

**Social Media and Politics:  
Theoretical and Methodological Considerations in Designing a Study of Political Engagement**

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**1 Introduction**

Web 2.0 has become the buzz word describing a plethora of social media available on the internet, including blogs, photo and file sharing systems (e.g., Flickr, SlideShare, YouTube), and social networking sites (e.g., Friendster, MySpace, SecondLife). Although these media are largely designed for personal presentation, political speech and action sometime emerge, such as in postings protesting government actions on YouTube, creation of candidate headquarters in SecondLife, and utilization of still image and video functionalities on mobile phones during demonstrations and police confrontations. Last year, as candidates began preparing for the U.S. Presidential Primaries, CNN coined the term [YouTube-ification of Politics](#) to describe this development. From a perspective ascribing importance to everyday settings as venues for political expression, these Internet-based social media have become both the tools for and sites of politics. The question, however, is how such manifestations of political life can be empirically investigated within a social science theoretical framework.

In this paper we examine the theoretical and methodological approaches involved in studying social media utilized for political expression and action. In question form, we ask: How do empirically oriented social scientists consider the theoretical and methodological challenges involved in investigating social

media? We address this question through examining a sample of research-oriented peer reviewed journal articles addressing facets of social media. On the basis of this examination, we consider the central objective of this paper: construction of a research project for exploring the contribution of YouTube videos in the political arena.

In the next section of this paper we outline the procedures followed for selecting and reviewing relevant literature. A total of 17 articles were selected, 15 of which were reviewed, and the results of this examination are presented in Section 3. Finally, in Section 4 we suggest the theoretical and methodological contours of a study of YouTube and political expression that incorporates some of the observations made with regard to the empirical studies of social media.

## **2 Procedures**

The selection criteria for journal articles to be reviewed involved a three-step process. First, articles were chosen from six scholarly journals that focus on new media in relation to social and political environments: *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*; *Information, Communication & Society*; *Convergence*; *First Monday*; *New Media & Society*, and *Social Science Computer Review*. Second, all of the articles related to Web 2.0 applications in the journal issues from January 2005 until February 2008 were selected, based on inspection of article titles and abstracts. This list consisted of 50 articles, which were mainly concerned about blogs (22), social networking sites (12), wikis (6) and online videos (1 on YouTube and 2 on short online videos). Other applications – videogames, file sharing (BitTorrent), podcasting, and online collaborative cartography- were considered in 1-2 articles.

Third, from this list a subset of 17 articles was selected that involved empirical exploration of Web 2.0 applications for civic or political purposes. The selected articles are noted in Appendix 1; these articles were read and assessed using the question guidelines indicated in Appendix 2. We were concerned with the theoretical perspective guiding the research, the research design, aims of the study as reflected in the research questions, the types of Web applications considered in the study, research methods employed, sampling procedures, and ethical considerations related to the study. We summarized these features of the studies and indicated overall positive and negative aspects; see Appendix 2 for details.

## **3 Literature Review**

For the purpose of this paper, five aspects of the literature review are presented: the type of social media investigated, the theoretical perspective guiding the study, the research design and methodology, sampling procedure, and ethical considerations related to the investigation. Table 1 provides an overview of these aspects for the articles reviewed.

Perhaps the most striking aspect of this overview is the emphasis given to investigation of blogs: more than half of the articles examined report research at least in part based on studies of this form of social media. This aspect is probably related to the fact that blogs are text-based and relatively easy to retrieve and analyze, at least in comparison to those social media employing video and those for which a sampling frame is difficult to specify. Other Web 2.0 developments, such as social networking sites and wikis, are increasing in popularity among researchers<sup>1</sup> but none of these studies related to politically-oriented topics within the time frame of this overview.

A second aspect reflected in this overview is the number of articles with little or no elaborated theoretical perspective. And, those articles that did address theoretical issues often did so in general, exploratory terms. Few of the articles either tested concept-based hypotheses or developed theoretical perspectives through an interpretative, grounded approach. This aspect probably reflects the general newness of researching Web 2.0 developments; emphasis seems to be more on description and exploration rather than formal theory construction or hypothesis testing.

Three of the columns in the table – design & methodology, sampling procedure, ethical consideration – relate to facets of research methodology. Although most of the studies did specify, at least in general terms, basic design characteristics and methodological approach, many failed to explicate in detail the sampling procedures and most did not consider ethical concerns of conducting studies where the identity of subjects may be traced and have potential harmful effects.

These aspects taken together suggest both theoretical and methodological deficiencies in the articles examined. These were further identified in the literature review protocol that allowed identification of positive and negative aspects of the studies. Here, the absence of theoretical discussions and elaboration of research methods was frequently associated with articles appearing in those journals with a broad perspective of scholarship. In a sense, the above-mentioned research deficiencies may have reflected the editorial policies of the journals in which the articles were published. Finally,

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<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., the articles in a theme issue devoted to social network sites, edited by boyd and Ellison (2007).

elaboration of ethical considerations was infrequent, possibly because of the space restrictions most (print) journals impose on authors. Institutional Review Board requirements for research in most North American and West European countries probably accounted for at least minimal attention given to ethical issues, generally reflected in the studies through camouflage of respondent identity.

**Table 1: Overview of Literature Review, Web 2.0 & Politics**

| Art. | Journal | Social media            | Theoretical perspective                      | Design & methodology                           | Sampling procedure  | Ethical considerations             |
|------|---------|-------------------------|--|--|---|------------------------------------|
| 1    | SSCR    | blogs                   | mediatization & democracy                    | hypothesis testing; content & network analysis | search engines lists, snowball  | not addressed; anonymous notation  |
| 2    | SSCR    | video                   | Elaboration Likelihood Model                 | Experiment, Online survey                      | students of two universities  | not addressed; anonymous notation  |
| 3    | FM      | games                   | procedurality                                | no elaboration                                 | no elaboration  | not addressed                      |
| 4    | FM      | blogs                   | no theory (methodological article)           | exploratory; network analysis                  | identification of 'seeds' for site sampling   | not addressed, bloggers identified |
| 5    | JCMC    | NS                      | mobilization theory                          | case study; content analysis                   | elaboration of case selection, most active discussion threads for specific dates, key-word search | not addressed; anonymous notation  |
| 6    | FM      | video                   | Globalization                                | exploratory; case study                        | no elaboration  | not addressed                      |
| 7    | FM      | blogs                   | agenda setting; 2-step flow of communication | comparison of agendas                          | limited elaboration   | not addressed; anonymous notation  |
| 8    | SSCR    | websites                | no elaboration                               | content analysis                               | population study; includes all Congressional candidate sites                                      | not addressed                      |
| 9    | FM      | blogs                   | none   | exploratory, content analysis                  | use of Google blog search engine  | not addressed; bloggers identified |
| 10   | SSCR    | websites                | information provision & action               | hypothesis testing, content analysis           | population study: all Congressional candidate sites   | not addressed; anonymous notation  |
| 11   | JCMC    | blogs                   | credibility issues                           | online survey                                  | self-selection, snowball  | not addressed;                     |
| 13   | JCMC    | blogs, discussion lists | media use, political discussion              | hypothesis testing; online survey              | self-selection, snowball  | no elaboration; anonymous notation |
| 14   | NM&S    | blogs                   | media effects                                | model testing; online survey                   | self-selection  | not addressed; bloggers identified |
| 15   | NM&S    | blogs, lists, chat      | media organizations                          | exploratory                                    | no elaboration  | No elaboration; anonymous notation |
| 16   | JCMC    | blogs                   | network theory                               | content & network analysis                     | search engine ranking   | not addressed; bloggers identified |
| 17   | FM      | maps                    | none   | case study                                     | no elaboration  | not addressed                      |

Note: Bibliographic information on articles is available in Appendix 2. Journal abbreviations are:

- FM: *First Monday*
- SSCR: *Social Science Computer Review*
- JCMC: *Journal of Computer Mediated Communication*
- NM&S: *New Media & Society*

#### 4. Researching YouTube: Theoretical Considerations

In this section we briefly present the theoretical grounding of a proposed study of YouTube and political expression, along with the related research questions. This sketch provides the basis for delineating the research design and main methodological challenges to be addressed in analyzing material from and related to YouTube.

The study builds on theories that assert that public political discussion to be the central element of democracy (e.g., Dewey, 1954; Habermas, 1989; Barber, 1984; Carrey, 1995; Schudson, 1997; Splichal, 1999; Fishkin, 1991). According to Dewey the public consists of all those “who are affected by the indirect consequences of transaction to such an extent that it is deemed necessary to have those consequences systematically cared for” (Dewey, 1954: 15-26) – this public more generally refers to the polity.<sup>2</sup> Since there are individuals who are not direct participants in public transactions, it is “necessary that certain persons be set apart to represent them, and see to it that their interests are conserved and protected” (Dewey, 1954: 16). This position reflects a process whereby the public organises itself. Heuristically speaking, the process by which a public is organized goes through several stages: from awareness of public problems, to public discussion, and finally achievement of a consensus that influences decisions adopted by a majority (Splichal, 1999: 4). For a long time the state was the main regulator of public transactions; the polity was bounded by the (nation)state borders and the state was entity toward which publics organized themselves. With the process of globalisation, however, the relation between the polity and the state has begun to change profoundly.

Globalization has contributed to two processes: depolitisation and denationalization. The process of denationalization is the transferal of regulatory powers from the nation-state to political authorities outside of national legitimacy. Depolitisation is the transferral of regulatory powers from the nation-

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<sup>2</sup> The public may be considered in two ways. First, the public is understood along the lines delineated by Dewey (1954) as “those individuals that are influenced by indirect consequences of public transactions to the extent that it is deemed necessary to have those consequences systematically cared for” (Dewey, 1954: 15-26). Traditionally, this public was understood as polity and was constructed toward the state as the main regulator of public transactions. But within the system of global governance, the polity does not relate only towards the state. The second understanding of the public – a public - is concerned with the process of organizing the polity – not all members of the polity are members of a public, but only those that become aware of a public problem, participate in public discussions (which has specific normative criteria) and try to build a consensus which would influence the decisions of the majority.

state to economic or private actors outside the arena of national legitimacy. Both processes have resulted in political powers, sovereignty, democracy, and citizenship no longer being bounded by a national territorial space. In this situation, the nation-state is forced to share power with different transnational, public, and private organisations within a global governance system (e.g., Rosneau, 1980, 2002; Held, 1995; Scholte, 2005; Habermas, 2003).

Until the processes of globalisation, the polity was bounded to the nation-state and with the different publics that turned to the state for regulation of indirect transactions. Globalisation, however, means that the (nation)state is disempowered in the sense of being able to regulate public transactions that affect its polity. According to Habermas (2003:88) states are witnessing the loss of their capacity to control, face the growing legitimisation of deficits in decision-making, and have to deal with an increasing inability to provide legitimate and effective steering and organisational services (Habermas, 2003: 88) due to market globalisation. The state is, thus, no longer the main addressee of requests for public regulation, but also includes actors of global governance: supra-state political, civic, and economic organisations. The polity is also not bounded by nation-state limits; as the consequences of public transactions extend globally, so does the polity. Ideally, this means that with a global polity a form of global publics emerges that: (a) becomes aware of indirect global public transactions and formulates them from a common perspective, (b) tries to mobilize public discussion on globally-related problems and to build a consensus on possible solutions, and (c) tries to influence the perceived regulators of public transactions. If there is such a process emerging, it is important to see what role participatory media channels with a global reach play in this process. The aim of this proposed research is to examine how new media – specifically YouTube – contribute to the self-organization of a global public .

Furthermore, with globalisation and empowerment of nation-states, “old” political organisations (e.g., political parties, trade unions) that were mobilizing the members of a national polity toward nation-state governments are losing support. On the other hand, there is an increasing empowerment of social movement organisations (e.g., anti-liberal globalisation movements) and global civic players such as GreenPeace and Amnesty International. Individuals are also increasingly turning toward un-associated, individualised forms of political action, such as life-style politics (Giddens, 1991) or political consumerism and environmentalism (Shah et al., 2007, Stolle et al., 2005), but also are initiating first steps in organizing a public. This transpires through providing awareness to other members of a nationally-bounded and global polity in order to convince people to discuss and act on problems

collectively (e.g., writing blogs, initiating petitions, starting viral campaigns, writing letters to the editors, and posting videos with political content on Web 2.0 initiatives like YouTube). There are basically three ways for a public to emerge: to be spurred by an individual, by a group or association or through political top-down mobilisation. These three types of actors differ in terms of economic and political power and the resources they have at their disposal (e.g., information, information channels, and knowledge of persuasive communication), and should consequently also differ in terms of effects of the new information and communication technologies for their empowerment and success in organizing a particular public.

There are several theoretical strands regarding the impact of new communication technologies on democracy. "*Techno-optimists*," a term suggested by Woody and Weare ((2004), believe that the internet is making political information more compelling, lowering the costs of participation and creating new opportunities for involvement. The techno-optimistic view is illustrated by Coleman's assertion (2001) that the internet is becoming a "*fifth estate*". According to him, the internet is having a transformative effect in at least three ways. First, it is opening up to public scrutiny a wealth of hitherto inaccessible information which may enable citizens to engage on a more equal basis with political authorities. Second, it is developing spaces for unmediated public deliberation in which citizens can interact with one another, with other communities and with elites that were once less vulnerable to such direct engagement. Third, it is changing the way that representatives perform because the very nature of the mandate for democratic representation is open to transformation (Coleman, 2001: 118). For *techno-pessimists*, such as Bucy and Gregson (2001), the internet is only a new legitimizing mechanism of mass democracy, where new media are providing merely the *perception* of governmental accessibility and responsiveness, and thus serve only as a legitimizing mechanism for representative democracy. "The richness and accessibility of the internet do not mean that the traditional politics will be altered, given the tendency of the traditional party system to normalize political activity" (Bucy & Gregson, 2001: 357). New ICTs are thus simply a new venue for information provision to the citizen-consumer (Needham, 2004; Åström, 2004). Moreover, they allow politicians to circumvent journalists by creating a direct line of communication to their constituents that is unfiltered and unrestricted by the norms and structural constraints of traditional journalism (Stromer-Gallery & Jamieson, 2001), putting greater demand on people to evaluate the quality of texts themselves (Livingstone and Bober, 2004). Another fear is that the online public sphere risks generating a very fragmented public sphere that consists mostly of private discussions (Dahlgren, 2001). Furthermore, while the internet provides not

only (over)abundance of information, but also vast amounts of entertainment and ways of personal socializing, it is said to become even easier for people to tune out from public life (Norris, 2001). The position on technology and its effects for democratization taken here is what Tehranian (1990: 4-18) terms technostructuralist, claiming that technologies by themselves are neither inherently good, leading to democracy and dispersion of power, nor bad, leading to concentration of power, “nor neutral because they developed out of institutional needs and their impact is always mediated through the institutional arrangements and social forces” (Tehranian, 1990: 5-6).

Turning now to the venue for the study, the European Union serves as the venue for this study and is illustrative of a regional, international actor involved in global governance. The EU is also a prime example of the changing nature among the public and the state, and of processes of depolitization and denationalisation. Although the EU started primarily as an economic organisation, it has acquired considerable political power during the past years. Nevertheless, the EU is often seen as having a large democratic deficit, where political decisions are reached by experts unaccountable to elected representatives, and these decisions usually have little transparency and publicity (e.g., Rumford, 2003; Eriksen & Fossum, 2001; Krašovec, 2006).

The organisation of a public can be facilitated by top-down mobilizing efforts, grass-roots organizations or un-organized individuals. The main thesis of this study is that new media may provide opportunity to “level the playing field” and allow new voices to enter the public arena. At the same time powerful institutions such as the EU do not seem to engage new media for purposes of mobilisation since this would endanger the status quo. The EU recently arranged for a special division of YouTube, EUtube, which provides possibility to compare how the public organizes itself on the same online platform, but in two different ways: first, through the top-down EUtube information videos and, second, through the individual and group videos made available on the general YouTube site. Three research questions relate to the above-mentioned thesis, the EU and YouTube.

RQ1: To what extent do three types of actors – the EU, non-government organisations, and un-associated individuals – post videos with political content (regarding EU) on YouTube?

With traditional mass media the right to publicly speak is largely restricted to economically and politically powerful actors, and only a very small number of selected individuals can make their views known through channels such as letters-to-the-editor, and radio talk shows. Small organisations have to

invest considerable effort to achieve media attention, while major political players are routinized sources of information for journalists (Kovačič Poler, 2004). The internet, it is alleged, diminishes such barriers to publishing. Margolis and Resnick (2000) divide the internet into the old and new Net – typical for the old version are “news-net conversations”; typical for the new Net (around year 2000) are websites. This distinction is reflected in the level of special training and technical skills an individual needed in order to produce content. What is according to Hilbrich (2007) characteristic of Web 2.0 is the fact that it simplifies use of the new technology, on the one hand, and increases its usability on the other. As providing content does not require a deep understanding of the underlying technologies, the user base is rapidly growing (Hilbrich, 2007: 2). The internet thus provides a “levelling of the playing field” in terms of access to publishing. According to Pickerill (2002: 19), more political leverage is gained by non-hierarchical grassroots groups than formalised groups because new media help reduce the importance of resources for smaller groups. The same argument can be used for individuals unaffiliated with organized groups. Taking the above considerations into account, we expect no significant differences among the number of political videos regarding the EU published by individuals, organizations, and the EU, but we do expect differences in content.

RQ2: To what extent do the three types of actors (EU, organisations, and individuals) try to: (a) raise awareness on indirect global or international public transactions and formulate them from a common perspective, (b) try to mobilize public discussion on these problems and to build a consensus on possible solutions, and (c) try to mobilize others in order to influence perceived regulators of public transactions?

The above research question stems from a theoretical perspective regarding new information technologies suggesting “politics as usual” (Margolis & Resnick, 2000) in favour of powerful institutions, which see new technologies as a tool for preserving the status quo and one-way channel of information provision to “citizen-consumers”. Initial e-democracy initiatives were built on techno-optimistic hopes that the technology would revitalize democracies and revive political participation, but the technology itself was not the answer; the problem did not reside in a lack of technological means, but in a lack of genuine interest by political powers to listen. These actors saw the new communication technologies as a means to provide information to citizens designated as consumers of service delivery and not as active participators in public policy making (Needham, 2004: 46). Even in cases where politicians express positive attitudes towards the opportunities offered by the internet, they often fail to exploit these opportunities (Åström, 2004: 109). The same argument may be relevant to the EU: since it is accused of

having a democratic deficit offline (eg. Rumford, 2003; Eriksen & Fossum, 2001; Krašovec, 2006), we do not anticipate it will act differently online. We expect, in other words, that EU videos will have a low value on all three levels of mobilizing public action.

On the other hand, social movement organisations are seen as the most important users of new communication technologies, employing them primarily to engage the already engaged. Interest groups and alternative civic organizations can bypass the traditional news media and thus gain more power than before (Norris, 2001: 173). Social movement organisations try to frame issues as problems of common concern, through collective action frames – these “not only perform an interpretive function in the sense of providing answers to the question ‘What is going on here?’, but they are decidedly more agentic and contentious in the sense of calling for action that problematizes and challenges existing authoritative views and framings of reality” (Snow, 2004: 385). We expect that videos from social movement organisations and other grassroots organisations will employ mobilizing techniques and calls for action on YouTube because, collectively, they have already gained experience and knowledge in collective framing and persuasive argumentation.

It remains uncertain, though, how individuals not associated with the EU or other organizations will employ YouTube for publishing political videos on EU. The thesis is that those that have potentially gained the most with Web 2.0 applications such as YouTube are un-associated individuals that want to publish their concerns on their own, without having to become part of non-government organisations, political parties or interest groups. One example of such a Web 2.0 application is blogs: having developed from a personal diary format they have become a means used to publish personal views and comments on public issues (e.g., Tremayne et al., 2006; Herring et al., 2004). But whether publishing comments and concerns about public problems also involves mobilizing efforts on the part of individuals, remains unknown. Ideally, this would be the case; new media would thus be employed for building global publics, but if individual videos fail to frame an issue as a collective problem and fail to call for public discussion and action, it could hardly be claimed that usage of YouTube provides individuals with the means for public mobilisation, since skills of argumentation and persuasion are also needed. Only having technology available for public dissemination without knowing how to use it effectively does not provide empowerment.

The remaining three research questions address the success of organizing global or international<sup>3</sup> publics through new media.

RQ3: To what extent do the three types of mobilizing efforts manage to achieve publicness?

The third research question is essentially directed at the consequences of online participation. Barber argues that politics describes a realm of action, but that not all action is political: “We may more properly restrict politics to public action, to action that is both undertaken by a public and intended to have public consequences” (Barber, 1984: 123). He adds: “When I act, the publicness of the act can only be measured by the publicness (or privacy) of its consequences, when we – the community, the people, the nation – act, the act is public regardless of its consequences” (Barber, 1984: 124). But what about an individual that acts online – not as a member of a nation, but as a member of an international or even global public? With the rise of Web 2.0 applications it seems that people are collaborating, publishing and discussing online more than ever. In the past there was no doubt that publishing through mass media formats, such as letters to the editor or calls to radio talk shows, have been forms of public participation. It was assumed that the information reached large enough numbers of people who had started to perceive interactions with public consequences and begun to generate a common interest and thus to constitute the public. Online, with the large number of people participating, this is no longer self-evident, since the possibility of publicness does not guarantee actual public consequences. Due to the internet's capacity to potentially reach extremely large numbers of people, it has been easy to talk about online participation as public participation. As anyone with internet access can write blogs, comment on online articles, deliberate on online forums, screen a documentary, start a viral campaign, this technology has an enormous potential for organizing publics. But if individual actions remain at the level of reaching small groups of people and fail to inform enough people in order to constitute a public, then these actions inevitably remain private. Possible indicators of the publicness of YouTube videos include: (a) the number of people that view a video, (b) the number people that engage in public discussion related to a particular video, and (c) the extent to which a video spreads to other online spaces outside YouTube.

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<sup>3</sup> EU is a pan-European organisation and by definition involves international polity of European citizens – thus also international publics to emerge. But it is also a global actor: the consequences of EU decisions affect not only European citizens, but also citizens of other nations from other localities, and thus reflect global publics, crossing the borders of EU nation-states.

The hypothesis behind this research question is that the extent of publicness depends on mobilizing efforts provided in initial videos. EU will thus not manage to attract a wide public discussion, since this is not its aim. Organisations and individuals who manage to define certain problems as common problems that need to be commonly tackled with, try to mobilize public discussion on these problems (to find solutions), and try to mobilize into political action in order to influence public transactions will be successful in employing YouTube as a tool for organizing the public into public discussion.

RQ4: To what extent are discussions on YouTube in accord with normative criteria of a rational public deliberation: rationality, civility, reciprocity and orientation to problem solving?

An important question in analyzing how new media help the public to organize itself, is whether this process is anything like it ideally should be: a rational, civil and reciprocal discussion among, in principle, equal participants oriented toward problem solving. According to Habermas (1989) the political public that gathered in French salons, English coffee houses and German reading groups of the 18<sup>th</sup> century was above all characterised by the public use of reason. For Carey, the public in its original understanding was taken to be (a) critical in the sense that nothing in public was to be taken for granted, everything was to be subject to argument and evidence, and (b) rational in the sense that the speaker was responsible for giving reasons for believing in any assertion, so that there was no intrinsic appeal to authority (Carey, 1995: 381). According to Schudson (1997: 298) democratic talk is not necessarily egalitarian but it is essentially civil, public and oriented to problem-solving. Barber states that strong democratic talk “entails listening no less than speaking, it is affective as well as cognitive and its intentionalism draws it out of pure reflexion into the world of action” (Barber, 1984: 174). Barber’s first point, *listening as well as speaking*, refers to reciprocity. It is a necessary condition for formation of the public; without it, online discussions stay only “virtual sounding boards” (Wilhelm, 2004) where individuals simply wish to air their own views without being particularly interested in listening to what others have to say (Tsaliki, 2002) - individual action thus stays at the level of individual and does not become a collective endeavour of the public. Barber’s second point, *affective as well as cognitive*, refers to the fact that discussion has to be rational – providing arguments, but that rationality does not exclude personal involvement or what Dahlgren (2006) terms passion. “Engagement in politics involves some kind of passion.... Apathy is precisely this absence of passion. To feel an intense political enthusiasm does not mean that one thereby becomes incapable of rational discussion or loses the capacity to compromise” (Dahlgren, 2006: 25–26). Nor does passion necessarily mean the opposite of civility –

respect for others arguments and employment of respective dialogue. Barber's third point, *intentionalism*, refers to problem solving. The organisation of the public has a goal – to build a consensus on regulation of public transactions that will influence the decisions of majority or political agents.

RQ5: To what extent do the public discussions manage to build the international or even global public?

With globalisation public transactions have ever greater global consequences. Global public transactions call for a global public to organize itself (according to Dewey (1954) the public constitutes all those persons influenced by indirect public transactions: the more international the consequences, the more international the public). Just as globalisation itself was not possible without new information and communication media (Rosneau, 1980; Deibert, 1997; Scholte, 2005), the global public will not be able to organize itself without communication channels with global reach and access. YouTube is a prime example of such a communication channel. The question is, whether discussions on international public transactions actually build an international public.

## **5. Analyzing YouTube: methodological challenges**

The main methodological challenges identified through the review of the literature that are relevant for the proposed study of YouTube and public discourse include: sampling, analyzing video material, counting number of clicks and number of responses that YouTube provides, ethical considerations, and language barriers. We address these challenges here.

### **Sampling**

Several methods and stages of sampling have to be taken into account in investigating public discourse on YouTube. First, there is the matter of sampling videos on YouTube. Since the aim is to analyze how global or international publics could organize themselves through YouTube, the ideal would be to sample all the population – that is all videos that consider global or international transactions. But because we have already delimited the study to European Union as the global and international actor toward which a global or international public could emerge, the videos should be sampled from the population of videos on YouTube that relate to the European Union. The sampling procedure could be done by a broad keyword, such as European Union. This can be achieved with the YouTube word search engine. An important concern in such sampling procedure is the search algorithm employed by

YouTube, which is not known. Although reliance on unknown search engine algorithms and ranking services have been used in previous studies of Web 2.0 applications (e.g., Albrecht et al., 2007; Dewiche, 2005), this is salient serious methodological weakness. In their study of blogs Tremayne and colleagues (2006) assess the search engines that rank blogs, but only very briefly: “after searching each site (that provides rankings of blogs) with a list of known blogs, the Blogosphere Ecosystem was found to be the most complete” (Tremayne et al., 2006). The authors provided no further information on the assessment of the sampling procedure with such search engines. For the YouTube study, the sampling will be similar to the word search analysis conducted by Byrne (2007): she selected a number of issues that were defined as salient issues for the black community and made a word search through all online discussions at BlackPlanet.com.

Assessment of YouTube’s word search engine is possible only with information as to how it functions. YouTube provides possibility for a word-search of videos on the basis of two sorting criteria : by relevance and by date. Since there is no information on how exactly the sorting transpires, sorting by date of publishing seems the most appropriate selection criteria. Second, although the YouTube engine does search for videos, it functions through the word search facility. The search engine does this on the basis of the text that is published together with the video under the title “About this video” and textual tags and definition of category for the video that are provided by the person uploading the video (see Figure 1). A problem is that selection on the basis of date also takes into account other words that are considered similar to the specified word. In the case of the phrase “European Union”, the selection only provides those videos that include both words (on the date on writing, 9 March 2008: 208,000 videos); selection by date also includes videos related to “European Union”, such as “eu and European ”. Sorting on the criteria of date of publishing thus provides large numbers of videos that include the abbreviation “eu” that have nothing to do with EU (on the date of writing 401,000 videos). YouTube videos also provide category information , for example “Entertainment”, “Sports” or “Travel” among which there also the category “News & Politics”. A word search on the basis of the phrase “European Union”, within the category “News and politics” and date of publishing diminishes the selection of videos to 9,560 videos. From these 9,560, then, it is possible to randomly select videos, either on the basis of dates or position within the selection.

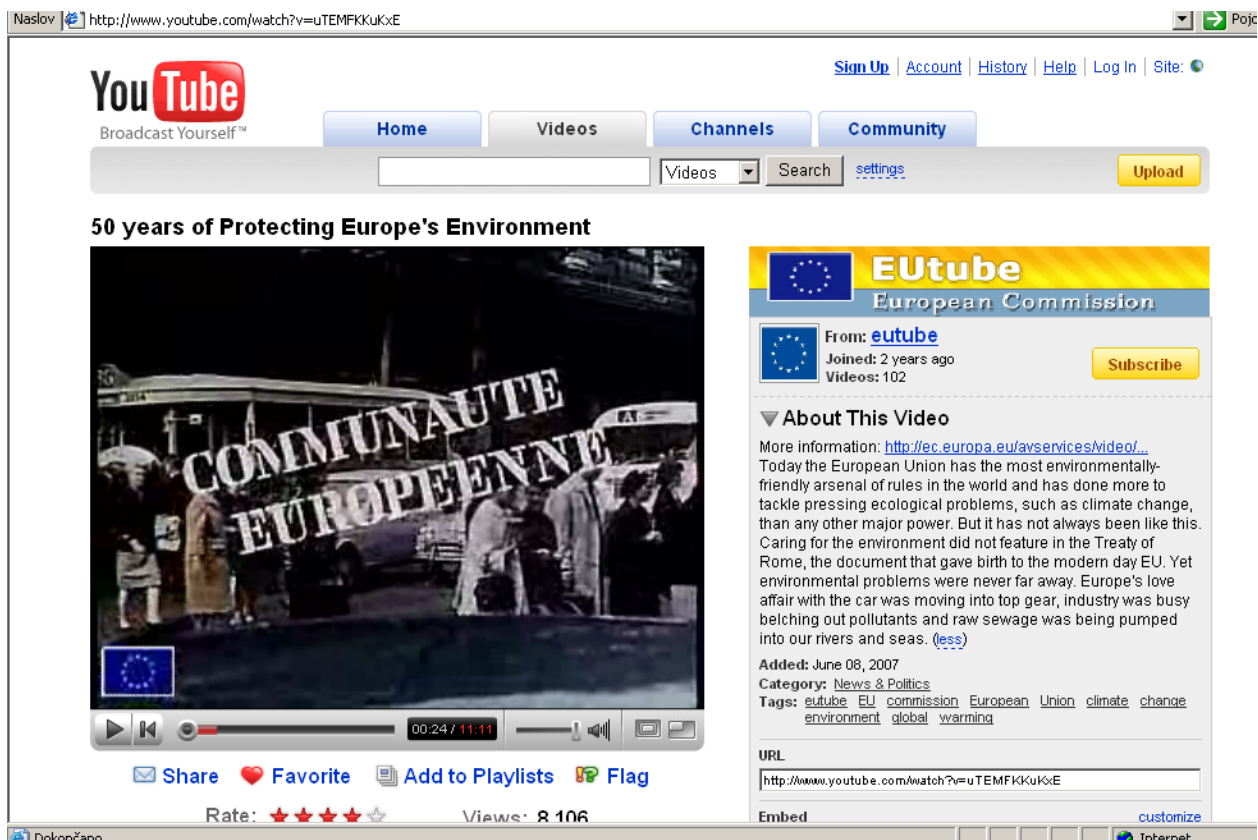


Figure 1: Video posted at YouTube by EUtube and accompanying text<sup>4</sup>

Source: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uTEMFKKuKxE>; consulted 6 April 2008

After selecting videos as described above, the sampling procedure is also extended to comments about the video. In some cases the number of comments is very large: the video that is rated as the most relevant regarding the European Union solicited 3,347 textual and 5 video responses, as of 6 April 2008. Although conditional on available time and resources, it probably will be necessary to limit the number of comments for analysis. For example, the first 100 comments could be selected in a manner allowing for analysis of reciprocity among participants and with the video publisher.

The third sampling procedure involves sampling other websites that provide links to a selected videos – either provide links to the video or embed the YouTube content at their websites. For each video YouTube namely provides information on where the people who viewed it, were accessing to it (from YouTube directly or from other websites). For example, if someone posts a video from YouTube at

<sup>4</sup> All images presented here are taken from EUtube Channel and are considered illustrations of public speech by a public organisation; publishing such content seems ethically unproblematic.

her blog, the visitors from this blog that will click on the video will be automatically linked to YouTube and YouTube will count how many clicks to the video were made from this blog. It will also publicly provide information on the URL of the blog and number of clicks from the blog. YouTube thus provides for each video information on the URL and the number of clicks from other websites (but only for first top 5 websites); see Figure 2. This provides opportunity to trace how videos are linked. Sampling these URLs and using the selected URLs as seeds for a social network analysis with software such as Issues Crawler would provide understanding on how YouTube videos become part of a networked sphere. The study by Bruns (2007) provides valuable illustration on the use of Issue Crawler in this manner.

The screenshot shows a YouTube video player interface. The video title is "European Commission" and it is from the channel "eutube". The video has 6,364 views and a rating of 4 stars from 15 ratings. Below the video player, there are several sections:

- Share, Favorite, Add to Playlists, Flag** buttons.
- Rate:** 4 stars (4 out of 5) with 15 ratings.
- Views:** 6,364.
- Comments:** 5, **Favorited:** 9 times, **Honors:** 0, **Links:** 5.
- Sites Linking to This Video:**
  - 10 clicks from <http://adultseduc.gr.blogspot.com/>
  - 9 clicks from <http://www.programmallo.it/content/index.php?action=...>
  - 6 clicks from <http://pamunkev20things.blogspot.com/2007/08/first-l...>
  - 3 clicks from <http://www.hobby-tent.com/hobby-tent/player.pl?App=C...>
  - 2 clicks from <http://video.stumbleupon.com/>
- More From: eutube** section with a list of related videos:
  - Health** (03:19) From: eutube, Views: 9,245
  - EURANET Radio Network** (01:14) From: eutube, Views: 11,102
  - RFID: The future begins now!** (04:04) From: eutube, Views: 20,247
  - Hands - Life online is what you make of it!** (00:20) From: eutube, Views: 20,614
  - Taking a head start to create a low**

Figure 2: Video posted at YouTube by EUtube with information on clicks and links

Source: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hwCwaGXzPIU>; consulted 6 April 2008

## **Content analysis of video material**

After selection, a number of videos and the related textual content is to be analyzed. Analysis of online political discussion has been a priority among researchers interested in normative criteria for an ideal of public discourse within various online forums (e.g., Schneider, 1997; Dahlberg, 2001; Tsaliki, 2002; Wilhelm, 2004, Graham, 2007). This study of YouTube will build on this work when analyzing the textual discussions, but the video content will require innovation in the procedures for analysis. Although most responses on YouTube videos are textual, some responses are also in the form of videos; these range from individual responses of people video shooting themselves while addressing mass media clips in combination with pictures and textual slogans. Applying textual analysis to online videos is less problematic where individuals are themselves speaking, but considerably more complicated when other material is posted. Several methodological challenges will arise in this phase of the project: analysis of reciprocity; coding images and drawings, determination of 'ownership' of arguments, and analyzing slogans in relation to images. In sum, the difficult task is to apply the procedures for analyzing textual discourse to a much more varied multimedia mode.

## **Analyzing numbers of participants**

YouTube provides a detailed description for each video: the number of views, number of ratings and the average rating, number of comments, how many times the video has been selected as favourite (see Figure 3), whether it was linked to from other online sites and the number of links for the first five URLs (see Figure 2). All of this information provides a valuable collection of information on the publicness of YouTube videos. The third research question, regarding mobilizing efforts and publicness can be addressed through analyzing how many views and how many texts or video responses a video has managed to attract. The most serious problem is the interpretation of the figures obtained and providing theoretical grounding for the results. Byrne (2007) is the only study among those examined that analyzed rate of participation. She terms the analysis of participation in online forums and thread as "participation analysis" and uses it to answer the research question "Is there a relation between forum popularity and race issues?" Similarly, in the case of this YouTube study, participation rates in public discussions will be used to analyze the extent to which the three types of mobilizing efforts contributed to public discussions.

Tremayne and colleagues (2006) employed content and network analysis to determine which features of Iraq War blogs best predicted the emergence of blogs as hubs in a network. The dependent variable was incoming links; the method used for their determination was first content analysis of all outgoing links of blogs in the sample and then counting incoming links from blogs with a network analysis program). They thus used a limited sample of blogs for determination of incoming links. This is not the case of incoming links on YouTube – it provides information on all online publicly or semi-publicly accessible sites that were used as “gates” from which a new click was made to the video. It thus does not provide information on how many incoming links to each video exist, but information on how many times (among the top 5) these links have been used from a variety of sites: blogs, websites, other video portals and discussion forums. In one way this is a more valid account of the centrality of videos because it is not based on incoming links alone but their actual use. In another sense, it may generate difficulty in interpreting the results due to the variety of incoming links and the fact that the researcher is dependent on information provided by YouTube.

## Life Long Learning programme



The image shows a screenshot of a YouTube video player. The video title is "Life Long Learning programme". The video player interface includes a play button, a progress bar showing 02:15 / 29:57, and a volume icon. Below the video player, there are several interactive elements: a "Share" button with an envelope icon, a "Favorite" button with a heart icon, an "Add to Playlists" button with a folder icon, and a "Flag" button with a flag icon. The video has a rating of 4 stars (out of 5) based on 15 ratings. The view count is 6,364. Below the rating and view count, there are statistics for comments (5), favorited (9 times), honors (0), and links (5). A "Comments & Responses" section is visible, with a "Show:" dropdown menu set to "poor (-10 or better)" and a "Post a text comment" link.

**Figure 3: Video posted at YouTube by EUtube with information on number views, comments, and online sites linking to video**

Source: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hwCwaGXzPiU>, consulted 6 April 2008.

### Language Barriers

One of the most important questions while sampling and analyzing YouTube content is the language in which the material is presented, termed “in which language?” on the EUtube site. For YouTube as a whole there is no possibility to sample only one language, but selecting key words in one language determines that most of the content selected will be in that language. This decision is necessarily pragmatically bounded by the language capability of the coders. None of the articles analyzed in the

literature review addressed this problem, which is particularly surprising for those articles that analyzed blogs and blogosphere; they apparently assumed that the borders of the blogosphere are the borders of the language studied (e.g., Tremayne et al., 2006; Elmer et al., 2006). Only Burns (2006) manages to avoid language problems since he uses Issue Crawler which operates on the basis of searching for links (it does not matter in which language the links are composed). The reason for the lack of consideration of language is probably related to the fact that analyzing internationality of content was not a research aim of these studies. Since one of main concepts in the YouTube research questions is globalization and the aim is to determine how new media facilitate in organizing an internationally distributed public, the consideration of possible effects of language selection for results of the study acquires attention. For any substantial form of international public to emerge, a common language is probably necessary. For the European Union, English is taken as the *lingua franca* and the procedure is that only those videos and comments with key words in English are to be taken into account. But this would mean that all other languages would be missing from the analysis – and also information on how international the public is. The solution would be to make a sample of key words also in all [insert number of working languages in EU] formally acknowledged EU languages and try to analyze in what language the videos and discussions are provided. If the large majority of videos is in English and if there are no significant differences within a small sample of different languages, then we can assume an analysis limited to English will provide valid results.

### **Ethical considerations**

There is much concern about ethical issues related to internet-based research, and the literature in this area is expanding rapidly (e.g., Frankel & Siang, 1999; Ess, 2002; Jankowski & Van Selm, 2007). Although ethical guidelines vary considerably between disciplines, institutions and funding bodies, the primary concern is to prevent possible harm to human subjects. Basic procedures related to this concern involve requesting permission to conduct research, protecting subjects through use of fictive names and camouflaging other identifiers. In the literature examined, researchers frequently used pseudonyms rather than real names and deleted text such as URLs that might facilitate tracing quoted material to the original sources.

For this study of YouTube and political expression, care will be taken to avoid identification of quoted text with sources. Personal images that might be considered sensitive to respondents will only be reproduced with approval. On the other hand, text that can be considered forms of public expression,

and images that appear designed for public viewing, will not require prior approval for reproduction in research reports.

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## Appendix 1: Selected and analyzed articles

- 1 Albrecht, S., Lübcke, M., & Hartig Perschke, R. (2007). Weblog Campaigning in the German Bundestag Election 2005. *Social Science Computer Review*, 25(4), 504-520.
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- 3 Bogost, I. (2006). Playing Politics: Videogames for Politics, Activism, and Advocacy. *First Monday*(7).
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- 16 Tremayne, M., Zheng, N., Lee, Jae K., & Jeong, J. (2006). Issue Publics on the Web: Applying Network Theory to the War Blogosphere. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication, 12*(1).
- 17 Tulloch, D. (2007). Many, Many Maps: Empowerment and Online Participatory Mapping. *First Monday, 12*(2).

## Appendix 2: Topics for literature review

- 1. Journal article:** Authors, date and title of the paper or research project
- 2. Theoretical background:** On which theoretical approaches do the authors build? (identifiers of theories and main referenced authors)
- 3. Research design:** Qualitative (interpretative) or quantitative, explorative or hypothesis testing?
- 4. Aims of research:** What are the most important RQs?
- 5. Types of applications analyzed:** Which applications does the research consider? (e.g., blogs, social networking sites, videos (YouTube), discussion forums)
- 6. Research methods:** Which methods are used? (e.g., content analysis, discourse analysis, interviews, online survey)
- 7. Sampling procedures:** How is the sample selected? (e.g., snowballing, theoretical sample, case study )
- 8. Ethical considerations:** Do the authors address ethical considerations and how are ethical problems resolved?
- 9. Positive aspects:** What are positive aspects about this research, especially in terms of methodologically? In what manner might the study be considered illustrative of methodologically sound research?
- 10. Negative aspects:** What are negative aspects about the research? Where are its main methodological problems? Could these problems have been resolved; if so, how?