Social Media Activism at the Margins: Managing Visibility, Voice and Vitality Affects

Anthony McCosker

Abstract
This article is concerned with social media activism at the margins and deals with the problem of managing visibility and voice and the role of affect in the emergence of contested publics over time. While we hear a lot about social media mobilization and exchange during critical and large-scale protest events, less is understood about the capacities for building and maintaining more peripheral dissident publics over longer timeframes. And while platforms such as YouTube have been celebrated (and censored) for their ability to make protest visible through dispersed affective networks, the increasingly commercialized channel structure raises questions about the sustainability of ordinary acts of protest in the long term. This article examines a case study of peripheral anarchist political activism that moves through and beyond critical events. The study applies methods of video content analysis, qualitative analysis of comments and interactions, and visual analysis of selected videos to examine emergent “affective publics,” drawing on Daniel Stern’s notion of vitality affects.

Keywords
visibility, voice, participation, activism, YouTube, social media, vitality affects, affective publics

Introduction
Let me explain how it works: the footage is only interesting when you guys come out and try to stop me. (Veitch, 2013a)

Distraction, provocation, drivel . . . as usual. (@Nea Frea; Veitch, 2011a)

While numerous widely researched, large-scale protest movements have become starkly visible through their integration with social media platforms in recent times, visibility remains a goal rarely achieved by many, particularly more peripheral activist movements or dissident actors. Visibility is the scarce and highly contested currency upon which new modes of digital activism or civic participation depend. Similarly, it is assumed that new social platforms enable, amplify, and proliferate voice in ways that deepen the possibilities for civic participation. In contexts such as Egypt, Turkey, Iran, Hong Kong, Spain’s Indignados, or the Occupy protests, questions of visibility and voice were tied to the mass disruption of public spaces, with contested news media coverage pitted against the mobilizing capacities and the fast and extensive spread of photos, video, and text across multiple social media platforms (Castells, 2012; Gerbaudo, 2012; Hands, 2011; Thorson et al., 2013). At the more marginalized scale of “subactivism” (Bakardjieva, 2009), everyday dissidence, and civic protest, the question of how to attain visibility and voice remains vital for understanding the contours and parameters of participation (Dahlgren, 2012: 33, 2009).

The case examined in this article is a relatively peripheral but long-standing anarchist YouTube channel maintained by Charles Veitch. Veitch makes use of the YouTube channel and partnership facility (ironically a key component of YouTube’s commercial enterprise) in such a way as to enact his variety of anti-state activism and to build, sustain, and moderate an often highly contested space for public dissent,
While applying a range of tactics to attract attention and secure micropayments from advertising and direct donations, his videos are shot mostly in the streets, squares, and shopping malls of UK cities and, as the quote in the epigraph illustrates, often engage in localized confrontations with authority in order to call that authority into question and promote the right to video and protest in public. The channel’s marginality and sense of superficiality belies the intense activity and passion that flows through the channel as a whole and among his subscriber base of more than 96,430.

From certain critical perspectives, outside of the large-scale, globally visible, and materially intense situations of protest, the flow of social media contribution may do little more than feed the circuits of “communicative capitalism,” bound by a neoliberal “crisis of voice” (Coulardy, 2010; Dean, 2005, 2010b). Following research examining the more marginal life worlds of subactivist social media (Bakardjeva, 2009; Neumayer, 2012; Uldam & Askanius, 2013), I emphasize the peripheral in contrast to the critical event in order to better understand the role of video and comment in sustaining visibility and voice, and examine the role of affect in the communicative potential of platforms like YouTube to sustain dissident publics over time.

This article addresses the issue of visibility and voice by examining the ways publics form and are sustained, managed, and contested through the affective qualities of video content and capacities for comment and (inter)action and channel moderation. One key question here is how a marginal activist YouTube channel, replete with contested engagement, vitriolic disagreement, and passionate support in equal measures, through provocative and confrontational video content, might constitute a visible and cohesive activist public at all? There are multiple emergent affective publics at play in the intersection of users and viewers, video content, Veitch as channel moderator, global and local spaces and events, and platform affordances. But it is the affective, intensive element that distinguishes the channel’s capacity for engaging activity over time. For Papacharissi (2014), “disorder, marginality, and anarchy present the habitat for affect, mainly because order, mainstreaming, and hierarchy afford form that compromises the futurity of affect” (p. 19). Passion and perseverance are vital, and Veitch’s channel illustrates and capitalizes on this day-to-day disorder, marginality, and anarchy in many ways. The flow of affect through marginal spaces such as this signals its inherent, dynamic, and often opaque politics and its departure from “the structures we symbolically internalize as political” (Papacharissi, 2014, p. 19). This element of “political affect” has been understood to operate through processes of “affective attunement” at the edges of mainstream political or cultural discourse, and often in excess of rational dialogue (McCosker, 2013; Papacharissi, 2014; Protevi, 2009). However, it is notoriously difficult to identify and hence analyze empirically.

In this article, I draw on theories of publics that might provide more nuance to the notions of network publics and online participation that have developed through research into social media activity and activism (boyd, 2010; Varnelis, 2008). The formation, social and political function, and potential of “publics” have been theorized since early Greek philosophy, and certainly predate networked, social media participation. John Dewey’s (1927) classic The Public and Its Problems presents a trajectory that can account for difference, multiplicity, vitality, affect, and conflict in the constitution and dissipation of publics as plural, contested, problem-oriented social formations (Bennett, 2010; Dahlberg, 2011; Mouffe, 2005; Papacharissi, 2010; Warner, 2002). However, unlike Warner and more recent theorists of networked publics, Dewey was less interested in visibility or the fragmentation that comes with our contemporary multimodal, multi-channel communication platforms and practices. By examining Veitch’s dissident channel through the notion of affective publics, the aim is to attend to the question of visibility, and the contours and parameters of marginal but intense forms of online participation.

The research presents a “content ethnography,” adapting Altheide’s (1996) approach to analyzing broadcast audio-visual content, and characterizes the targets of Veitch’s video activism across more than 600 videos. Against this setting, the analysis examines the interjections, support, and contest that take place through the comments field, and the moderation practices that seek to sustain the channel as a political platform for dissentive expression. The analysis of visual content identifies a particular pattern of measured but passionate tones of voice and expression in public spaces followed by a rising intensity or tension in the form of confrontations, public argument, and conflict. Veitch refers to this on several occasions as a deliberate tactic of “sensitivity capture,” as a kind of action, tone, and physicality that brings the everyday to life and sparks interest, attention, and further activity, bringing together offline and online activity.

In the analysis of these tactics and the intensive activity that follows, I draw on child psychologist Daniel Stern’s concept of “vitality affects” (Stern, 1998, 2010), which I argue holds a clue as to how activist publics become visible, ebh, and flow, are modulated and sustained in ways that prefigure and enable productive forms of impassioned civic activity. Vitality affects, for Stern, are transitional relations concerning feeling, relational attunement, the dynamic shifts, or patterned changes or movements from one state to another. They can be identified in the rise and falls, intensifications and disruptions of the rhythm and flow of interaction and experience carried, for instance, in voice, video, music, or gesture (Ammaniti & Ferrari, 2013; Køppe, Harder, & Veever, 2008; Massumi, 2011; Munster, 2013; Stern, 2010). It is the constant attempt to push just past thresholds of rising aggression and anger, mostly in the form of public confrontations or contested commenting and moderation practices that structures and sustains the affective publics that emerge around and in relation to Veitch’s videos over many years.
Civic Cultures of Activism and YouTube’s Affective Publics

There are a number of critical concerns raised about the role of social media platforms in broadening the conditions for civic engagement and dissident practice. For some, distributed media formations entail a fragmentation of civic and political discourse and movements into digital enclaves of like-minded groups and hence further exclusion of marginalized voices and loss of cohesion (see, for example, Harmon, 2004). This connects in many ways with what Couldry (2010) has called the broad specter of a “crisis of voice” under the conditions of neoliberal politics and global capitalism. Within this scenario, the possibility of effective, impassioned civic participation outside of the circuits of global capital is itself in doubt. These critiques point to a continued uncertainty regarding the value of social media platforms in enabling effective forms of civic activism, particularly outside of the more visible, large-scale protest movements. But how totalizing are these conditions and what are the social media tactics that might challenge from the peripheries?

YouTube remains a prominent platform for effecting and contesting civic cultures, and for observing and understanding the dynamics and emergence of heterogeneous publics. Despite compelling critiques and analyses of the increasing “professionalism” of YouTube’s channel and subscription structure (Van Dijck, 2013), the video upload, sharing, networking, and commenting capacities are still able to foster productive conditions for civic participation and protest. It provides the means by which online activity can be corralled into what Lincoln Dahlberg, following theorists such as Michael Warner (2002), refers to as counterpublics, where loose collectives of individuals are “moved to act by a perception of systemic exclusion and injustice” (Dahlberg, 2011, p. 860). Of course, long before YouTube, marginalized forms of dissident activity have taken form through counter discursive practices and in relation to texts. In a pre-social media era, John Keane (1995) used the term “micro-publics” to point to the formation of dynamic, small-scale, ad hoc social movements around problem or issue-oriented do-it-yourself communication technologies. Keane’s term captures something of the emergent and often ephemeral nature of the loose or minimally organized participants in activist discourse online, and pre-empt the formative capacities of newer communication platforms, in this case YouTube. In addition to the multiplicity and counterpublic formations identified by Warner and Dahlberg, Keane’s notion of micro-publics also captures the problem-oriented experience, event, or provocation that pulls disparate people together into publics, as theorized by John Dewey (1927; see also Bennett, 2010). The analysis below is informed by this theoretical tradition, but also aims to better understand the optical and aural element in the play of visibility and voice, and the enabling role affect or intensity plays. I will return to the notions of affective publics and vitality affects below as a way of more precisely framing this analysis.

If YouTube, as visual social media platform, is to enable the conditions for sustaining dissident or activist cultures—while being both beholden to the circuits of global capitalism and in some way disruptive of them—it is through the novel forms of encounter, activity, passion, and thought that can arise around certain kinds of image-based content and as a response to its capacity to enable interaction and exchange around that content. However, like voice, the visibility and the cohesiveness of any micro-public cannot at all be taken for granted as the causal effect of such platforms and practices. In this vein, a growing body of research has explored the characteristics of what has been referred to by Van Zoonen, Vis, and Mihelj (2010) as YouTube’s “video publics,” or the social formations and interactions that are facilitated by the production and uploading of videos to YouTube, and sharing and commenting practices among users of the site (Banaji, 2013; Lange, 2007). Because of its archival, searchable, and sharable capacity, YouTube allows activists use of video to “coordinate on-the-ground tactics,” “facilitate information sharing,” “develop collective identities,” “negotiate the meanings of a protest activities,” and a movement’s trajectory (Thorson et al., 2013, p. 425). This research extends and brings some nuance to the formation, intensification, and dissipation of the formations and patterns of “networked publics” (boyd, 2010; Varnelis, 2008). What shows through in many different contexts is that YouTube operates as a heavily contested site, or public forum, for civic engagement, with video remaining a key organizational and provocative factor (McCosker & Johns, 2013, 2014; Neumayer, 2012).

Visibility is also moderated by platform affordances, protocol and algorithmic factors (Bucher, 2012; Van Dijck, 2013), and by cross-platform sharing practices (Thorson et al., 2013), among other techno-cultural forces. For users, however, as sites of political protest, activism, and mobilization, YouTube’s publics are dynamic, porous, and ephemeral (Rahimi, 2011), and often highly contested or “agonistic” (Neumayer, 2012). In their studies of YouTube’s “video publics” surrounding the anti-Islam video *Fitna*, for instance, Van Zoonen et al. identified an “agonistic pluralism” and multiplication of viewpoints in relation to the video’s original provocation, rather than dialogue and close networks of interaction, in which new “acts and practices of (unlocated) citizenship” emerge (Van Zoonen et al., 2010, p. 260). In such sites of video-based activism, Uldum and Askanius (2013) follow Dahlgren in “acknowledging both antagonisms and the messiness of everyday engagement as part of being political” (p. 1190). They argue that at the micro-level of video posting, commenting, and reacting, political engagement remains mundane yet important, and difference, anger, and conflict become “an intrinsic part of deliberation” (p. 1190). A non-institutional politics emerges...
in this sphere of social media practice on the basis of the expression of both passionate forms of affinity, and vitriolic modes of conflict (McCosker, 2014).

The notion of affective publics is often posed as a counterpoint to the insistence that an ideal “public sphere” coheres on the basis of its rationality, affinity, or civic contract. Research in this area “has sought to explicate the complex and contentious meaning of affect, marking what has been termed an affective turn in the analysis of politics and everyday life” (Papacharissi, 2014, p. 12). Of particular interest here is sensitivity itself, the force that carries and is carried with forms of expression, and a body’s openness to be affected. In this way, “affect can help understand networked logics that drive power distributions and emerging political formations that take shape through contagion and virality” (Papacharissi, 2014, p. 17). The relational qualities of social media exchange and audio-visual content form vital parts in the assemblage of affective publics and the platforms, channels, or spaces in which they might emerge and dissipate.

While there have been notable attempts in social science to more systematically identify and articulate the traces of affect in discourse and other material forms (Wetherell, 2012), it is worth simply pointing toward the tendencies, dynamic thresholds, and variable sensitivities that make up the complex and fuzzy contours and parameters of our social media participation and the visual content and connections that flow across platforms like YouTube. Protevi explains the role and significance of intensity well in his account of political affect:

The intensity of the situation is composed of tendencies, sensed as approaches to switch points, as anticipation of triggers to thresholds. Intensity is felt both positively and negatively, as inviting or repelling, or even simply as strange, as in the sensation of being off-kilter, when things do not make the sense they ordinarily do. Our ordinary language reflects the bipolarity of such affect: “don’t make me go there,” we say, in wanting to avoid escalation of conflict, or “just a little more, that’s what we need to get things going around here,” when the situation is about to hit a desired threshold. (Protevi, 2009, p. 51)

It is the play of intensity, in the rising and exploding tones and in the anticipation shadowing confrontation and contest, that features most consistently across the prolonged period of peripheral activism analyzed below.

One way of accounting for these aspects of YouTube’s emergent micropublics is through the concept of vitality affects. “Vitality affects give rise to forms of life that are fundamentally shared” (Massumi, 2011, p. 111). Vitality affects are associated not with the “categorical affects” or emotions, but rather with the dynamic, relational, or in-between qualities and movement in experience (Stern, 2010). Stern (2010) tentatively lists a set of adverbs and adjectives to characterize these dynamic experiences that are not sensations, emotions, or cognitions: “Exploding, surging, slipping away, fading, effortful, easy, floating, fleeting, attacking . . .” (p. 91). These are forms that can be applied to visual and auditory perceptions, and lie between specific and/or general contours that present as a feeling, sensation, statement, incident, scene, or conversation, and for Stern, in music, dance, film, as well as in communication between a parent and infant—that is, in dialogue (Stern, 2010, p. 98). In the contexts of dance, music, and film, Stern looks to the transitions or dynamic changes that take place across a temporal progression, a musical phrase or melodic line, or between cinematic shots and a body’s proximity to those movements. Protevi (2009) explores similar ground through the notion of “bodies politic” and the sense-making process as it involves sensitivity, significance, and action-orientation (p. 51). For Stern, these dynamic forms of vitality become the basis of the most powerful connections we make with others in communication, in intersubjective relations and processes (including group processes) of attunement—which indicates the sharable, contagious attributes of forms of vitality (Stern, 2010, p. 93).

Although the concept is often criticized as being too vague to apply or identify in practice, the notion of vitality affects has a general usefulness for understanding the encounters with social media’s audio-visual content and its movement across networks. Anna Munster (2013), for instance, makes the connection between vitality affects and the kinds of YouTube videos that “go viral.” She identifies in such videos a singularity and a contouring of the everyday and the operation of the short refrain or repetitive sequencing that “catches on” and spreads (Munster, 2013, p. 10). And though not achieving any significant level of virality, these are features that commonly flow through Veitch’s videos and vitalize the channel as a whole. Because a precise definition of vitality affects has been lacking in social science and neuro- and cognitive psychology research, I start with a qualitative methodology where the concept is developed in relation to the participants’ own practices.

**Research Context: Charles Veitch’s YouTube Channel of Anarchism and Agitation**

In the United Kingdom and the United States, a number of channels have built large subscriber bases around political events and provocations, activism, and “alternative” civic cultures; some popular examples include the channel of Stefan Molyneux—the voice of popular web-based Freedomain Radio—or Mark Dice and his secondary channel The Resistance, and the many “chapters” of the WeAreChange channel among many others. The channel of Charles Veitch presents wide ranging expressions of dissent and long-standing practices of public agitation that center on regular location specific vlogs, megaphone-enhanced confrontations, and public dialogue. Active on YouTube since 2006, Veitch’s channel has at the time of writing 103,000 subscribers and 22,608,200 video views, and he has posted more than 800 videos.
The rationale for examining video content, activity, and channel management practices over time for this single channel lies in the benefits that can be gained by taking in the whole channel context, platform features, and affordances, and drilling down into the intensive or affective qualities of the content and interactions. While this may limit the generalizability of the findings and analysis, it points to the connections between particular kinds of affective video content, modes of contested interaction, and the characteristics of the marginal activist publics that form around them. These publics can be understood to consist of each of the dynamic elements in the channel system as a whole: the hosting platform, its affordances for users and channel owners, the channel owner and video producer (Veitch), video content, urban spaces and people filmed, subscribers, video viewers, and commenters. To conceive of the channel as offering a space for an affective publics to emerge and cohere over time, each of these elements should be seen as part of a whole social media ecology.

**Methods**

This study examined Charles Veitch’s channel as a whole through its video archive, comments field, channel management, and user practices. This involved observations of content and activity across the 5 years of video uploads to inform what David Altheide (1996) called an “ethnographic content analysis,” referring to the discovery, reflexive and circular aspects of the data collection, and contextualized observational and analytical process. The data collected consisted of videos posted \( N = 625 \), a subset of videos with more than 20,000 views \( N = 199 \), more detailed analysis of the audio-visual content for a smaller selection of videos, and analysis of comments for a selection of four typical videos \( N = 1,457 \) total comments). The videos and comments were open coded by the author to identify broad themes and patterns of activity, and then recoded in relation to the emerging themes and the concepts applied and developed through the study. NVivo qualitative data analysis software was used to systematize the coding process, and to identify and examine representative videos for closer textual analysis.

Stage 1 of the data analysis classified the 625 videos constituting Veitch’s channel archive at the time of the research according to the targets of protest (Figure 1). As many of the videos are up to or longer than 10 min and ranging in their focus, with overlapping and diverse themes, a number of videos were coded between several categories (categories are presented in Figure 1 as a percentage of coded items). The process aimed to establish the broad range of themes and topics Veitch’s videos commonly addressed, and the targets...
of his videos, highlighting those categories that received greater emphasis, or were returned to consistently throughout the observation period. From the larger set of videos, a second stage of data analysis involved extracting a subset of 199 videos with greater than 20,000 views. One reason for the selection was to find a more manageable data set for closer analysis. Additionally, this process aimed to identify those videos where subscriber interest, attention, and intensity of interaction were taking place, to account for content patterns associated with the formation of affective publics, and to inform selection of a smaller set for closer analysis. Some more detailed textual analysis (of video content, commenting, and channel moderation practices) is provided for several videos that exemplify Veitch’s use of affective dynamics involving rising, intensifying moments of protest or confrontation. These videos are examples of what I describe as the intensifying visual and vocal strategies observed across the subset of most viewed videos and were prevalent in videos falling into the top eight most common categories according to the initial content analysis.

The analysis of 1,457 comments from four videos was undertaken as a final stage, and focused on levels of affinity and agreement, and dialoguing practices with Veitch, other commenters, and the video content. The qualitative coding of these comments sought to identify the kinds of political identity, affiliation and affinity expressed, and the modes of interaction expressing either support or contest and conflict. To contextualize the observed contest within the comments, I also examined channel practices, for instance, in the number of videos in which comments had been disabled and deleted, or where explicit challenges over channel management arose.

**Findings**

A wide range of topics are covered in the 625 videos analyzed, but particular emphasis is placed on subject matter central to the anarchist ideals and the producers’ sense of self-identity, affinity, and (sometimes changing) beliefs (see Figure 1). Four predominant trends emerged from the analysis of the videos. The most common points of focus were forms of dissident expression along standard anarchist lines, contesting government, policing, the state apparatus, commercial institutions of capitalism, and the monarchy. A second common theme emerged around forms of self-reflexivity, self-promotion of Veitch himself, his “Love Police” group, and others’ protests, and to a lesser extent requests for donations. A third common theme formed around the idea of the “right to video” and contested boundaries of public voice and private governed spaces. Related to this, as a method of production and dissidence, a large number of videos perform what Veitch calls “sensitivity capture,” involving the videoing of public contests usually with police or security personnel, which I will return to below. And beyond these were an array of shifting topics of political protest. In terms of signaling a set of beliefs or a framework for dissidence, there was little overall coherence in viewpoint and some significant shifts over the years. Both through the videos Veitch produces and in the range of commenting, ideological affiliation remains contested and dynamic throughout.

As well as responding to changing world events and local and global political issues and flashpoints, several developments shape the kinds of videos that Veitch makes over this time period, along with reactions to those videos and expressions directed at him. Most notably, in 2011, Veitch made explicit moves to reject previously held views associated with “truther” ideology or the “truth movement” and 9/11 conspiracy theory claims in 2011. This shift is articulated in videos such as “No Emotional Attachment to 9/11 Theories—The Truth is Most Important” (Veitch, 2011b), which attracted 72,592 views and 3,546 comments and articulates Veitch’s change of perspective, “Failure to Communicate—Melancholy for 9/11 Mind Change Reactions” (Veitch, 2011c)—Where he explains his change of thinking and perspective, his participation in a BBC aired documentary about 9/11 conspiracy, as well as the impact within his Channel to this shift:

> everyone knows why I’m making this video. I don’t even know where to begin because of the incredible levels of hatred and vitriol and disgust sent my way . . . I’ve suffered for this, I mean everything I had was lost; it’s as if people once really liked what I did and now they hate everything about me . . . (42,912 views and 3,597 comments that continue to be posted over 4 years after its upload). (Veitch, 2011c)

This change in perspective indicates the complexity of considering such a long-standing channel of protest as a unified or cohesive whole. Much of the contest and vitriol, and the channel maintenance practices discussed below occur as an ongoing response to these events. But it does little to dampen engagement with the channels and videos over the subsequent years.

Many of the most widely viewed videos are aligned with a distinct brand of “anti-protest” that Veitch associates explicitly with his group the “Love Police” with accomplice Danny Shine, who later split with Veitch. Of the subset of 199 videos with greater than 20,000 views, 69 (35%) are explicitly tagged as Love Police videos or stunts, and these videos received a combined 6,576,401 views out of 14,375,145 (46% of the total views for this video set). These videos, like many of the others, involve megaphone speeches and confrontations in crowded city spaces, often with a confrontation with police, and with messages of “anti-fear” sentiment insisting “everything is okay.” Unlike many of Veitch’s other confrontational videos, which constitute the remaining 65% of this subset, the Love politics videos are far less aggressive, but establish a pattern of calm or measured (although amplified) monologue protest followed by rising, tense, and sometimes explosive confrontations with police. This pattern occurs as a constant across the majority of videos that achieve high numbers of views, likes, dislikes, and comment activity.
**Vitality Affects and Emergence: Sensitivity Capture**

In his exploration of political affect, Protevi states that “Sensitivity is the openness to the world, our ability to sense aspects of situations” (Protevi, 2009, p. 51). If intensity is felt in the approaches to switch points or thresholds, as a strategy of visibility, it requires certain kinds of dynamic activity, activity that takes ordinary public spaces and measured interactions “off kilter” somehow, toward and perhaps beyond a turning point that makes an impression. This can be seen in emplaced, raw, minimally edited video confrontations, expressed through bodily comportment and faciality, heard in strained or rising vocal tones, and traced through aggressive targeted kinds of commenting activity. As noted already, the pattern of rising aggression and tense exchange mainly with police and security guards, referred to by Veitch as “sensitivity capture,” achieves a great deal in generating and sustaining activity across the channel, particularly in the subset of most watched videos.

Significant attention is paid to the sensitivity of the act of filming in specific public or commercial spaces, for instance, in shopping malls, churches, or army recruiting centers. Constant reproaches directed toward Veitch express this sensitivity: “you don’t have permission to film here” to which the repeated response comes “do I need to have permission to film in public” (Veitch, 2012b), or to help escalate the scenario “If I don’t obey you, what are you going to do?” (Veitch, 2013b). The singular and general qualities of the locations and their ambiguous public–private (or commercial) status establish the foundations for the contouring and forms of vitality in the rising tensions or explosive confrontations that follow. In the video “London Riots—Security Bother Man on Public Property” (Veitch, 2011a), the filming begins in front of a Westfield shopping mall, where Veitch points out the setup of barricades in response, we are told, to the recent riots near there and across England. In contrast to the endless YouTube video of burning cars, buildings, and riot (McCosker & Johns, 2013), this one appears almost banal with crowds moving by and going about their business albeit with some additional signs of security. As the security guards attempt to stop his filming, Veitch argues in measured but rising and eventually aggressive and confronting tones about his right to film. With his camera, he frames his face and body, the temporary fence, the footpath, and road, attempting to delineate the public, commercial, and “secured” spaces. He refers to the closed-circuit television (CCTV) camera targeting him, and the scene escalates around those points of conflict and sensitivity.

About 90s into the “London Riots” video, as Veitch is shunted back away from the barricade, he addresses the camera directly while warning the security personnel not to physically harm him, at the same time that he provokes them referring to them as not real police. The transition to the threat of physical violence shifts the dynamic of the video, and raises its tempo and intensity, following a rise in the pitch of Veitch’s voice as he says more pleadingly “I don’t need to fucking ask anyone for any fucking permission”; off camera, a security guard can be heard saying “hold on, hold on, calm down.” This dynamic movement and rising tension around the sensitivity captured in the confrontation operates as a point of provocation that brings into visibility a contest over authority, power, and control. Commenters engage directly with the video, with Veitch, and each other:

> Why are so many people siding with the security guards? This is exactly what is wrong with the majority of the UK. Everybody is whipped up into such a state of heightened paranoia about every little insignificant thing. (@Enkidu; Veitch, 2011a)

> mpharahh Although it looks like a public road, in the UK, the ownership of the road depends on if it is publicly adopted and maintained or not. Most shopping centres are accessed from publicly adopted and maintained roads. This one isn’t. It’s a private road . . . (@Sounds4theInfowar; Veitch, 2011a)

And these kinds of comments in turn generate their own intensity. Others respond to the rising levels of aggression in either the video or the comments, in the form of meta-commentary or modulation attempt: “CV is starting to lose the plot, he never used to get nasty like that. I sense a nervous breakdown happening.” (@martin958); “stay more calm in your videos Charlie rather than lowering your self. Like your older ones:)” (@FishTricks).

In later videos, attention is focused more consistently on the events recorded, as in the video “Barton Moss Fracking Protest” (Veitch, 2013c) where Veitch travels to, films, and joins a small group blockading equipment in a rural area, struggling to stand their ground against the aggressive push of riot police. For example, “What a TOTAL FAILURE AND A COMPLETE WASTE OF TIME. I should have come down myself because I wouldn’t have been moved so easily.” (@Richreeve75; Veitch, 2013c); Despite explaining that he does not know the science behind fracking or wish to take a position, Veitch places himself in the middle of the protest in order to call out the use of police force. In both the actions recorded and in many of the comments responding to that action, outrage builds: “. . . this shit’s fucking ridiculous. […] ‘Charlie, when do you think the British people will have had enough, and unleash terror on this corrupt system?’” (@Charlie Hutchinson; Veitch, 2013c). Voice and action are aligned in the relation formed between the initial scene of protest, Veitch’s act of videoing and becoming part of the protest line confronting the riot police, and the commenters who capture some of that movement, intensity, and urgency over the days and weeks following the event.

The patterns of vitality or sensitivity capture that Veitch uses to set up engagement with his videos also enables a
kind of “dialoguing” to take place—occasionally between Veitch and subscribers/viewers, but more commonly between commenters and actions or points of intensity within the videos, or between commenters in relation to those events or in relation to Veitch. In the video “Manchester Police Given Reality Smackdown by Love Police” (2012b), Veitch jumps straight into a sustained aggressive argument with a police officer about his right to film and protest in the public space in front of a crowd, many of whom are also recording with mobile cameras. Because this video skips the usual measured, calm initial protest, it attracts extensive vitriol from commenters. Veitch defends himself in the video description:

As I filmed for 10 minutes outside Barclays Bank, the Police suddenly appeared and stood very close to me (1 ft, 33 cm away) for no apparent reason other than to “facilitate my PROTEST.” I lose my temper because I need the Policeman to know how offensive his action is in a “cilivised” country. (Veitch, 2012b)

And in a comment receiving 99 replies, Veitch hints at his strategy: “Loving all the angry comments . . . hahahaha-hahaha. Just keep watching okay?” (Veitch, 2012b).

In “Angry Fake Cop Attacks Me on Public Street” (2014), while Veitch attempts to dodge a security guard trying to physically move him away from a public area next to Manchester Town Hall, a bystander can be heard asking him, “What are you doing?” to which Veitch quickly replies “It’s for YouTube. I get millions of hits on this shit.” The video was widely viewed (684,324 views), attracting more than 9,000 likes and 774 dislikes, along with 3,319 comments. The camera frames the security guard confronting Veitch, Veitch himself (including reflexive smiles to the camera as he is chased), and occasionally the watching crowd. Like the other videos examined, commenters engage directly with the events, are antagonistic toward Veitch, and supportive of him. One exchange exemplifies the kind of dialoguing at play:

This is pathetic, do you really have nothing better to do than harass police and everyone else? You should have been arrested for creating a public nuisance and then involuntarily taken in for a psychiatric assessment, maybe a few ECT shocks to treat your illness. (@Blackwolf; Veitch, 2014)

It’s amazing that many peoples only comment is that CV is stupid etc. when they have just witnessed some grotty cheap little toser impersonating a cop and assaulting a member of the public, which could be you or me next time. (@1978ajax; Veitch, 2014)

Dialoguing in this way becomes another means for intensifying, provoking, rising, or simply “moving something forward” (Stern, 2010, p. 98). It continues the push toward a certain threshold or a transition, which doesn’t necessarily actualize but nonetheless draws out visibility, amplifies voice, and sustains activity.

That these patterns of aggressive reaction and counter-provocation might continue through the comments field should not be surprising. But nor do they signal a breakdown in the efficacy or unity of the channel as site for activism, or in the initiation of thought and further action. At each site and scale, passionate activity provokes a contested plurality of increasingly visible and embodied acts of voicing protest, building tension or sensitivity in situations where challenges to authority and to the idea of publicness itself, and subsequently to Veitch through comment exchanges, are given the opportunity to arise.

Channel Management and Moderation Practices: Contest over Agency, Control and Voice

It becomes very clear that provocation, passion, and outrage flow across the channel in many directions. This is often tied to those points at which the mechanisms for maintaining and modulating engagement with the channel become apparent. This occurs, for instance, in the blocking of subscribers or management of video comment fields, or in the posting practices of Veitch and those engaging with him directly, with the videos and with others. Notably, commenting is disabled for 106 videos, which at various points provokes consternation among users. Ratings are also blocked for many videos provoking users: “charlie given reality smackdown by youtube ratings, Charlie blocks ratings” (@John Smith; Veitch, 2012b). And in videos such as “Comments Section—I Will Never Read You Again,” “Poor Angry Haters,” and “126 Thumbs up for Racist Genocidal Comment?” Veitch reacts directly to vitriol directed at him and that occurs among users within the comments field. From the users’ perspective, there are constant comments expressing dislike or demanding others to “UNSUBSCRIBE!” particularly in relation to Veitch’s explicit requests for donations and support, but also where beliefs diverge, or where a video disappoints.

In one of many videos specifically engaging in requests for support and donations, Veitch explains that through advertising and video views, he receives about £180 a month, but needs viewers’ donations to continue his video activism. Around 30 of the 625 videos analyzed contained a direct request for financial or in-kind support. User comments following such requests are almost entirely negative and often vitriolic in expressions of anti-Veitch sentiment. For example, in the short video “Please Donate—I Need It as Do Others Who Do This Type of Thing” (2013d), the camera moves down a subway escalator, to the background sound of a busking violinist, interspersed with text asking for donations. Of 292 comments, 3 defended Veitch’s request or offered support. Almost unanimous antagonism, disdain, or vitriol is expressed; for example, “who in their right mind would donate to this idiot! dont even sub to him.”
STATEMENT X XSAMMONX; Veitch, 2012b). This hatred is expressed by some users through direct short expressions of affirmation toward Veitch, such as "KEEP IT UP MAN!! You have every right to speak your mind!! THIS IS NOT NORTH KOREA!!! >=(" (@HappyTeacherESQ; Veitch, 2011a). These instances indicate the volatility inherent in providing "open" conditions for the provision and distribution of activist voice. Voice, participation, and contribution are always subject to modulation, and these practices are part of the conditioning of the emergent publics, experiences, and events that actualize through the channel. Access is a process here that requires not just a sense of the tools and their affordances but also the event, the often conflicted and messy taking place of activism.

Affinity, and incongruity, dislike, or hate work very differently across this channel to how they might work to catalyze support for traditional political parties. There are few evident "common terms," and in fact, the idea of a coherent message of protest is shunned regularly by Veitch. As one of the police officers who has been trying to quieten Veitch in an early video says "I’ve seen you loads of times, I’m still not sure what your cause is" (Veitch, 2009a). This encapsulates the nature of the channel’s dissident form, which is consistently discontinuous with any particular message, meaning, or cause. In the analysis of comments responding to Veitch’s videos, it becomes clear that notions of political identity, affinity, and affiliation are problematized by the same tools that might be thought to open up the possibility of accelerating coherent civic or dissident cultures. For instance, in the four selected videos, anti-Veitch sentiment was expressed slightly more often than pro-Veitch agreement or disassociation. The experience or practice of impassioned voicing, to emphasize the action, achieves a certain primacy over message, against political identity or alignment, even when those are specifically targeted and heavily contested.

Conclusion: Affective Networks and Dissensual Politics

While on one level it may be straightforward to note that particular kinds of visual or textual provocation form the basis of activist media and its agonistic contestations, these can be conceived as expressions that act as the relational and qualitative dimensions through which individuals can co-perceive themselves as constituting the contours of any activist event, and the basis for emergent affective publics. If a YouTube channel should offer anything to civic cultures, it is in provocations and interventions that are voiced—plural (or dissensual) and contested as these may be (McCosker, 2014). In the analysis presented above, I have attempted to illustrate the emergence of activist publics or the event of activism in relation to the conditioning factors of YouTube as a social media platform and in relation to its channel structure, in the modulation practices that take place within as they affect voice and contribution, and the vitality affects that constitute the provocations and intensifications that give rise to and sustain the channel’s activist micropublics at any given point.

While this case does test the conditions in which passion operates to foster or impede civic cultures, equally significant are the intensities, the transitional relations that generate shared and contested forms of platformed dissidence. In this often heavily moderated channel space, vitality affects are mobilized by Veitch and by other participants to maintain, intensify, and extend activity as a dynamic, pluralistic, and agonistic form of (qualified) activism. Affective micropublics “happen” not in the quantifiable entity of the subscriber base as a whole, but in the more finely divided relations and activities, or activity–counter-activity formations—that is, in
the provocation and in the contest—through the multiplication of points at which people might “co-perceive their mutual inclusion in the same event” (Massumi, 2011, p. 4), regardless of ideological affiliation.

Publics, like networks, are not given; they don’t exist as a priori entities. The experiences presented here suggest that the emergent processes and forces associated with acts of provocation function as intensifiers of relationality and expressive events. To use John Protevi’s (2009) language in his theorization of political affect, provocation and vitality affects can be understood as the force and gravity that always sit “above and below” a site’s affordances and its individuated and collective forms of activity. As a mode of civic engagement, it is consistently the element of provocation that generates visibility. For Jodi Dean, “People enjoy the circulation of affect that presents itself as contemporary communication. This system is intense; it draws us in. Even when we think we aren’t enjoying, we enjoy” (Dean, 2010a, p. 21). But rather than require unified protest or dissenting networks, or insist on an adequate “feeling” for an experience of community in Dean’s sense, it makes more sense to identify the vitalizing tactics through which visibility becomes possible, even if at the level of micropublics and micropolitics. Further research might explore the ways that in open, dense media environments, affect as force, intensity, and duration, not unity of message (as a kind of crystallized and unhelpful concept of voice), becomes the key organizing factor in the generation of attention.

In the analysis above, provocation, confrontation, and contest form the basis of a set of rising and exploding vitality affects that intensifies many loosely targeted acts of voicing, and operates at the level of thresholds and emergence, which is to say brings things into view and into relation, and “gets things going.” But intensity as felt relation both invites and repels. It draws us in and fires us up to react and provoke anew. This is why Veitch’s channel, as a basis for everyday activism, appears deeply dissensual, but is no less generative and sustaining of activist micropublics. There is an aesthetics here that can be understood as dissensual, but still works tactically to produce an emergent visibility.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

References

Altheide, D. L. (1996). Qualitative media analysis. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

Ammamiti, M., & Ferrari, P. (2013). Vitality affects in Daniel Stern’s thinking: A psychological and neurobiological perspective. Infant Mental Health Journal, 34, 367–375.

Bakardjieva, M. (2009). Subactivism: Lifeworld and politics in the age of the Internet. The Information Society, 25, 91–104.

Banaji, S. (2013). Everyday racism and my tram experience: Emotion, civic performance and learning on YouTube. Scientific Journal of Media Education, 40, 69–77.

Bennett, J. (2010). Vibrant matter: A political ecology of things. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

boyd, D. (2010). Social network sites as networked publics: Affordances, dynamics, and implications. In Z. Papacharissi (Ed.), A networked self: Identity, community, and culture on social network sites (pp. 39–58). New York, NY: Routledge.

Bucher, T. (2012). Want to be on the top? Algorithmic power and the threat of invisibility on Facebook. New Media & Society, 14, 1164–1180.

Castells, M. (2012). Networks of outrage and hope: Social movements in the Internet age. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.

Coudry, N. (2010). Why voice matters: Culture and politics after neoliberalism. London, England: SAGE.

Dahlberg, L. (2011). Re-Constructing digital democracy: An outline of four “positions.” New Media & Society, 13, 855–872.

Dahlgren, P. (2009). Media and political engagement: Citizens, communication, and democracy. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

Dahlgren, P. (2012). Reinventing participation: Civic agency and the web environment. Geopolitics, History, and International Relations, 4, 27–45.

Dean, J. (2005). Communicative capitalism: Circulation and the foreclosure of politics. Cultural Politics, 1, 51–74.

Dean, J. (2010a). Affective networks. Media Tropes, 2, 19–44.

Dean, J. (2010b). Blog theory: Feedback and capture in the circuits of drive. Cambridge, MA: Polity Press.

Dewey, J (1927). The public and its problems. New York, NY: Henry Holt.

Gerbaudo, P. (2012). Tweets and the streets: Social media and contemporary activism. New York, NY: Pluto Press.

Hands, J. (2011). @ is for activism: Dissent, resistance and rebellion in a digital culture. New York, NY: Pluto Press.

Harmon, A. (2004, January 25). Politics of the web: Meet, greet, segregate, meet again. The New York Times. Available from http://www.nytimes.com

Keane, J. (1995). Structural transformations of the public sphere. The Communication Review, 1, 1–22.

Koppe, S., Harder, S., & Vaever, M. (2008). Vitality affects. International Forum of Psychoanalysis, 17, 169–179.

Lange, P. (2007). Commenting on comments: Investigating responses to antagonism on YouTube. Paper presented at society for applied anthropology conference, Tampa, FL. Retrieved from https://www.academia.edu/1098178/Commenting_on_comments_Investigating_responses_to_agonism_on_YouTube

Massumi, B. (2011). Semblance and event: Activist philosophy and the emergent processes and forces associated with acts of provocation in the generation of attention. New Media & Society, 13, 855–872.

Mccosker, A. (2013). Intensive media: Aversive affect and visual culture. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.

Mccosker, A. (2014). Trolling as provocation: YouTube’s agonistic publics. Convergence, 20, 201–217.

Mccosker, A., & Johns, A. (2013). Productive provocations: Vitiolic media, spaces of protest and agonistic outrage in the 2011 England riots. The Fibreculture Journal, 22, 171–193.
McCosker, A., & Johns, A. (2014). Contested publics: Racist rants, bystander action and social media acts of citizenship. Media International Australia, 151, 66–72.

Mouffe, C. (2005). The democratic paradox. London, England: Verso.

Munster, A. (2013). An aesthetic of networks: Conjunctive experience in art and technology. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

Neumayer, C. (2012). Which alternative? A critical analysis of YouTube comments in anti-fascist protest. tripleC, 10, 56–65.

Papacharissi, Z. (2010). A private sphere: Democracy in a digital age. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.

Papacharissi, Z. (2014). Affective publics: Sentiment, technology, and politics. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Protevi, J. (2009). Political affect: Connecting the social and the somatic. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Rahimi, B. (2011). The agonistic social media: Cyberspace in the formation of dissent and consolidation of state power in post-election Iran. The Communication Review, 14, 158–178.

Ster, D. (1998). The interpersonal world of the infant. New York, NY: Karnac Books.

Ster, D. (2010). The issue of vitality. Nordic Journal of Music Therapy, 19, 88–102.

Thorson, K., Driscoll, K., Ekdale, B., Edgerly, S., Thompson, L. G., Schrook, A., & Wells, C. (2013). YouTube, Twitter and the occupy movement: Connecting content and circulation practices. Information, Communication & Society, 16, 421–451.

Uldam, J., & Askanius, T. (2013). Online civic cultures: Debating climate change activism on YouTube. International Journal of Communication, 7, 1185–1204.

Van Dijck, J. (2013). The culture of connectivity: A critical history of social media. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Van Zoonen, L., Vis, F., & Mihelj, S. (2010). Performing citizenship on YouTube: Activism, satire and online debate around the anti-Islam video Fitna. Critical Discourse Studies, 7, 249–262.

Varnelis, K. (Ed.) (2008). Networked publics. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

Veitch, C. (2009a). EVERYTHING IS OK 1 (corporate property), 12 May. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KGA9ZUEa3ZY

Veitch, C. (2009b). Why I make the videos - by Charlie, 31 July. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4LMfG-X6rWg

Veitch, C. (2011a). London riots - Security bother man on public property, 12 August. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HRoU3hZWktQ

Veitch, C. (2011b). No emotional attachment to 9/11 theories - The truth is most important, 29 June. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eZiHNdBE5pzC

Veitch, C. (2011c). Failure to communicate - Melancholy for 9/11 mind change reactions, 6 June. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dplk9WDXLLk

Veitch, C. (2012a). How NOT to deal with private security on public land, 9 October. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P3Rz5D8AUuU

Veitch, C. (2012b). Manchester police given reality smackdown by love police, 26 May. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HZ_t1SQ7OSk

Veitch, C. (2013a). Overzealous security control attempt creates conversation, 24 June. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GFRdK6_EmZk

Veitch, C. (2013b). Authority attempt backfires on security fancy dress wearer, 8 August. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2PHWWYRSJTo

Veitch, C. (2013c). Barton Moss fracking protest feat: Old lady Monty Python montage, 27 November. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y6lDmejPy1I

Veitch, C. (2013d). Please donate - I need it as do others who do this type of thing, 5 May. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9uT9zVssCM

Veitch, C. (2014). Angry fake cop attacks me on public street, 22 May. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P0_Y2TarRII

Warner, M. (2002). Publics and counterpublics. Public Culture, 14, 49–90.

Wetherell, M. (2012). Affect and emotion: A new social science understanding. London, England: SAGE.

Author Biography

Anthony McCosker, PhD, is a Senior Lecturer in Media and Communications at Swinburne University, Melbourne. His research explores media affect and intensity, new media technologies, digital and visual cultures and social media platforms, publics, and practices. Current projects focus on visual social media, digital health, and digital citizenship. He is author of the book Intensive Media: Aversive Affect and Visual Culture (2013).