(New) participatory framework on YouTube? Commenter interaction in US political speeches

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Abstract

This article examines the various participant roles adopted by users on YouTube, when watching and commenting on Barack Obama's Inaugural Address (January 2009). Based on the notion that YouTube has become a powerful medium for (re)broadcasting institutional texts and genres, the article argues that text commenting practices allow for the co-creation of distinct participatory roles.

Drawing on a quantitative and qualitative corpus-assisted analysis of the comments to the speech, the article examines how roles are defined and participatory positions delimited through linguistic and non-linguistic means. It addresses the different types of production and reception roles (Goffmann, 1981; Levinson, 1988) exploited by users for communication and how they differ from the traditional ones, 'ratified' and 'unratified' participants in the medium, and the ways in which the YouTube medium affects participation. A reworking of the traditional participatory framework categories is proposed on the basis of the new online environments. Specifically, it proposes a multi-level representation of production, with the original speech and speaker (Obama) seen as the first level of production, and the comments as a secondary level. Both levels entail various reception roles, which are exploited to various degrees by YouTube participants.

Keywords: Participation framework; YouTube; Text commenting; Ratification; Political discourse

1. Introduction

In the past few years YouTube has become an important medium in the dissemination of institutional texts and genres, such as political speeches (Boyd, 2011, 2014). An example of its successful adoption in politics is represented by Barack Obama, whose team has made wide use of YouTube to disseminate videos of various political genres from his first primaries (2008) into his second term in office (cf. Boyd, 2011; Hanson et al., 2011; Heffernan, 2009; Nagourney, 2008). The high number of views and comments of the videos is a clear sign of the platform's popularity, especially among younger voters who eschew traditional media sources for news and information (Nagourney, 2008). Another factor that has contributed to YouTube's popularity is the medium's ostensible openness, i.e. it allows users to comment freely on videos with no moderator interference. While, at first glance, many of the comments posted may exhibit blatant uses of rude, obscene and even racist language, upon closer examination examples of constructive interactional practices can be uncovered.

Commenters, in fact, express opinions in a variety of ways, adopting various strategies, which, it is argued here, can largely be categorized as either constructive or disruptive depending on the comment(er)’s apparent desire to engage in and continue conversation. Moreover, the empirical study presented here demonstrates that most comments are part of
multi-participant, asynchronous ‘conversations’ with other YouTube users. The main goal of this study, then, is to determine and categorize the different types of YouTube users who participate in the medium through text commenting within the domain of political discourse. In particular, it addresses the ways in which YouTube users define their participatory roles and delimit their positions by linguistic and non-linguistic means. The underlying hypothesis is that these positions are defined not only through discursive practices but also through the participatory practices and the (co-)construction of user roles of commenters. To determine which participant roles are available to and exploited by users, the participation framework (Goffmann, 1981; Levinson, 1988) is considered, and its possible application proposed in light of the empirical data. From a more general perspective, the work is aimed at determining the ways in which the medium of YouTube affects participation, what the main production/reception roles in new media are and how they may differ from the traditional ones. The empirical data are drawn from a sample of comments in a YouTube version of Obama’s First Inaugural Address (2009) and are investigated both quantitatively and qualitatively.

In Section 2, the most important theoretical considerations are introduced. In Section 3 the corpus and methodology are discussed, while in Section 4 the data and specific examples from the corpus are analyzed from a theoretical point of view. This section also offers a tentative proposal for user roles on YouTube. Finally, Section 5 offers some preliminary conclusions as well as some considerations about the nature of participatory framework in YouTube and what this could mean for political communication.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. YouTube: from user-generated content to politics

Since its introduction in February 2005 YouTube has since become one of the most popular and influential social networks in what Lister et al. (2009:225) label as “one of the most astonishing and characteristic developments of networked new media”. Originally conceived as a seamless way to share user-generated content, the site has expanded to include a wider array of video material including clips from TV shows and films, complete programmes and films, institutional videos such as speeches and policy statements, and video blogs “where users offer opinions regarding current events, politics, and entertainment” (Hess, 2009:413). While a full discussion of YouTube is beyond the scope of this article, I will focus on the areas most pertinent to participation on the medium, namely the roles available to the users and how these roles are defined by observers, scholars and users themselves.

While both registered and non-registered users can watch videos on YouTube, an activity which accounts for most traffic on the site (Chau, 2011:67), logged in users can also access interactive services. As part of this ‘registralional activity’ (Lister et al., 2009), in that users must be registered (and logged in) to access the services, users can upload and share videos, flag and like/dislike them as well as post comments. Registered users can also customize their profile, create friends and subscriptions lists, send private messages, subscribe to playlists and comment walls, etc. (Chau, 2011:71–72). A tacit result of these features is that static users are transformed into “co-creative participants” (Lister et al., 2009:204; cf. Tolson, 2010).

YouTube is known to create a strong sense of community among some of its core users (also known as ‘YouTubers’ or ‘Tubers’): “YouTubers frequently respond to each others’ videos, enacting spoofs of originals or giving commentary to issues brought up by their peers” (Hess, 2009:414). Logged in users often engage in dialogue with other users through text commenting, a practice that Chau (2011:67) sees as being “crucial to the way the community operates”. The same author further notes that “[YouTube’s] unique technical and social features support the formation of a participatory culture among the members of its community” (2011:67). However, as stated above, most YouTube users remain on the “periphery” as non-interactional viewers (Chau, 2011:67), using the medium merely to watch videos without reading or writing comments, which, according to Adami (2009a:382) is also “the least demanding” practice in the communication practices that are generated by a video on YouTube”. Since such users do not need to register for an account, the only evidence of their participation on the medium is in the view count, which when considered on its own, however, “is a poor metric for understanding viewing practices” (Lange, 2008:97).

The current discussion’s focus on text commenting can provide insight into (new) discursive practices. A small number of studies have focused on YouTube text comments. Jones and Schieffelin (2009:1062) see them as “a valuable source of user-generated metalinguistic data”. According to Burgess and Green (2009) the use of comments on YouTube helps to create a “mediated participatory culture”, which Jones and Schieffelin (2009) underline as being “inherently dialogic” in nature. Savoie (2009) stresses their potential for text production, while Hess (2009) concludes that the “playful” and negative aspects of commenting overshadow the serious ones. Bou-Franch et al. (2012:502) see comments as a place for

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users “to share, negotiate, agree, and challenge opinions, often with seemingly no other end in mind than to interact and be in touch with other, often unknown, YouTubers”. Finally, Boyd (2014) argues that text commenting in political videos rebroadcast on YouTube may play a significant role in reshaping linguistic and social practices.

As noted, text comments can also exhibit a high degree of antagonistic behaviour, often referred to as ‘hating’ among YouTubers (Lange, 2008; see also Lange, 2007a,b; Jones and Schieffelin, 2009). In the literature agnostic online behaviour is referred to in a number of different ways. In their analysis of video-response behaviour, Benevenuto et al. (2008: online) adopt the term “spammers” who, they argue, “aim at commercial intent [...] advertising, self-promotion, and belittlement of ideas and reputation”, but they also admit that such a definition, at least in the case of video-respondents, is subjective because it relies on personal assessment. According to their analysis legitimate users interact more with the system, without defining exactly what is intended by interaction.

Probably the most widely used term to refer to such antagonistic behaviour is ‘trolling’. Hardaker (2013:79), however, disagrees with the purely negative connotation of the term arguing that “[t]rolling is the deliberate (perceived) use of impoliteness/aggression, deception and/or manipulation in CMC to create a context conducive to triggering or antagonizing conflict, typically for amusement’s sake”. While a full discussion of trolling is well beyond the scope of this work what I consider significant in Hardaker’s proposed definition is the fact that trolling should be understood in terms of how other users perceive the practice and user. In fact, the author calls for a wider definition of ‘troll’ that “should strive to incorporate how both the H[earer] and the (alleged) troll jointly construct, challenge, and negotiate their own, and each other’s identity” (Hardaker, 2013:81). One of the aims of this work, in fact, is to uncover further evidence of such co-construction of user roles through participation practices.

The scarce agreement among both scholars and users about the various roles available (and attributed) to YouTubers demonstrates “the relative, interactional and negotiable” nature of the terms (Lange, 2007b:42). But the fact remains that many antagonistic comment practices include flippant, crude, sexist, racist and homophobic remarks, which may offend other users and ‘complicate’ interaction on YouTube (Lange, 2010) discouraging many users from certain types of participation on YouTube (Lange, 2007b). Lange (2007b:43) further notes “while some people have a high tolerance and indeed enjoy confrontational types of participation, others eschew it to the point where it can interfere with their enjoyment of basic online participation”. Furthermore, some users may even favour hateful comments they can still be used to generate higher counts so that the video can be included in the ‘most discussed’ category. In some cases, however, the debates can often turn into hostile encounters, or what are sometimes called ‘flame wars’. Pihlaja (2011) notes that the mixing of ideological differences with interpersonal factors can lead to hostile “back-and-forth” debates especially when controversial topics such as religion and politics are involved, which may further complicate participation.

In the sphere of politics, the 2008 US elections marked the “YouTubification” (May, 2008) of politics as a result of numerous factors: the majority of candidates declared their candidacies, disseminated campaign speeches and announcements, and stayed in touch with electors and younger voters via the video-sharing site. YouTube became “a first-stop source for political everything” (Heffernan, 2008; see also Grove, 2008), a strategy that was continued and expanded in the 2012 elections. Adopting YouTube, however, did not and still does not guarantee political success, since the YouTube community has come to expect total freedom in their participatory practices, allowing them to embed, critique, satirize and comment upon politicians and political issues. Thus, to be accepted by YouTubers, politicians have to relinquish control over videos and the public reaction they generate (Heffernan, 2008).

Hess (2009) analyses a series of videos posted by the Official of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP) focusing on the ways in which users attempted to challenge both their content and structure by posting video and text comments. He concludes that YouTube’s “structural limitations” and its main focus on entertainment create a “dismissive and playful atmosphere [which] does not prove to be a viable location for democratic deliberation about serious political issues” (Hess, 2009:411). In this particular case, YouTubers expressly criticized ONDCP’s “disregard for forum expectations” because they had disabled the comment and other built-in features; users saw this as a violation of both “the spirit of YouTube and [...] the freedom of speech with democracy” (Hess, 2009). In clear recognition of such attitudes among users, the Obama team has generally enabled commenting and other functions in the videos they post. In the next section we will look at some aspects of the participation framework and offer some preliminary observations about how Goffman and Levinson’s participatory roles might be adapted to CMC and, more specifically, to YouTube.

2.2. Participation framework from Goffman and Levinson to CMC and beyond

In this section we will focus only on those aspects of Goffman’s participation framework (1981) pertinent to the current discussion. Goffmann (1981) proposed a distinction between “production format” (speaker) encompassing the roles of animator (or “the sounding box”), author and principal (“someone whose position is established by the words that are spoken, someone whose beliefs have been told, someone who is committed to what the words say” [Goffmann, 1981:144]) vs. “participation framework” which includes various roles for ratified and non-ratified hearers (Goffmann, 1981:130–32). In relation to the latter, he assigns roles for ratified participants who are either addressed or non-addressed
recipients and non-ratified participants, as bystanders and eavesdroppers. A ratified participant (or hearer in Goffman’s terms) is also the addressee, at least in a two-way conversation, and is expected to take on the speaking role (Goffman, 1981:132–133). Finally, since the above categories are only applicable to conversational roles, he introduces other roles, such as, for example, the platform monologue or podium talk which correspond to the genre of political speech (cf. Levinson, 1988:170). In this case the podium is a single speaker before a larger audience (Goffman, 1981:137), or, in modern political communication, various audiences, from the primary, co-present listeners at a live event to the secondary ones who listens to (or watches) the event live via the mass media and, finally a tertiary audience that listens to or watches a recording at a later time (Reisigl, 2008:257).²

Levinson’s (1988) subsequent refinement of speaker and addressee roles was meant to reflect with greater precision the varying participant roles in different types of social encounters. His categories were broken down into underlying component concepts “to be recombined into other, related more specialized participant roles” (Levinson, 1988:164). Importantly, he introduced the term “reception roles” to replace Goffman’s production format to cover both production and reception roles. A division between basic and derived participant roles was also proposed. In the former, we can find source (“the information/illocutionary origin of the message”), target, speaker, addressee and participant (“a party with a ratified channel-link to other parties”), while in the latter derived categories we can find producers (“sources or speakers”), recipients (“addressees or targets”), author (“source and speaker”), relayer (“speaker who is not the source”), goal (“an addressee who is the target”) and intermediary (“an addressee who is not the target”) as well as others (1988:170–171).

While a full discussion of the 17 possible roles in his classification (Irvine, 1996:133) is beyond the scope of this paper, one of Levinson’s classifications, MOTIVE, deserves further comment. This term is used to indicate a “desire to communicate some particular message” (Irvine, 1996) in his complex version of production roles (173) along with the categories PART(ICIPIANT), TRANS(MISSION), etc. An author possessing all three of these labels, i.e. [+MOTIVE, +TRANS, +PART], “hold[s] responsibility for several different aspects of message production simultaneously: for motivating it, for supplying its form, and for actually transmitting it” (Irvine, 1996:133).

Since Goffman and Levinson’s participatory descriptions well predate the communication paradigms enabled by Computer-mediated Communication (CMC) and the Internet, we need to consider the “new communication settings” which have reshaped the pragmatic features of language in online environments (Giltrow and Stein, 2009:9). This transformation is conditioned by a vast and variable range of interaction forms, such as push and pull technology, distance-synchronous forms of communication, new combinations of speakers vs. hearers (N-to-N), and the ability to save interactions (Giltrow and Stein, 2009). This does not mean, however, that interactive text-based CMC does not imitate spoken conversation, the similarities of which have been noted by Herring (2010), who stresses that both scholars and users are well aware of this likeness. More importantly, the users “experience CMC in fundamentally similar ways to spoken conversation, despite CMC being produced and received by written means” (Herring, 2010:2). However, since users have a constant written record of their interaction, discourse is processed on the basis of a more efficient strategy “than the one-turn-at-a-time model” (Herring, 2010:2). Moreover, in this model both dyadic and multi-participant modes are possible, exhibiting similar characteristics to spoken language and often fulfilling the same social function: “typographic practices that imitate spoken prosody; discourse produced in chunks that resemble ‘intonation units’ [...] turn-taking; topic development via step-wise moves [...] ‘conversational’ code-switching [...]” (Herring, 2010:4).

This new paradigm may also give rise to complications among multiple participants. First of all, as noted above, CMC interaction is largely one-to-many often involving multiple responses (cf. Crystal, 2010). A larger number of participants can lead to turn disruptions as well as a high degree of intervening messages between turns (Honeycutt and Herring, 2009) especially, I would add, when messages are not threaded. To avoid confusion in multi-participant environments a high degree of addressee is necessary, as a specific addressee’s attention must be captured with every new utterance (Honeycutt and Herring, 2009). Moreover, the “metaphorical sense of distance” created by anonymity and asynchronicity leads to more liberties taken than in face-to-face communication (Giltrow and Stein, 2009:13) often manifesting itself as antagonistic behaviour (i.e. hating, spamming or trolling) as noted in Section 2.1. As far as YouTube is concerned, Lange (2007b:37) lists a number of “participatory complications” which include learning the necessary skills to participate, following the terms of service and laws, negotiating the new social conventions and “dealing with unpredictable interactional effects both on and off the site, all of which influence whether participation will take place, and what the quality of that participation will be”. At this point, we should ask which participation roles are available to YouTube users.

First, however, we need to address the issue of new communication settings available on the medium, which, I would argue, entail two complementary levels of production and reception. Thus, at the first level, we can find the YouTube video (in this case, Barack Obama’s Inaugural Address) and speaker (Barack Obama). Pihlaja (2011) stresses that we should

² Goffman’s (1981:138) definition of audience also includes “those who hear talks on radio or TV”. Yet, at the same time, he stresses the fundamental differences of “mutual stimulation”, which is lacking when witnesses are not co-present, and “imagined recipients”, which in broadcasting are often styled as “single” listeners rather than “massed” groupings.
consider all of the features available on the video page, which include “a dynamic relationship among the content of the video, the text the author attaches to the video (in the description box and title), and how commenters interact with these different elements of the video page”. Similarly, Adami (2009:382), who is primarily interested in video-responses and video-threads rather than textual responses, sees the video-thread as but “a (tiny) part of the communication generated by a video”, also stressing the importance of the original video in the YouTube communication process.

In addition to medium-specific features, the original speech and speaker (Obama) also need to be taken into account, as representative of the first level of production, or the podium in Goffman’s terminology. This level includes the reception roles for those who watch the video as both registered (logged in and non-logged in) viewers and unregistered viewers or watchers, as illustrated in Fig. 1. The secondary level of production includes users who participate in text creation through commenting (or other registrational activities). The possible roles for this level or production and reception are also illustrated in Fig. 1. As in the first level of production, we should note a division between registered and unregistered users, the former representing those who can actively participate in text commenting, with specifications for various forms of antagonistic behaviour.

As we can see, the roles proposed in Fig. 1 are far from ideal. Firstly, we have not considered precisely what constitutes user ratification. Namely, should only registered (and logged in) users be considered ratified, or should anyone who watches a video on YouTube and is counted as a viewer be considered ratified since the medium is clearly public and therefore open to (almost) anyone? Since actual communication can only occur when a user is registered and logged in, registration is a necessary step in ratified participation at least in the second level participation roles. Nevertheless, unregistered users can both watch the video and read the comments without directly participating in communication. Registered users, however, also have a choice as to whether they want to participate directly or not, or in Goffman’s terms, ‘to change footing’. Should they be considered differently from registered users who actively participate in the second level of production? Finally, are unregistered viewers and readers any different from registered ones? In the medium itself such users are sometimes called lurkers, but should such disparaging terminology be adopted in the participation framework since such viewers probably do not consider themselves as such?

In what follows it is proposed that the commenters can be better classified according to the type of comments they write and their presumed underlying motivation (i.e., either to promote or hamper participation). Thus, while many comments

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1st Level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PRODUCTION ROLES (Podium/Platform)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Video</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Speaker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Speech, etc.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| RECEPTION ROLES |
| Registered user | Unregistered user |
| • Logged in user |
| • Non-logged in user |
| Viewer | Viewer |

| 2nd Level |
| PRODUCTION ROLES |
| Registered user | Unregistered user |
| Reader |
| Liker (disliker) |
| Commenter |
| • hater |
| • troll |
| • spammer, etc. |

| Reader |

Fig. 1. Possible participation roles in YouTube.
may appear to be antagonistic in nature, they do not necessarily obstruct participation (at least among some users). New terms are proposed to reflect better these practices in favour of the often value-laden and misused traditional terms discussed above and in Section 2.1. And what of the comments that remain unanswered and therefore are not part of a conversation? Should they be considered differently from the comments that either initiate a conversation or respond to a comment? Many of such commenters appear to do nothing to motivate their encounters and/or elicit a response, a distinction that might be best captured by Levinson’s MOTIVE classification. These roles will be further discussed in Section 4 in light of the empirical data.

3. Corpus and methodology

The empirical data for the corpus study are drawn from a small sample corpus consisting of 502 threaded comments (from Barack Obama’s “Inaugural Address” (January 2009).\(^3\) The relevant data for the corpus are presented below in Table 1.

The limited size of the corpus is justified by both the nature and scope of the study: since the main focus is participation among users it was thought that such practices could better be observed, studied and classified through manual reading and sorting by the author. The 502 comments in the corpus (out of a total of almost 8000) cover an approximately one-year period ending in June 2011 (when a preliminary study was carried out). The sample was considered to be sufficient to elicit at least some online behavioural practices in this particular corpus. While such a methodological approach is undoubtedly both highly subjective and time consuming, it was thought that a manual analysis would prove to be the best way to determine the various turns that were part of longer exchanges, or conversations. Comments were classified according to the various strategies adopted by commenters.\(^4\)

Another possible limitation in the methodological approach might be seen in the comment function in YouTube. It should be noted that the standard comment view is chronological with the most recent comments displayed first, but a threaded view is also available.\(^5\) For the purposes of this study it was decided to use the threaded option to facilitate the sorting process for the qualitative analysis. While it is true that we cannot be certain which option the commenters and readers select when viewing and making comments on YouTube, it can most likely be assumed that users respond to the most recent comments (in either chronological or threaded view). According to googlesystem.blogspot\(^6\) the threaded view might be “useful if you read a reply to a comment, but you can’t find the initial comment”.

A pilot study was performed on the data using WordSmith Tools (Scott, 2006) to draw out instances of lexical usage, which might be indicative of participation (Section 3.1). The search parameters were in line with the results found in a parallel study (Boyd, 2014) and based on a much larger corpus of YouTube comments from the same speech (ca. 66,000 comments, or 1.8 million words). This study focused on how commenters positively and negatively recontextualize political discourse, revealing a higher incidence and wider variety of both positive and negative commenting strategies in Obama’s inaugural address as compared to two other speeches. The work argues that the language used in inaugurals, characterized “by an elaborate and conventionally scripted orality rich in metaphors” (Reisigl, 2008:252–253), can lead to misunderstandings and criticism by the public (Campbell and Jamieson, 2008:29–56). In the present study, it was hypothesized that the comment data generated by this speech would also provide evidence of participation practices.

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\(^3\) The version used for the analysis used to be found on the ‘whitehouse.gov YouTube channel’, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vjnyg-Q02aW4, last accessed 29 July 2012.

\(^4\) For similar considerations in creating a corpus for video responses on YouTube and the difficulties this might entail, see Adami (2009b,c).

\(^5\) At the time of writing the function was still in beta version (July 2013). As of November 2013, however, Youtube refined its commenting function so that comments are sorted according to “the people you care about first”. Moreover, video posters now have more ways to manage the comments and “moderate welcome and unwelcome conversations” (http://youtube-global.blogspot.it/2013/11/youtube-new-comments.html). While these changes are not taken into consideration in the present analysis, it will be interesting to observe in future research if/how they will affect participatory practices in text commenting on the medium.

\(^6\) http://googlesystem.blogspot.it/2011/01/youtube-comment-threading.html.
Table 2
Inaugural address view information (June 2011).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>N</th>
<th>% of viewers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Views</td>
<td>1,490,137</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Likes</td>
<td>3374</td>
<td>0.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dislikes</td>
<td>471</td>
<td>0.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Total) comments</td>
<td>7729</td>
<td>0.52</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3
Most frequent relevant lexical items in the comment sample.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>N</th>
<th>Word</th>
<th>Freq</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>#</td>
<td>1088</td>
<td>6.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>YOU</td>
<td>280</td>
<td>1.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>208</td>
<td>1.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>HE</td>
<td>196</td>
<td>1.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>OBAMA</td>
<td>170</td>
<td>0.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>HIS</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>0.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>PRESIDENT</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>0.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27</td>
<td>YOUR</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>0.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29</td>
<td>BUSH</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>0.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33</td>
<td>PEOPLE</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>0.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34</td>
<td>WE</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>0.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60</td>
<td>ME</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>0.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>64</td>
<td>NIGGER</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>0.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>85</td>
<td>BARACK</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>0.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>89</td>
<td>WHATKINDOFDUMBRU</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>0.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>94</td>
<td>POLTERGUIST</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>0.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>98</td>
<td>GOVERNMENTSLAVES</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>0.14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In line with Pihlaja’s (2011) view that any investigation of interaction on YouTube should include all the elements on the video page (see Section 2.2), we provide the most important interactive features\(^7\) in Table 2.

Table 2 provides crucial information about viewers and their relevant registrational activity. Thus, while the number of views is quite high, only a small percentage of these (ratified) viewers directly interact with the medium by liking/disliking the video (0.25%/0.03% respectively) or commenting (0.52%). These data would appear to confirm, as noted above, that most YouTube participants remain mere viewers.

3.1. Quantitative analysis

The pilot study was aimed at uncovering lexemes that might indicate some level of participation by users. A wordlist was generated by copying and saving the comments as a text file and then using WordSmith Tools 4.0 (Scott, 2006) to calculate the most frequent lexical items among the following categories, which were identified on the basis of the lexical frequencies found in Boyd (2014):

1. Deictic pronouns (I – You), 3rd person singular pronoun (he).
2. Terms of address, including references to the podium and other politicians (Obama, President).
3. User names (WHATKINDOFDUMBRU).

Evident lexical evidence of antagonistic behaviour was also considered to facilitate comment labelling in the subsequent round of analysis. The quantitative analysis was limited to the first 100 items. Of these 17 were considered pertinent (Table 3).

As we can see in Table 3, the most frequent lexical item is indicated by #, a symbol generally used in WordSmith Tools to indicate lemmas containing numbers or symbols (Scott, 2006). Crucially, subsequent analysis with the Text Converter programme within WordSmith Tools revealed that the symbol @ accounts for almost half of the uses in Table 3 (with a

\(^7\) As noted in Table 2 the information refers to June 2011. The video is no longer available on the whitehouse.gov YouTube channel and the original URL leads to the C-SPAN page.
Table 4: Constructive and disruptive commenting in the corpus.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>S</th>
<th>R</th>
<th>US</th>
<th>Total N (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Constructive</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>53 (0.11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>12 (0.02)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>218</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>282 (0.56)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>26 (0.05)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disruptive</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>92 (0.18)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>37 (0.07)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

frequency 2.92% in the corpus). The symbol has been used since the 1990s: first in Internet Relay Chat (IRC) and then later in social networks as a means to address other users in multi-participant public environments in which “a high degree of addresivity is required [. . .] because the addressee’s attention must be recaptured with every new utterance” (Werry, 1996 in Honeycutt and Herring, 2009). Its widespread use might also be a reflection of the complications in the YouTube interface and the fact that in the standard chronological view all members of a conversation are not necessarily visible.

Table 3 also exhibits a high frequency of first- and second-person deictic pronouns (you, I, your, we, me), accounting for 3.81% of overall word usage, and third-person singular pronominal forms (he, his), accounting for another 1.61%. The lexemes Obama, president, Bush and Barack are evident examples of reference to the podium both directly and indirectly. The last three lexemes in Table 3 are clearly user names, while nigger is a glaring example of antagonistic (racist) behaviour, which we will discuss further below.

3.2. Qualitative analysis

The qualitative analysis was aimed at determining the number of conversations in the sample corpus and, subsequently, coding the different commenter strategies. Thus, the 502 “threaded” comments were evaluated and the various conversations determined. The comment initiator or Speaker [S], the respondents [R] and unanswered comments [US] were also noted. The first phase in the sorting process evinced 391 comments (out of 502) that were part of a conversation, which means that ca. 78% of the turns either initiated or responded to a comment. Further analysis reveals that most conversations are multi-participant with an average of 3.4 participants per conversation. Specifically, only 39 turns (10.15%) were part of two-turn conversations, 323 part of conversations with 3 or 4 turns, and 20 were part of conversations with five or more turns. These longer conversations, accounting for a mere 5.2% of the turns, contained an average of 6.3 participants.

All comments were then annotated and coded according to two general commenting strategies: constructive and disruptive. The names serve a purely descriptive function meant to capture two major strategies: the former, which appear to be aimed at initiating, responding or maintaining conversation, while the latter involve some sort of “disruption” on the part of the commenter, who appears to be doing everything to jettison the Gricean cooperation principles (Crystal, 2010:236), thereby hindering communication. The importance of the distinction for the participation framework should become clearer in Section 4. At this stage the comments were tentatively coded according to the two strategies in as far as possible. Subsequently, the constructive comments were subdivided into positive, in examples where Obama, the speech, the video and or the inauguration were evidently being praised, or negative, which were critical of Obama, the speech, etc. and/or offered disparaging remarks about other (political) actors and commenters were disparaged. Many of the comments in the negative constructive category also included instances of seemingly playful behaviour, irony, light name calling and obscenities. Disruptive comments, on the other hand, make use of racist (nigger, porch monkey), homophobic (tag), conspiracist (birth certificate, communist, marxist) language and appeared aimed only at antagonizing or offending other users, thereby hindering conversation. The category includes many instances of flaming, hating, trolling, etc., but the differences among these practices, as we have seen above, are not always clear-cut and the result is often the same. The comments that appeared to be completely off-topic or were clear cases of spam advertising products or political parties were excluded. It should be stressed that in a few cases comments could not be easily classified as either positive/negative or negative/disruptive, which we shall see in Table 4 below. While these categories are admittedly far from perfect and could not always be applied to the various comments, they would appear to offer a tentative picture of the participatory behaviour patterns among commenters in this corpus.8 In Table 4 we can see the different commenting

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8 For more about the difficulties involved in grouping users into different categories in video responses, see Benevenuto et al. (2008, 2009) and Adami (2009c).
strategies used, which are also divided according to the location of the turns as the original commenter [S], a comment respondent [R] or an unanswered commenter or speaker [US].

As we can see in Table 4, most of the comments have been classified as constructive (74%), indicating that a large portion of commenters are interested in maintaining conversation, even though such comments did not always prompt a response. Furthermore, only 18% of the comments were categorized as being clearly disruptive, while a small percentage (7%) off topic or containing spam. The results will be discussed in the next section in light of some examples and how these might be indicative of participation.

4. Discussion

The analysis in Section 3 evinced a high degree of interaction among commenters in the sample data presented. However, I would argue that while it is impossible determine the exact level and quality of participation among the users, the sample corpus data can provide some tentative observations about user behaviour. We shall now review the most important points to emerge from the corpus analysis and examine a couple of specific examples from the data.

In the quantitative analysis, the high frequency of first- and second-person pronouns and the addresivity marker @ are clearly indicative of participation at some level. The symbol has the highest frequency in the simplified word list (2.95%) in Table 3, second only to the definite article the (3.34%) in overall frequency. As noted by Levinson (1988:179), second-person pronouns and other linguistic forms that encode second-person “do not generally in and of themselves serve to pick out one addressee from other participants” while “[v]ocatives may serve to exactly identify an addressee”. This is especially true of on-line communication as gestures or gazes are absent, making such forms a crucial indicator of addresivity. These frequencies are similar to the ones calculated in the larger corpus analysis found in Boyd (2014).

The quantitative analysis has demonstrated, first of all, that most comments (78%) are nominally part of a conversation in that at least one commenter has opted to respond to another comment(er). Secondly, it was determined that conversations are for the most part both multi-participant and consisting of more than two turns. Finally, upon closer examination of the lexical and pragmatic features adopted by the commenters a general pattern of behaviour emerged: constructive and disruptive to indicate a general pattern in the ways the comments are used and perceived by other users. In the former, which were further subdivided into positive and negative, the participants would appear to be more interested in initiating and/or propagating conversation. Although it is impossible to determine this in the case of unanswered comments, over 56% of the turns which were part of conversations were labelled as constructive. The disruptive comments are overwhelmingly antagonistic and rife with examples of hateful, racist, homophobic and conspiracist language. Interestingly, however, the category does not preclude participation: some 6% of the conversations were initiated by a disruptive comment, while almost 8% of respondents used disruptive strategies as some point in a conversation. Future research could focus on the various types of disruptive commenting and attempt to determine their specific role within conversations on the basis of (im)politeness strategies.

Due to space limitations we will look at only two short examples from the sample data. (1) is a dyadic exchange and illustrates constructive commenting strategies by both participants:

(1) \He says in this speech there is work to be done? Not by him obviously and we are gonna bring jobs is a joke still no jobs to be found! DrDevin21 5 days ago
  @DrDevin21 I couldnt agree more, I was so excited on that day, along with most people, but sadly your right, what has he really done. rickyq61 1 day ago9

Since S is critical of the speech and Obama, the comment was labelled negative, as is R (even though there is agreement with S). The comments by R, however, also highlight some of the problems encountered when applying the categories: although the comment agrees with what S says, it is not necessarily completely critical of Obama (“what has he really done?) claiming to have been “so excited on that day” (clearly positive). It was for this reason that the positive category was applied only in the cases of complete praise as in (2) below. Sample (1) illustrates some other salient features for the discussion: @ is used to address S; in R the conversational form your appears to be aimed at reinforcing the interactional nature of the exchange. Interestingly, the third-person pronoun (he, him) is used by both participants to refer both to the podium in the form of both the speech and Obama. Thus, (1) demonstrates two different levels of interaction: S reacts to the podium, while ostensibly addressing other users; R directly addresses the speaker ending his message with an unpunctuated question directed at the wider YouTube public.

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9 The examples are taken verbatim from the downloaded text files which were used in the sample corpus. Spelling conventions and errors are left intact.
Sample (2) is an example of a multi-participant exchange that is also initiated with a constructive (positive) comment followed by negative comments and ending with an example of disruptive commenting.

(2) Great man, great speech. I look forward to Obama being our President for the next six years. davidsl11 1 month ago 2 likes
   @davidsl11 he is fucking done benchod94 1 month ago
   @davidsl11 NObama 2012! liberalsuck931 2 weeks ago
   @benchod94 Shut the fuck up you 16 year old lil bitch. you are a child you don't have an opinion. stay in school and get you sme education. you are from Canada stay the fuck out of the United States Businesscrib1981 1 month ago

(2) is rendered more complex by its multi-addressivity: S makes a positive statement about the speech, which has been ‘liked’ by two unnamed users, while R1 disagrees with the original commenter using rather obscene language, which I would argue, is still an example of negative commenting as is the next turn (R2). These two turns, in fact, while clearly anti-Obama in content are still ostensibly aimed at maintaining conversation. The last turn in (2) is more difficult to categorize. While R3 is interacting with another user in the conversation (R1), the turn is full of obscenities, which are clearly directed at another user: R3 makes reference to age (discernible from the username) as well as to the country of origin (presumably discovered by clicking on the username and reading the YouTube account page). The comment was therefore marked as disruptive. In spite of these elements, it is still part of a conversation, but appears to have disrupted further participation by commenters.

The data analyzed appear to demonstrate that YouTube users do engage in conversation adopting a variety of strategies to play out the various participant roles provided by the medium. In the text comments, specifically, these roles are delineated by both linguistic and pragmatic means through two general types of commenting strategy. Thus, commenters widely employ both @ and second-person pronouns to signal addresivity; they use first-person pronouns to indicate their own participation, while using third-person pronouns to reference the podiun or another user or external actor (such as, e.g., Bush); and they often use both names (Obama, Barack, president) to refer to the podium or usernames to refer to other participants.

As far as the general strategies used in commenting are concerned, a few points need to be made. Although the categories used in sorting the data were far from perfect, they appeared to be relevant in most cases. Nonetheless, 38 of the comments could not be clearly categorized as either positive/negative or negative/disruptive. This would suggest that the categories and the codification process should be further streamlined in future research. Yet for the sake of the present discussion, most of the comments were constructive and generally exhibited more features of conversation and greater participation by users. The smaller number of disruptive comments was generally offensive and highly antagonistic in nature, and exhibited elements of racism, homophobia, and conspiracy theory and often targeted specific users. It should

![Diagram](image.png)

**Fig. 2.** Participatory framework on YouTube: a proposal.
be stressed, however, that the use of disruptive commenting does not preclude participation. Finally, if we move beyond the comments for a moment, we should recall that the majority of users remain on the periphery as viewers, but they are still participants in the broader sense of the word because they may watch the original video and/or read the comments. Moreover, they may interact in different ways, i.e. by liking the video and/or comments while still remaining anonymous.

In Fig. 2 I provide a proposal for a YouTube participatory framework. As we can see in Fig. 2, the original YouTube speech/speaker represents the first level of production, or the podium (Goffman’s ‘platform monologue’). The first-level reception roles are fulfilled by both registered and unregistered participants. Since registration enables users to like/dislike a video, comment or like/dislike a comment in a second level of production, does this automatically make them ratified? And what about if a user is registered but not logged in? It would appear that the original categories of ratified/unratified no longer correspond to the roles adopted by users on YouTube: those roles should be replaced by registered/unregistered. Furthermore, the production role of commenter reflects the comment classification proposed here: constructive and disruptive commenter and what I have called non-interactive commenters (off topic, spam). As noted, this distinction appears to be connected with Levinson’s [+MOTIVE] and the commenter’s “desire to communicate some particular message” (Levinson, 1988:133). In such a revised view, a constructive and disruptive commenter would be marked [+MOTIVE] while a non-interactive commenter would be [−MOTIVE]. We might extend this category to include unanswered commenters as well. Finally, the second-level of production feeds back into the reception roles of watchers and readers in that these participants can also ‘eavesdrop’ on the comments and other interactional features.

5. Conclusion

From a theoretical perspective, the study proposes a reapplication of the traditional participatory framework categories on the basis of YouTube with specific reference to its commenting function. Thus, while the original speech (Inaugural Address) and speaker (Obama) are seen to represent the primary level of production, the comments and other activities available to registered (and logged in) users are seen as a secondary level. In between these two levels we can find various reception roles, which are exploited to various degrees by YouTube participants. A new distinction between registered and unregistered has been proposed to replace the original fuzzy categories of ratified and unratted. I would argue that the act of registering and logging in activates the secondary level of production and a specific set of participation roles that this entails. In the role of liker/disliker they can interact with the other commenters and the original video, while in that of commenter they can adopt different strategies in their commenting, which for the most part fall within two roles: constructive and disruptive commenter.

Although far from perfect, these classifications would appear to capture some important differences in commenting strategies. We should not forget, however, that the overwhelming majority of YouTube participants remain watchers and readers. Although both of these roles can be further subdivided into registered and unregistered, at this stage in the participation framework, such a distinction would appear to be untenable. Another major focus of the work is the distinction between constructive and disruptive commenting practices, which is seen as crucial for the description of the participatory framework in YouTube, and can possibly be extended to other new media. The adoption and expansion of Levinson’s [MOTIVE] category was also seen as salient to such a distinction. As far as YouTube is concerned, I would argue that many of participatory ‘complications’ created by the medium are addressed by the users in various ways. Thus when responding to a comment, users can decide whether to enable the ‘threaded’ comment view or not so they can see the initial comment in its original context conversation. While this strategy may not be adopted by all users, it remains to be seen what might happen if the threaded view were to become the standard comment view and how this might affect participation. Finally, while often ignored, antagonistic behaviour by commenters is accepted by some users and can often be seen as increasing participation among commenters.

The proposal, however, is incomplete as it has not taken into account all possible participation roles in the medium. First, it has not fully addressed the possible differences between registered and non-registered watchers if any exists, and whether we should consider registered non-logged in users differently. Furthermore, the various types of production roles (animator, author, principal) have been ignored as has Levinson’s distinction between basic and derived categories. Future research should address these issues.

As a final consideration we might ask whether YouTube commenters are directly involved in the political process. While it is true that their comments may be read and studied by a politician’s team and/or political pundits it is hard to imagine that what is said by the commenters actually influences podium output. Thus, we can safely assume that the traditional paradigm for mediated (political) discourse is still generally observed in which “constitutive members cannot directly respond to a political text as such but only to react in an indirect manner through commenting on the political discourse and exchanging their opinions with other members of the audience” (Fetzer and Weizman, 2006:145). What has changed, however, is the importance that text producers attribute to the medium and their willingness, at least to some extent, to adapt to it. One might expect then that text comments take on a more crucial role in political communication as they do in
relation to amateur videos posted on YouTube in the not so distant future. Obama has certainly continued to embrace the YouTube medium in his second term and even been experimenting with new formats (e.g. user interviews).

References


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