Trolling as Provocation: YouTube’s Agonistic Publics

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Abstract

This paper explores the productive role of provocation in YouTube publics in the context of two culturally and geographically situated visual events that took place in New Zealand throughout 2011. Through qualitative analysis of the extensive comments fields for the two videos, the paper examines the nature of participatory acts associated with what has been called at different times flaming, hating or trolling. The paper argues that such acts can only be properly understood within their cultural and geographic context, and in their ability to affect and extend ‘agonistic’ publics. The analysis addresses online passion, conflict and vitriol through the notion of ‘acts of citizenship’, as productive forms of provocation.

Keywords

Provocation, trolling, YouTube, social media, disaster, flash mob, agonistic pluralism, publics, digital citizenship

Introduction

What is broadly referred to as digital citizenship is usually concerned with ethical behaviour in online environments, and takes aim at problematic or aberrant forms of participation. Through a related lens, references to ‘trolls’, troll histories and sites, trolling events and behaviours have caught the attention of mainstream media and have begun to feature in ethnographic scholarship. Both frames of reference, however, can easily elide the complex set of practices, ways of acting, and modes of use and participation that are encompassed by the participatory potential of many online platforms. At worst, they advocate for online spaces that are affectless. A dynamic or pluralistic participatory experience includes not just being affected by new forms and flows of
networked media content and communication, but also the power to affect with new forms of reciprocal capacity to act out and even ‘act up’. That is, participation includes activism, resistance and conflict as much as the creative deployment of new media literacies and productive cultures of media co-creation encompassed by ideal forms of networked publics.

This paper examines the emergence of what might be considered by some as problematic networked publics in the context of YouTube videos of public events, and forms of engagement that may be typically described as aberrant, as exhibiting qualities of ‘trolling’ or ‘hating’. The analysis here demonstrates, though, that as acts, as cultures of practice and as modes of social media use and participation, what has come to be called trolling should be taken as a starting point rather than a vague end point for understanding the place of provocation in its multiple, highly contextualised and always changing forms. As they are levelled at the various aberrant uses of successive networked and participatory media sites, the terms flaming, hating and trolling become increasingly ineffectual. Rather than isolating the characteristics of trolls my aim here is to shift the focus to the multifarious and sometimes quite inane acts of provocation that characterise YouTube video and comment spaces. The main contention here is that provocation should be understood in context and examined in terms of the way it can not only problematise, but also productively intensify, vitalise and sustain publics within social media sites. The analysis is framed by Isin and Nielsen’s (2008) notion of acts of citizenship, as a way of rethinking the common sense of the term digital citizenship that positions provocation, vitriol and conflict as ‘aberrant’ forms of online participation. I position such conflict as a productive element of social media spaces by reference to the political theory of ‘agonistic pluralism’ as conceived by Chantal Mouffe (2000). Agonistic pluralism describes modes of democratic sociality that are always and necessarily contested, where conflict remains ineradicable, but may be productively accommodated by social institutions and platforms that allow space for the flow of passion and contested interaction among adversaries.

The context for this research is two events that occurred in New Zealand in 2011: a major earthquake in Christchurch on February 22, and a ‘flash mob’ performance of a haka (traditional Maori war cry or challenge) in an Auckland shopping centre on September 4. These typify the kinds of events that initiate a broad local, national and international sphere of public engagement particularly through the access afforded by platforms such as YouTube. Following both of these events, videos were uploaded to YouTube, and in the subsequent months attracted a significant number of views and global attention. The two videos attracted extensive and at times intensely vitriolic comments and exchanges (there were more than 18,000 comments for the earthquake video and over 2,500 for the flash haka). In association with the public events they record, the two videos are themselves provocative of empathy or cultural pride. In this sense, for many users and
onlookers the vitriolic quality of much of the expression associated with these particular videos is particularly disturbing because it grates with a normative encounter with the events depicted.

The videos of the Christchurch earthquake and Auckland flash mob haka were chosen for a number of reasons. The devastating scale of the Christchurch earthquake drew global attention at a time when other large-scale disasters such as the earthquake in Haiti (2010) and earthquake and Tsunami in Japan (2011) were dominating global and social media. Likewise, the flash haka was linked directly to the Rugby Union World Cup held in New Zealand in September 2011, which drew extensive international television audiences. In this sense, both videos address or work to generate local, regional and global publics giving rise to both widespread attention and potential for conflict among commenters. Comparing the participatory fields for both a traumatic and celebratory event paints a more detailed picture of the centrality of provocation and the complexity of vitriolic forms of expression and exchange in the production of YouTube’s contested, pluralistic publics.

**YouTube, social media publics and digital citizenship**

Most observers and commentators note that YouTube is a highly unstable and dynamic entity evolving constantly through iterations of interface, structures, rules, norms and cultures of use, and in terms of the millions of hours of video content that constitutes one key part of its raison d’être. As a repository for digital video, YouTube hosts both mainstream commercial video production and vernacular and user-generated video, with capacity for user commenting and interaction. The global accessibility of the site and the enormous cache of video have contributed to the increase in video viewing online. As of May 2011, according to the Pew Research Centre, 71% of adult Internet users in the US reported viewing videos through sites such as YouTube or Vimeo, a 5% increase from 2010, and a 38% increase from 2006 (Moore, 2011: 2,3). Capturing by far the largest share of Internet video production and consumption, YouTube has achieved mainstream status.

Rather than simply a new site for traditional commercial media consumption, Burgess and Green see YouTube as ‘operating as a coordinating mechanism between individual function and collective creativity and meaning production’ (Burgess and Green, 2009: 37). The audience or user centred perspective is vital, they argue, to understanding the cultural or social impact of YouTube. And while Snickars and Vonderau (2009: 12) note the common perspective on the typical ‘YouTuber’ as someone who ‘just surfs the site occasionally, watching videos and enjoying it’, with only the minority uploading the vast content, YouTube plays a significant role in creating ‘content communities’ and spaces for ongoing interaction. In its early iterations at least, YouTube’s important generative function has emerged from its multiple roles ‘as a high-volume website, a broadcast platform, a media archive, and a social network’ (Burgess and Green, 2009: 5). This combines with
the central role that broadcast and print media have played in creating the kinds of “big-media”-related events’ that drove attention to particular YouTube videos and helped make it the place to view and upload video (Burgess and Green, 2009: 3). A number of design iterations between 2006 and 2012 have emphasised the social networking aspect of the site, and YouTube has encouraged user registration and foregrounded ‘channels’ around which the platform’s social networking functions operate. Patricia Lange (2008a: 362) also identifies the formation of YouTube communities in the practices through which ‘participants manipulate media to maintain social networks and intimacy amid public scrutiny’.

The conflict, and subsequent moral panics, often associated with the use of YouTube by young people is often associated with the relative lack of constraints placed on posting videos or commenting. Burgess and Green cite the work of Drotner, (2008) and Jenkins et al. (2006) to frame forms of YouTube participation in terms of new media literacies, where ‘active and creative participation might also be used to help young people learn to be more “critical” of media messages’ (Burgess and Green, 2009: 71). Commenting and sharing are important components in this sense of active and creative participation. In a large scale study of YouTube comments, Thelwall and Pardeep (2011) examine the characteristics of authors of comments, of the comments themselves, and the topics and factors that trigger and sustain comments. They contend that commenters are on average in their late twenties and come from a range of countries, though around a third identify as from USA (Thelwall and Pardeep, 2011: 7, 9). Amongst other results, they found a high prevalence of negative comments in videos with a high total number of comments, and that controversial or perhaps ‘provocative’, topics such as politics and religion were most likely to trigger and sustained comments and discussion (Thelwall and Pardeep, 2011: 14). This signals the importance of the economy of attention that can build around particular videos, and indicates the kinds of contested publics that can form around particular online content as well as the counter uses and potential for conflict within the site. Within the comments field there is extensive scope for reactive, ‘deviant’ or ‘aberrant’ participation. As an aspect of the contested terrain around ‘digital citizenship’ it is this power to act, or to ‘act-up’ that I will explore here through a review of approaches to what has been deemed problematic participation through notions such as flaming, hating and trolling, and by developing a less reactive concept of provocation as an aspect of ‘agonistic’ publics to account for these powers of expression and participation enabled by YouTube.

The notion of citizenship has its origins in the nineteenth century and is commonly understood in relation to those rights, obligations, duties and forms of conduct associated with a nation state. Contest over the term revolves around the discord between the ‘formal’ and ‘substantive’ aspects of citizenship, between its ‘relational status (mutual obligations) and individual identity (personal attributes)’ (Hartley, 2012: 136). This is particularly pressing in those acts, obligations and behaviours associated with ‘networked publics’ (Ito, 2008). For Hartley (2012: 14), ‘Citizenship has
changed by being practiced in conditions of semiotic plenty, play, and commercial consumer culture, all of which are amplified, networked, and coordinated anew in online media’. In addition, and counter to the often idealised understandings of online participation, ‘citizenship is at heart a combative (ideological, mythologizing) term, with a long history of bloodshed, struggle, resistance, hope, fear, and terror caught up in its train’ (Hartley, 2012: 136). In seeking to understand the multi-forms of citizenship, as political, economic, and cultural, (Hartley, 2012: 141, 2), Hartley notes the ‘do-it-yourself’ cultures of contemporary networked media, pointing to George McKay’s (1998: 37) account of citizenship as ‘the right to protest and the right to dance’ (Hartley, 2012: 144). In this sense, the work of cultural production in the form of TV satire, satirical news shows, and demotic YouTube video production performs a productive form of what Hartley calls ‘silly citizenship’, giving rise, also, to new sites of conflict negotiated through the sometimes combative ‘formation and expression of relational identities’ (2012: 152).

**Aberrant participation: From flaming, hating and trolling, to agonistic provocation**

Research and scholarship on flaming, and more recently hating and trolling spans two decades’ worth of dramatic change to, and expansion of, networked computer mediated communication. In attempting to isolate what is unique to new media environments, this scholarship is often highly technical and platform specific. Much of the research has focussed on, and consequently been criticised for its technological determinism, favouring a model of mediation that attempts to link reduced non-verbal cues to decreased inhibitions and thus an increase in conflict (Milne, 2010: 171). The persistent belief in the transformative effects of reduced interactive cues, altered feedback structures and flexible identification (or anonymity) offers a tempting, though problematic, starting point for categorising new forms of antagonistic online behaviour.

Attempts to define and refine flaming as a distinct category of ‘problematic message’ have not, however, resulted in conceptual agreement. O’Sullivan and Flanagan (2003) focus on the ‘importance of the message sender’s intent’ despite difficulty in ascertaining that intent through available research methods including interviews. Lange (2006a, 2006b), on the other hand explores the ‘flame claim’, de-emphasising intent to focus instead on the experience of the recipient of hostile messages. As empirical confirmation, one study of YouTube users tellingly identifies some degree of uncertainty from users about what flaming actually is, and disagreement as to whether particular comments or videos could be considered flames or not (Moor et al., 2010: 1544). Moor et al. point out that some flamers intentionally offend others, but most of what is considered flaming by their definition (‘displaying hostility by insulting, swearing or using otherwise offensive
language’), is simply meant to express disagreement or an alternative opinion or humorous play (Moor et al., 2010: 1537). Ultimately, for Milne, ‘much of the literature of flaming has understood the phenomenon to operate as a unified, empirically verifiable, unproblematic, socio-linguistic category’ (2010: 172), and Milne repeats Vrooman’s (2002) point that research on flaming is profoundly ahistorical and decontextualised. Like Vrooman, Milne argues that ‘the view that flaming is an aberration and a deviation from an ideal of calm communication, needs to be revised’ (2010: 172).

Recent studies have altered and refined the language used to categorise different forms of online expression and interaction, to either reflect the terms used by users themselves or to account for the specificity of practices, the variety of genres of antagonism and vitriol, and their differences to earlier Internet contexts. In the context of social media sites such as YouTube, Facebook and Twitter, the terms ‘trolling’ or ‘hating’ have become more common than flaming. In an early piece on identity and virtual community Donath (1999: 43) positions trolling in newsgroups as a form of deception and manipulation, often with tacit consent of community members, but with the potential to disrupt, offend or ‘disseminate bad advice’. Taking up Donath’s identity deception focus, Dahlberg (2001) sees trolling as aiming to ‘embarrass, anger, and disrupt’, and states that ‘it is often undertaken merely for amusement, but is sometimes driven by more ‘serious’ motives including political goals’ (Dahlberg, 2001). More recently, and in the context of the Reddit.com discussion forums, Bergstrom (2011) defines trolling in relation to the anger, harm or discomfort resulting from its transgressions of particular community norms: ‘To be trolled is to be made a victim, to be caught along in the undertow and be the butt of someone else’s joke’. Similarly, Phillips (2011) explores the emergent practice of ‘RIP trolling’, where the deliberate defacement and disruption of public access Facebook memorial pages can be considered a kind of activism or at least a form of ‘disaster humor’ that works on some levels to critique ‘tragedy-obsessed global media’. And while the language of trolling has been associated with YouTube participation, ‘hating’ or ‘haters’ are also terms in common use to describe forms of vitriolic provocation in that environment (Lange, 2007). Lange acknowledges, however, that these categories and practices are always ‘relative, interactional, and negotiable’ (2007: 42), and therefore neither easily managed nor defined for the purposes of research and scholarship.

It is possible to draw out of the above approaches to online hostility a broader concept of provocation that can account for the affective power not just at play in specific user interactions or personality types, but also as a quality of the visual texts, and in the passionate expression of collective forms of identification. The acts associated with these varied, and ultimately problematic terms can be better accounted for through an understanding of ‘acts of citizenship’ that incorporates, simultaneously, the political, ethical, and aesthetic (Isin and Nielsen, 2008) in terms of
a wide variety of forms of provocation and affective engagement. Each of the terms used to describe forms of ‘aberrant’ participation become problematic where they are used to generalise on the basis of an essentialised identity type (flamer, troll, hater), or delineate and normalise a set of (aberrant) behaviours. ‘Acts’ of citizenship, Isin argues, places emphasis on the processes or events of becoming citizen, rather than a priori subject positions fixed legally, institutionally or historically (Isin, 2008: 39). The important thing, for Isin, is that in addition to the implied legal status of citizenship, ‘it also involves practices of making citizens – social, political, cultural and symbolic’ (2008: 17). This may include everyday acts that are not normally considered as political but nonetheless instantiate constituency in a way that is dialogical (Isin, 2008: 18). While ‘acts of violence, hospitality, hostility, indifference, love, friendship and so on’ are not reducible to citizenship, they can be intertwined in significant ways (Isin, 2008: 19).

In better accounting for what is broadly understood as digital citizenship, the aim then is not to understand the specific behaviours of ‘trolls’ or ‘haters’, but to conceptualise and examine acts themselves that might best be characterised as forms of provocation as the impetus or intensifying force that vitalises and sustains online participation. Along similar lines, van Zoonen, Vis and Hihelj (2011) have investigated YouTube’s ‘video spheres’ in an analysis of video and comment reactions to the controversial and highly provocative short anti-Islam film by Dutch MP Geert Wilders. In their network analysis of comment and video based responses to the initial provocation, they found a profuse flow of YouTube content, but little dialogical interaction between posters and commenters (less than 13 per cent). In this sense acts of provocation manifest as affective-expressive events that are both self-constituting through often antagonistic acts of citizenship, but also take on a ‘life of their own’, operating beyond the moment of their initiation and either intensify or dissipate depending on the relational circumstance. A concept of sociality or publics emerges here that can be understood through Chantal Mouffe’s (2000) notion of agonistic pluralism, which delineates a concept of democracy in relational acts of citizenship alongside forms of ‘acting up’, contest and even violence.

In her critique of the deliberative and aggregative models of democracy of Jürgen Habbermas and John Rawls, Mouffe argues that political theory has failed to account for the persistence of conflict and the constitutive nature of power in society (Mouffe, 2000: 125). This aligns with the recent work of Bülent Dicken who also emphasises omnipresence of violence in society, arguing that conflict is ‘the main principle of life’ and is constitutive of the social in ways that have been poorly understood or rationalised away (2009: 108). For Dicken ‘even though society is basically a reasonable form of togetherness, passions thus remain significant elements of conduct in it. And because there are passions, social identities cannot be constituted independently from passion, or antagonism’ (Dicken, 2009: 108). Passion or affect in this sense is constitutive of the political and of relations of power (Ruddick, 2010). Mouffe’s concept of ‘agonistic pluralism’ places both conflict and power at
its core. Agonism generally refers to those productive forms of conflict that follow from a pluralistic society with irreducible forms of difference. In this way Mouffe defines agonism as a struggle between adversaries, where the aim of democratic politics should be to recognise the need to provide ‘channels through which collective passions can express themselves while simultaneously permitting modes of identification that will label the opponent not as an enemy but as an adversary’ (2000: 126-7). By recognising the productive potential of the adversary, Mouffe avoids reducing all conflict to the destructive or annihilating aims of some forms of antagonism. The analysis below shows the enactment of such an agonistic space over a sustained period in relation to YouTube videos of traumatic and celebratory public events.

Contesting the comments field: Engaging, provoking and responding

While it should not be assumed that YouTube videos of public events constitutes those events in their entirety – the event always exceeds any attempt to capture or express its individual or collective qualities – it is in relation to witness videos and images circulating through both commercial and public news media and social media that events are increasingly encountered and responded to publicly (McCosker, 2013). Hence, such encounters can be understood as dynamic formations of publics that operate through and on the events themselves. Though the two events here are very different, they work quite similarly to provoke and sustain online publics through the practices afforded within YouTube.

The 6:08 minute edited, but ‘raw’ or unvoiced, video titled ‘Major earthquake hits Christchurch, New Zealand’ was uploaded to YouTube by TVNZ on the day of the earthquake. It was one of many videos capturing the immediate aftermath of the 22 February, 2011 magnitude 6.3 earthquake that struck 10km south-east of Christchurch, New Zealand’s second most populous city, at 12.51pm on Tuesday February 22, 2011 (23:51, 21 Feb UTC time) (GeoNet, 2011). The earthquake caused devastating building and infrastructure damage in and around Christchurch city centre and resulted in 185 deaths and between 1,500 and 2,000 injuries (New Zealand Police, 2011). The video shows a number of scenes shot from the streets around the central business district immediately after the initial earthquake and captures some of the aftershocks. These scenes were cut together in a way that emphasised certain dramatic flashpoints such as expressions of grief, injuries, and the effects of aftershocks. Twice in the video there is frantic movement and shouts as parts of buildings fall into the street possibly due to aftershocks. Two women are shown supporting another who has heavy bleeding covering her face, and what looks like a piece of flesh hanging off the side of her face near her left eye. And at several points groups of bystanders and a couple of individual police officers are shown shifting blocks of concrete, stone and metal to help those trapped or, at the end of the video, uncovering what looks like a lifeless body. These scenes amount to a highly emotive, provocative visual encounter with the destruction brought about by this natural disaster.
The second video proffers a very different set of affects. Where the earthquake video presents scenes of trauma and provides a site for the expression of grief, the ‘flash haka’ video offers a more celebratory and entertaining video event. In the lead up to and during the six-week Rugby Union World Cup in September 2011, numerous Maori hakas were performed as flash mob events in public spaces across New Zealand. The first was performed on Sunday 4th September at Sylvia Park shopping mall in Auckland, and was the most globally prominent. It was recorded by several low resolution cameras and uploaded to YouTube that on the same day. The version analysed here, titled ‘Flash haka @ Silvia Park, 4.Sept. 11’, was up loaded by eyiboom43 and gained the most attention as it was reposted across a wide variety of sites including BBC news, Guardian and CNN. The troop was tutored by Maori leader Tapeta Wehi and performed the Maui Potiki haka in a number of flash mob scenarios, and during the opening ceremony of the World Cup (Tahana, NZ Herald News, Sep 8, 2011). The camera is positioned at the edge of an open atrium area that is part of the Silvia Park shopping centre. People are sitting around, standing in a few small groups or randomly crossing the space. After about 17 seconds the initiating call of the Maui Potiki haka can be heard in the background, as a small number (four or five) respond with the initial movements and calls of the haka, building as the full troupe joins in from about 1:25. When the haka finishes the group silently disperses with onlookers clapping and cheering in the background. As with the performance of the haka generally, the video carries a powerful affective force, and this is indicated in the reactions and interaction expressed throughout the comments field as discussed below.

Methods

Observation of the comments field for the Christchurch earthquake video took place between February 23 and December 10, 2011; and for the Auckland haka video between September 5 and December 10. Data was captured at several points throughout the two observation periods but mainly at the end. Due to the dynamic nature of the comments field (for example, comments can be deleted, or flagged and removed, and disappear if an account is closed down), some data captured early on disappeared from public view by the end of the observation period but still features in the analysis below, partly due to its highly provocative and vitriolic quality and the reactions it set off.

As of December 10, 2011, the Christchurch earthquake video had 2,946,656 views and 18,199 comments, with 2030 ‘likes’ and interestingly, 410 ‘dislikes’; the flash mob haka video had 1,242,368 views and 2,634 comments, 6,700 ‘likes’ and 240 ‘dislikes’. The sample of comments manually coded and analysed for Christchurch earthquake video was 1,639, with a sample of 865 taken from March, 535 taken from May to July, and 239 taken from September to December 2011. For the Auckland haka video, 1,448 comments were coded and analysed taken from the whole observation period of September to December 2011. Open coding was used to generate initial categories, with axial coding
(Strauss and Corbin, 1998) used to extract three key categories consistent across both videos and relevant to the research questions and theory: (a) engagement with the video, (b) identification and engagement with place, nation and culture, and (c) affective qualities of expression, including forms of vitriolic provocation. These categories form the basis of the analysis and discussion below.

The decision was made to retain the original usernames of the commenters. This aligns with approaches to online research that emphasise the ‘public domain’ qualities of certain forms of networked communication, where no privacy settings hurdles are breached in collecting data that is published specifically for public view and consumption (Sveningsson Elm, 2009). In addition, in the iteration of YouTube at the time of the research, Google did not actively encourage single user profiles or parity with users’ actual names. This meant that the usernames given are effectively pseudonyms in the samples presented for analysis. In addition, there are expressive qualities in the original usernames that are worth retaining. Care was taken, however, to ensure that comments presented below would not have an adverse impact on those implicated.

Engagement with the videos

One factor that distinguishes the kinds of antagonistic interaction and expression in YouTube from the ‘flaming’ of discussion forums and email lists is the role of the visual text. In both the Christchurch earthquake and the Auckland flash haka, the video content affects the comments and the forms of antagonism that emerge. Both videos themselves serve as a form of provocation and stimulate passionate responses, though in different ways. It is immediately evident that the antagonistic exchanges and vitriolic expression found throughout the comments fields cannot be generally disentangled from the video and from the events that the videos depict.

Christchurch earthquake

There are many instances of users’ close engagement with the video of the aftermath of the earthquake through direct or indirect reference, particularly early in the observation period, but also continuing throughout. As in much YouTube commentary, specific time references to points or segments within the video are often given. Direct reference to aspects of the video often serves as a way of engaging with others in the sense of shared witnessing, but also to single out specific provocations. For example, some are critical of the camera person for filming and not helping: ‘why the hell would you video someone crying? leave them alone.’ (adi87tya, March). Many are simply a way of expressing messages of support and empathy, singling out some of the efforts made by bystanders in clearing rubble or freeing trapped survivors: ‘Kiwis are STRONG! just look at the bloke @3.34. Kia Kaha Chch’ (RIPSHITandBUST, March); ‘I got chills as you see that guy lift those massive
peices of cement peices... he is really doing anything it takes to save a life... this is what you call humanity!’ (sakin81, March).

Many of the direct references to the video target a segment between 00:24 and 00:28 where a woman who appears at the bottom right of the screen walking away from a dusty and confused street appears to be smiling. Though it is not necessarily clear whether she is smiling, the image is in clear contrast with the cuts before and after that focus in close up on two women crying. Some of the comments directed at the smiling woman are questions or propositions: ‘0:25 she is laughing, That’s the Spirit’ (nidzaPFC, March); ‘what is the woman between 00:24 and 00:28 so happy about?’ (TRUEGAMINGMONTAGES, March). However, many are more derogatory: ‘why is that bitch smiling at 0:24!!!!’ (wyattcostello, August); ‘0:24 WHY THE FUCK WOULD SHE BE SMILING?????’ (KillerDbz45, August). A second, who enters the frame after the smiling woman has passed by, cries quite profusely, while an older woman tries to support and comfort her. In some of the direct references to the video there is a focus on the more explicit details as the footage shows the physical effects of the earthquake. The brief sight of a possibly lifeless body, and a woman’s injured face are two such provocations: ‘anyone else see the dead guy at 6:03? or was that just rubble?’ (DrunkinnPanda, March); ‘3:20 holy fuck is that flesh hanging there?’ (David2, March)

**Auckland flash haka**

The vast majority of comments for the flash haka are either direct or indirect references to the acts within video, in the form of engagement with the event, the performance of the haka, the type of haka performed, the shopping centre location, and the performers. Some discuss cultural and historical intricacies in relation to specific aspects of the haka that is performed. Direct reference to this video often takes a humorous form. For example: ‘dude looking for his sandals that pop off in middle... at the end...awesome :) <3 haka/New Zealand... from CALi, USA’ (kennygulley23, September); ‘LOL guy with brown hoddie on the cellphone to his MRS. "Sorry sweetheart....Gotta fly.. ITS HAKA TIME!!!" AWESOME!’ (IRONTROZ 3, September). A number of comments refer to a member of the group wearing the basketball top of NBA player Derrick Rose: ‘How sexy is bulls shirt fullah ;) hhe absolutely mean’ (cairarulz, October) ‘derrick rose knows how to haka’ (iqmant12, September). And some comments also point out specific people known to them: ‘OMG ANDREW !!!! I SAW YOU !!!!!!!’ (starshey101, October); ‘THATS FUCKING STEVE FORM BLUES CLUES SHIRT! throughout the entire vid but he is centered at 1:36’ (barrijitos, September). Some expressed cynicism in relation to the video and the ‘flash mob’ genre in a way that places the video within a broader media culture. But there is also cultural cynicism running counter to the more common expressions of cultural pride posted in response to the video, where criticism is directed at the over use of the haka itself. Many of these expressions of cynicism are themselves taken as a provocation, and responses often follow as a way of reasserting pride felt in response to the event and video.
**Affective expression: Grief, pride and varieties of vitriol**

Engagement with the two videos, and interactions within the comment fields can be described on the whole as highly affective, offering a site for the expression of grief, horror and sympathy, for instance in relation to the earthquake, or celebration and cultural pride in relation to the haka. In both cases aggressive vitriol, bigotry and antagonism is expressed consistently throughout the observation period. While interpretation is required by both researcher and general reader alike in marking distinctions between the qualities of affective expression, the broad sense of support or hostility are usually clear if also nuanced. Nonetheless, the aim of this analysis was not to specify or quantify distinct boundaries for forms of affective expression, but to examine and emphasise the blurring of the affective qualities of the expression and interaction and the uncertain origins of provocation in the form of vitriolic expression. The theoretical perspectives outlined above regarding ‘agonistic pluralism’ and the work of Phillips (2011), for instance, suggests that the passionate expressions of sadness or exuberant cultural celebration may be themselves considered forms of provocation in the same way that sexualised vitriol at other points could be considered a form of (perhaps overly aggressive) critical reaction to the public display of grief or cultural pride.

**Christchurch earthquake**

There was an observable concentration of comments close to the February earthquake that could be described as shock, trauma, forms of sadness and grief, and support. And even toward the end of the observation period these forms of expression appear in comments as if the viewing of the video was concurrent with the event. Comments such as these are common in March and April: ‘it happened so quick, people were enjoying there lunch and a huge earthquake strikes the city. my hart goes out to all the injered and all the ones who have lost ther lives :{ to all the people that have perished in this accident.’ (emarits101ya, March). Some commenters also express personal experience of fear and anxiety about the ongoing dangers of the earthquake, particularly in the first few weeks: ‘[...] everything was moving besides me! Freaky experience! Roads have rose, sunk, silt everywhere! My cousins place is a mess so they have to stay with us!’ (TheMegElla1203, March). Fear and horror are also expressed almost as if the commenter is watching a genre film: ‘3:18 bit of flesh sticking out of hear face yuck’ (toofastfgbx, March), ‘that last scene just sends chills down my body =\’ (idontcare1894, March). Throughout the comments, however, humour is also expressed in various forms, often bordering on a direct provocation: ‘Man this place looks worse then Haiti... This happens when you don't have good construction codes.’ (NoChrome, March); ‘Mordor has awaken again.....’ (jopija27, March); ‘FAKE! No sheep.’ (reven50, March).
Expressions of support and sympathy also enact a located and relational national or cultural identity. Support and camaraderie from within the region, and between Australia and New Zealand is common: ‘No matter how hard nature strikes New Zealand and Australia, we stand together united as one, with such strong spirit and companionship. We grieve with you, New Zealand. [...]’ (Phuxx0r, March). These forms of support and located relationality often reciprocally:

Thank you to our Ozzie mates, for your kind words, (sigh ) it seems that Oz and NZ have a tag team going from one country to the other, helping each another out in our hour of need (when's it gonna end). I can’t think of any other countries that look after each other the way we do. Proud to be a Kiwi and pleased to have Oz as a neighbour (dobstaable, March).

geeze, this has made me start to cry =[ i feel so bad for the people affected by the EQ. this is terrible. First Australia, now New Zealand. we now have two countries that are side to side that need desperate help =[. i cant take this any more my home country Australia and my closest allied country both being smashed by natural disasters. I cant handle any more. (smexytwixz, March).

Possibly as a reaction to the intensity of the sadness and sympathetic support, forms of expression that could be characterised as vitriolic or spiteful (regardless of their author’s intention) occur right throughout the nine month observation period. Few comments in the middle and later observation periods were not vitriolic in form or expressed as an aggressive defence; but nonetheless these exchanges still typically engaged with the events in some way. Less commonly, vitriolic exchange that is disconnected from the video and events occurs in a way that indicates a contest over use of the comments space. Racial bigotry is used by the following commenter as a vitriolic reply to the provocations of @LAComptonNigga: ‘@LAComptonNigga Fucking nigga chocolate piece of shit, I’d drop you like a bag of shit (which you look like anyway) in 1 second, you think you’re fucking tough on the internet, in reality you are a nigga piece of shit, come at me bro’ (testing123453, March). Similarly, sexualised vitriol is used commonly throughout as a tool for engaging directly in an intensified antagonistic exchange.

Particular commenters posted heavily at different points throughout the observation period, and there was a concentration of comments most easily characterised as vitriolic or spiteful around a small set of usernames. Throughout the early period LAComptonNigga and MrAussiebogan posted heavily, and in the middle period Vetteheat was prolific, along with cosmicfile, MnoWuno and and SupaSnoozie who continued to post heavily through to the nine month mark. For this video, some of the most vitriolic and creative expressions of provocation were made in the first few months after the event by a user who went by various names as each account was successively closed down,
including Annieberkowitz1, Annieberkowitz3, Annieberkowitz8, GordonBerkowitz. This example, captured in late April, exemplifies the intensity and targeted nature of the expression, and its attempt to leverage off and challenge the grief and empathy expressed elsewhere:

TO THE FAMILIES OF THE EARTHQUAKE VICTIMS: You can rest assured I and the rest of the world are pleased your piece of shit family member is dead and rotting in the ground, we laugh at your suffering and think it's pathetic you are upset because your family member was an insignificant worm who was shit while they were alive and now they are dead squashed filthy shit rotting in the ground. Especially those two filthy babies that were squashed REST IN PISS YOU FUCKING RODENT PIECES OF SHIT (Annieberkowitz8, April).

Provocative and vitriolic comments such as this often attract many responses, often themselves highly vitriolic and contextualised in relation to the seriousness of the trauma of the earthquake. While this might be understood in terms of a discourse of ‘trolling’ practices, both the initial vitriolic expression, and the equally vitriolic responses can be understood more fruitfully as varied forms of provocation that instigate and help to sustain interaction and attention to place, personal experience and the tragedy of the events – a point to which I will return below.

Auckland flash haka
The majority of comments in response to the flash haka were expressive of support, pride, cultural celebration. Common to these forms of expression is a sense of affective excess, a passionate engagement with both the video and culture, an eruption or overabundance of ‘feeling for’ the event as a provocative cultural act: ‘0:37 onwards had me shivering with excitement.’ (fengshuay, September); ‘Got goosebumps watching this. So proud to be Maori. Such a beautiful culture we get to enjoy and share with te Ao whanui [the world at large].’ (MrsBossyBoots, December); ‘Makes my heart burst with pride and my skin tingle.’ (squarelecircle, September). The overwhelming feeling for the event mostly takes the explicit form of cultural or national pride: ‘Makes ya proud to be a KIWI !!!’ (RIPSHITnBUST, September); ‘Thats my people!’ (cog808, September); ‘yeah dat was sick, poly fo lyfe’ (MrSayerp, September); ‘This is awesome! So proud Maori culture is only getting stronger and Maori are rising up...WATCH THIS SPACE! [...]’ (Nannyhika, September).

Gotta love the Maori culture - it’s what gives NZ it’s own unique identity from the rest of the world and you can’t help but admire and appreciate the cultural pride and honour that these young men have as they represent our tupuna (ancestors) in this haka. NEOne that says otherwise are just jealous and can’t grasp this concept so go tell it to someone who cares!!! (missownz, October)
Expressions of support and celebration often exhibit multiple and complex layers of identification with place, nationality, cultural ancestry and history. Often these comments are defensive or actively seek to shore up cultural identification. That is, they enact forms of ‘cultural citizenship’ through continuous affirmation of cultural membership. To this end Maori language is often used as an inclusionary and exclusionary device. ‘Wow that was "AWESOME!!" Chur Chur [cool / sweet] Brothers! Scenes like this makes you miss home... [...] Kia Kaha Aotearoa Kia Kaha.’ (Be strong New Zealand be strong) (CPR275, September). And these expressions of cultural specificity and identification often take the form of provocation or response to provocation throughout: ‘Welcome to NEW ZEALAND the only place in the world with a living breathing culture, we have passion and fire in our veins because we all know our Whakapapa [lineage] and our relationship with each other and the land, sea.’ (LittleMissRaven09, September). This commenter notes the role of the passion expressed by the haka itself as an identifier of cultural pride:

@minecraftsmmpmine This isn’t just attention seeking behavior, this is something that uplifts the culture. Something that keeps order. This is a rally cry, something someone like you would not understand, Someone like you who probably lives in America where the rich and powerful are the new kings and queens and yet you do nothing to stop it. This right here is a rally cry, a union, a public bond, this is something far more significant than anything any Americans has done in the last decade. (SnafuMatthew, September)

A significant number of comments could be described as vitriolic provocation, incitement or spite. However, as with the Christchurch earthquake video, the provocation running through the comments field takes many different forms and is multi-directional. It features often as forms of bigotry, particularly racial bigotry, which often incites equally aggressive forms of defence of cultural identity and practice. But it also takes the form of exuberant or even aggressive expressions of cultural and national pride. Some of the provocation takes a fairly non-inflammatory, humour-inflected form: ‘they were lucky it wasnt a flash spelling bee’ (bobofaggins, September); ‘how does this help the world? other than making bystanders laugh at you’ (getbakedtonight, Septemebr). Many short comments express simple forms of racially framed and humour-inflected provocation: ‘after the Haka they then went to your house and robbed you lol’ (lordcrumb07, November).

Much of the vitriolic provocation seems carefully constructed to initiate ongoing reactions and to draw attention. Unlike the earthquake video, this type of provocation mostly takes the form of racial bigotry and comes from individual commenters framing their provocation in a way that directly counteracts the cultural pride more commonly expressed. One user, TheJayEffkay, offers some typical examples later in the observation period, between 1 and 3 months after the event and video upload: ‘THE HAKA IS A PRIMITIVE SAVAGE DANCE MADE BY A HORRID RACE. MAORIS WERE
CANNIBALS TILL 150 YEARS AGO - UNTIL THE BRITISH BANNED IT. THEY ARE ANIMALS…”
(TheJayEffkay, October). While on the whole the explicit forms of provocation are far less sexually
violent than those responding to the earthquake video, homophobic, sexual and racial invective are
used to intensify the forms of antagonistic exchange taking place. For example: ‘It’s a hardcore
masturbation session.’ (MonkeyWildCat, September); ‘And then they all went back to their welfare
shack to suck each other off….’ (SYNYSTERfknGATES, September); ‘Get a life you bored faggots.’
(jOeYBMeW, September); ‘@ignobilis nuts in your mouth.. now CHOKE on that BITCH !!’
(McNaughteEbaYbeE, September).

Responding to provocation: Agonistic contest

Vitriolic expression and conflict within these two YouTube publics can be understood as productive
intensifiers if a broad sense of the notion of provocation is applied. By considering provocation as
the dynamic force or expressive tool that sets in motion a sustained public engagement with these
two events (one tragic, the other celebratory), we arrive at an understanding of digital citizenship
and of YouTube as a participatory space that incorporates, and perhaps also accommodates conflict
and cruelty. In the analysis of the interactions surrounding these two events, it became clear that
affective expressions of grief, pride and invective as forms of provocation and counter provocation
were continually folded into each other in ways that intensified and sustained collective
engagement. Acts of provocation and counter provocation can be seen here as integral (rather than
simply aberrant) acts of digital citizenship.

Posing an ontological difference between ‘action’ and ‘the act’, or the broad character of the actions
of citizens versus specific acts of citizenship, Isin (2008) provides the conceptual grounds that also
links, for instance individual and collective expressions and interactions in online spaces within a
post-state notion of citizenship. In fact, Isin’s penetrating theorization of ‘the act’ offers a way of
moving beyond the identifying designation of ‘troll’ or the action of ‘trolling’, to understand the
variable, affective and intensive forms of provocation that these terms imply but also elide. Drawing
on Robert Ware (1973), Isin argues that ‘the essence of an act, as distinct from conduct, practice,
behaviour and habit, is that an act is a rupture in the given’ (Isin, 2008: 25). That is, central to the
infinitive verb form ‘to act’ is the impetus ‘to begin, create or disrupt’ (Isin, 2008: 21, 22). ‘To act
means to get something in motion, to begin not just something new but oneself as the being that
acts to begin itself’ (Isin, 2008: 27). Equally it incorporates the notion of performance that can be
either genuine or counterfeit and signals a break with authentic or essential being and expression;
and includes the potential to ‘act up’ as disgraceful or anti-social conduct (Isin, 2008: 21, 22).
Networked publics can be defined by their ephemeral and unpredictable nature (Ito, 2008). If the comments field for YouTube videos provides the space for the emergence such networked publics, their formation can be located in the connections that are instigated, in this case through acts of provocation. Also telling here is the way that dialogical connections among commenters strengthen as the number of comments and length of time from the event increases. In the sample of comments for the Christchurch earthquake video, there was a clear progression throughout the observation period toward a higher rate of ‘@replies’, or responses to other comments flagged with the ‘@’ symbol in front of the user name responded to. Of the 1,639 comments analysed for the Christchurch video, 62 per cent were @replies. Examined across the nine month observation period, the progression is more obvious: of the 865 comments analysed for the March period, 42 per cent were @replies; of 535 comments between May and July, 63 per cent were @replies; of 239 comments between September and December, 88 per cent were @replies. For the Auckland flash haka video, there was a much lower proportion of @replies overall (1,448 comments, only 27 per cent were @replies), aligning with the lower level of initiating provocation and vitriol. However, like the Christchurch comments, there was an increase over the period, with only 18 per cent @replies in the 515 comments throughout September, and 33 per cent of the 933 comments during October and November, indicating that as time passes commenters tend to engage less with the event and more with each other.

It is the category of counter provocation in these interactions that most significantly affects our ability to delineate trolling as a discrete form of comment practice. When we look at the comments themselves, for both videos’ comments field, it is difficult to distinguish origins for the vitriol, rather there is only escalating levels of aggressive expression, and difficult to distinguish initial from responding vitriol. In the Christchurch earthquake comments, direct replies often take the form of simple reaction: ‘@MrnoWun0 People died. Show some respect. You are sick.’ (HausOfHayden, September). Others are more detailed and assertive and more general in their counter attack:

There are so many fucking hate comments to this video. Hey foreigners, what the fuck is your problem? Do you have anything to do with the earthquake? I think not, so bugger off and go and spread your bullshit elsewhere. A lot of lives were lost in this total disaster, so have some fucking RESPECT and GET LOST. (kaboosha, November)

Expectedly, responses of this sort might also provoke lengthy exchanges, drawing both vitriolic contest and agreement. These exchanges constituted an ongoing contest over the comment space, but one that also had the effect of dramatically extending the dynamic public that formed around the event in relation to the video.
Likewise, for the Auckland flash haka video, much of the vitriolic provocation seems deliberately constructed to initiate ongoing reactions and to draw attention. As noted above, this provocation mostly takes the form of racial bigotry and comes from individual commenters framing their comments in a way that directly counteracts the cultural pride more commonly expressed. Interestingly, in this case, there is also an attempt to collectively engage in transformational dialogue, a kind of pedagogy of Maori culture and history. A good example took the form of a long exchange that followed from a provocation connecting Maori men with domestic violence (a specific, targeted cultural and racial provocation) by elgar104: ‘...and when they get home, they take it out (for real) on their partners, children......’ (elgar104, September). Comments such as these followed:

@elgar104 is that so ? so you've been to every Maori house there is ? or have you just seen what the media portrays. Shut the fuck up. All your fuckin comments have been directed racially at us Maori. The haka isn't just to ‘intimidate’. Learn and understand our culture before you make racist statements. Fuck wit. (iSkuxxiiDance, September)

@elgar104 People who consider this attention seeking probably have no culture or traditions to learn from. I am not a Maori but I can see the passion these guys have when they do it. [...] (jandalkingz, September)

@jandalkingz Back you up there bro, this is New Zealand and if haterz in here have issues than migrate to Australia, simple. This is about passion and these boys have given a glimpse into our heritage. [...] (joeydudester1, September)

Comments and exchanges such as these are often both vitriolic and generative of a plurality of acts of citizenship. The original and responding provocations put significant cultural boundary work in motion – in the form often passionate expressions of selfhood and in the broader sense of becoming national, social or cultural. And this sense of cultural acts of citizenship is vital to how we might understand YouTube and other lightly moderated social media spaces as enabling a wide range of practices (including the use of vitriolic or aggressive expression) – those forms of acting up that are often condemned as aberrant misuses of social media sites. A crucial opportunity is offered here to accommodate the expression of collective passions, vitriolic and cruel as they also might be, in an agonistic mode where acts of provocation play a legitimate and productive, if uncomfortable, role.

Conclusions: Provocation and Agonistic Video Publics

Following Mouffe, Bülent Dicken characterises agonism as ‘an element of public culture and politics that can accommodate cruelty’ (2009: 108). The provocation described above is context dependent,
and seeks not to achieve some outright victory of presence and righteousness, but to intensify and sustain engagement, affect attention, and contest forms of participation. The provocative and often vitriolic expression associated with the two videos serves this purpose, functioning not merely as a simple ideological, racial or sexual and gendered antagonism. While we must acknowledge the problem of normalising bigotry and vilification within public discourse, the most symbolically violent forms of bigotry and vitriol expressed in these comment fields are also tools for intensifying an agonistic space that seeks to draw out and multiply interaction or reaction and extract responses. Provocation operates here as an active, resistant and creative probing for affect, and is highly context specific and relational. If there is a commonality to what might be categorised as expressive acts associated with the vitriolic expression described here, it lies in this agonistic sense of searching for an adversary and trying to best them, or at least maintain contact; and in response, to shore up bonds of identification and agreement. Each of these operates as acts of citizenship that we would do well to acknowledge as legitimate uses of a dynamic participatory space.

In response to both videos analysed here, the vast majority of comments engage at least indirectly, but often explicitly, with the events and experiences depicted and many refer to specific aspects of the video or its production. For both videos, there is strong and repeated identification with place, nationality and culture; though reference to place and nationality is more common in the earthquake video, and reference to culture and aspects of cultural identity and practices is stronger in the haka video. This renders the comments as highly contextual, specifically responsive to the events depicted, the places and cultural practices or experiences they involve in ways that retain a capacity to ‘provoke’ and maintain a pluralistic public.

While we can identify and characterise affective varieties of vitriolic expression throughout the comments field, it is fruitless to correlate that with one or more ‘actors’ definable as trolls or haters despite the temptation to do so. What is clear, however, is that vitriolic forms of provocation and vitriolic responses work as expressive tools to engage with the video, events and with others in an agonistic contest that extends the public that forms around these video events. The other key observation made here for both videos, but particularly the flash haka, is that provocation tends to drive a greater number of respondents to band together to protect a more positive viewing of the video, events and experiences. The productive role of provocation in these contexts lies in the resultant desire to pull together in response, and to push back, often equally aggressively. In both the earthquake and haka contexts, the resulting flow of expression in response to provocation simply exemplifies this desire to assemble within and in relation to the visual expression of place (and its destruction) on the one hand, and cultural pride and belonging on the other.
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References:


### End Notes

1 [www.digizen.org](http://www.digizen.org)
3 ‘Flash haka @ Silvia Park, 4.Sept. 11’: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=puXad30DSfg](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=puXad30DSfg)
4 This system has been adjusted recently to allow up votes and down votes, changing the structural flow of the comments field in line with other sites such as Reddit.