Bilingualism in America • Environmental regulations vs. private property for protecting environment • Stem cell research • The place of religion in politics • Gun control • Guantanamo Bay • Obama's handling of Iran's election • Health Care Reform • Racism
None of These	50%	Videos did not fit into any category because <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The comments were pro or con a person rather than an issue (51% of videos in this category) • They were only comedic (15%) • There were too few comments for discussion (11%) • The videos were irrelevant to any current issue (11%) • The video's purpose was to make fun of a politician (8%) • The comments were disabled (4%) • The comments were all positive (4%)

* Percentages were rounded up to whole numbers, and therefore do not equal 100%.

Findings

Table 2 summarizes the results of the analysis. Of the 106 videos sampled for this paper, twenty-eight (about 26%) promoted some form of active participation, but most of these videos limited participation to asking people to create and post videos in response to a discussion question. Only four videos asked people to become actively engaged in their communities through volunteering, and four other videos asked people to become engaged through signing various forms of petitions. The fact that over a quarter of the most-watched favorite videos on Citizentube contained an element of active participation is encouraging; however the relative lack of choices for participation is worrisome for modeling thick democracy. Even more worrisome is that some of the comments made on the four videos that promoted volunteerism as a form of active participation either equated service with socialism or promoted racist ideas about people most likely to need help. In many cases, these videos and their comments provided an excellent negative example for educators looking to improve students' critical thinking about the nature of democracy.

The types of videos that people were asked to create and post varied, but some of them required other types of active participation, or at least active thinking about civic issues. For example, several popular videos encouraged people to submit questions for the upcoming YouTube debates, during which the Republican and Democratic nominees would be addressing questions that people uploaded onto YouTube (e.g. "What will YOU ask the Republican candidates?," 2008). Another popular video asked people to film themselves voting on Election Day, and then post the video in response ("Tavis Smiley Asks You to Video Your Vote," 2008). Several presidential nominees solicited advice or support by asking people to post video responses related to various campaign issues (e.g. How Has Illegal Immigration Impacted You?," 2007; Want to see the IRS disappear?, 2007). One of John Edwards' videos combined this idea with volunteerism by asking people to submit videos outlining their plans to volunteer for a cause (What are you going to do to bring about change?, 2007). In all of these cases, the specific call to action may have been to create and post videos, but the preparation required in order to do so required either active participation or at least active thinking about current issues in order to participate in the debate.

Only five of the 106 videos (or less than 5%) selected for analysis promoted social justice in that they drew attention to various injustices around the world and in the US. The issues raised in these videos included three videos drawing attention to various atrocities in Africa, one video on Guantanamo Bay, and another video asking people to find injustices and videotape them to post on a website. The paucity of videos promoting social justice on Citizentube is not surprising considering the channel was created in the midst of an exciting election season that has so far dominated the popular video content, but it is still unsettling. However, unlike the comments for volunteer-drive videos in the active participation category, the comments for these five videos tended to be positive in nature and at least interested in pursuing strategies for solving problems.

Twenty-six videos (or 25%) included a comments section that contained democratic dialogue about topics of importance including gay rights, global warming, English-only policies, stem cell research, the place of religion in politics, illegal immigration, gun control, the Fair Tax, health care reform, and many others. This format seems to encourage discussion about such complex issues, and many users utilized the platform to delineate their views, listen to the views of others, defend their stances, and engage in debate about the issues. However, the hatefulness, ignorance

or complete irrelevance of many comments made finding the genuine dialogue something of a challenge most of the time.

Two videos from a user called Razela (who calls herself Jamie in the videos) can illustrate both the potential of these discussions and the occasionally ugly comments that interfere with the discussion. In one video (Re: Mike Huckabee and The Fair Tax, 2007), Jamie responds to a video posted by Mike Huckabee briefly explaining his plan to dismantle the IRS and institute a fair tax instead in the form of a national sales tax. This video elicited 620 comments and discussions ranging from how to cut the overhead costs of the IRS and the potential workings of the fair tax to whether people should pay for government services they do not use. The tone of the conversations were generally civil; people asked and answered questions, responded to people directly, and were generally polite. One sample exchange ran as follows (as with all quoted comments cited in this article, the original spelling, capitalization and grammar is maintained):

SpartanCXVII (2 years ago): Great point, there are too many loopholes in FairTax. A REAL good way to deal with it is to actually just charge for what Government services we use.

bklyndg (2 years ago): Right, that would mean that if I don't have kids I shouldn't have to pay for education? or libraries? NOT a great way to do things since directly or indirectly, I'd still benefit from them.

Razela (2 years ago): Plus the welfare system couldn't exist. Would the poor pay for what they recieve?

j0eg0d (2 years ago): The absurdity of these politicians in tell people living in poverty to simply not purchase things to maintain this tax. We already have people that do not pay for meds simply to pay for food, and our government wants to force them to budget spending (?) TELL THE GOVERNMENT TO BUDGET THEIR OWN SPENDING !

cphine (2 years ago): Not exactly. Every household receives the prebate check. Nobody is taxed up to the "poverty" level of spending. After that, the more you spend, the more you are taxed.

j0eg0d (2 years ago): It is NOT FAIR to tax our necessities and then expect us to NOT buy food, clothing, medicines or gasoline when our money gets tight. Mike Huckabee wants us to BUDGET while he and his fellow politicians continue their current government spending. That isn't FAIR.

cphine (2 years ago): j0eg0d - The history of capitalism shows businesses will lower prices. It's called competition. All it takes is one "greedy" competitor to pass the savings on in order to grow marketshare, and they all follow. Remember when the luxury tax on airlines was eliminated? All it took was Delta (I think) to lower prices and then they all followed.

In this exchange, a legitimate, public issue was raised (should people pay for only the government services they use?) People responded to this issue, and one user (cphine) directly addressed another user (j0eg0d). A democratic dialogue took place.

In another of Jamie's other posts, a reply to Tom Tancredo's question regarding how people had been affected by illegal immigration (Re: Tom Tancredo and Illegal Immigration, 2007), conversation was so interwoven with racism or comments about Jamie's wardrobe and appearance (specifically her breasts) that it was sometimes difficult to follow. One sample exchange:

wytkracka (2 years ago): alot of this is moot, however, without an actual border wall or fence, if you have a leak in your basement you don't start pumping it out without first stopping the leak.

theillegalimmigrantx (2 years ago): you talking about Mexico, Yes, México accept anchor babies, it's on the Article 30 of the mexican constitution.

Jeffball5 (2 years ago): boobs

theillegalimmigrantx (2 years ago): how many fugivites are on the FBI list???, how long do you think is going to take the FBI to arrest them??, do you think that ICE is going to arrest to 12, 15, 18 millions?? mmmmmmm, think about it!!

theillegalimmigrantx (2 years ago): I'm an illegal immigrant and it's funny how people talk about us and our future without even asking us, but I know that I don't have the righth to make an oppinion, no wall stop me, on my way to this country because I came here with a tourist visa just as the 40% of illegal immigrants. I know that it's not righth what I'm doing but you have to understand that hunger is stronger than fear!!

alexandro420 (2 years ago): I feel you brother. People that never experienced real NEED will never understand that feeding your family comes before following silly laws.

wytkracka (2 years ago): and in doing so you are illegally depriving me of resources for which i work to take care of my family, no one asks about you because you're illegal.

theillegalimmigrantx: I know I'm illegal every time I go to sleep I thank God for giving me the oportunity to be here another day, you don't have to remember me that!! What resources?? I'm single with no children , I've never asked for any public benefit, I pay my health insurance every month, so don't give me the "depriving me of resources" because I'm not, I'm paying taxes so you can take care of your family!!

d4m7s8 (2 years ago): Nice, smart response, Razela. Though if I were a U.S. citizen (instead of a Canadian), I probably would have been harsher in my response. The immigration issue is, it seems to me, being used as a (mostly Republican) scare tactic or wedge issue. One more thing I just gotta add - a compliment: U R so gorgeous, just smokin' hot!

xiola696969 (2 years ago): love you if your "legally an American" if not you broke the law and don't belong here and there is nothing racist about that, also this bill is a farce look up 1986 amnesty on yahoo 3.1 million where given amnesty already did that solve the problem, NOPE

In this exchange, two users with clearly opposing opinions (wytkracka and theillegalimmigrantx) spoke directly to each other and attempted to explain their personal stake in the issue. Meanwhile, two other users (Jeffball5 and d4m7s8) feel the need to address Jamie's appearance in the middle of the discussion. In fact, of the 442 comments posted to this video, 75 (or 15%) of the comments responded to some aspect of Jamie's appearance rather than her message. Although this is disturbing, it is also important to remember that the reverse is also true: 85% of the comments were at least generally addressing the public issue raised by Jamie's video, even if they were doing so in sometimes ignorant or racist ways. Thick democracy was modeled through the use of democratic discourse, but incompletely and with substantial caveats.

Finally, half of the videos sampled did not fit into any of the categories required for thick democracy as it is defined in this article. As can be seen from Table 2, videos did not fit into these categories for a variety of reasons. Some videos were simply irrelevant in terms of current events (examples in this category include a song about protons and neutrons and a video extolling the virtues of West St. Paul); others were intended for comedic purposes only and did not elicit any discussion in the comments section. Others potentially could have elicited discussion, but comments were either disabled, or YouTube users simply did not choose to carry on a discussion in the comments for that particular video. By far the greatest percentage of videos that were excluded from any category, however, were excluded because the comments were solely focused on attacking or defending a person, rather than this person's ideas. These videos did not fit the definition of democratic dialogue because a human being does not constitute a public issue; nor could the comments lead to any potential policy outcome (as per Parker's (2003) definition of deliberation) and therefore these discussions did not count as deliberation, either. The best way to describe these types of comments would be either "rants" or "advertisements" depending on whether the user was posting positive or negative comments.

YouTube conducted a series of interviews with all of the Presidential candidates prior to the 2008 election, including fringe candidates. One example of the phenomenon just described would be this exchange, from the comments section of the YouTube interview of Bill Richardson (Governor Bill Richardson: The YouTube Interview, 2007):

39rc6cf (2 years ago): Richardson would do anything for a vote. He's a BAD candidate.

darthsuave (2 years ago): Dude, He's done a lot of good for New Mexico.

39rc6cf (2 years ago): Good. Then be sure to keep him there.

halvor311 (2 years ago): Really? I believe if you watch the first debate or his Meet the Press appearance you'd change your mind

39rc6cf (2 years ago): I don't trust any politician with that much hair. Furthermore being a Gov. of a state like New Mexico brings nothing to the table. A Gov. running for Pres.

should be from a MAJOR industrial state having many problems. New Mexico is placid with a lot of cowboys.

halvor311 (2 years ago): Well, I'll respect your opinion, but he brings governing experience first of all, and being from the midwest and a battle ground state. So the idea that he brings nothing to the table is just ridiculous as is your comment about New Mexico being "placid with a lot of cowboys" Richardson is a proven leader and an honest politician which is a rarity these days

39rc6cf (2 years ago): Sorry my friend but I've been to New Mexico and it's a backward state when compared to the industrials. It's a state for cowboy yodelers, wetbacks and farms. Richardson's candidacy is a JOKE; he uses YouTube to scrape up money and he'd be better off going back to cleaning up sagebrush rolling on the streets of Albuquerque.

Uarehere (2 years ago): well, it's obvious that commenters like 39rc6cf are racist, cynical, apatheitc, hate-mongering, ignorant do-nothings whose only pleasure in life is to go on youtube and find 2nd tier presidential candidates to deride. That said, New Mexico is not a state without problems and to say it lacks industry is absurd.

jamanslaman (2 years ago): Why so negative? NAZI?

Uarehere (2 years ago): But even if I go with 39rc6cf's argument for a second, we have to conclude that someone like Bill Clinton, who was governor of Arkansas for crissakes!, could not be an effective president for the same reason. Thank God we didn't fall for such lame arguments in 1992. By the way, what the hell do you care about a candidate's hair length???

39rc6cf (2 years ago): His hair is too full because he doesn't think enough. Where are all the 1940s cowboy pictures filmed, New Mexico or New Jersey or New York? And if Bill Clinton was such a good President coming from a "goober state," why was he impeached?

Uarehere (2 years ago): Your first two sentences make absolutely no sense. As for Clinton being impeached, that was because a slew of neo-cons were determined to convince the media that what a president does with his dick is more important than say how many countries he needlessly invades.

39rc6cf (2 years ago): Your problem is that of being a crazed Democrat. It's so hallucinatory that you actually think this goober Richardson would make a good Pres. You must be screwy. The guy is a nobody who is popular in Goobersville because he's part Hispanic so the wetbacks love him. Vote for Rudy--the mayor of the world.

In this exchange, the topics of discussion brought to the table by the user 39rc6cf include Bill Richardson's hair and his home state. Although other users' comments demonstrate their disagreement that these are legitimate topics of conversation, they nonetheless participate in this discussion and grant it a form of legitimacy by continuing it. Many of the other comments

similarly focus more on the person or the party of a candidate and contain no real discussion of issues. This type of "conversation" where users essentially attempt to speak over each other may be popular in media representations of politics, but represents "thin," political definitions of democracy rather than "thick," advanced notions of democracy.

Conclusion: Thick democracy on YouTube?

The purpose of this article was to examine whether and in what ways the medium of YouTube (and in particular the Citizentube channel) could model a thick definition of democracy, and what limitations existed for democracy to be modeled and enacted in this medium. The next step is to begin to formulate an answer based on the findings presented in the previous section. Active participation was defined in this study as a concept akin to political engagement, including behaviors ranging from contacting public officials and campaigning to deliberating on issues to more direct action (Parker, 2003). The sample YouTube videos demonstrated some level of this definition, including encouraging people to contact public officials and contributing to campaigns (in fact, the majority of these videos were created by campaigns for presidential candidates). Most of the videos listed under active participation, however, were active in the "deliberation" aspect of this definition, as they attempted to create a conversation among YouTube users over topics they chose. Sometimes these topics were deliberately chosen to generate particular kinds of responses beneficial to a candidate's campaign. For example, Tom Tancredo's query "How has illegal immigration impacted you?" is a quite a loaded question that appears to be soliciting stories about a certain type of experience with "illegal" immigrants (How Has Illegal Immigration Impacted You?, 2007). Sometimes the topics are not quite as compelling as they could be; for example, Hillary Clinton solicited advice from YouTube about what her campaign song should be (Bill and Hillary Soprano?, 2007). However, at least the videos demonstrated an attempt to create a conversation with people outside of Washington and the traditional media outlets.

However, the most significant part of the definition for "active participation" may be participating in direct action; and this aspect is not present to any great extent on YouTube. In fact, many of the comments on videos that do recommend direct action in the form of volunteering demonstrate hostility to the ideas of volunteering and being asked to volunteer. In one video, Michelle Obama introduces [serve.com](#), explains its purpose, and attempts to persuade people to use this website to find local volunteer opportunities (First Lady Michelle Obama calls on you to serve, 2009). A great number of the commenters simply posted racist and sexist comments so inflammatory they should not be repeated, but others addressed the topic directly, with comment threads such as:

gtxtreme360 (1 month ago): Im not working for your damn New World Order digitalized currency system..u n your husband better gain your humanity back and stop worshipping satin on the DL..you will be exposed n you will fail

pennstate51rox (1 month ago): wait. united we "serve"? what the fuck. thats scary. what happened to united we STAND. and what do any of these things have to do with fixing the economy. and to people who say. "shes great" or "what a beautiful speech". keep in

mind: any retard can read off of a teleprompter. basically a draft for the obama nazi youth. hey! its 1934 all over again!

Many other users similarly tied the notion of service to either socialism or fascism--interestingly, since these two government types are completely opposite. The hostility seemed to stem from being asked to actively participate in the community, considering similar accusations of socialism and fascism also arise in the comments of all of the other videos requesting service. "Active" participation on YouTube is therefore largely restricted to creating conversations for people to join, campaigning for political candidates, and requests to sign petitions.

The definition of social justice established for this article involved raising consciousness about the social, political, and economic structures that create inequalities for various groups (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). Much like the "active" part of active participation, this concept was almost non-existent in the sample of YouTube videos. One reason for this paucity may be that these kinds of videos are simply less popular than the political videos, and therefore did not elicit enough views to be selected as part of the sample. The comments sections for these videos demonstrated the potential of YouTube to succeed in consciousness-raising, but not necessarily to help foment a desire to act in order to end inequalities. One of the videos in this category was a 10-minute interview with a former child soldier from Sierra Leone, and the comments are almost universally sympathetic, horrified, and inspired by the interviewee's ability to bounce back from such a childhood (Ishmael Beah -- *Child Soldier*, 2007). Typical comments ran as follows:

swirlingturtle (1 year ago): The maturity and insight he has is incredible; I hope people can learn from him, from his wisdom and the way he conducts himself. I will read the book. It does make you want to stop watching anything violent. I've thought for a long time that it might be immoral to watch something that in reality is so appalling.

mpbrazil (1 year ago): Man, You deserve every good thing you achieve in your life...You made it all the way through the difficulties in your life and now that you found yourself showing the world what the war is and what it can cause to a child, the best is to be achieved for you, Im positive! I advice everyone to read this book...

frostbite1080 (1 year ago): He spoke at the Amnesty International North Eastern Conference, beautiful. Proof that people can rise above any situation and become an outstanding person.

Individual people were moved by this story into a new understanding of violence and specifically the violence of war and the horror of forcing children to become soldiers. The definition of social justice was therefore met, but the commitment to fight injustice that social justice implies was not necessarily also present.

Democratic dialogue was defined in this paper as a back and forth conversation about public issues wherein citizens communicate across differences while attempting to understand and appreciate those differences. A more specific form of democratic dialogue, "deliberation," or the process of attempting to solve issues of policy or resolve political disagreements was also mentioned as a key aspect of thick democracy (Gutmann, 1996; Parker, 2003). The sampled YouTube videos demonstrated a mixed record with regard to democratic dialogue and

deliberation. There were clearly some users who appreciated the opportunity to discuss their opinions regarding important issues with others, just as there were clearly some users completely uninterested in the back-and-forth nature of discussion. However, emphasis, even in the democratic dialogues that occurred, was definitely on getting other users to understand one's own opinion rather than on trying to understand the opinions of others. If deliberation requires an attempt to resolve political disagreements or policy issues, this standard was not met by the comments of the sampled YouTube videos. Issues were not deliberated so much as opinions about an issue were given by one YouTube user, followed by opinions from another user. Dialogue took place because users referenced each other's comments, commented directly to other users, and were often able to maintain a civil tone while addressing each other's points. However, genuine deliberation, much like consciousness-raising social justice videos and videos promoting direct action in the community, was rare in the sampled YouTube videos.

The world of social networking is challenging many of our long-cherished beliefs about democracy and other cultural and political institutions. As an entity devoted to promoting citizenship, Citizentube represents an example of a social networking site that has the potential to model both elements of thick democracy and the limitations of democracy in these anonymous spaces. This paper was an attempt to create a baseline for the democratic potential inherent in such a website. The conclusion that must be drawn is that although YouTube, and in particular Citizentube, evidences many elements of democratic content, including some superficial elements of thick democracy, the more advanced aspects of democracy have yet to be developed in this medium. It may be that democracy in social networking spaces, like democracy everywhere, is a process rather than an accomplishment.

Considering the vast number of visitors to YouTube every day, it would be a terrible waste for educators not to use this tool for discussing democratic attitudes and participation and their online manifestations. This may take place despite the actions of those who use YouTube as their personal forum for spewing hatred and ignorance. Every democracy must contend with malcontents and find some way to reach compromises and educate even the most unwilling. As a democratic community accessible to all with a computer, YouTube provides an excellent potential forum for people of all nationalities, races, interests, and other differences to contribute to discussions and produce actions beneficial to their communities. For this reason, future research should monitor the development of democracy in social networking spaces to note trends and determine whether democracy can actually *evolve* in social networking spaces like Citizentube the way it can in the real world.

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