

Video Rants:
Anatomy of a Genre

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Scholars have expressed concern about the appropriateness of highly emotional and critical interaction online (Lange 2007; Dery 1993; Herring 1994; Kiesler et al. 1984; Tannen 1998). Haters, griefers, trolls, flammers, and ranters, are said to engage in harmful communicative behaviors that compromise interaction. Similar concerns have recently reappeared about the realistic opportunities for meaningful communication and civic interaction in video forums (Buckingham 2009; Hess 2009). On sites such as YouTube, mediated interaction occurs among people with heterogeneous agendas (Burgess & Green 2009) as well as asymmetrical media literacies, self-expressive skills, and cultural beliefs about communication.

According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, ranting means talking “loudly and in a way that shows anger,” or refers to “[complaining] in a way that is unreasonable” (N. A. 2013). Rants have often been lumped together with online communication such as flames, which have been seen as toxic to online discussion and discourse (Dery 1993). Flames have been defined as “vituperative messages that attack” (Tannen 1998) and as *ad hominem* attacks (Arendholz, 2013). More recent research advocates a reconsideration of how “problematic” discourse may be received differently in various contexts (such as argumentative cultures of academics or technologists), where researchers’ communicative preferences do not necessarily align to emic assessments of aggressive argumentation (Lange 2006; O’Sullivan and Flanagan 2003). In addition, exchanges such as polemic talk may serve communicative functions, such as coalition building (Blitvich 2010). On the rare occasions that rants are mentioned in scholarly works, rants

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are assessed negatively and are assumed to be a slight variation of the genre that was once called “flames.” At best rants are seen as pointless vents for selfish frustration; at worst they are dismissed as puerile and inappropriate forms of online emotion that are not civically meaningful.

This study investigates whether the form and content of rants characterize them as belonging to an identifiable genre. Should rants simply be analytically subsumed under the category of other communicative genres such as prior “flames,” or more recently, “hating”? Or do rants consistently exhibit their own interrelated bundle of recognizable characteristics?

For the purposes of this study, rants are defined as emotional messages, often exhibiting anger or frustration, that identify a problem or criticize things such as an interlocutor’s behavior or technical devices or features (Lange 2012, 2014). To date, the genre of ranting has received almost no attention in scholarly communication research. Yet, self-labeled rants abound on YouTube, which is the focus of this study. Ranters routinely record themselves describing many troublesome issues that are often shared by other participants in the same social space.

This paper uses a discourse analysis approach to investigate the content and form of a qualitative corpus of rants that discuss problems on YouTube. It argues that many YouTubers explicitly frame their videos as rants, and these rants share similar characteristics including: 1) exhibiting an articulation of a social problem; 2) displaying a feeling-tone of heightened emotion; and 3) offering proposals for subsequent consciousness-raising or further action. Ranting is an emotional genre, one which is arguably persuasive and empathy-arousing because it combines rather than separates passion and logic.

Ranting as an Online Genre

Genre identification has always been a slippery enterprise; no real consensus has emerged to delineate what genres are (Miller 1984). Kwasnik and Crowston (2005:77) argue that, “Genres are recognized and used, but not so readily described.” Most definitions seem to privilege the idea that a genre is a category of works that exhibit consistent and similar aspects of form, content, communicative purpose, and acceptance or recognition across interlocutors (Kwasnik & Crowston 2005:77). According to Yates & Orlikowski (1992:84), genres are defined as “socially recognized types of communicative actions...that are habitually enacted by members of a community to realize particular social purposes. A genre may be identified by its socially recognized purpose and shared characteristics of form.” Swales (1990:58) emphasized the fact that genres exhibit recognized “communicative purposes” and similar attributes.

Demonstrating the blurriness of genres is a rather easy enterprise. At the same time, however, genres are often treated as distinct, and this delineation becomes particularly visible when genres are used in unexpected communicative contexts. For example, Krasnik and Crowston (2005) discuss how a minister became puzzled when a family requested that a recipe be read as part of a departed loved one’s funeral services. Recipes are a genre of communication that has particular content (information about how to prepare food) and a consistent bundle of attributes (such as lists of ingredients and cooking directions) that are not usually read during funerals. But the juxtaposition of genres (recipes and funeral readings) took on a meaningful poignancy for the departed’s family and colleagues, given that the deceased was passionate about cooking.

In addition to form, content, communicative purpose, and social acceptance, genres also often exhibit particular feeling-tones. A particularly illustrative example is the 1940s-era murder mystery genre of *film noir*. Although there are similar kinds of content outside of *film noir* (such as murder mysteries), an important distinction concerns a “mood” that is recognizable and

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important for understanding this cinematic genre. Krasnik and Crowston (2005:78) explain that “content alone is not sufficient to make it *film noir*, since similar content treated differently would produce an entirely different type of film.” Similarly the rants in the present corpus exhibit a distinctive feeling tone, typically one of annoyance, anger, frustration, or confusion. Arguments in these rants might be perceived differently if stated without emotional force.

Despite its slippery connotations, researchers have identified several types of digital genres. Genre studies in digital environments were more frequent between the mid-1990s to 2005. Scholarly interest often focused on how new digital genres were drawing on or departing from their offline antecedents as web usage was accelerating. For example, Askehave and Nielsen (2005) argue that the homepage is a type of digital genre that transmits information about the content of a web page and provides tools to help viewers navigate a site. It is not a novel genre, given that many of its functions resemble those of a newspaper’s front page. However, a homepage is not simply an online version of the newspaper front page. Homepages contain distinctive media properties, including multimedia hypertext and linking. In their analysis of blogs, Herring et al. (2005) argue that antecedents for this genre might be found in written diaries. Even though they facilitated a wide range of sub-genres, blogging is a recognizable online genre with shared characteristics such as listing events in reverse chronological order and displaying and sharing a blogger’s interests.

Similarly, rants have offline antecedents and sub-genres. Rants have origins in antiquity and continue to the present, with references spanning from Cicero (Richlin 1992) to Shakespeare (McPhee 1978) to Swift (Conniff 1983). Cicero, for example, was known to rant against his enemies, using particularly forceful, rhetorical venom (Richlin 1992:85). In contemporary times, rants are often associated with the comedy routines and social commentary of comedians such as

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Dennis Miller, whose rants on television and in his books have achieved widespread recognition. Miller (1996) has made a career of humorously attacking people or things that irritate, especially in the realms of politics and popular culture.

“Adjectival-rants,” which privilege strings of colorful and emotional adjectives, have also appeared online. An example of an online adjectival-rant online provided by Vrooman (2002:59) is the following, “Permit me a moment to laugh at you derisively, you gnarled-up stump of an insignificant boy, you who secretes lies and misrepresentations as easily as a victim of ebola virus in its hemorrhagic phase secretes diseased blood and other fluids.” Rants can exhibit cleverness and have an entertaining quality. In the present study, viewers sometimes left comments about how “entertaining” a rant was, and encouraged ranters to continue to provide more videos of this type. Analyzing viewers’ reactions to rant videos—which are often seen as acceptable forms by audience members—constitutes a research project in its own right, one which I have tackled elsewhere (Lange 2012, 2014).

The purpose of the present paper is to examine whether rants exhibit a generic set of communicative characteristics in terms of form, content, purpose, and feeling-tone. It investigates whether rants are simply chaotic emotional vents, or whether they exhibit a particular structure. Although it is often assumed that emotions and logic are separate activities, contemporary research in social movement theory argues that, “Emotions can be strategically used by activists *and* be the basis for strategic thought” (Goodwin et al. 2001:9). Arousing empathetic feelings through video can stimulate recognition of and support for social goals that may be identified through a rant video.

Former scholarly discussions of online rants have collapsed this genre into the same category as other online problematic talk, such as the prior category of “flames.” Yet are they the same or

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different phenomena? Both flames and rants have historically been considered inappropriately emotional online interactions. For example, Dery (1993:563) asserts that within flame wars, rants were “demented soliloquies that elevate soapbox demagoguery to a guerilla art form.” Flaming has also been defined as acts meant to “abuse, make offensive comments, or criticize sharply” (Kim and Raja, 1991:7). Flames and the rants in this corpus do seem to share the characteristic of invoking sharp criticism. The Hacker's Dictionary defines flaming as a message meant to “insult or provoke” (Raymond 1996:193). To what extent the problem-centric rants in the present corpus target a specific person is an empirical question. The data suggest that these rants are not individualized attacks; rather they aim to provoke action to address shared problems.

Prior definitions have stated that flames are typically directed towards individuals (Thurlow et al., 2004) or are interpreted as *ad hominem* attacks (Arendholz 2013). More recently, YouTubers have called attention to a group of commenters whom they characterize as “haters.” For YouTube participants, haters are generally defined as those who leave mean-spirited, stereotypically-insulting, or pointlessly cruel comments, such as “go die” (Lange 2007). YouTubers react in a variety of ways to haters. They range from being deeply hurt to ignoring them, or even finding them entertaining as a way of distancing their effects, which tend to be targeted toward a particular video maker. In contrast, the rants observed in the present corpus were not necessarily directed towards a single person. Although they typically used emotion and exhibited strong criticism, video rants about YouTube tended to focus on categories of perpetrators of particular problems, many of which were shared by viewers.

Flames have also been characterized as having extended time dimensions. For example, Baron (1984:130) characterizes flaming as “speaking incessantly, hurling insults, using profanity.” The Hacker’s Dictionary similarly discusses characteristics such as “speaking

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incessantly and/or rabidly on some relatively uninteresting subject” or “[directing] hostility at a particular person or people” (Raymond, 1996:193). These definitions contain seeds that analytically relate flaming to ranting, or “speaking incessantly” on a particular topic. Of course to what extent communication is perceived as “incessant” (and thus inappropriately long in duration) is a qualitative interpretation made by interlocutors.

In studying flame wars on the newsgroup alt.flame, an online forum devoted to flaming and being flamed, Vrooman (2002) observed two types of rants. The first included clever parodies or satire of considerable length, that often emerged during arguments. Vrooman (2002) characterized the second type of rant as a glorified flame that did contain some measure of originality and creativity, but often functioned to silence, chastise, or publicly outwit an online opponent (Vrooman, 2002). Here, flames are likened to rants, and yet, what passes as ranting is identified using a separate term, which would suggest that ranting exhibits its own characteristics, and thus deserve analysis about their status as a separate genre.

Research on online ranting has also emerged with the context of customer interactions with Starbucks’ baristas. Manning (2008) examined online rants of wait staff’s complaints, and equated them with “vents” about how customers annoy and abuse service employees. According to Manning (2008:104), a rant or vent is a genre that ““vents’ opinions that perhaps have no other venue: they are hidden transcripts made visible.” In this context, ranting serves a specific social purpose, which is to enable baristas to commiserate by sharing similar “stupid customer of the week” rants. Although they may be entertaining, the emphasis is not so much on originality as achieving psychological stress relief. As Manning (2008:24) argues, “Since the customer is always right in the moment of interaction, only on the internet can one relive and redress the inequality of the encounter with the customer in a dialogue with peers.” The rants in the present corpus

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exhibited more in common with the rants that Manning describes, in terms of identifying and sharing problems, rather than resembling prior scholarly literature on flames, which were defined as competitive, personal attacks. Video rants about YouTube are generally targeted toward specific issues or classes of persons, and addressed collective problems.

This study empirically investigates whether YouTube rants about specific issues on the site attempt to relieve stress as was the case with the Starbucks' barista rants, or whether they work to solve problems that initially seem intractable. Are YouTubers ranting to vent, or ranting to expose problems in ways that produce motivational empathy over similar experiences and reactions? Eliciting empathy and discussing problems are seen as crucial initial steps to furthering civic action. Rants may help pave the way for creating communicative platforms that are not overly restricted by unfavorable administrative agendas. The present study investigates these questions through an examination of a qualitative corpus of video rants on YouTube. The analysis is primarily concerned with addressing the question of whether video rants constitute a recognizable digital genre on the basis of form, content, purpose, and feeling tone.

A Corpus of Video Rants

The principle method of investigation for the present qualitative study was discourse analysis of transcripts and video descriptions drawn from 35 video rants posted to YouTube. Each video yielded numerous pages of commentary, with more than 3,000 comments collectively posted to the videos. Elsewhere I have examined the results of commentary in more analytical depth (Lange 2012, 2014). The present study uses discourse analysis to address more closely the content and form of the rant videos.

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I became interested in this video genre during an ethnographic project devoted to understanding how people express the self through video, and how they bond by sharing collective interests. The ethnography oriented around the online video-sharing platform of YouTube, which opened its doors in 2005. The site enables participants to upload videos and video responses, and to post text commentary on videos. During the ethnographic project, I noticed 4 videos that YouTubers self-identified as “rants” in which they addressed a social or collective problem using emotional tones and rhetoric. For example, in one rant posted on August 16, 2009, called *A Rant Response for Rentto (#4)*, a YouTube participant named OhCurt expresses frustration that people remove their videos. Although he acknowledged legitimate reasons for removal such as inadvertent revelation of private information, OhCurt displays aggravation because such removals corrupted the legibility of conversational threads, and ignored the labor that participants engaged in to watch videos and provide detailed feedback. Three other rants emerging during the ethnographic study included one from thewinekone that criticized YouTubers’ banal videos, one from a participant named SordidInsurrection who complained about poorly-executed thumbnail images of videos, and another about what a comedian named nalts characterized as YouTube’s poorly-conceived monetization model.

I became fascinated with rants and wondered what other topics people address when they rant about YouTube. I wished to explore whether such videos have a consistent format, tone, or objective. Do video rants have a recognizable set of interrelated characteristics that generally appear, or is each rant unique? Were they emotionally chaotic and random or logically patterned? What kinds of problems did people report when they decided to rant? Also, were people letting off steam, or were they hoping to effect change on collective concerns?

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To address these questions, the present study examined a qualitative corpus of 35 videos. As mentioned above, the first 4 videos were discovered during an ethnographic project. An additional 31 videos were identified from the YouTube search engine using the search term “rant on YouTube.” My search originated in the United States, and thus all the videos in the corpus are in English. Eliminated from analysis were rants by professional comedians. Only rants by participants that specifically addressed YouTube were considered.

Demographics are difficult to ascertain. Upon casual inspection, it is difficult to know with certainty individuals’ racial self-identifications. The same is true about age. Visual inspection is not always possible, as a few video makers did not include their faces but used images and voice over to argue their case. Judging from the video and audio tracks, and from other clues such as apparently real names stated in videos or text description, I estimate that 28 of the ranters were male and 7 were female. About 25 appeared to be white, 4 were black, 3 were Asian, 1 was Latino, and 2 ranters’ races were undetermined. About 28 ranters appeared to be adults, and 7 seemed to me to be under 21. Of these 7, at least 2 males appeared to be under 15. Given its massive size, it is difficult to determine if these demographics reflect YouTube as a whole, or simply the composition of people who are more likely to rant about problems on YouTube. More than 100 million hours of video are now uploaded to YouTube, which sees some 1 billion viewers visiting every month (Warman 2013). Content by many professional organizations and users can also be observed. These factors complicate teasing apart the composite demographic make-up of ranters. Casual inspection suggests that white males form the largest demographic of ranters (21 videos or 60%) in the corpus, followed by white females (4 videos or 11%) and black females (3 videos or about 9%).

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When implementing a search on YouTube, users may choose one of four categories to display search results: relevance, upload date, view count, and rating. I chose to sort my search for “relevance,” as I wished to identify videos that contained the concept “rant on YouTube” somewhere in the title, text description, or content of a video. The rants identified for analysis were only those that video makers self-identified as rants. Future studies might consider the characteristics discussed here, and compare them to other forms of video messaging that are not explicitly labeled as rants but seem to exhibit similar qualities.

The results that were returned on the search depended upon YouTube’s search engine parameters. No information is provided by YouTube staff nor its parent company of Google about how specific search results are obtained, although it is generally assumed that certain videos are given more prominence in their position on search lists according to perceived commercial potential. Notably, several videos did appear in the search with low view counts (a few hundred or less), as did videos that were highly critical of YouTube’s policies. Many of the videos in the corpus had several thousand views, but typically did not approach the viral range of more than a million views. The appearance of these videos suggests that the search feature is not overly weighted toward professional comedians’ videos or other content that YouTube wished to promote for profitability. The search returned videos that were critical of YouTube, its employees as a whole, other participants, and policies of YouTube and music industry executives. Their complaints suggest that many YouTubers are using rants to expose and solve communicative problems related to the technical infrastructure and cultural context of the site.

Several rationales motivated use of the search term “rant on YouTube.” As mentioned above, the first motivation emerged from a prior ethnographic interest in understanding how people participate and share ideas about similar interests and concerns about YouTube. The second

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reason was to test whether rants seemed to function for venting or problem-solving. Finally, the main rationale was to understand whether rants could be considered as a separate genre with recognizable and consistent characteristics across works, and so they were scoped to one topic for comparison. Other scholars may examine additional ranting topics such as rants about “bad hair days” or technical devices such as Google Glass, and determine whether they contain the same characteristics and structure exhibited in the present corpus.

This paper uses a discourse analysis approach, as described by Johnstone (2002) and Eemeren et al. (1997). Johnstone (2002) states that an important aspect of discourse analysis concerns identifying patterns across similar forms of discourse and discovering the underlying parts that constitute its structure. Consistent parts tend to reveal categories of discourse within a particular genre. For example, newspaper stories contain patterned forms such as headlines, a description of an event, and information about people’s reactions or the event’s consequences. Even seemingly chaotic discourse such as oral monologues contain patterned parts that discourse analysis can uncover. The present study investigates transcripts of video rants to identify any recurrent parts to video structure that are common across videos that creators label as “rants.” Are there consistent parts, and if so, how do these features speak to larger questions of the cultural and communicative functions of rants within civic contexts?

An initial examination of the corpus of rants revealed several common features across many of the rants. Therefore, each video was systematically coded to determine whether or not this initial impression could be substantiated, and if so to what degree did the pattern hold? Did only a few or most videos exhibit these features? Videos were coded to see if they contained the following parts: 1) a statement of the problem that the ranter was upset about; 2) an elaboration of the problem, where elaboration was defined as describing 2 or more details about the problem

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or listing multiple (often related) problems; 3) a person (or class of persons) or issue deemed at fault; 4) a particular feeling-tone (such as anger or frustration); and 5) whether the ranter included next steps such as a proposed solution or motivators to encourage others to take action. The coding was done in binary way, rather than by degree. Much like a recipe has certain parts, such as ingredients and instruction lists, the point was to see whether the rants across the corpus contained recognizably similar elements.

A key question motivating the research is, are rants chaotic rambles of emotion, or do ranters invoke elements of logic? Do ranters make coherent arguments? According to their methodological application of discourse analysis, Eemeren et al. (1997) note that arguments include propositions that are offered and bolstered with justifications or reasons. They state that even an argumentative monologue is actually dialogical. A person who is making an argument is trying to convince an audience to adopt or agree with the ranter's position. For example, a ranter complaining about copyright policies situates his or her argument within the context of a video-sharing site in which many people incorporate music into videos even though they do not own the copyrights to the music. The present investigation of rants on YouTube seeks to understand what people rant about, and how they explain the reasons behind their concerns.

Characteristics of a YouTube Rant about YouTube

In discourse analysis, it is argued that many casual observers assume that oral discourse, such as the type of spontaneous remarks that video makers record, must be "chaotic," "random," and "unstructured" (Johnstone 2002). Several video makers noted that they were not going to edit their videos, but were speaking extemporaneously in their rant. Yet, discourse analysts argue that oral discourse exhibits a particular structure that may be detected through careful observation.

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Videos in the present corpus tended to have an identifiable structure in which the video maker stated a problem, often elaborated on the problem by discussing different dimensions of it (or discussed multiple and often related problems), and proposed solutions and/or motivators that directly attempted to address the problem(s).

For most video makers in the corpus, rants were not simply vents. People could often envision and articulate a potential solution. Proposed solutions varied with respect to their creativity and realism. Solutions included everything from revenue sharing proposals with music companies to directives that urged administrators to solve a problem by simply changing things back to the way they were. For example, several video makers called for YouTube to revert back to a prior incarnation of YouTube's layout before the controversial "beta" format of YouTube's design was implemented.

Rants on YouTube often contained multiple themes or activities that the video maker wished to talk about on camera, including non-YouTube related subjects. For example, in a video entitled, *Is Youtube Racist? TonyaTko Rant Day 11 Pushup w/extra convo (#25)*, posted on July 11, 2009, a black female video maker named TonyaTko expresses well-articulated concerns about the lack of black partners on YouTube. She then proceeds to do push-ups while talking about other matters. She also takes phone calls in the middle of the video. Even though it is interwoven with other comments, themes, and activities, her video contains a recognizable set of components including raising an issue, elaborating on the problem, offering a solution, and motivating people to take next steps. TonyaTKO raises an important issue of civic concern by asking her viewers whether they are observing a dearth of popular black video makers who are not comedians. She suggests making more connections with black participants and doing collaborations. She also urges her viewers to raise her awareness about other black participants.

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The majority of videos (32 or 91%) in the corpus of 35 rants included, usually early in the video, a recognizable statement about a problem that the video maker had about the site. A slight majority of videos (18 or 51%) presented problems with other YouTube participants and their behavior. Examples of problems included bullying, banality in videos, hating, spamming, trolling, bad typing, and poor execution of lip synching videos. The second largest category of problems included issues with YouTube administrators or their policies (11 or 31%). Issues included YouTube's poor design and layout, thumbnail issues, technical glitches, copyright policies, video removals, and account suspensions. Another group of videos (4 or 11%) directly targeted music industry executives or companies such as Warner Music Group (WMG) for their aggressive and controversial take down of videos. Other issues included problems with YouTube's business model, racism, and the fact that making videos is highly time consuming. A majority of videos (30 or 86%) also provided a solution to the problem discussed in the rant. In addition, most rants (26 or 74%) also provided motivators such as directives to YouTube administrators or other participants to implement specific changes to address the problem.

However, not every video in the corpus followed this basic structure. Although they labeled their own videos as "rants," three of the videos were really more of a "ramble" in which the video maker did not articulate specific problems, as much as address things that interested them and/or their viewers. For example, in a video entitled *Morning Rant About YouTube* (#6) posted on September 22, 2008, a Latino male video maker begins by talking about technical glitches he had on the site when uploading videos, but provides no solutions or motivators. The bulk of the video is spent answering viewers' questions about technical devices such as computer screen shields.

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Another video entitled, *Bean's Rant: Common YouTube Themes*, (#11) posted on July 1, 2009, comedically mocks several video themes such as make-up tutorials and news blogs. Although the video was entitled as a "rant," the Asian man speaking to the camera did not necessarily call out these themes as problems for themselves or the site. On the contrary, the video maker admits that structuring one's video around a particular format is "not necessarily a bad thing because that's exactly what YouTube is all about." Finally, a black male video maker's video entitled, *Rant On YouTube Partnership* (#31) posted on January 21, 2010 includes the word "rant" in the title but neither rambles in free-form nor states a particular problem. The video maker, who calls himself TheArtisticGemini, outlines his approach to partnership revenue. YouTubers who participate in the partnership program receive a share of ad revenue on advertisements placed next to or on the videos. Using an articulate and largely dispassionate tone, TheArtisticGemini states that he earns very little money from ads, but promises to use any earnings to run fan contests and provide cash rewards.

Discourse analysts argue that exceptions such as these must be investigated. Further research might delve into the linguistic connotations of "rant" versus "ramble," for they seemed to be linked in a few video maker's minds. Indeed definitions of ranting carry a similar connotation to flaming, which includes talking "incessantly" about a subject (Baron 1984; Raymond 1996). Of course what constitutes "incessant" is a qualitative judgment that depends upon viewers' interests. Even though the video makers of the technical device rant (#6) and the YouTube partnership rant (#31) may have been expressing insecurities about videos' reception by titling them "rants," they seemed to address topics in which their viewers expressed interest. For example, in the *Morning Rant About YouTube* (#6), the video maker is answering technical questions submitted by his viewers.

Nevertheless, these few exceptions prove the rule; the vast majority contain a particular generic structure including an articulated problem, solutions and motivators, and emotions that gave the rant a certain character. Notably, the outward emotion expressed in most of the rants did not preclude a video maker's ability to articulate a rational statement of problem that YouTube administrators or other participants should address.

Statement of the Problem

An initial viewing of the videos suggested that nearly all of them contained a clear statement of a problem that was of concern to the video maker and possibly to other YouTubers. To test this preliminary impression, all videos were coded to see if they did contain a clear statement of a problem on YouTube. The coding was conducted in a binary way, rather than by degree in terms of whether they did or did not exhibit a particular characteristic. Future studies might tackle degrees of rhetorical eloquence, but the present exercise more modestly endeavored to determine how and whether the videos exhibited particular components and structures.

Most of the videos (32 or 91%) contained a description of a problem. For example in the video, *Damn Thumbnails (#1)* posted on February 7, 2007, a white male video maker named SordidInsurrection talks about problems with YouTube's method for creating thumbnails for videos. Thumbnails are small images placed next to a video title. They appear on YouTube's search lists and on participants' channels to provide information about a video's content.

SordidInsurrection labels his video as a rant, not in the video's title, but in title cards that use white writing on a black screen to bookend the beginning and end of his rant (See Figure 1). Before his rant, a title card structures his forthcoming rant by depicting the word rant in brackets. When the rant is complete, a second title card uses the convention of a forward slash to show the

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end of something. In computer languages such as Hypertext Markup Language (HTML), a forward slash is used to demarcate the end of a series of text that has been formatted in a particular way. In this way, SordidInsurrection warns his viewers that a rant is forthcoming.



Figure 1
Demarcating one's video as a rant
Screenshot by author, November, 2013

SordidInsurrection exhibits a kind of performance of technical affiliation (Lange 2011) to certain technologized forms of communication by using HTML-like characteristics to indicate to viewers that his forthcoming video will be a rant. He situates his rant in a technologized form. Although he admits that he is a “little annoyed,” he is clearly able to articulate the problem he is having with how YouTube chooses thumbnails to advertise videos. He states:

Little annoyed right now. Uh, I made a video, uh, it took me a couple of hours. I'm particularly proud of it. The link to that is in the description of this video, so uh, please watch it. Um, and in this video I used uh titles, and these titles appear on a black frame, and I happened to have one exactly at halfway through the video. And as you know, YouTube takes that frame exactly halfway and makes it the thumbnail for the video. And that's not exactly what I want as the thumbnail. I don't think it looks good. I don't think it attracts attention. And I want people, uh, watching my video, seeing my message, you know. And, little annoyed, at a loss for words because I put a lot of effort into that.

Even though he is emotionally distressed, he is able to articulate a clear statement of the problem, which is that YouTube's system for taking thumbnails at the midway point was

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disadvantageous for him because he happened to have a black screen at that point. Although his tone is never forceful, he nevertheless indicates emotion through his facial expressions and gestures to the camera. He also states in words that he is “annoyed” and “at a loss for words.” He might emotionally feel at a loss for words, but he states his problem quite clearly.

Further, not only does he clearly state a problem, he elaborates by explaining that he does not like this procedure because in this case, the thumbnail does not “look good,” and “does not attract attention” and does not help him convey the message of the video. He elaborates by listing justifications of his claims. In this case, as in the majority of videos on in the corpus, displaying emotion is not incompatible with making a rational argument about a problem that he and those of us who posted videos in the early days of YouTube experienced. Later, YouTube’s system enabled people to choose one of three images, but at the time of his video, he considered this a problem worth ranting about.

SordidInsurrection was not alone in faulting YouTube’s technical execution of video sharing practices. Similar complaints appeared in 11 or 31% of the videos in the corpus. Other issues included problems with YouTube’s infamous “beta” layout which often “confused” people; changes in the rating system from 5 stars to thumbs up or down; and frozen views, in which a YouTube glitch prevented accurate viewer tallies. Such a technical problem greatly vexed one video maker who was trying to become a partner, which of course is partly determined on the basis of metrics such as views. He was denied partnership status, and proposed the obvious solution which was to fix the glitch so that his popularity could be accurately assessed.

A majority of complaints concerned other participants’ behaviors. Most videos (18 or 51%) addressed a specific problem such as bullying, spamming, trolling, hating, complaining about partners, and making poor videos or exhibiting lack of skill in typing and lip synching. In the

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video *YouTube Rant!!!* (#7) posted on January 7, 2003, a young white woman with the account named *monstar1234* rants about the fact that a small clique of participants seem to receive the bulk of attention. She is vexed by this behavior as it reminds her of high school and causes good video makers to be ignored. She explains why she is “pissed off”:

What is it with the in-crowd of YouTube? You know like the popular kids of YouTube are like the popular kids in high school, but it's YouTube and it's just like school all over again, except it's YouTube and it's videos and it's supposed to be something for everybody but I really don't feel that it is that anymore... Obviously people get popular and I can understand that but it's like all the popular people on YouTube have this love-in together and they just shout out to each other and just, it- they just lick each other's asses, and it's just so, it's just I hate it, it makes me sick... I just think it's a shame that um, there are so many people doing good things on YouTube now, and they don't even get a look in because it's the same people who've been around for the last couple of years, who just always get talked about and get mentioned in other people's popular videos and they don't really bother to uh look at anybody new. I just think it's a shame, personally.

Speaking quickly and animatedly, *monster1234* not only states a problem, which is that YouTube's popular crowd is insular and self-promoting, she also elaborates on the problem by discussing its nuanced dimensions and consequences. In gaining so much attention and ignoring good video makers, she is arguing that the dynamic resembles that of high school cliques and popularity contests rather than rewarding creators' merit for skills, ability, and contributions. She discusses how this dynamic has eroded the feeling of inclusiveness that YouTube once offered. Further, she states that people making high quality videos are ignored which is a “shame.”

Notably, *monstar1234* says that she does not “have to name names” or “pick particular people out” to make her point. Her rant is not about attacking individuals but rather seeks to explain general problems exhibited by a category of participants who are insular and focus on other popular individuals while ignoring new, talented participants. Her rant is generically distinct from that of prior conceptions of flaming which were often characterized as *ad hominem*

attacks (Arendholz, 2013) targeted towards specific individuals (Thurlow et al., 2004). In contrast, monstar1234 is illustrating a general problem with a category of persons whose behavior threatens the inclusive feeling that she believed YouTube once exhibited.

Monster1234's rant is also interesting because she is confident that it will be received well. She states that, "If you have anything remotely to do with YouTube on a regular basis, you'll know what I mean." Her rant does not simply vent about a pet peeve, but rather taps into a problem that she believes should be addressed for the collective good of participants on the site. Her video's message is more civically rather than solely personal in content. The implication is that people may lose motivation to participate on YouTube which may also decline in creative content as long as participants remain in a "bubble" of interaction and viewership.

A white male ranter named Hellsing920 also targets the behavior of a category of persons in his rant entitled *Hellsing920: The "Epic" Rant – YouTube*, (#14) which was posted on April 22, 2010. Using colorful and frequent profanity to criticize certain YouTube participants, Hellsing920 clearly explains that he has a problem with people who engage in problematic behaviors on the site. Even worse than the copyright problems, the old partner system, haters, spammers, flaggers, and other "fucksticks" with "no life," his biggest problem on YouTube involves people who tamper with YouTube's comment systems. He rants:

If they don't like you they will fuck with your comments on your videos by- by like marking them all as spam, or marking things thumbs- thumbs down on that completely retarded thumbs up thumbs down system which they've got goin'. Or they will spam the comment area on your page directly. I have had to three times since I have come back I have had to clean up that comment area because fuckin' douchebags with no life, less of a life than I have mind you, had to scroll this little fucking fancy ass little bit of art work that must have sucked up the last 7 brain cells which these idiots have to send a little image of the finger [he demonstrates with left hand raising middle finger] repeated again and again and again, all the way down my fuckin' page. I had to clean that shit up. That is annoying as hell.

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Hellsing920 rants about multiple things, demonstrating that a rant does not necessarily target one problem or identify only one set of individuals as problematic. For example, in the middle of a rant about people who spam his comment area, he also characterizes the new thumbs up/thumbs down comment system that YouTube adopted as “completely retarded.” The system was changed from a 5 star rating system to a binary thumbs up and thumbs down because YouTube administrators claimed that very few people were marking the middle stars in the original rating system (Rajaraman 2009). People tended to rate videos as either awesome or poor, and so a binary system was instituted, which received numerous complaints at the time.

Hellsing920 similarly complains about a category of video maker, although elsewhere in the rant he does identify particular individuals whom he takes issue with. In this part of the rant, he is targeting a group of comment vandals who create work for him to “clean the shit up” when they defile his comment pages. He uses liberal profanity and strong emotional tones, yet he is clearly able to articulate a specific problem, which is that people can lace pages with spam or use the comment system to sabotage a video’s reception. Despite his emotional disposition, Hellsing920 and all of the other ranters in the corpus were able to not only articulate a problem, but also identify nuances, dimensions, and consequences of the issue. The rants in this qualitative corpus suggest that logical framing and statements about oft-shared collective problems on YouTube were not incompatible with multi-modal expressions of strong emotion in tone, facial expression, and bodily gestures. The YouTubers combined emotion in ways that underscored rather than complicated their ability to point out problems on the site.

Emotional Expression

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Most videos (32 or 91%) included indications of emotion. Typically this emotion took the form of annoyance, anger, frustration, or confusion. The videos that showed emotion often included more than one modality; they indexed their emotions through a combination of tone of voice, facial expressions, or animated bodily gestures. Even though most videos showed emotion in more than one form, not all video makers indicated their emotions through tone of voice. For example, a white boy from the United Kingdom expresses his criticisms about adverts in his rather even-tempered rant video entitled, *RANT : ADVERTS ON YOUTUBE!!*, which was posted on April 15, 2010. Although more emotionally subtle than other rants, he indicates his emotions through a combination of facial expressions and words. He states that the ads are “annoying” him. As a rule, ranters did not shout particularly loudly at the camera. The one exception was a video from a white, male Australian video maker named 1GOD1JESUS who at times screamed in his video, *MY RANT ON FEATURED VIDEOS!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!* (#29), which was posted on, July 17, 2009. To my ears, this screaming was highly unpleasant and sometimes even distorted the audio. Yet even in this emotional outlier, 1GOD1JESUS arguably stated a legible a problem on YouTube that other participants have observed, which had to do with the questionable quality of videos that the YouTube staff chose to feature on the Australian YouTube page. He screams, “Australia seems to choose the most ridiculous stupid fucking videos you’ve ever fucking seen!” His proposed solution was also collapsed into a forcefully constructed motivator addressed to YouTube administrators to “Fucking do your job properly!”

Many of the videos did contain animated facial expressions and bodily gestures, with some video makers moving around or waving the warms in frustration at a problem (See Figure 2). In addition, a majority of the ranters (23 or 66%) used profanity to make their point, where profanity was coded for variations of words including: “fuck,” “shit,” “damn,” “crap,” “pussy,”

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“ass” and phrases such as “go to hell.” Not all of the videos included outright profanity, but even these often contained hints of the profane, as when one Asian male ranter used the substitute word, “frickin” for “fucking,” and a white female said in her *Rant on the New YouTube Layout* (#21) that it “sucks butt” and that she wants to use the word “H - E - double hockey sticks” but declines to do that. Profanity is often said to boost group cohesion and alienate non-members (Selnow 1985). Contrary to previous scholarship that lumped rants in ways that branded them as extended flames that were toxic to group interactivity, the use of profanity in the rants suggests a wish to bond with other YouTubers who shared similar frustrations, who might wish to delineate themselves from outright perpetrators or even passive supporters of the problem.



Figure 2: YouTubers use animated facial expressions and gestures to make their points
Screenshots by the author, November, 2013

A final emotional characteristic that was observed in the corpus included comedic elements. Ranters might mimic the voices of the haters or people who were begging for subscriptions to videos to mock their behaviors. In one video, a ranter mimics participants who make crushingly banal videos using “dead eyes” and a “dead face.” Ranters also used humorous turns of phrases that might include colorful profanity, such as calling spammers “fucksticks” when they engaged in comment spamming. It may be the case as Manning (2008) observed that ranters are using the genre to find psychological relief, but most rants also offered solutions or motivators that suggested how a problem might be addressed in more public and collective terms.

A Genre of Venting or Problem Solving?

In the corpus, most videos (30 or 86%) offered a proposed solution to the stated problem. In addition, 26 videos, or 74% also included motivators that urged others to take next steps to solve the problem. In some cases solutions and motivators were collapsed into the same directive targeted at the individuals who created the problem, or who had the ability to address it. For example, in the video called *Rant on the New YouTube Layout* (#21), posted on March 31, 2010, a white female YouTuber named ittybittyannie assumes that those who changed YouTube's layout will be the same people who can change it back. She implores the nameless, faceless staff who implemented the unfortunate layout change with the directive, "Whoever did this, change it back!" In this example, the solution to the problem is rather simply to revert back to the system that she originally preferred. At the same time, it is also uses the pragmatic function of a directive to encourage people to mold their behavior according to the needs of the person issuing the directive. In most cases, YouTubers moved beyond venting and explored, with varying degrees of creativity and plausibility, potential solutions to the problems that they identified.

Proposed Solutions

Solutions varied in intensity, beginning with simple and straightforward directives to proposing somewhat more detailed solutions. For example, in his rant, *Hellsing920: The "Epic" Rant – YouTube*, (#14), Hellsing920 explores how the behavior of problematic YouTubers might be addressed. He states:

Is there any way to fix any of this? Well YouTube has started because they've already modified the partner program and you have to punch in some cockamamie code after you punch in so many comments in a few minutes but that doesn't help it at all. I personally

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believe that if someone is a fucking spammer or a hater or other such bullshit they should- you actually should be able to report them.

Notably, Hellsing920 explicitly orients toward a possible solution by rhetorically raising the question of whether there is a way to “fix” problems caused by troublesome participants. He acknowledges that YouTube has initiated a potential corrective by modifying the system to require that participants punch in a “code” if they have posted too many comments in a short time frame. But Hellsing920 criticizes this scheme, calling it “cockamamie” and no “help at all.” He believes that YouTube should enable participants to report troublemakers who engage in “bullshit” behaviors such as spamming and hating.

In, *WMG Rant – WMG and why they suck* (#18) which was posted on February 23, 2009, a white male ranter named ivickvv proposes a solution to the problem brought on by music companies such as Warner Music Group (WMG), which owns the copyrights to many songs and has orchestrated the take-down of many YouTube videos containing even brief snippets of copyrighted music.

What do I think they can do to fix this? I think the best way for them to fix this is that instead of removing the audio from my track when they see that my s- that I’m using one of their songs in it, they need to just be able to put an ad right there that says, buy this song on iTunes from right here and you click the link and you can go buy it on iTunes. That would work out great for them. And it wouldn’t piss everyone off, you know. All I would have to do is click a little ad. And that is way less stressful than getting my entire video fucked up because you thought it would be a good idea to take away the music.”

Again, ivickvv explicitly orients to a solution by rhetorically asking what he thinks the site can do to address the situation. He proposes what others have termed a “click-to-buy” scheme in which people can click a link to a song they are listening to on YouTube and purchase it from online music stores such as iTunes. Several other YouTubers complained that the music industry

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was being short-sighted to crack down on music in videos given that YouTube is a source for many young people to discover new music and musicians. Indeed statistics back up their argument: YouTube is the number one arena for young people aged 18-34 to discover online musical content (Robbins 2013). Rants about music and copyright issues often included the argument that YouTube was an excellent place to promote one's music, and preventing music circulation could not only anger fans and dissuade them from purchasing music from bands with over-zealous copyright enforcement, but would also prevent others from discovering their work.

It is curious that ivickvv proposes a solution which apparently had already been implemented on the site several months before he posted his video. According to YouTube's official blog, the site had implemented a click-to-buy scheme for media content in the latter part of 2008 (The YouTube Team 2008). By the time of ivickvv's video, the site had also announced an expansion of its click-to-buy scheme beyond the U.S. and the U.K., to appear on YouTube's sites in Germany, Spain, and the Netherlands (The YouTube Team 2009). Perhaps he had not yet encountered the feature; nevertheless his suggestion was direct, practical and clearly not far-fetched given that it was actually being implemented. Such proposals suggest that ranting is not necessarily limited to venting. In some cases, ranters envisioned solutions that had practical reality.

Motivators

In numerous videos (26 or 74%), YouTube ranters not only proposed solutions but also attempted to motivate viewers's behavior to improve the site's functionality and social usability. For example, in the *Damn Thumbnails* rant (#1), the video maker addresses potential hearers on the YouTube staff and requests that they change their thumbnail policy. He states:

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If anyone from YouTube is watching this, please take this as a message that you need to let the users choose what they want as the thumbnail of the video, or at least choose a point in the video where they want to do it cause sometimes halfway isn't exactly perfect.

Again, in this case YouTube actually did later change the system such that video makers could choose from one of three thumbnails taken from different places in the video. This change suggests that the ranters' request was not unreasonable; indeed others complained of this problem. The eventual change also reinforces the idea that it is possible to combine emotion and logic to make a persuasive argument about agreed-upon site improvements.

Video rants also addressed other YouTubers and criticized their behavior. In the video entitled *A Rant Response for Renetto* (#4), OhCurt faults YouTubers (including himself) for removing videos. He argued that such deletions destroy the coherence of video conversations and removed valuable commentary from the site. OhCurt uses a series of impassioned directives to motivate participants to stop deleting videos. He states:

Do not go back and delete old videos. It doesn't matter if it's a response video to something that's no longer on the site. Keep it there! Don't take it down! Because you just never know what is going to have some sort of value later on down the road.

Similarly, in the video entitled, *3:00 AM Madness* (#2), a video maker called thewinekone hilariously parodies people on YouTube who make banal videos about checking their mailbox. He also says he has a "beef" with how people "just talked to the camera with dead eyes and a dead face." He simulates this behavior to great comedic effect, a characteristic which fueled his popularity when the video was posted. He eventually becomes more serious and directly addresses such participants with the statement, "you need new material, cause that stuff is all done with, and done with." He too employs directives to urge change. He implores

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unimaginative YouTube participants to “do something innovative, something unique that someone has never done on a webcam and then show it to the world.” Perhaps thewinekone does not perceive the problem to be intractable because he uses motivators to inspire other video makers to improve their videos and thus the general viewing experience on YouTube.

Discussion

The present analysis examined generic aspects of rants in a binary way. Either the rant exhibited a structural characteristic such as a statement of the problem, solution, and motivator or it did not. The rationale was to initiate a scholarly dialogue on whether rants, similar to other recognizable digital genres, exhibited consistent features across a body of similarly-labeled works. Future studies might attend more closely to the degree of emotions in rants, and code for just how agitated YouTubers seem to be when they choose to rant. For example, in the rant on *FEATURED VIDEOS* (#29), the video maker used a level of force that clearly fell outside the typical parameters of the rest of the corpus. Most of the ranters expressed emotions in an animated but far less assaultively audible way.

The present investigation was limited to problem-centric rants about YouTube. Future studies might examine other kinds of rants which abound on YouTube. Typing in the word “rant,” without also using the term “YouTube” identified an array of videos on topics such as: having a bad hair day; criticizing devices such as game boxes; complaining about the usability of services and social media such as Instagram; and engaging in professional comedians’ routines. It would be interesting to investigate whether these rants exhibit the same characteristics as the problem-centric rants found in the present corpus. Do rants about different topics have the same components and general sequence, or do they exhibit a wider variety of features?

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Finally, future studies might address the implications of these rants for processes of civic engagement. It is notable that motivators sometimes took the form of addressing other YouTubers, who were urged to contact administrators or media companies to air their grievances about policies. In other cases, YouTubers addressed YouTube administrators, media company executives, or musicians directly and suggested—or demanded—that they change their policies in accordance with YouTubers’ needs and concerns. An interesting question concerns why certain audiences are targeted over others and whether there is any correlation between perceived intractability of a problem and the chosen audience for the rant. For example, if a problem is seen as difficult to address, do participants tend to rally other participants instead of addressing the perpetrators or decision-makers directly? If, for example, haters are perceived to be a problem for YouTube, do ranters address them directly to persuade them to change their unfortunate behaviors, or does the perceived futility of that tactic lead them to appeal to the higher power of YouTube to take action? It is also possible that rants may target multiple audiences as occurred in several videos. Future studies might tease apart various dialogical aspects of messages, and determine how they are crafted to change policies or behaviors in a particular social milieu.

Conclusion

Contrary to prior scholarly and popular discourses that characterized rants as emotional, harmful, and chaotic, the majority of rants in the corpus exhibited a recognizable structure. The anatomy of the problem-centric rant included a statement of a problem, an elaboration of the problem or discussion of multiple (often related) problems, and next steps that typically took the form of proposed solutions and motivators to action. Using a discourse analysis approach, it was

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demonstrated that, just as other familiar digital genres such as homepages and blogs exhibited consistent form, so too did rants exhibit similar basic characteristics across works that video makers self-identified as “rants.” Most rants also exhibited a common feeling-tone animated around annoyance, anger, frustration, or confusion.

The findings contradict prior research that rants are simply an incessant or “long version” of a flame, or *ad hominem* attack. Although rants and what were once referred to as “flames” may share the characteristics of criticizing something in strong terms, very few rants in the corpus named specific individuals. Most ranters targeted a class of perpetrators such as YouTube administrators, music industry executives, musicians, and other participants who engage in unfortunate behaviors such as hating, spamming, trolling, narcissism, and inappropriate flagging.

In the parlance of prior generations of research, a rant is not simply a long “flame.” Although contemporary YouTube participants use the term “rant,” none of them used the term “flaming” to characterize their own or other others’ critical behavior. A more common term on YouTube to describe pointless or overly harsh criticisms of persons or their videos is “hating,” with those who engage in this behavior called out as “haters” (Lange 2007). It maybe argued that ranting might be interpreted as a form of “hating” although almost no video makers characterized their rants using that term. However, such an interpretive irony was not lost on one apparently male (determined through audio track only) ranter named brawlmaster08, who posted a video called *Haters Rant* (#35) on February 25, 2010. Brawlmaster08 characterized haters as people who criticize others for no reason and engage in personal attacks. He stressed that the problem was essentially intractable and will never go away, as hate would always exist online. He addressed other YouTube participants and urged them to block and remove haters’ comments. He was certain that at least one viewer would call him a hypocrite for hating on haters. Similar to other

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ranters, he nevertheless said that he “had” to post the rant, as the situation had been “pissing him off” for quite some time. He noted that he was not at all bothered by being a hypocrite for hating on haters, and urged his viewers to ignore haters and refrain from engaging with them.

Prior research posited that the primary function of rants was about finding psychological relief through collective venting with fellow sufferers. This function was arguably also in play in the present corpus, as ranters talked about how their emotions tended to brew to a boiling point that lead to the ultimate creation and posting of their rant video. Indeed the present corpus included stress-relief strategies such as profanity, comedic overtones, and selection of well known examples of interactive infractions on the site. Ranters often explicitly stated that if they had spent any time on the site at all, viewers “knew” what the ranter was talking about. These strategies help identify and create collective outlets and forms of empathy for experiencing similar frustrations and problems.

However, the majority of the rants in the corpus did not stop at airing grievances but moved toward exploring potential solutions and motivators. Ranters did not all post solutions and motivators with the same degree of gusto or cleverness. Some proposed solutions took a somewhat weak form as directives that encouraged power brokers to set things right. At other times, ranters took evil-doers to task, or they addressed other YouTubers who experienced similar problems and encouraged them to contact administrators about their concerns.

Addressing collectively important issues raises interesting questions about the future digital continuation of an age-old genre that might pave the way for meaningful discussion in digital public sphere(s). Indeed, Markham (2011) has argued that protecting the possibilities and parameters of digital platforms is crucial for the functioning of online communication. If democracy is to move online, then it would seem of primary importance to keep spaces open and

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capable of encouraging meaningful dialogue on any number of issues. People should be able to debate and discuss things of importance to them, using formats and media that help them express the self and engage in civic criticisms. To accomplish such interactions, people will need platforms that protect their ability to exchange ideas online, and it would seem that rants may be successful mechanisms for fighting for digital rights.

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