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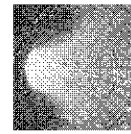
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# 'This is citizen journalism at its finest': YouTube and the public sphere in the Oscar Grant shooting incident

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## Abstract

On 1 January 2009, Oscar Grant was shot and killed in a subway station by Bay Area Rail Transit officers. This event was recorded by several passengers on their cellphones and later uploaded to the video-sharing website YouTube. The videos generated significant protests among online and offline communities, and were eventually used as evidence in the ensuing trial. This study employed a critical thematic analysis to examine audience responses to this act of citizen journalism on YouTube. Results indicated that although some viewers critiqued the video quality and the cameraperson's passivity, several supportive comments praised the cameraperson's presence of mind and courage. Furthermore, some viewers called for resistance and retaliation, while others advocated a more prudent response. We argue that these findings necessitate a reconceptualization of traditional notions of the guard-dog media and the public sphere to accommodate new media technologies.

## Key words

citizen journalism, guard-dog media, new media technology, public sphere, YouTube

Shortly after 2.00 a.m. on 1 January 2009, a group of young men returning from New Year revelry were pulled from a train car at a crowded Oakland, California, subway station by Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) police officers (McLaughlin et al., 2009). Responding to

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reports of an alleged altercation, the officers handcuffed most of the young men, although 22-year-old African-American Oscar Grant III was not immediately restrained. In the ensuing commotion, as Grant was seized and pressed face down on the platform, BART officer Johannes Mehserle stood above Grant and fired a single shot into his lower back. The bullet ricocheted off the concrete platform and punctured Grant's lung, resulting in his death seven hours later. The event was recorded by passengers on the train on their cellphones (Stannard and Bulwa, 2009), and multiple videos of the incident from various angles were uploaded to the internet within a few days. The incident sparked widespread protests and rioting among residents of Oakland, eliciting comparisons with the 1991 beating of a black motorist, Rodney King, that was also captured on camera (Egelko, 2009). Mehserle resigned from the BART force a week after the shooting and was eventually arrested at a relative's residence in Nevada. He was released on bail on 6 February 2009.

Initially, the BART officers attempted to confiscate all cellphone recordings at the scene of the event (Vass, 2009). However, some passengers succeeded in concealing their phones and later released the videos online. The incident and the cellphone videos have led to much debate and have provoked widespread reactions among policymakers, the media and the general populace. Internet-based responses are particularly intense and Grant's murder has prompted a range of passionate arguments online: sympathetic, harsh, rebellious and critical. From a media perspective, the incident presents an interesting opportunity to investigate the manner in which user-generated content that aims to challenge social injustice is received by the public. In other words, the cellphone video footage of Grant's shooting provides a unique opportunity to examine how citizen journalism engages the public sphere in contemporary virtual environments.

Accordingly, this research project analyzes audience responses to the Oscar Grant shooting incident that had been captured by non-media individuals – or ordinary citizens – attempting to document unjust and unwarranted aggression against an unarmed man. In doing so, it will examine the manner in which the online internet video-sharing web portal YouTube provides a forum for public dialog and argument, specifically with regard to the role of citizen journalism in recording Grant's death and sharing the video with a global audience. We will also consider citizen journalism as a response to the agenda-setting prerogatives of a primarily conservative guard-dog news media (Donohue et al., 1995). Ultimately, our analysis aims to interrogate contemporary reconceptualizations of Habermas's public sphere (Bryant, 1993; Jacobs, 1996, 2000) and their applicability to online arenas of interaction and political engagement.

## **Theoretical framework**

### *Guarding dominant interests and agendas*

Some scholars argue that the mass media function more along the lines of a guard dog metaphor (Donohue et al., 1995; Olien et al., 1989, 1995), abandoning the traditional conceptualization of the media as a fourth estate watchdog on government ethics, policies and excesses. Donohue et al. (1995: 118) state that the time-honored watchdog perspective implies 'substantial autonomy for the media, their representation of the interests of the populace rather than the dominant groups, and their independent power to directly

and independently challenge those dominant groups'. However, the authors claim that mainstream media seldom conform to these characteristics, particularly in interdependent pluralistic communities (Olien et al., 1995). Rather, they suggest that the news media function more like a guard dog, 'a sentry not for the community as a whole, but for groups having sufficient power and influence' (Donohue et al., 1995: 116). Under this framework, mainstream media reports on conflict tend to be constrained and restrained, and tend to focus only on particular issues within a particular structural environment.

Olien et al. (1995) further note that the role of the guard dog media as a sentry for established societal elites varies according to the level of diversity or homogeneity in a given community. In particular, these authors argue that in pluralistic societies, characterized by a multitude of social power groupings in metropolitan centers, crisis and conflict are seldom analyzed or addressed by mainstream news media, particularly when they directly involve powerful social sectors. Instead, interest groups and agencies of government business, education and religion tend to rely on secondary communications (such as non-mainstream and/or alternative news media vehicles) for information. This observation is of direct relevance to the current investigation with regard to the role of the media as a public agenda-setter.

The agenda-setting influence of the mass media has received much scholarly attention (McCombs, 1997; Paletz and Entman, 1981; Scheufele, 2000; Strodthoff et al., 1985), and its primary premise is that 'the news media influence the salience or prominence of [the] small number of issues that come to command public attention' (McCombs, 1997: 433). The traditional agenda-setting hypothesis concerns the transfer of salience through journalistic reporting and coverage. Other conceptualizations of first-level agenda-setting state that 'the mass media establish what people think *about*, if not what they in fact think' (Strodthoff et al., 1985: 136, our emphasis). McCombs (1997) clarifies that this is not necessarily intentional; rather, it is a byproduct of the necessity to define and choose a few topics for public attention in daily news coverage. In other words, through the selection and coverage of particular issues, the news media inadvertently define which issues are newsworthy and deserving of public attention. Scheufele (2000) states that agenda-setting is an inherently causal theory, an aspect that has contributed toward much debate in most agenda-setting research, particularly concerning audience evaluations of the media's purported agenda. To clarify, although researchers may identify particular issues as comprising the news media's agenda, it does not necessarily follow that all audiences will isolate the exact same issues in their appraisal of the media's agenda.

An inevitable aspect of agenda-setting theory concerns the issues that are omitted by the mainstream news media. For instance, several critical scholars have voiced concern over the exclusion of particular topics in domestic US news vehicles. Paletz and Entman (1981) examine the significance of this lapse with regard to the restricted domestic news coverage of foreign events. The authors conclude that 'the mass media are conduits of elites' visions of America's overseas interests in all but the most exceptional circumstances' (Paletz and Entman, 1981: 215). Similarly, Strodthoff et al. (1985) and Owens and Palmer (2003) investigate the manner in which social movements and activists are generally misrepresented and vilified in mainstream news reports. In such situations, the agenda-setting prerogative of the mass media can hinder audiences' interpretations and

evaluations of issues and events. The mainstream mass media exert a considerable influence on what issues may be deemed newsworthy and the corresponding level of importance they are afforded. This characteristic, in turn, reflects and is shaped by the media's relationship with dominant and powerful interests within a given community in its role as a metaphorical sentry, or guard dog. Furthermore, the mass media's potent influence to emphasize or omit particular perspectives and events from the public agenda directly affects its capacity to engage political dialog and participation among the general populace as conceptualized by Habermas.

### *Citizen journalism and reconceptualizing the public sphere*

The notion of the public sphere is chiefly associated with Habermas, who defined it as 'a network for communicating information and points of view' (Habermas, 1996: 360). Communication among various publics regarding political and social issues constitutes a fundamental element of participatory democracies, and Habermas argues that freedom of expression and equality of opportunity are essential conditions for the functioning of the public sphere in society. The public sphere is thus a political space where publics come together to engage the state in mutual discourse over issues of political legitimacy and common concern (Jacobs, 2000). Indeed, Chouliaraki and Fairclough (1999) state that the goal of public discussion is not the elimination or suppression of difference, but rather its constant negotiation and an entailing appreciation of divergent perspectives.

However, there are some who find fault with Habermas's description of the public sphere. Bryant (1993) and Jacobs (1996, 2000) claim that in addition to being somewhat idealistic and overly rational, it does not acknowledge the plurality or heterogeneity of contemporary social spaces.<sup>1</sup> Jacobs (2000) further observes that civil society consists of multiple non-rational and contestatory public spheres that address myriad cultural and political issues. Modern societies are rarely homogenous or integrated on issues of public concern. Rather, they tend to be fractured and pluralistic by nature, consisting of 'overlapping and competing publics' (Jacobs, 2000: 21). These myriad interests are reflected in an increasingly diversified media environment, where new communication technologies have contributed to the pluralization of media publics.

The notion of the public sphere assumes significance with regard to the role of the media as an agenda setter and representative of privileged interests. Audiences are no longer restricted by largely elitist and inaccessible media systems. The increased prevalence of interactive media options – particularly internet-based and wireless technologies – has enabled an unprecedented level of creation of media content and participation in a virtual environment. To quote Friedman (2005: 9), 'Individuals from every corner of the flat world are being empowered'. Research by the Pew Internet and Life Project indicates that participatory technologies have been adopted on a significant scale by internet users (Lenhart, 2006; Tancer, 2007). The result is that participatory media technologies that allow for the creation and distribution of user-generated content overturn traditional notions of all-powerful news media that define and restrict a largely passive audience. In other words, traditional power dynamics that separate sender and receiver are shifting and blurring. As Jacobs (2000: 25) notes, 'a civil society consisting of multiple publics requires

a media system consisting of multiple media', and the nature of contemporary multifaceted media environments reflects this necessity. In addition, recent technological developments such as Web 2.0 subvert the 'vertical, top-down, passive, one-way flow of information' (Birdsall, 2007: ¶2) that is characteristic of conventional media, allowing for alternative discourses to manifest through blogs, podcasts, virtual reality (e.g. Second Life), collaborative technology (e.g. Wikipedia), social networking sites (e.g. Facebook, MySpace) and video-sharing sites (e.g. YouTube). The viewer is thus simultaneously a user and a producer of media content.

The repercussions of these technological developments on traditional news media and the corresponding opportunities that they provide for various publics are staggering. One area of recent interest is citizen journalism, which Bowman and Willis (2003: 9) define as: 'the act of a citizen, or a group of citizens, playing an active role in the process of collecting, reporting, analyzing and disseminating news and information ... [in order to] provide independent, reliable, accurate, wide-ranging and relevant information that a democracy requires'.

Through blogs, video-sharing and other forms of participatory publishing, citizens have the potential to set the agenda themselves, subverting the traditional model of the press as the primary arbiters of the public agenda. Conventional one-way producer to consumer mass communication has given way to user-generated media, made possible by the availability of relatively inexpensive, easy-to-use technological gadgets, as well as cultural trends that encourage citizens to produce media (Livingstone, 1999, 2002; Tapscott and Williams, 2006). In addition to fostering proactive agenda-setting and public journalism (McCombs, 1997), new media allow for the circumvention of traditional mass media control (Bowman and Willis, 2003; Hartley, 2005; Livingstone, 1999), leading some to question the set of characteristics that determine who may be considered a journalist in the digital age (Berkman and Shumway, 2003). In this sense, new media technologies are 'potential sources of social change, simultaneously increasing the likelihood of inter-public engagement and intra-public autonomy' (Jacobs, 2000: 22). Citizen journalism can therefore be viewed as a direct response to lapses in the performance of the traditional mass media role in the public sphere.

New communication technologies have made it possible for members of the public to take on the responsibility of representing common (i.e. non-elite) interests and actively participate in the creation and dissemination of information. YouTube is a prime example of participatory publishing, and is the focus of this study. YouTube's user-friendly interface allows for free sharing of video content and interaction regarding the video content with an accompanying message board. The cellphone is quickly becoming a newsgathering device, the citizen-journalists' equivalent of the traditional tape recorder. YouTube's prominence within the citizen-journalist framework is apparent from the public's response to an online video of a former Virginia senator, George Allen, using the racial slur 'macaca' during a campaign rally. The video quickly became an online sensation, resulting in Senator Allen losing his subsequent re-election bid (Craig and Shear, 2006). Therefore, as Castells et al. (2004: 5) point out, 'mobile telephony has moved from being the technology for a privileged few, to essentially a mainstream technology', and tools that were once exclusive to media professionals are now accessible to any member of the general public.

Web 2.0 and new communication technologies have thus jolted the public from mere passive consumption and encouraged them to actively engage in the production of their own media, while simultaneously giving the opportunity to provide continuous feedback and responses via online postings and user comments. It is this aspect of the public sphere that constitutes the focus of the current research project on audience responses to public vigilance in the Oscar Grant shooting incident. Accordingly, we pose our research question:

RQ: How do audiences respond to the citizen-journalism aspect of the Oscar Grant shooting? What dominant themes characterize these responses?

## Method

We began our qualitative thematic analysis by locating all available videos of the Oscar Grant shooting on YouTube. Following this, those videos that comprised television news footage or other such professional media editing were discarded because we wanted to focus on raw cellphone video footage of the BART shooting on YouTube that was generated by users and unfiltered by professional news media. The goal of this research is to interrogate the manner in which such unfiltered media generated by non-media professionals is received by members (citizens) of the general public. A total of four such videos were identified that consisted of varied angles of the event. Details of the dates on which the videos were posted online, the total number of comments posted for each video, and the number of comments selected per video for analysis are included in Table 1.

The majority of audience-based research entails exposing viewers to some form of experimental stimuli and then eliciting responses via surveys, questionnaires, interviews or other similar self-reported data. However, we chose to analyze comments that were posted as viewer responses by audiences of their own volition. In this manner, we hope to access spontaneous comments generated by the incident, that are indicative of an audience voluntarily engaging with the event and its outcome, as distinguished from the comparatively obligatory and forced responses provided at the request of a researcher. We believe that this manifestation of discourse prompted by videos of the BART shooting encapsulates the democratic participation characteristic of the public sphere.

**Table 1.** Details of raw cellphone videos of Grant's shooting on YouTube.com

	Date posted	Views	No. comments	No. comments analyzed
<b>Posted by YouTube member</b>				
Observateur	06 January	160,972	697	35
SomoshihopRadio	06 January	87,792	1195	33
Observateur	06 January	234,880	783	6
Desertfae	08 January	34,666	144	8

All details as of 2 February 2009

Furthermore, our investigation seeks to explore audience reactions to the role of proactive citizen journalism in capturing videos of Grant's death and uploading them to YouTube. We therefore chose to examine only those user comments that directly addressed the act of recording the event and, by extension, the role of the internet and user-generated media in determining the details of the incident. Furthermore, although YouTube allows users to post video responses to viewed videos, we chose to limit our analysis to text-based comments alone. Each text comment can contain up to 500 characters, and therefore provides a relatively concise data unit. In addition, we examined all comments posted until and including 2 February 2009, exactly one month after the event, in order to encompass a range of audience responses, from the raw knee-jerk reaction to Grant's death to more contemplative musings. An aggregate of 2819 text comments was posted to the four videos of Grant's shooting on YouTube (see Table 1).

The first author then reviewed all the comments and discarded those that did not conform to data requirements. For instance, the racially charged nature of this incident provoked several passionate statements about the former BART Officer Mehserle's actions, police brutality and injustice toward minority groups by law enforcement personnel. Other users engaged in heated back-and-forth exchanges that frequently involved derogatory racial terms and insults. Comments such as these were not included in the analysis. This initial selection process yielded a dataset of 82 comments.

We then conducted a critical thematic analysis, as employed by Orbe and Kinefuchi (2008) in their analysis of audience reactions to the movie *Crash*. This technique utilizes three criteria to elicit emergent themes: repetition, recurrence and forcefulness. First, both authors conducted individual preliminary analyses of the dataset, searching for words and phrases that appeared frequently. This constitutes the repetition phase. Next, we examined how these terms contributed toward expressing shared meanings and interpretations regarding the role of proactive citizen journalism in this particular incident. This is the recurrence stage of the analysis. For instance, some comments criticized the passivity of the passengers at the subway station for not intervening to prevent Grant's death. However, other comments chided these users, saying that such actions would have surely jeopardized these bystanders' lives, and would have prevented them from filming and releasing these videos to expose the true circumstances of the BART shooting. Taken together, they reveal the complex process whereby audiences negotiate facts and opinions, and eventually reach a consensus about a particular issue. We also integrated the third aspect, forcefulness, to identify areas where audiences emphasized particular reactions to the videos. Orbe and Kinefuchi explain that these thematic insights are of significance to the analytical process, even though they may not be consistent or uniform across a particular text. For example, some words or phrases may occur in upper case and use excessive punctuation for effect. In addition, the inclusion of excessive profanity and derogatory language were also considered as expressions of forcefulness. The results of our analysis are presented in the next section.

## Results

The resultant themes consisted of two major categories: those that approved of the proactive video recording of Grant's death and those that were critical of this mode of citizen

journalism. Within these broad groupings, our analysis yielded several sub-categories. Among the negative disapproving reactions, two themes emerged: inferior film quality that failed to provide conclusive footage of the incident and criticism of these bystanders' passivity. Positive and supportive responses generated three subthemes: first, commendation for brave and vigilant fellow citizens; second, calls to challenge an oppressive law enforcement and media system through increased video surveillance; and third, cautionary praise tempered by an appeal to operate within prevailing structures for optimal results. We now examine these themes in greater depth, elaborating with examples where relevant. The original spelling and text formatting of all comments have been preserved to retain the authentic voice of the authors.

### *Anti-citizen journalism*

*'What the hell is wrong with the person filming[?]'* Some comments criticized the quality of the video footage, stating that it was impossible to determine anything because the camera was unsteady and there was too much external noise and commotion. YouTube user amerizilian stated 'it's funny how you said "I got that," because you didn't. [L]earn how to hold a camera steady' (observateur, 2009a). Other such comments included 'What the hell is wrong with the person filming[?]', and 'Geez ... c'mon you ignorant clowns, learn how to focus and shoot a camera' (observateur, 2009a). These remarks reveal viewers' dissatisfaction with the gritty and unrefined production quality of the video, and simultaneously suggest an inability to appreciate the chaotic circumstances under which the event was filmed. Rather, these users compare footage of a real fatality at a crowded subway station with the polished and slick production aesthetics characteristic of mainstream media products. Their frustration is thus indicative of a dependency on traditional video formats and conventional narrative structures.

Other comments decried the inferior picture and audio quality of the cellphone videos, questioning their validity as potential evidence in a murder trial. They argue that the shaky camera does not permit a clear view of Mehserle and Grant, making it therefore impossible to ascertain the details of the event and conclusively state whether Mehserle's actions were justified or not. One user, mozzmann, claims 'I'm just pissed at all the comments when the Video is not clear and is inconclusive, there are many confusing sounds and no motive nor cause, we will probably never know' (observateur, 2009a). Likewise, ebusive notes 'Innocent until proven guilty. All of the facts of this case have not come out yet. You shouldn't make judgements based on a shaky video shot with a cell phone' (observateur, 2009a). These arguments therefore claim that the videos cannot be permitted as clear evidence in court and simultaneously advocate a prudential assessment of the incident on the basis of the videos alone. Unlike the previous comments that merely disparage the quality of the video, these comments reveal a deeper level of engagement with the media content, as well as an inherent contemplation of the damaging repercussions of hasty conclusions.

*'Where's the compassion for a fellow human being?'* Another area of strong criticism concerned the overall passivity of the bystanders. Some comments blatantly attacked the cameraperson(s) for standing by and filming the death of a fellow human being instead of intervening to save his life. User craigd0013 said, 'He's dead and this girl is happy that

she got it on video. where's the compassion for a fellow human being? ... an unstable cop shoots a guy, and people still act ridiculous on the train. I think society is fucked' (observateur, 2009a). Kennelmouth voiced similar indignation at one of the videos:

Can someone tell me why a hundred civilians didn't think to take justice? They should have taken those cops into vigilante custody ... The bystanders here should have tried to overcome that fear, and gone after those cops instead of just filming like it was some tourist attraction (SomoshiphopRadio, 2009).

An overarching sense of frustration and despair is evident in these remarks, as well as revulsion toward individuals who can callously film an act of violence without intervening to aid the victim. Statements such as these frame citizen journalism as opting to stand by and document events as though they are a tourist attraction rather than intervene. It is possible that these users equate general insensitivity with mainstream media professional ethics, and are therefore disgusted that fellow civilians have resorted to similar behavior.

Some comments expressed more conflictual and contradictory reactions, such as cloudcompanion, who posted 'How can we forget? Has "witnessing" so many deaths on tv and film desensitised you to the weight of this human life? Do you prefer your snuff films controlled and produced?' (observateur, 2009a). This comment communicates genuine discomfort at the fact that the cameraperson has captured a real fatality on video, and simultaneously questions the ability of the producer (and viewers) to watch the film without experiencing intense emotional angst. This user's reaction criticizes the apparent inability to empathize with the loss of human life.

Other postings framed this overall passivity as an inherently US-American personality trait, suggesting that desensitization to profuse violence is typical of contemporary American society. For instance, johanivanovic stated, 'that's awesome, they catch it (almost) on film and then get on the train and bounce [leave]. right there is one of the worst and one of the best things about the U.S.' (observateur, 2009a). This comment suggested that while the USA is to be commended for the 'freedoms' that allow citizens to document such events, it also has a far more sinister side. In a similar vein, playerjake12 comments: 'In Europe, all passengers would get outta the train and beat the living hell out of the cops. In America they only video tape and shout' (SomoshiphopRadio, 2009). These critical reactions suggest that a general habituation toward violence is a systemic issue among the American populace and prevents outright intervention in a violent situation. Rather, the public tends to subscribe to a primarily passive perspective when it comes to confronting violence in real life, operating as spectators rather than activists.

### *Pro-citizen journalism*

'Thank GOD for cell phone cameras and You Tube.' The majority of viewers' comments expressed an overwhelming appreciation for modern communication technologies, as well as praise for the camerapersons' swift responses to the event as it occurred. Some of these reactions expressed gratitude, including raposofan's posting: 'Thank God for cell phone cameras' (observateur, 2009b), yodagetskkrunks remark 'thank god people were smart enough to record this!' (desertfac, 2009) and dorafang's statement 'thank you for

posting. this is citizen journalism at its finest' (SomoshiphopRadio, 2009). Still other comments implied an almost religious faith in the internet, and YouTube in particular, as a savior of the masses. The centrality of new communication technologies to modern life was emphasized in these responses. Examples include technicalfouler's 'thankfully we have the internet to prove what happened' (observateur, 2009a), and greoar's passionate plea, 'as they said: "Put that on youtube" for now internet has been our savior against a lot of political and media bullshit, everywhere in the world, so protect it!' (observateur, 2009a). These audience members' effusive gratitude for the internet and YouTube conjures up images of a dystopian reality in which YouTube does not exist, where 'political and media bullshit' run amok with nobody to keep matters in check.

Some of these comments directly engaged prior responses that accused the camerapersons and train passengers of passivity, defending their actions as proactive efforts to document reality and pursue justice. Examples include cloudcompanion's pithy retort, 'Why hate? Congratulate. This person has captured history!!' (observateur, 2009a), and prideventures' observation, 'You can hear the people who were actually there protesting the treatment of these guys' (SomoshiphopRadio, 2009). Responding to Kennelmouth's earlier tirade against passive bystanders who should have attempted to overpower the BART officers, kaponeG retaliated: 'wit what dawg? they got guns the people had cameras? If they shot that dude what the fuck u think they was gone do 2 them? IS ALWAYS EASY 2 SAY WHAT THE FUCK U WOULD DO N A SITUATION WHEN ITS NOT U ... stupid ass bastard' (SomoshiphopRadio, 2009).

These reactions suggest that although new communication technologies provide the potential for the average citizen to respond to everyday injustices and injuries, it is not often that such situations present themselves or that individuals grasp these opportunities when they become available. The overarching appreciation and gratitude expressed testifies to the need for members of the public to be more vigilant in their daily routines, and simultaneously encourages other users to contemplate the risk involved in recording and distributing controversial media content that incriminates members of the police force. This genre therefore lauds these individuals' courage and their prompt response to a volatile situation, while also defending their actions as proactive and in the interests of public welfare and justice.

*'STOP TALKING AND START SHOOTING!!!'* A second theme that emerged among supportive responses to these acts of citizen journalism advocated more militant and retaliatory actions to combat authoritative oppression. Some users highlighted the role of the internet in protecting citizens' civil rights and liberties, as evident in statonra's observation, 'Obviously the police will try to downplay this, but eventually it will go to trial and with all the video evidence there is no way he can get away with it' (observateur, 2009a). Similarly, Fayme20 noted, 'Luckily we're in the era of Youtube. The whole world will see how corrupt the boys in blue can actually be' (observateur, 2009a), and ronnpearson concluded, 'the biggest mistake by a cop ever caught on camera' (SomoshiphopRadio, 2009). Reactions such as blatz66's 'i'm just happy some one from cop watch was there (with the ability to actually use a video camera to catch the action, not just wave it around)' also suggest an aspect of community vigilance in chronicling instances of police brutality and legal violations in the interest of public safety. The comment that we are in 'the era of YouTube' suggests heavy expectations of YouTube and its Web 2.0 counterparts in the modern social tapestry.

Other comments called for more direct action, as in the case of mopunkscene's reaction, 'its fucking sad!!! we have to organize our resistance now ... it could be too late tomorrow' (observateur, 2009a), and Pepsifx357's response, 'This is what happens when people allow the Government to control the people. Fight back ... Quit letting them scare you' (SomoshiphopRadio, 2009). Similarly, blatz66 notes, 'the law protects us and gives us the right to video tape them. the only one who should fear the camera is some one trying to hide something' (SomoshiphopRadio, 2009), and gooberg corroborates this sentiment, 'i say eye for an eye ... may justice be upon you' (SomoshiphopRadio, 2009). Resistance against corrupt state authorities therefore appears to be the prime motivator behind these statements. These users advocate direct force to retaliate against what they perceive as blatant injustice. These traits are encapsulated in NEWNEW's passionate call to action: 'If a blackman can become a sniper[,] now is the time to train and start killing off this racist cops and their family. They do their dirt on camera and STILL nothing is done but start sniping these cracker cops and their families and I bet this bullshit will stop. STOP TALKING AND START SHOOTING!!!' (SomoshiphopRadio, 2009).

Reactions such as these therefore portray the internet and YouTube as providing a forum for voices of the oppressed and subjugated. It constitutes a democratic yet subversive platform where the citizen can reclaim power that has been usurped and wielded by corrupt authorities, either through direct physical action, or through technological artifacts. In this sense, these responses express a reversal of the typical Big Brother metaphor that characterizes the relation between state and citizen. Although surveillance technologies are increasingly used to scrutinize the actions of citizens, YouTube and cellphone cameras provide the opportunity to reverse this power dynamic and afford citizens the potential to monitor state agents. Therefore, the state ultimately becomes a victim of its own repressive modes and apparatuses.

*'If they are doing something bad[,] take video from a distance.'* A final subcategory expressed admiration and support for citizen journalism in general, but simultaneously advocated a more cautious response to the incident. Such comments typically recommended that the public organize their resistance through existing societal structures that do not explicitly confront and antagonize powerful societal sectors. A common characteristic of these responses was the imminent threat to the cameraperson's wellbeing, as well as the potential consequences of taking on elites. For instance, TheSonsOfLiberty1776 noted, 'Cops tried to steal womans cell phone to destroy evidence. This woman will now be killed or hurt by cops because she exposed them!' (SomoshiphopRadio, 2009). Similarly, noimoticvibe commented, 'they couldnt confiscate like they wanted to so they can supress the facts, but be sure they will spin doctor Oscar from Victim to aggitator they always do' (SomoshiphopRadio, 2009). Gzephier forecasts a bleak authoritative outcome of the incident, prophesying: 'what's gonna start happening is the government is gonna start banning people from taking video on their cell phones in public so that they can look out for the fucking cops, and so that people can't use evidence against them in public' (SomoshiphopRadio, 2009).

These remarks insinuate a repressive and totalitarian police state where information that threatens powerful figures is suppressed or destroyed. Those who challenge authority are forced to pay for their actions. Chopsuey114 makes a fervent plea, 'Ma sure everyone makes copies of this video and send it to people over the phone cause it's

going to be removed from YOUTUBE. This is huge news and it's not being show on TV' (desertfae, 2009). In such circumstances, the safest course of action is wary resistance with an eye to self-preservation, as encapsulated by Jimmymac504's comment, 'It's just a shame that this happened to the kid. The thing is stay away from cops. If they are doing something bad take video from a distance' (observateur, 2009b). On a similar note, iDULGENCE says, 'sometimes observing and taking badge numbers is the smartest thing you can do ... play the game the same way and make a paper trail for dirty officers so you can weed them out the system' (SomoshiphopRadio, 2009).

Therefore, these responses suggest that the best plan of attack involves subtle subterfuge rather than full-blown confrontation. Unlike the passionate firebrand reactions in the preceding subcategory, these users advocate a combination of prudence and vigilance for optimal results. Users are thus encouraged to work within the parameters of the system, and work the system itself for their benefit.

## Discussion

Jacobs (2000) claims that increasingly diverse and participatory media are potent agents of social change and simultaneously challenge the domination of previously inaccessible and elitist mainstream news media. The Oscar Grant shooting that was captured by subway passengers on their cellphones presents a strong case in favor of Jacobs' argument. This research project examined voluntary and spontaneous audience reactions to the online unfiltered videos of Grant's death. Our findings corroborate Donohue et al.'s (1995) proposition that the mainstream mass media operate to preserve the status quo, as evident in the conspicuous absence of this event in the mainstream news media prior to the ensuing riots and civil unrest (Vass, 2009). However, the popularity of the videos on online internet sites such as YouTube eventually led to them being broadcast on several major cable channels across the USA. In this sense, the Oscar Grant shooting presents a clear argument in favor of: vigilant and proactive citizen journalism that compensates for an otherwise lax mainstream media response, which in turn precipitates a reversal of the traditional agenda-setting prerogative of the guard-dog news media (Donohue et al., 1995).

Our results also demonstrate how online communities coalesced around myriad reactions toward Grant's death: sympathy for the life lost, resistance against oppressive authoritative figures and critical reflection regarding potential responses to the situation. The manner in which YouTube users responded to the videos and engaged each other in dialog about various aspects of the incident is evocative of Habermas's description of a democratic public sphere, or 'a network for communicating information and points of view' (Habermas, 1996: 360). However, the range of topics covered and the diverse reactions to a single event reflect the multiple publics (and their corresponding agendas) described by Jacobs (1996, 2000) and Bryant (1993), as well as the fractured and fragmentary nature of this public sphere. The assorted responses and the various subcategories therefore present potent evidence to challenge the idealistic and exceedingly rational original notion of the public sphere. We therefore posit that the availability of increasingly participatory online forums and networks necessitates a radical and systematic reconceptualization of the public sphere with regard to new communication media.

However, we acknowledge that even the virtual sphere may not be truly democratic, as evident in the more inflammatory and derogatory comments posted by certain users. It was indeed disheartening to note the excessive presence of racial slurs, outright insults and other provocative reactions that comprised the majority of all posted comments. As noted by Davis (1999), online discussion forums often tend to become controlled by the belligerent and aggressive, leading the courteous to eventually abandon participation, a likely result of the anonymous nature of virtual participatory environments. Therefore, anonymity in online discourse may give some users the license to engage in otherwise socially unacceptable behavior without having to account for their actions (Davis, 1999; Streck, 1998). While we recognize the injurious effect that forceful and explicit profanity can have on some audiences, we do not wish to discount this mode of expression as irrelevant to the public sphere. Although it may not necessarily conform to the Habermasian notion of constructive critical discourse, such content nevertheless constitutes a viable aspect of political engagement with the incident and its social repercussions, while also alluding to simmering discontent and hostility in a pluralistic urban environment.

The focus of this study was to analyze audience responses to the act of citizen journalism, and as a result, our analysis did not extend to encompass issues of race, police brutality and the role of the mainstream news media in reporting on these aspects. However, these areas present viable options for future investigation. We chose to limit our data to user comments posted as responses to the videos on YouTube, but further research could potentially examine other forms of proactive public journalism and non-mainstream media publication, such as blogs and personal websites. We also wish to emphasize that although the one-month period in the current study is useful for investigating the range of reactions to this particular incident, it is important for media scholars to conduct longitudinal analyses of other similar events to truly understand the manner in which proactive user-generated citizen journalism influences public opinion, and, by extension, how new media technologies are redefining the relationship between the media and public agendas. We also urge a thorough and systematic re-theorizing of the public sphere as it applies to new communication technologies. While we do not discount the foundations of this critical communication concept, research must begin to interrogate new discourses that extend the public sphere in directions more relevant to contemporary physical and virtual interaction.

Incidents such as Grant's murder illustrate how a single event can rupture the social fabric by reintroducing past injustices (specifically, the 1991 Rodney King beating) and raising critical questions about the nature of law enforcement with regard to minority groups. Many have referred to Grant's death as an instance of police brutality (McLaughlin et al., 2009) and an 'execution' (Egelko, 2009), accusing former BART officer Mehserle's conduct of being racially motivated. The various cellphone videos in particular have prompted much public debate about the nature of the shooting and are expected to feature as evidence at Mehserle's trial (Egelko, 2009). This incident has therefore demonstrated how technology can empower the average citizen to challenge the restrictions imposed by authority figures attempting to suppress the truth.

Finally, this research opens up several promising avenues for further investigation by new media technology scholars and theorists, not the least of which include social agency and the politics of censorship. For instance, YouTube is rapidly gaining

sociopolitical significance beyond its initial popularity as ‘a video site [built around] entertainment and social networking’ (Stross, 2008: 125), as demonstrated by events such as Oscar Grant’s death and recent coverage of election protests in Iran (Gross, 2009). As a democratic forum for otherwise oppressed voices, YouTube has afforded individuals who are victim to repressive state and federal authorities the opportunity to broadcast their strife and turmoil for the world to view. In this sense, it may be an integral tool for fostering collective action and social change among global communities and agencies, an aspect of online citizen journalism that deserves scholarly attention. Another equally intriguing area for future research regards YouTube’s ingenious community-flagging regulatory system, which uses ‘the unpaid labor of volunteers ... its users ... to flag videos’ (Stross, 2008: 192) and thereby alert YouTube about clips that contain explicit sexual or violent content, a feature that opens up the inevitable issue of *what* exactly may be considered inappropriate and *by whom*. To clarify, the set of interests that compel a user to flag content as inappropriate may stem from a variety of motivations, ranging from the altruistic impulse to protect minors and sensitive viewers from graphic and disturbing imagery, or ideological fervor and loyalty to patriarchal, puritanical or nationalistic discourses, as in the case of blocked YouTube content in China (Vascellaro and Fowler, 2009). In addition, media scholars should also explore the processes whereby YouTube (and by extension, Google) determines whether these community members’ concerns are valid and justified before removing flagged content. The fine line between altruism and corporate interests, as well as how these motivations to censor specific types of content are influenced by material benefits and fiscal profit, no doubt warrant critical scholarly investigation. Future studies can potentially interrogate the extent to which this self-imposed censorship compromises the founding premises of democratic expression and public engagement that characterize YouTube and Web 2.0.

It is clear that media scholars must continue to study how recent online interaction forums such as YouTube and Twitter affect public dialog and civic engagement (Zhou and Moy, 2007) and, more importantly, influence how news events are framed and disseminated by mainstream news media. In addition, it is vital that prominent communication news media theories that address agenda-setting and framing likewise evolve to accommodate the online and offline sociopolitical implications of new media technology.

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### **Notes**

- 1 The Habermasian notion of the public sphere has been faulted for failing to recognize issues of race, gender and class. Although the Oscar Grant shooting incident has strong racial and class-based undertones, we wish to clarify that this is not the emphasis of the current project. Rather, our focus is on the role of new media technologies in the democratization of Habermas’s original conceptualization of public sphere.

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