Torytube.ca and the Ontario 2007 Election: The Web 2.0 Politics of Embedded Political Video

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Abstract

The claim that traditional political participation has been steadily declining (Wilkins 2000) needs to be re-evaluated in light of the rise of Internet-related means of social engagement. Ian Angus holds that democratic spaces, including new web spaces, are central to the health of a democracy (Angus, 2001). What are the democratic spaces and practices enabled by Web 2.0 in the context of Canadian political culture? How, if at all, has the recent proliferation of new media technology and techniques changed the nature of political agency and participation in Canadian politics? In particular, how do Canadian political leaders and established parties use Web 2.0? This paper uses cases from the recent provincial election in Ontario to explore how Canadian politicians structure public participation and political processes. Canadian politicians have recently engaged in Web 2.0 politics with videos and social networking sites to lampoon opponents and recruit supporters. These constructions shape the agency of the user and the public within their informational political campaigns.

The paper examines the role of money, publicity, video satire, surveillance, and recruitment into overtly political associations on an Ontario Liberal video satire site called Torytube.ca. Politicians chose in this election to use the Internet as a back room for more controversial and viral campaigning, a strategy that allowed them to disavow dirty tactics in the mainstream media. Theoretically this paper compares the case of the Ontario Election to Philip N. Howard's notion of "thin citizenship" and Wendy Chun's notion of "software as ideology." How do the Web 2.0 developments of the recent Ontario election indicate the promotion of thin citizenship and appeal to default ideologies in Web practice?

"Why associate myself with Reverend Wright in the first place, they may ask? Why not join another church? And I confess that if all that I knew of Reverend Wright were *the snippets of those sermons that have run in an endless loop on the television and You Tube*, or if Trinity United Church of Christ conformed to the caricatures being peddled by some commentators, there is no doubt that I would react in much the same way. But the truth is, that isn't all that I know of the man."

Barak Obama "A More Perfect Union" speech addressing controversial video clips of his Reverend (my italics).[1]

Television and Youtube mentioned by Barak Obama during damage control, in the same breath, side by side – this is the nature of Web 2.0 politics...

I. Dingpolitik without the Ding and "Politics of Transcription"

Making Things Public / Atmospheres of Democracy[2] gives us a few excellent starting points from whence to evaluate the nature of political video in Ontario's 2007 election. Images have come a long way from the first photographs of Britain's parliament by Sir Benjamin Stone and yet the charged nature of political video evokes the memory of a threatening technology one of significant portent for making things public in democracy (Edwards & James 2005). There can be no doubt that since the time of the closed satellite and broadcast envelope of Bush Sr. vs. Clinton (Springer 2005) some new space has opened up; the public is now the producer and the satellite feed is bypassed by the handheld device. Just as reality TV transformed broadcast television, so too has the political video been transformed by embedded digital video 2.0. But one striking question may adhere to our inquiry into political videos online during the Ontario 2007 election, namely; what is Dingpolitik in relation to democracy when there is no "Ding?" I

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[1] I gratefully acknowledge CBC parliament hill journalist James Cudmore for pointing out this moment. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2008/03/18/obama-race-speech-read-t_n_92077.html
[2] *Making Things Public* was a major art exhibition (and an edited volume by the same name) curated by Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel that was housed as the ZKM, Karlsruhe. I helped to build a *Civil Society Issue Index* that was displayed at the show www.infoid.org

am not trying to be disingenuous, rather I am trying seriously to give credit to the fact that digital video has become a reality of political partisanship today, and that as such digital videos are prototypical of Web 2.0 politics; they are ephemeral (hence the no "Ding"), they are widely distributed, they are user driven and they are perhaps even more partisan and controversial than the traditional video politics we are accustomed to, and finally they are often done on the cheap.

In the same collection L. Mondada examines the way a public at a speech comes into being and the way this constitution of an audience is portrayed by media. "Audio or video recordings of these events provide the possibility of understanding the interactional organization of collective action, as it is done in a local, emergent, contingent way through the lively details participants use as resources for coordinating their conduct" (Mondada 2005: 876) I agree with Mondada's analysis, and this articulation holds true for the video recordings examined in this essay. The digital dissemination of transcripts, audio and video recordings amount to a virtual public in action, and a digital extension of political speech. This is an important part of the phenomenon of web 2.0 video. The goal of a political video circulated via web 2.0 techniques is to relay a message and gather support, however the critical difference from a traditional political speech is the distributed nature of the audience, and the individual control of when a video will be viewed, and to some extent what else will be done with it. In web 2.0 video politics there is an interesting tendency towards chaos, and there are two main themes I will explore to elucidate this new politics 2.0 strategy; the digital political video as "issue object" and, borrowing from Mondada, the "politics of transcription" that she describes in the case of textual transcription of political speeches but that is also in play in the code transcription of videos as well as politics 2.0 strategizing. To explore these themes I will variously evaluate the technologies, practices and discourses making up the environment of video politics in the Ontario election of 2007. The findings of this research come, in particular, from examining the overlap between these three fields (technology, practices, discourses) when it comes to political videos online.
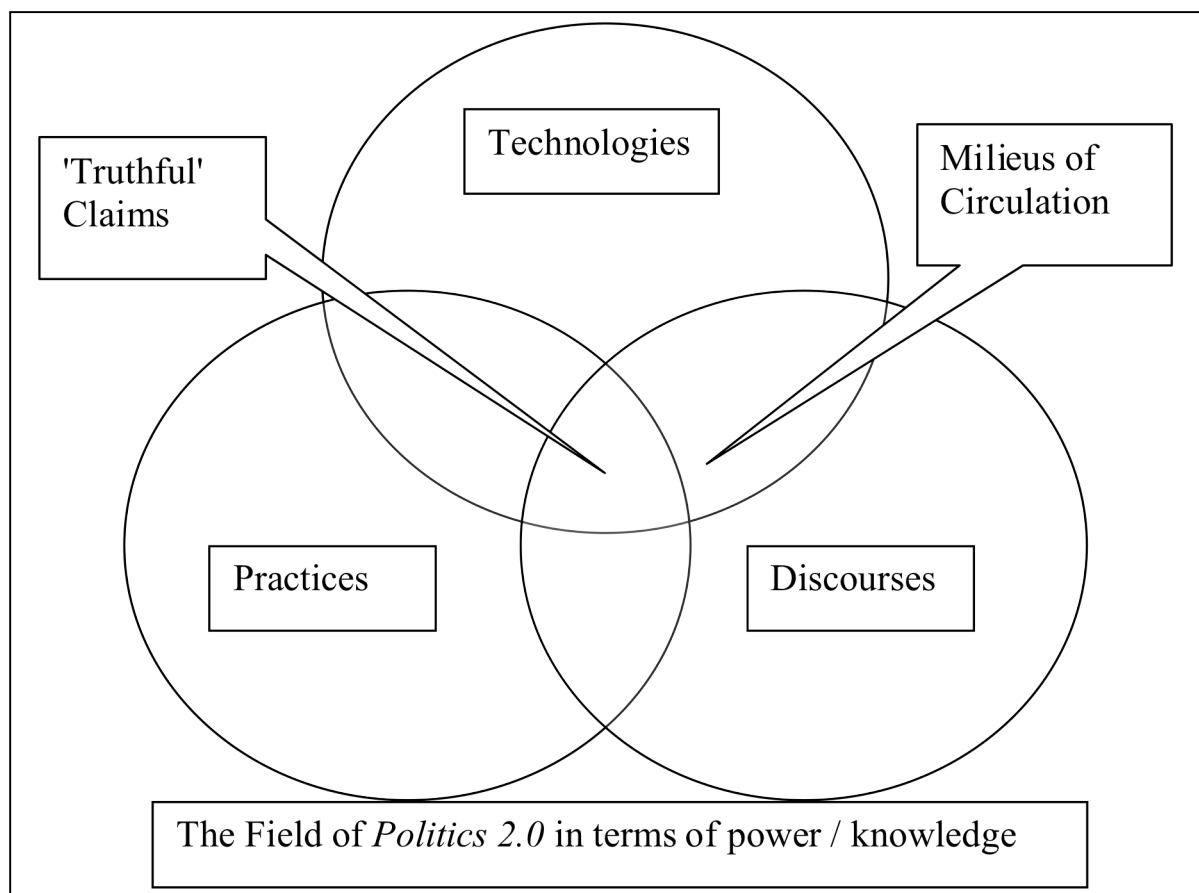
Figure 1 : Three overlapping fields of *Politics 2.0*

II. The embedded video as 'issue object'

What is the object of video politics in an electoral campaign in the age of web 2.0? Based on our research into the Ontario election of 2007, I argue that the basic element is the digital video online. It constitutes a most interesting dingpolitik, with an ephemeral thing and a surplus of politics. These videos may be mainly understood as "issue objects" circulating and being viewed within what Foucault calls a "milieu of circulation" in

particular the milieu of circulation established by web 2.0 platforms (Foucault 2007). Given the option to produce such videos in the online environment, what does one do? It is not network or cable TV, it is rather an environment marked by both stratification and a degree of chaos on account of the vertical and yet participatory nature of web 2.0 platforms.

What are the flows that accrue to these issue objects? Who are the proponents, who are the producers, and who are the viewers? What are the platforms and practices that mark the organization of political videos? And, last but not least, what are the discourses that result from this interaction of technology and practice? These are the questions I will briefly attempt to answer through an examination of political videos from the Ontario 2007 provincial election in Canada.

First of all, what is the digital video as a thing (or 'ding') and why is it an issue object? To answer this we need to start with the basic building block that is at the centre of this research project; the digital video online. The digital video, as an issue object is a type of atom. It is a software format combined with a Web 2.0 business / code model. It is a nonhuman in a network. It is reproducible and ephemeral. The key quality is its digitality and its transportability. The key decision for issue objects of this type is 'To share or Not to share?' I argue that this decision takes place within the triangulation of technology, practice and discourse that constitutes what I call *politics 2.0* or, how to do politics with and through web 2.0 media and techniques.

Embedded video code sample for "John Tory tries to speak French, por favor!:"

```
<object width="425" height="355"><param name="movie"
value="http://www.youtube.com/v/PaVou_LTK3Q&hl=en"></para
m><param name="wmode"
value="transparent"></param><embed
src="http://www.youtube.com/v/PaVou_LTK3Q&hl=en"
type="application/x-shockwave-flash" wmode="transparent"
width="425" height="355"></embed></object>
```

This is the code that is offered to reproduce any given political video on Youtube. Note that you are asked whether or not you would like to include related videos with your embed. If a political campaign is successful in reaching the top of the returns for a search string (e.g. opponent's name) then the chances are high that other videos from the same source will be recommended by Youtube. However the important thing is that the video can be embedded into any HTML markup website or blog. In this way we see that both through the transcription of the embed code and the application of a referral system, the aggregator influences the creation of meaning within the actor network (Latour 2005; Langlois 2006). Tapping into these networks is key for political video campaigns.

III. Methodology:

- Search terms: "John Tory" "Dalton Mcguinty" "Howard Hampton" "Ontario Election"
- Python script to query YouTube and capture videos / views
- Research (dig) into sources – code
- View videos and code for tone & affiliation
- Assemble Spreadsheet
- Visualizations (ReseauLu)

Resulting corpus:

- 7 weeks of top 5 videos for each candidate
- 6 weeks of top 5 videos for "Ontario Election"
- Total = 110 video entries

- Fields: Leader, Date, Title, URL, Upload Date, Views Last Week, Affiliation, Tone, Uploader.

Data Sample:

Leader	Date	Title	URL	Upload Date	Views Last Week	Affiliation	Tone	Uploader
John Tory	17-Aug	John Tory Platform Costing	http://www.youtube.com/?v=JDBcA7--NPE	13-Jul-07	2244	Unknown	3	saltymariner
John Tory	17-Aug	We won't be fooled again	http://www.youtube.com/?v=VaMxdQQLf50	26-Jul-07	1899	Unknown	3	Politicalguise
John Tory	17-Aug	Live News Update with Ben Chin	http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A89QuQNYsgs	11-Jun-07	1228	Unknown	3	October102007
John Tory	17-Aug	Let's Get it Started	http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jb57w3y14Ok	8-Aug-07	1194	Unknown	3	Politicalguise
John Tory	17-Aug	Why we Support John Tory	http://www.youtube.com/?v=8VTj75pyHX4	19-Apr-07	420	PC	1	johntory2007
Dalton McGui	17-Aug	Priorities	http://www.youtube.com/?v=5ZHxF_szUos	3-Jul-07	1919	NDP	3	GetOrange
Dalton McGui	17-Aug	Opening Canada's largest Hindu Temple	http://www.youtube.com/?v=Gvj7aVoUeo0	24-Jul-07	732	Liberal	1	premierofontario
Dalton McGui	17-Aug	Dalton McGuinty: Liberals Working	http://www.youtube.com/?v=_AePMz5oK7q	17-Jun-07	554	Unknown	1	JoeLiberal07
Dalton McGui	17-Aug	MoveOntario 2020 Vid 5	http://www.youtube.com/?v=Bo0TdZbzL-U	17-Jun-07	414	Unknown	2	nathburg2003

What resulted was a unique database related to the Ontario election of 2007. All of the results are on our website www.infoscapelab.ca although some of the charts I will show you here are derived from the new research I have undertaken (they will be posted later).

From this data several facets of video politics emerged:

- Types of 'broadcasters'
- Official e.g. Premierofontario vs. Unofficial e.g. Premierpinocchio sources
- Aggregators

But, perhaps most indicative of web 2.0 and, arguably most interesting, was the 'embed this video' code discussed above that allows a user to 'lift' a video from its source location, reproducing it elsewhere. It is important to note, in this aspect, that examining political video requires us to enter into software studies. Embedded video code is dependent upon how the video object is transcribed into the code environment. As such it is an example of what Adrian Mackenzie calls "practical virtuality" a trancoding articulation of video politics into the Web 2.0 arena (Mackenzie 2006). As we shall see, this virtual articulation shapes the possibilities for campaign politics, and can be managed more or less well by political actors.

IV. Modes of officialdom - Code Structure of Torytube.ca (and NDP4Tory.ca)

On Youtube, where this video contest was primarily fought, two official accounts serve the largest parties. The account *JohnTory2007* represents officially the Progressive Conservative party with 60 videos. *Premier of Ontario* is an official account of Dalton McGuinty, leader of the governing Liberals, and houses 37 videos. The Premier of Ontario account is additionally linked to the official (governmental) website of the Premier's office.

Torytube.ca, by comparison, is a stylized rogue site. What is a rogue? "Domain name fudging, in combination with either satire or impostering, constitutes rogueing." (Rogers, 2000). Famous examples include www.gwbush.com and www.gatt.org the later being the WTO parody site of The Yes Men. In a nutshell Torytube is a website that is claimed by the liberals only in the very small fine print. Otherwise it is left to the user to decide what the editorial stance is of the site and whom it comes from. The conclusion can't help but be negative, but it is not explicitly stated as an objective of the site anywhere. So Torytube is something of a trojan horse. What is interesting about the structure of the Torytube site is that it is heavily dependent upon a complimentary 'torytube' Youtube account. Torytube the site, aside from a repository of news clippings, is really a stand-alone showcase of embedded videos from the torytube Youtube account. There are 27 videos on the torytube Youtube account in total, with the most significant videos being repeated on the Torytube website.

It is rather important to note, in terms of Web 2.0 politics, that although the Torytube website looks rather professional its content is primarily dependent upon other aggregators, with Youtube being the most conspicuous. Thus we see a major attack mechanism powered at its core by a free user account at a public aggregator. Torytube does not even try to create stand-alone videos, everything is an embedded clip with the goal of being as viral as possible. Considering the code structure of this site and its reliance on Youtube, it would seem to be a model of cost and message control efficiency. We can only speculate how much the sister site cost, but it is not complicated enough to be extremely expensive. And this politics 2.0 strategy had an impact as an examination of the number of Torytube videos in the top viewership results for the 4 weeks of the campaign is significant (as our figures below reveal).

When pressed the liberals admitted ownership of Torytube.ca, however it is clearly a strategic decision to rogue the opponent and the media. What we see in the case of the Liberal campaign is that neither the Premier's site nor the Premier's YouTube channel carried out the most offensive video politics in the Web 2.0 strategy of the incumbents. Rather Torytube served as the platform for the more aggressive side of the campaign, aided by other, even less official liberal supporters who circulated videos. TheTorytube name sounds like something that could be supportive of the PCs, and the design of the site and its content masquerade as objective journalism. This is not a new phenomenon, but in this long tradition the new component is the embedded video clip, especially considering the ubiquitous video surveillance the PC leader, John Tory, was subject to during the campaign. Some of the most striking clips are a result of this 'over your shoulder' type of videography – and they were successfully spread to audiences through the Torytube account and site.

Thus we see, since the actual content is distributed and the platforms non-proprietary, a unique politics 2.0 strategy – the augmentation of web 2.0 enabled practices via additional technology, with consequences for the creation of discourses favourable to the Liberal campaign. In the week of SEP-14th 4 out of 5 videos for John Tory were Liberal sourced and negative. Indeed by the last week of the campaign all top 5

most viewed videos related to John Tory originated with Torytube (& Politicalguise), and were all conclusively negative towards the PC leader. None of the other parties were able to manifest such a coherent and concentrated 2.0 video strategy over the course of the campaign.

Drilling down we see the phenomenon of disguised partisanship; Politicalguise & Torytube overlap in their content despite the fact that Politicalguise is, aside from its cheeky name, unaffiliated. Furthermore, as discussed above aggregator recommendations based on metatags and viewership behavior affect meaning in the actor network. This fact can be extended as a means of understanding the Liberal video strategy – when it is examined closely we see the effects of practical virtuality and software as ideology (Mackenzie 2006: Chun 2005). The existence of the Youtube platform influences the practices of the campaign, and the resulting heterogeneous networks have consequences for the truth claims and discourses circulating online and presented to voters.

V. NDP4TORY.ca

The Torytube website, not content with fighting an offensive battle against the PC leader through the propagation of negative videos, quotes (Tory's head floating in the top left 'talks' as the quotes scroll out on screen) and news stories, also spreads the invective through a second, sister site called NDP4Tory.ca which is dedicated to attacking the socialist New Democrat Party. Thus we see politics 2.0 involves, in this case, rogues within rogues, a kind of link-based formation that is unified horizontally by linkage and vertically by aggregator hosted content. The Liberal video attack on the main opponent, the PC's is a kind of 'head on' battle, with a replete news archive focusing on the most divisive issue of the campaign, the PC proposal to extend public funding to faith based schools. The attack on the NDP however, is more of a 'battle of position' as the NDP rogue site mocks the socialists for supporting the progressive conservatives, asserting the message that a vote for the NDP is really a vote for the PCs. However when we dig

beneath the surface of the NDP4Tory attack site, we see that the video content is, once again, the Torytube Youtube account.

VI. The Three Fields of Politics 2.0 (In the 2007 Ontario Election)

Technologies (& Hubs):
- Video formats & code transcriptions
- Aggregators, especially YouTube
- Blogs
- Official Party Sites
- Party politics 2.0 'strategic' sites eg. Torytube.ca
- Mediasphere

Practices (& Participants):
- Amateur production eg. Liberal Youth
- Ubiquitous surveillance on the campaign trail
- Linking
- Embedding
- Official Releases
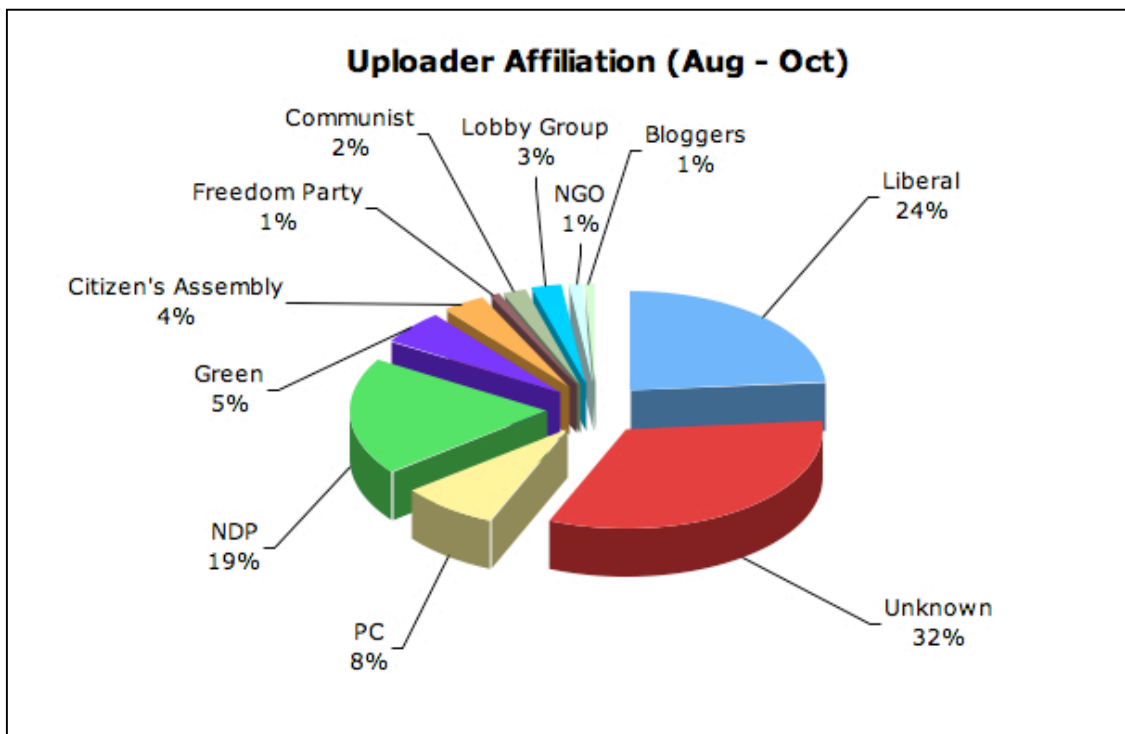- Viral strategies e.g. 'rebroadcasting content' & 'functional redundancy'
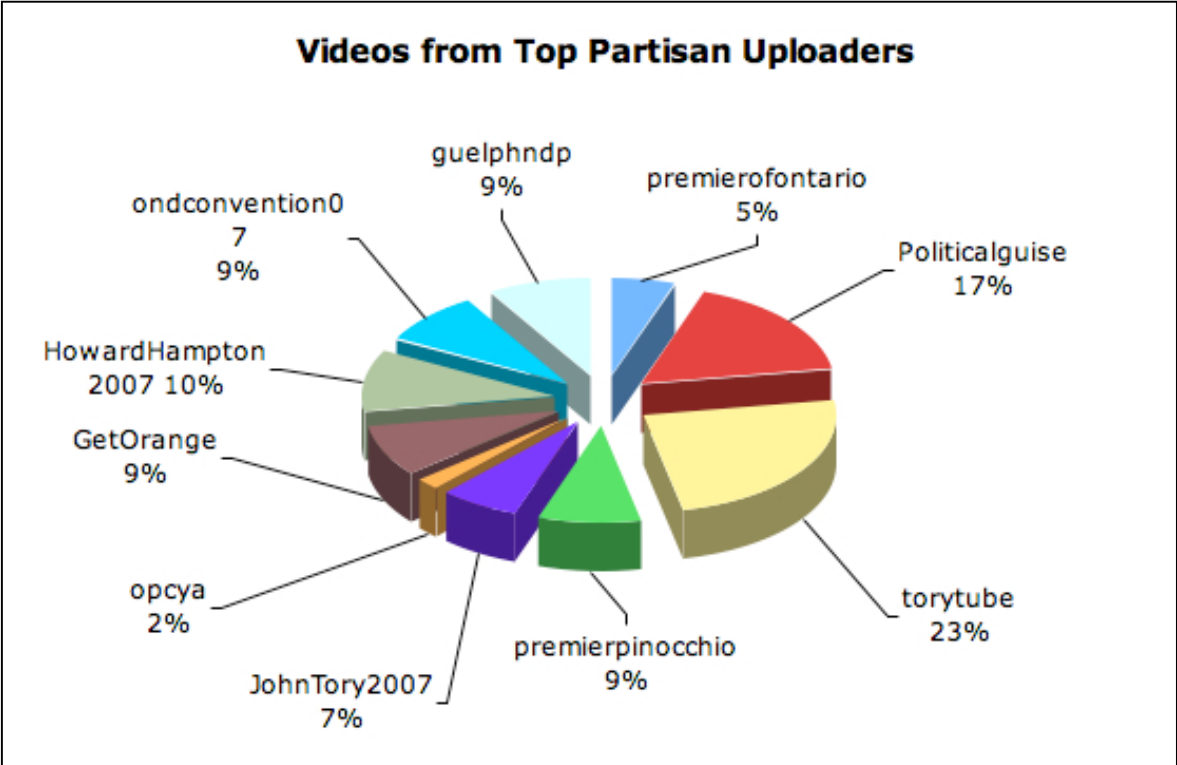
Discourses (& Tone / Issues):
- Comments (not very many) & Negativity (very much)
- Narrative of the issue object (NDP4TORY.ca & Sticky Notes)
- News stories 'about buzz' (Importance of links from media & blogs)
- Feedback / tipping point (Religious schools scolding)

VII. Charts and Figures:

Statistical Snapshots:

- Pie Chart of sources – entire campaign & top partisans

- Gapminder chart (average negativity X total views per leader)

- Leader X Uploader network graphs

Uploader Affiliation (Aug - Oct)

Communist 2%
Lobby Group 3%
Bloggers 1%
Freedom Party 1%
NGO 1%
Citizen's Assembly 4%
Green 5%
Liberal 24%
NDP 19%
PC 8%
Unknown 32%

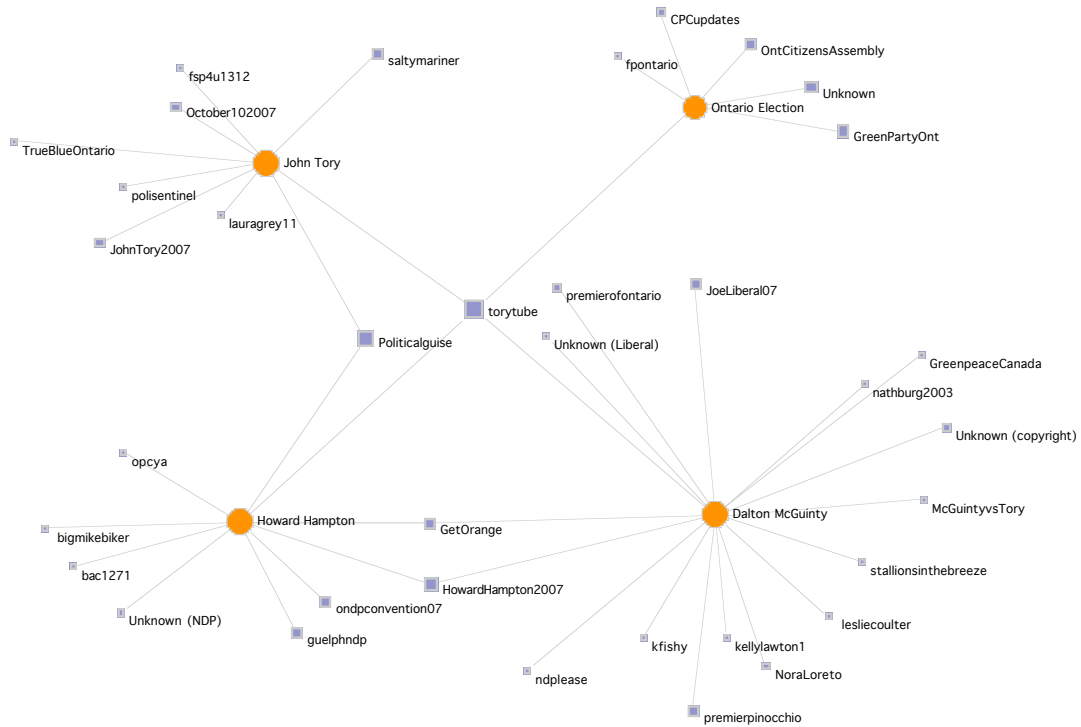**Videos from Top Partisan Uploaders**

NDP = 37%

PC = 18%

Liberal = 45%

'Gapminder' Google Charts showing the leaders as dots (size indicates total viewership) moving over time on a graph plot with the average tone to the left and the total viewership below.
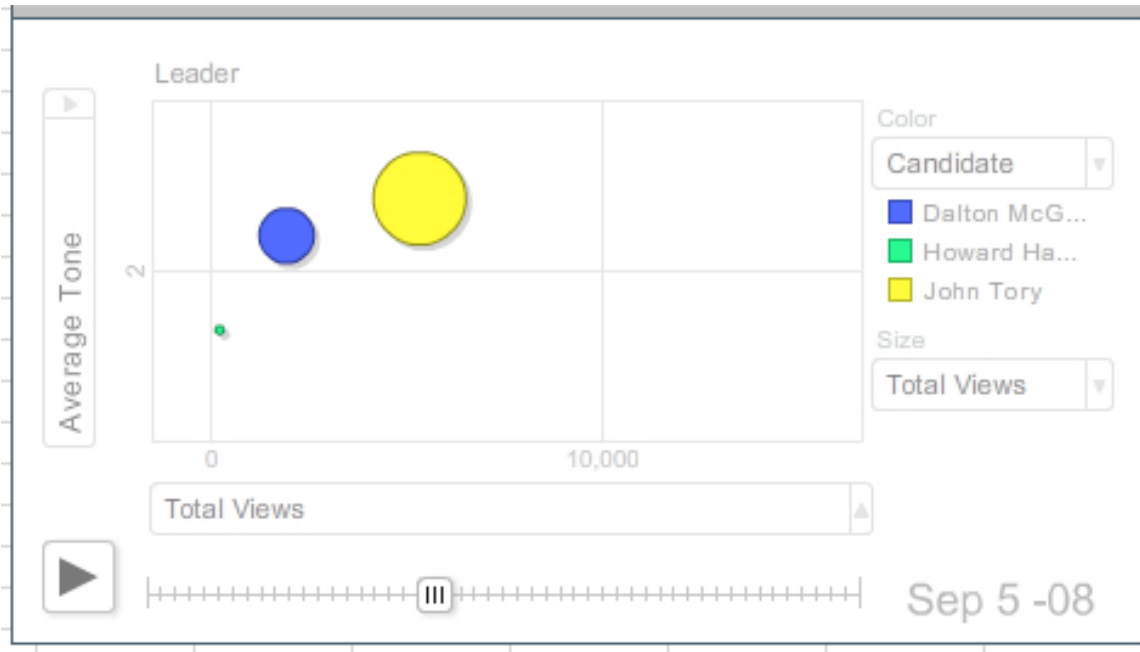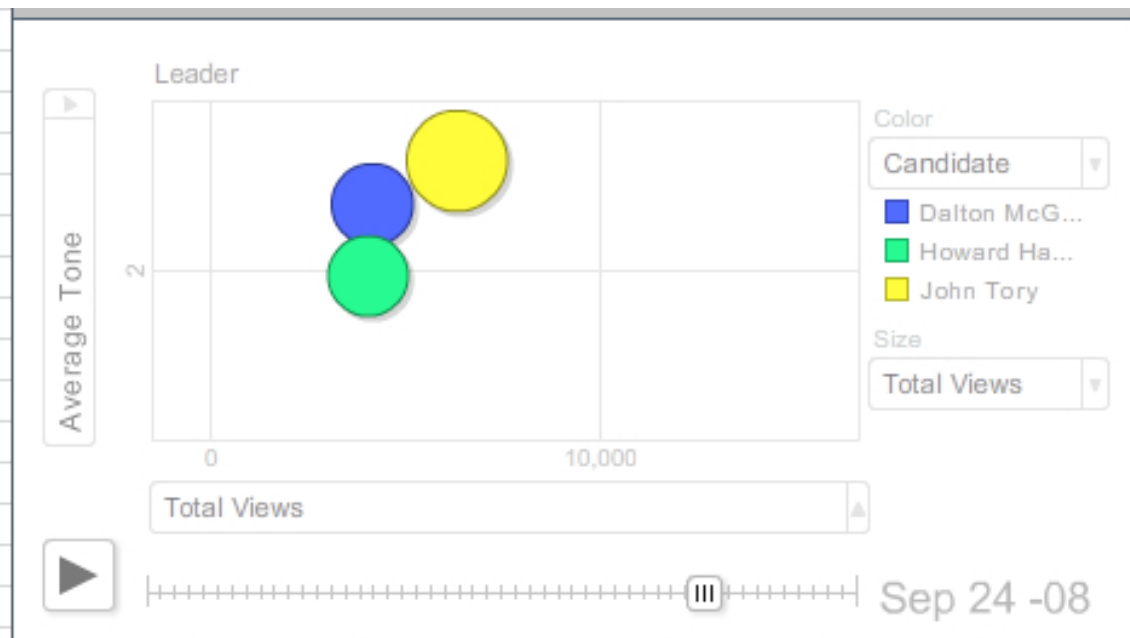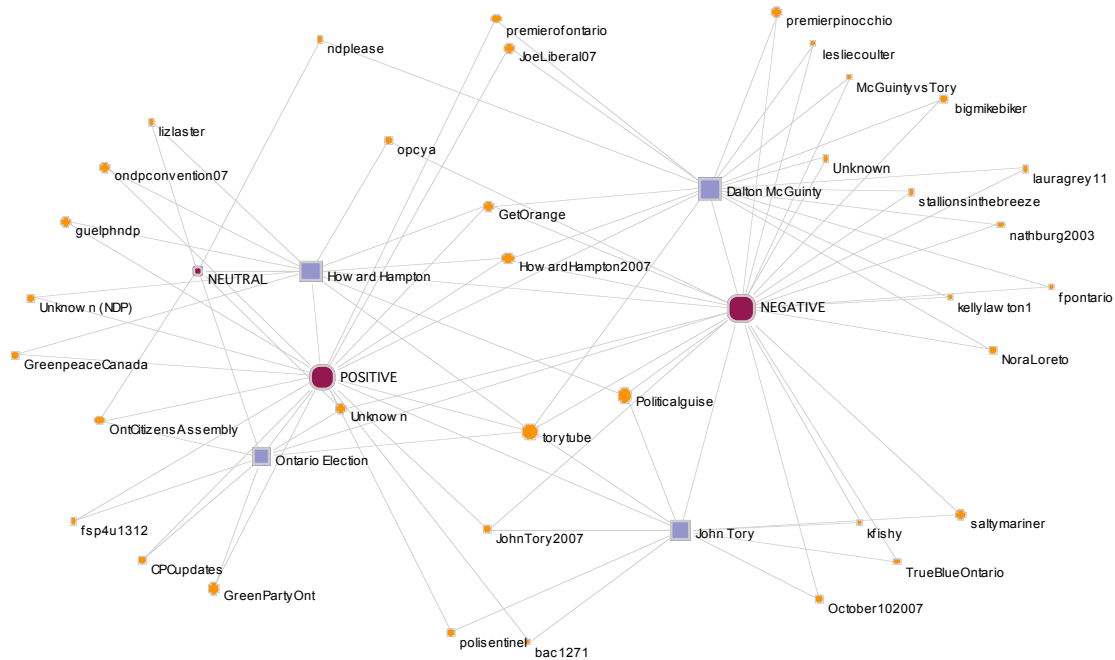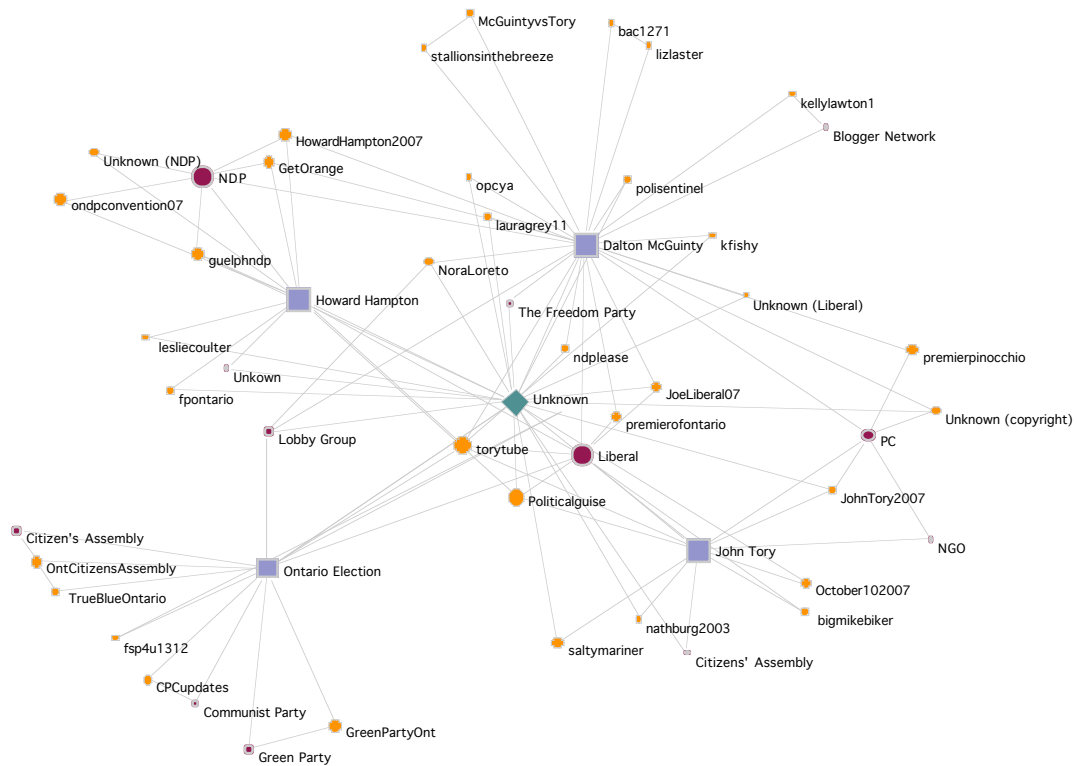
Leader X Uploader

Torytube touches on all the leaders, Politicalguise on the Liberal's opponents. The (official) NDP accounts GetOrange and HowardHampton2007 focus on their own leader and McGuinty. Official Liberal (premierofontario) and PC (JohnTory2007) accounts stick to their own leader.

Uploader X Leader X Tone

Overall "Ontario Election" and "Howard Hampton" are the most positive. Dalton McGuinty (Liberal incumbent) is negatively covered by a host of unofficial blogs which far outnumber the firepower of his official opponents. However, although less numerous the Liberal platforms (torytube and Politicalguise) outstrip all others in saliency and negativity towards the Liberal's opponents.

Leader X Affiliation X Uploader

Fringe parties (marginal voices?) gather around "Ontario Election" including the Citizen's Assembly dedicated to a failed Mixed Member Proportional electoral system referendum. McGuinty is awash in undeclared independent uploaders, but his own platforms stay strong against his opponents. John Tory is also touched by independents, but his own partisans are few and have less impact than the Liberals or NDP.

Leader X Uploader X Affiliation X Tone

Marginal voices and the NDP are the most positive, while McGuinty and Tory gravitate towards the negative, torytube and Polticalguise dominating all the while.

(Discourse) Turning Points:

- Trojan Horses – Media uptake & repurposing
- Message Rogues: "Get Orange" vs. "Forget Orange"
- Surveillance "Gotchas" : "University of Zero" & "Por Pavor" & "Religious Schools Scolding"
- Culture Jams: "Price Costing (I'm a PC)" & "Dalton Mcguinty's Greatest Hits" & "Simpson's Dalton McGuinty (removed due to copyright)"

Conclusion:

Practical virtuality – permanent memory – ubiquitous surveillance – software as ideology – media reverb... These tendencies have consequences for the political animal as politician and strategist. Not to mention the public, the voter, and the media. As we have seen, some campaigns have already begun to think in a new way when it comes to politics 2.0, and in this case examined here, the results have been notable. The key tendencies are flattening, flexibility and efficiency, as well as a tendency to promote controversy and identity games. It seems the Web 2.0 is a space for marginal voices and a more derogatory type of partisan video, however it is striking to note that the presence of Youtube clearly shaped the video strategy of all parties, with the Liberals executing a hydra like approach that was the most successful in targeting opponents.

In this way Youtube has taken a place alongside television as a front in any modern campaign, lending credence to the claim that Web 2.0 platforms do act in an ideological capacity (Chun 2005). The consequences for citizenship are harder to gauge, but the overall picture is one of sporadic and limited participation by a host of individuals opposed to a given candidate. This plethora of individual voices were joined at the lower end of the scale by fringe parties and public service campaigns. But in the end, citizens and small parties could not compete with the focused strategies of the major parties, which were significantly aided by the structure of the Web 2.0 aggregator, Youtube. Thus while we may not exactly see a 'thinning down' of citizenship a la P.N. Howard (2006), we do see an increase in undeclared affiliation, controversy focused videos, and limited opportunities for culture jamming due to copyright constraints. Youtube, as a Web 2.0 platform may seem to increase horizontal equivalence amongst uploaders, but the Ontario 2007 provincial election showed clearly how an incumbent campaign well versed in *politics 2.0* can dominate this ostensibly more democratic medium.

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