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Abstract

YouTube is a massively popular video streaming website. It has become so ingrained in daily consciousness that it is almost difficult to conceive of a time in which it did not exist. YouTube's slogan is "Broadcast Yourself." It connotes a sense of freedom to be whoever you want to be and communicate this conceptualization of the self with the world. Vlogs, or video blogs, share the same function as a traditional diary except there is no assumption of privacy since the videos are uploaded publicly. Both men and women participate in the production of these videos. However, the experience of male and female YouTubers is quite different. The following paper will explore whether YouTube operates as a public sphere in light of the gender divide that appears to have formed on the site. This paper has four objectives: to define the concept of the public sphere, to determine the factors that have contributed to a gender divide on YouTube by analyzing the gendered use of the medium, to examine the reception of the "Girls on YouTube" video by female vloggers, and to evaluate whether YouTube operates as a public sphere in light of the findings of the preceding sections. Ultimately, this paper will give greater insight into whether new media offers the possibility for women's voices to be heard or if it is simply a remediation of older patriarchal technology.

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Introduction

YouTube is a massively popular video streaming website and it boasts impressive statistics in regards to the consumption of online content. For instance, “Over 4 billion hours of video are watched each month on YouTube” and “72 hours of video are uploaded to YouTube every minute” (Statistics-YouTube, 2013), demonstrating its far-reaching influence. Its slogan, “Broadcast Yourself,” connotes a sense of freedom to be whoever you want to be and communicates this conceptualization of the self with the world. One of the most watched categories of YouTube videos is the Vlog Star category. Vlogs, or video blogs, are similar with traditional diaries but without privacy since the videos are uploaded publicly. Creators of vlogs are called vloggers. Both men and women participate in the production of these videos. However, the experience of male and female YouTubers is quite different.

According to the top one hundred most subscribed channels on YouTube, only six channels feature a female content creator (VidStatsX, 2013). This disparity cannot be ignored. Some YouTube community members have adopted the mindset that content created by male YouTubers is “default” content that can be enjoyed by everyone regardless of gender. In contrast, content created by female YouTubers is regarded as specialized content that could only interest fellow female viewers. As a result, women users on YouTube may feel like they have been placed in a category of content labeled “Other.” This serves as a contradictory message, as though as the community is telling female vloggers to “Broadcast Yourself,” but only if they conform to an established set of societal norms.

Is the Internet a public sphere? More specifically, does YouTube operate as a public sphere? One could assess that by examining videos created by users addressing the gender divide between vloggers. A recent video created by a user named ninebrassmonkeys sparked quite the online debate. The video, an amateur documentary called “Girls on YouTube,” included interviews with both male and female YouTubers responding to the topic of female vloggers. The goal of the video was to start a discussion of why there are more male YouTubers creating content than there are females. The response to the video (as seen by comments left on the original video) has been mixed. While some viewers have found the video’s message inspiring, others have criticized the video for oversimplifying the main issue. The following paper will explore whether YouTube operates as a public sphere in light of the gender divide that appears to have formed on the site.

This paper has four objectives: to define the concept of the public sphere, to determine the factors that have contributed to a gender divide on YouTube by analyzing the gendered use of the medium, to examine the reception of the “Girls on YouTube” video by female vloggers, and to evaluate whether YouTube operates as a public sphere in light of the findings of the preceding sections. Ultimately, this paper will give insight into whether new media is an avenue to highlight women's voices or if it is simply a remediation of older patriarchal technology.

Theory and Background – What is the Public Sphere?

German sociologist Jürgen Habermas (1964) defines the public sphere as, “a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed. Access is guaranteed to all citizens” (p. 73). It arose out of the destruction of the feudal system in the early eighteenth century. A clear line was drawn between the notions of public and private. As a result, “the bourgeois public sphere” was born (Habermas, 1964, p. 75). While independently the members of the public sphere were private individuals, they formed a public body when they congregated together. In these congregations, public opinion was generated through discussion of general interest topics. Habermas (1964) uses the term “public opinion” to describe “the tasks of criticism and control which a public body of citizens informally-and, in periodic elections, formally as well practices vis-a-vis the ruling structure organized in the form of a state” (p. 73). Communication channels such as television and radio are examples of contemporary media that are responsible for the transmission and mass dissemination of information to other people within the realm of the public sphere. However, in this use of mass media Habermas (1964) observes the refeudalization of the public sphere. He cites the commodification and propaganda of the newspapers of the mid 1800s as two reasons for this dramatic shift. Thus, the public sphere is not as idyllic as he may have originally claimed.

This leads to a key critique of Habermas's analysis. Is Habermas's (1964) assertion that a public sphere is one where “access is guaranteed to all citizens” truly correct (p. 73)? The public sphere can only be a democratic space if individuals have the freedom to discuss what they see as problems affecting society as a whole. A true public sphere has the potential to influence people to act and promote political change. Habermas requires that the public sphere be open to all individuals. However, Habermas is discussing a very specific historical moment where women and many other marginal groups were excluded from the public sphere. How is this an accurate representation of a society if women are considered lesser citizens than their male counterparts? Of course, one must acknowledge that Habermas's original ideas have evolved over time and he is not actually an advocate for such exclusion.

Lisa McLaughlin (1993) offers a counter argument to Habermas's original thesis. She provides a feminist critique of Habermas' public sphere. She says that Habermas's liberal model was based on exclusion that prevents social change and hides dominating forces. Drawing on the work of feminist scholar and critical theorist Nancy Fraser (1990) McLaughlin (1993) identifies how the “role of the media in democracy is crucial for consideration in a feminist critique of the public sphere” (p. 601). At the same time McLaughlin (1993) also challenges some of Fraser's ideas with her goal being the conceptualization and creation of a “radically democratic public sphere” (p. 601). She calls for feminists to consider their media environment and draw upon the work of the Frankfurt School theorists in order to envision a more inclusive public sphere. In her view, feminists can use the media to their advantage and disseminate their political message widely

(McLaughlin, 1993, p. 617). After all, the Internet represents the “epitome of mass personal communication” (Kleman, 2007, p. 2).

Critiques like McLaughlin's have inspired what literary theorist Michael Warner (2002) calls counterpublics. While counterpublics are formed in the same ways as conventional publics, there are some distinctions to be made. These are publics that are aware of their “subordinate status” and do not aim “to frame their address as the universal discussion of the people” (Warner, 2002, p. 423-424). Their values or beliefs may be seen as subversive as they do not conform to the social norms constructed by the dominant public sphere. It is inclusion and participation within a counterpublic that influence the ways in which “its members' identities are formed and transformed” (p. 424).

Law professor Michael Froomkin (2003) speculates the ways in which users will realize the Internet's “communicative power” and promote democracy (p. 855). He is fairly optimistic in his analysis. Many of Froomkin's observations are highly applicable to current new media technology. His examination of blog culture is especially relevant to the discussion of YouTube's potential (or lack thereof) to be a public sphere. He notes that in addition to email and website technologies, “[t]he Internet also creates new tools that make possible the construction of new communities of shared interest. In Habermasian terms, the Internet draws power back into the public sphere, away from other systems” (Froomkin, 2003, p. 856). Like its predecessor the blog, vlogs “illustrate how ease of publishing can stimulate debate: bloggers often read and react to each other's work, creating a new commons of public, if not necessarily always deeply deliberated debate” (p. 857). Froomkin (2003) likens the Blogosphere to “a sphere of shared interests rather than shared geography” (p. 60). Members do not need to inhabit the same physical space in order to form publics. They are tied together by their mutual interests which they communicate through online tools such as blogs and websites. As Froomkin (2003) attests, “Using democratized access to a new form of mass media — the Internet — these individuals engage first in self-expression, then engage each other in debate” (Froomkin, 2003, p. 857). Leaving textual comments and sharing web links are two methods of audience activity that enable the formation of an online public sphere.

Froomkin's (2003) analysis of blog culture has implications for the YouTube community. Before tackling the issue of whether YouTube operates as a public sphere in light of previous literature, it is necessary to acknowledge the factors that have contributed to a gender divide on the site. While YouTube by its construct does not automatically exclude users based on their gender, there are certain inequities that cannot be ignored. The following section examines gendered use of the YouTube platform.

Theory and Background – Gendered Use of Vlogging

A 2008 study conducted by Molyneaux, et al. examines the “potential uses of user-generated video for women, and how women are creating vlogs and using YouTube” (p. 2). The researchers examine both the production and reception of vlogs. According to the results of their study, there are more male vloggers than female vloggers (Molyneaux, 2008, p. 4). However, women that do vlog on a regular basis “are more likely to vlog about personal matters than male vloggers...and more women created vlogs that interacted with the YouTube community” (Molyneaux, 2008, p. 5). Female vloggers ask their audience questions and respond to questions from their audience or from their fellow vloggers in a process that Tannen (1990) calls “rapport talk” (Molyneaux, 2008, p. 10). In contrast, men's vlogging use is closely related to their use of the blog platform. Men blog in the same manner as their

face-to-face interpersonal communication. They form opinions and share information, but avoid emotional content (Pedersen & Macafee, 2007; van Doorn et al., 2007). When it comes to technical details and production values, the authors found little difference when comparing vlogs created by male and female vloggers.

While producing vlogs is not an activity that is exclusive to one gender, there are still limitations to this technology for female vloggers. Historically, women have been given access to technology in the workplace to complete their jobs, but this does not necessarily give them an equal voice. Furthermore, there is the issue of the objectification of female vloggers through the “male gaze.” Introduced by feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey (1975), the term male gaze refers to the voyeuristic practice of males looking at female subjects. In film, “women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness” (Mulvey, 1975, p. 9). Women are passive objects for the active gaze of their male watchers. Mulvey (1975) suggests that males cannot be the subject of the male gaze because “man is reluctant to gaze at his exhibitionist like” (p. 5) and as a result, reinforces a patriarchal ideology. Molyneux, et al. (2008) observe a similar exploitation of the female form occurring on YouTube. Female YouTubers are often given criticism for their physical appearance rather than the content of their videos. The male participants that they interviewed as part of an audience analysis were “more likely than women to note physical characteristics of the vlogger in their comments” (Mulvey, 1975, p. 8-9). In addition to this, a content analysis of selected vlogs created by women revealed that female vloggers received lower ratings on the (now retired) YouTube five star scale. Male vloggers were often rated higher than female. While the researchers acknowledge that vlogging is a platform that allows female users to have greater control over their own representation, these women are not exempt from scrutiny, criticism, and objectification. They warn that, “The greater visual representation of women on the internet, for example, is not necessarily a sign of progress for women, as greater representation could mean greater exclusion” (Molyneux, et al., 2008, p. 3). In the case of YouTube, those who do not represent or conform to the ideal will not get as many views. Given these limitations, one can begin to see that the Internet do operate as a gendered space.

Hans et al. (2011) analyze online performances of gender within the “gendered medium” of the Internet (p. 302). Technology and the Internet specifically operate as male-dominated spaces. This is due in part to the fact that historically and culturally, women performed domestic work which meant that their need to learn technical skills was not a priority. According to the authors, some feminists argue that technology oppresses and excludes women because of its male-bias. The authors cite statistics from a 2004 U.S. Department of Commerce report, indicating that, “Since 2001, male versus female access to the Internet has reached parity” (Hans et al., 2011, p. 303). This suggests that, “the Internet can provide a space for women's empowerment and agency” (Hans et al., 2011, p. 303). Similar to McLaughlin (1993), Hans et al. (2011) see the potential of the Internet's mass communication model to raise awareness of gender issues. Hans et al. (2011) state that, “because blogging is seen as a gendered technology that marginalizes women, women can become empowered through simply using the medium and transforming blogging into a feminine performance” (p. 308). Female YouTubers can give a voice to gendered and marginalized identities through the act of vlogging (Hans et al., 2011, p. 318).

However, this is not an easy task given the volatile nature of some YouTube comments. Siddiqui (2008) observes that YouTube videos tagged with the keyword “feminist” are comedic videos made by “young, white men” that do not take issues of

female representation or women's experiences seriously (p. 24). The comments on legitimate feminist videos are largely negative and “typical of the anti-feminist rants found on YouTube” (Siddiqui, 2008, p. 25). These comments can be “aggressive, derogatory, and/or sexual in nature, or include misinformation intended to undermine feminism” (Eudey, 2008, p. 28). Siddiqui (2008) and her students saw this type of abuse firsthand when a series of videos they produced about the misconceptions of feminism received negative feedback from YouTubers. As of April 2013, the four videos that Siddiqui's class uploaded to the site have been viewed for a combined total of 10, 911 times. Perhaps due to negative responses to the videos when they were first uploaded, commenting has now been disabled on all four of the videos. This only reinforces the notion that technology promotes exclusion. Despite these hardships, several other feminist academics have used YouTube in their classrooms to educate their students about social gender issues (see Andaloro, 2008; Falzetti, 2008; Eudey, 2008). While the YouTube platform may be divided by gender differences, it is also a site of resistance.

This paper addresses some of the questions posed by Molyneaux et al. (2008, p. 11) at the end of their research report and will investigate the following questions concerning women's participation in the YouTube vlogging community:

RQ1: How can women use vlogs to empower themselves?

RQ2: What do female vloggers see as obstacles to vlogging?

RQ3: Does YouTube operate as a public sphere?

In order to answer these questions, a case study of a recent YouTube video documentary and the subsequent reaction from the female vlogger community will be examined. The online response to the “Girls on YouTube” video may provide insight as to whether YouTube serves the function of a public sphere.

“Girls on YouTube” – A Case Study of Video Responses

Benjamin Cook (also known by the YouTube username “ninebrassmonkeys”) is the writer, director, and editor of an amateur YouTube documentary series called “Becoming YouTube.” Combining interviews with prominent YouTubers with sketch comedy, his online series addresses contemporary issues that the YouTube community faces. His seventh video in the series, “Girls on YouTube,” was uploaded to the site on February 25, 2013. The video boasts 233,722 views and 8,257 text comments as of April 17, 2013. Cook describes the thesis of his argument, saying that “Females struggle to make it big on YouTube...This video aims to find out why” (Cook, 2013). Before looking at the response to the video (which has been mixed), it is necessary to illustrate some of the main points of Cook's argument.

One point that is worrisome is the discussion of “fangirls.” Cook says that according to the statistics that YouTube provides its content creators, 82.4% of his audience is female with just over half falling into the ages of thirteen to seventeen. He says that this is indicative of the typical audience for male vloggers. One male interviewee suggests that a possible reason why female vloggers have difficulty finding success on YouTube is that the audience for vlogs is largely young girls. The interviewee further explains that the female audience would rather watch male vloggers than female vloggers. As one of the female interviewees states, “girls, especially fifteen year old girls, like to watch boys” (Cook, 2013). This is why male YouTubers have larger subscriber numbers. A conversation between two male interviewees does not paint female viewers in the best light:

MALE INTERVIEWEE 5: If you want to get fans, it's girls. Girls obsess over stuff.

MALE INTERVIEWEE 6: It's proven. It's been proven for ages just look at the Beatles and now you've got One Direction who have all these fans. The same sort of fans. The girls that latch on.

In this exchange, all young female YouTubers are likened to crazed fangirls. This type of generalization is not just unflattering. While the “Becoming YouTube” documentary series tends to be comedic in its approach (and this exchange was most likely included in the final edit for comic relief), this particular unscripted moment is not the most effective contribution to the discussion of the YouTube gender divide and certainly not reflective of the entire female YouTuber population.

Another female interviewee feels that female vloggers are held to a much higher standard than their male counterparts:

FEMALE INTERVIEWEE 5: Some people just go for looks. They want to see a cute boy on the screen and that's all that you really have to have. But with [girl vloggers], they're not looking at how attractive you are. They're seeing if you make good content, if you're relatable, if you're funny. And girls get judged a lot more than guys.

This brings up another factor contributing to the gender divide on YouTube: peer pressure. Many of the interviewees in the video spoke about the burdens of being a female vlogger. If female vloggers are not being judged for their physical appearance (see Molyneaux, 2008), they are being harshly scrutinized for other aspects of their vlogs' content.

FEMALE INTERVIEWEE 5: All of the worst comments I get are from guys. About 80% of my subscribers are female, but most of my comments are from males and all of the rude ones. The horrible hate that I get is all from guys.

The female interviewee feels that male vloggers do not face as much criticism as female vloggers do. Later on in the video, there is discussion of how a male vlogger who makes a silly video is considered funny whereas a female vlogger performing the same actions runs the risk of being labelled stupid, attention-seeking, and annoying (Cook, 2013). Another male interviewee speculates why this is the case. He assumes that it is not “necessarily the girl YouTubers that feel like they can't [make videos]. (Cook, 2013). He thinks that the fault lies on the audience who “kind of puts them in their place in a weird way” (Cook, 2013). Some of the other interviewees discussed the unfair pressure that is placed on female vloggers:

FEMALE INTERVIEWEE 4: I don't know if it's because there's a pressure from women to talk about being a woman and that makes the content less funny.

MALE INTERVIEWEE 7: It's this objectification of women that ruins their YouTube career because they can either turn vain or it just encourages them not to get better. There is no middle ground it's either “You're ugly, go away,” or there's “You're so hot, you don't need talent.” I hate the Internet. What have they done?

FEMALE INTERVIEWEE 2: I wish girls would just make videos because they have something to say rather than worrying about how their hair looks or how their makeup's done.

Female vloggers are trapped within a complex negotiation of their own representation. This online identity struggle is something that Benjamin Cook accurately describes as a “minefield of gender politics” (Cook, 2013). Even the production of the “Girls on YouTube” video left Cook conflicted. It is worth noting that of the nineteen interviews that Cook conducted for the video, only five were with female vloggers. All of the other interviewees were male vloggers. Cook states that this decision came down to a judgement call:

BENJAMIN COOK: Do I reflect the YouTube community as it is in 2013 with its glaringly obvious and rather sad imbalance between men and women? Or, do I aim for more of a fifty-fifty split, but in so doing end up featuring some female YouTubers primarily because they're female?

Cook chose the former in order to better reflect the current state of the YouTube vlogging community. He ends the video with a call to action where he asks female YouTubers to continue to upload videos and for those considering vlogging to start as soon as possible as “YouTube is crying out for you” (Cook, 2013). He encourages women to take risks, be funny, be smart, and be opinionated. He asks female vloggers to avoid playing it safe, warning them that he is “not sure [they] can afford to” under the current circumstances (Cook, 2013).

As stated previously, the response to the “Girls on YouTube” documentary video has been a mixed one. The original video has inspired more than thirty video responses created by both female and male YouTubers. Two of these responses will be analyzed as a means of examining the level of critical engagement with the original video's argument that these video responses demonstrate. This analysis will further inform the final assessment as to whether YouTuber operates as a public sphere.

The first response is created by YouTube user Amenakin (2013), a British Muslim female vlogger. The response titled, “I'm a Girl on YouTube,” is the most viewed response to Cook's original video. As of April 17, 2013 the video has received 41,884 views. Amenakin begins by stating that this was the first time in a long time that she felt so passionate about responding to an online video. While she does praise Cook for the fascinating content he provides, she explains that some of the discussion points raised by his interviewees were contrary to her own beliefs about female participation in the vlogging community. She also gives her own opinion regarding the gender divide on Youtube citing contemporary advertising as an example of the ways in which the objectification of women has become a societal norm. Despite this, Amenakin is hopeful for the future of women on YouTube:

AMENAKIN: That is why YouTube is so great. Anyone can upload, anyone can find an audience, and we can change the tide of how females are perceived in society.

Amenakin's response has received text comments of its own (408 as of April 17, 2013). As is the case with vlogs created by female YouTubers, the video received some nasty comments specifically in regards to Amenakin's Muslim faith. However, the positive comments far outweighed the negative ones as evidenced by the video's rating score (1467

likes to 45 dislikes as of July, 2013). Many of the positive comments were insightful, articulate, and continued the discussion of both Amenakin's video and Cook's "Girls on YouTube" video. One such comment left by a female YouTube user (her gender confirmed through a statement on her channel page) can be read below:

FEMALE YOUTUBE USER: THANK GOD!!!! YES! I was thinking about all of this while watching the video. Though his argument was extremely valid, and the video was well done, I couldn't help but detect some misogynistic undertones that, I believe didn't help the good intentions behind the video. It was a little to [sic] black and white, but does at least touch on the fact about females [sic] popularity in social and distributed entertainment media.

Another response to Cook's video came from Rosianna Halse Rojas (also known by the YouTube username "missxrojas"), a young female vlogger from the United Kingdom. In a video simply titled, "Women," Rojas echoes and playfully mocks Cook's final call to action in which he asks girls to be "funny, musical, intelligent, smart, forthright, have opinions, and change the world" (Rojas, 2013). When compared to Amenakin's response, Rojas takes a much more sarcastic and tongue-in-cheek approach to the delivery of her main argument. However, the video demonstrates a high level of critical engagement with the original "Girls on YouTube" video. She points out several flaws in the arguments of Cook and his interviewees and backs up each one of her claims with evidence. For instance, she takes aim at Cook's thesis that females struggle to find success on YouTube by listing several female YouTubers who have subscriber numbers in the hundreds of thousands. Is that not an indicator of success? Her response is in no way a nonsensical video rant. There is a clear logic to her argument. A particularly powerful moment in her video response comes from her selection of some of the most common and offensive comments she has received on her videos which she proceeds to recite to the camera. She says that these kinds of negative comments are not just mean comments, but that they are in fact a form of harassment. Rojas takes aim at a particular comment made by a female interviewee in Cook's video in which she speculates that women are "better equipped" to deal with mean comments because they are used to it:

MISSXROJAS: The question then becomes not whether or not women are better equipped to deal with such harassment – and it's not just trolling or mean comments, it's harassment – but whether women should have to be better equipped. Obviously not! And crucially whether we're taking it seriously enough and doing enough to stop it. But no, of course the apex of the argument has to be that women aren't doing enough to create good content. Try harder women! Or should I say "girls."

All of the video responses to the "Girls on YouTube" video have extended the discussion of the original video and raised important considerations about the topic. Each response has even inspired text and video responses of its own. With this in mind, a judgement can be made in regards to YouTube's functionality as a public sphere.

Does YouTube Operate as a Public Sphere?

RQ1: How can women use vlogs to empower themselves?

As indicated by Amenakin's video response, YouTube has the potential to set its own agenda as to what it means to be a woman in contemporary society. Female vloggers

can counteract the harmful messages and stereotypes perpetuated by the mass media. Since “the Internet has been identified as a tool that *shapes* social reality,” women can use vlogging as a platform to raise awareness of gender inequities in the hopes of persuading viewers to change their attitudes and behaviours towards women's issues (Hans et al. 302). Rosianna Halse Rojas is an example of a female vlogger who creates entertaining videos that promote critical thinking and deeper engagement within the YouTube community. YouTube needs to continue to be a community in which women help other women reach their goals. As a medium, “the Internet offers...a forum for exploration and discovery that could lead to improved or deteriorated online and offline relationships” (Hans et al., 2011, p. 318). In the same way that online interactions can impact interpersonal relationships, what one does and says online can have very real consequences in the real world.

RQ2: What do female vloggers see as obstacles to vlogging?

According to the interviewees featured in the “Girls on YouTube” documentary, the main obstacles that female vloggers face include: young female viewers are more likely to watch male vloggers, female vloggers are held to a higher standard, criticisms of physical appearance, pressure from others to conform to the ideal image of a woman, objectification of women, and harassment. Despite these obstacles, many of the text comments and video responses left on the “Girls on YouTube” page indicate that women are more motivated than ever to overcome these adversities and become vloggers not because they want attention, but because they have a love for the medium of user-generated video.

RQ3: Does YouTube operate as a public sphere?

The findings of this research paper indicate that while it is an effective medium for participating in online debates, YouTube is not a true Habermasian public sphere. The hostile environment of YouTube comment sections and the various factors that have contributed to a gender divide on YouTube are not indicative of a Habermasian public sphere in which each individual member can discuss their opinions openly and freely. It does, however, share some of the traits of Habermas's original concept. Access may be guaranteed to all YouTubers regardless of gender, but as the case study of the “Girls on YouTube” video indicates every contribution is open to scrutiny and criticism. This is not quite the free and open dialogue that Habermas first envisioned.

While YouTube may not operate as the ideal Habermasian public sphere, it is possible that incidents like the aftermath of the “Girls on YouTube” documentary reveal *moments* of a public sphere at work. In these isolated moments one can see the democratic potential of the YouTube platform. One video (“Girls on YouTube”) acted as the spark that created a firestorm of passionate video responses from female (and some male) YouTubers that wanted to share their opinions on the issue. Even if these moments are fleeting, they give hope that one day a true feminist public sphere like the one McLaughlin (1993) advocates for will be possible. Perhaps the aftermath of the “Girls on YouTube” video indicates the beginnings of a counterpublic (see Warner, 2002). However, one must not forget that exposure to these alternative perspectives always comes down to the tricky problem of access. How does one access video responses if they do not even know that they exist? A network model is a more appropriate way of describing YouTube's potential to circulate the views of groups that oppose mainstream ideology and societal norms.

YouTube provides a network of connections through related videos and video responses. If someone is highly engaged in an online discussion, it is likely that they will not just stop at one video. They will use the related video links that make connections between

videos on similar topics. YouTube operates more like a web of interconnected discussion and talking points rather than one giant public sphere. As Molyneux et al. (2008) observes, “Vlogs, as a result of comments that viewers make, can become links in a social network. Such connections can form a social hypertext, a network of connected videos” (p. 10). This is where careful selection of category and key words (or tags) becomes important for content creators.

Does YouTube still have democratic potential if people are merely “lurking” and do not actually post comments or video responses? Yes. The rising video view counts is an indication of the importance of the issue in the minds of its viewers. It is receiving exposure and thus, raising awareness for a particular cause. Furthermore, there are more inconspicuous ways of showing support and approval for a YouTube discussion point. For example, sharing the link through social media, adding the video to one's favourites list on YouTube, or even clicking the thumbs up button to rate the video as favourable. These are acts that justify and legitimate the importance of the issue at hand. YouTube is not an ideal public sphere, but it revolutionizes traditional notions of democracy.

Conclusion

YouTube is the manifestation of the democratic potential proposed by Froomkin (2003). Though lacking physical proximity, participants in YouTube debates such as the one started by the “Girls on YouTube” video are united by their shared interest and dedication to a common goal – empowering women to make YouTube vlogs that challenge the mainstream media's perception of what it means to be a woman in contemporary society. The experience of creating and uploading vlogs is different for men and women. Men are often comedic in their delivery. Female vloggers are actively involved in the YouTube community and try to facilitate debate by asking questions of their audiences. A case study of responses to “Girls on YouTube” proved that this is true. Two video responses in particular created by Amenakin and Rosianna Halse Rojas indicated a high level of critical thinking and thoughtful articulation of counter responses.

Although female vloggers face more challenges than male vloggers do, they are still able to use the communicative power of vlogging to empower themselves and each other. While it is not a Habermasian public sphere, YouTube still presents users with the opportunity to participate in discussions and debates that can have a lasting influence on participants long after they have logged off of their computers. YouTube is not a remediation of older patriarchal technology. It operates as a network of support for women who are all dedicated to the common goals of acceptance and respect. It is a virtual space where women's voices can be heard and moments of a feminist public sphere can begin to take shape.

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