

YouTube Nation

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College professors have a front row seat to the latest youth addiction, the side effects of which include bloodshot eyes and late assignment. YouTube, the most popular video sharing website, is the newest media technology craze, and, like other web-based virtual communities (e.g., MySpace and Facebook), logging on has become part of the daily routine for millions of young people. This essay examines the political implications of YouTube. I begin with a brief description of its history, a profile of its users, and the company's practices. I then analyze the potential political impact of YouTube using examples from the 2006 congressional election cycle, and conclude that this medium will change the face of campaigns in coming decades.

Brief History of YouTube

YouTube was started by Chad Hurley, Steve Chen, and Jawed Karim, three 20-something employees of PayPal, in order to share videos with their friends. The site was officially activated on February 15, 2005 to modest popularity, and nearly 20 million people now visit the site monthly (*USA Today*, 2006). Approximately 100 million videos are viewed on a daily basis, and about 65,000 videos are uploaded each day. YouTube is one of the fastest growing websites on the Net in terms of visitors, handily beating the competition, including Yahoo! Video Search, MSN Video Search, MySpace Video, and Google Video. YouTube currently enjoyed 43% of the video sharing market, as measured by number of "hits" (*USA Today*, 2006), and was named *Time Magazine's* 2006 "Invention of the Year." With fewer than 70 employees and modest operating costs, YouTube was sold for a considerable profit to Google for \$1.65 billion in November of 2006.

The popularity of YouTube can be explained by the conflation of three "revolutions": relatively inexpensive video cameras and accompanying software; the advent and popularity of virtual communities; and the desire for unfiltered, as opposed to "slick," information (Grossman, 2006). Some YouTube videos have a veritable cult following, including the blog of the (now known to be fictional) teenage character named Bree (screen name LonelyGirl15), and Noah, the user who took a picture of himself every day for six years and posted the montage on YouTube with haunting background music. I can attest to the entertainment value and

addictive nature of the website after spending countless hours distracted by YouTube videos while researching this essay.

Profile of Users

YouTube is the domain of Generation Y, also known as the Baby Boom Echo generation, comprised of nearly 80 million Americans born roughly between 1977 and 1997. Approximately half of YouTube users are under the age of 20 (Sterling, 2006), and those under 35 make up the vast majority of users. Other demographic distinctions emerge as well. First, despite being globally accessible, approximately 70% of YouTube viewers are American (Sterling, 2006). Additionally, a gender gap is present with YouTube users. Male visitors outnumber female visitors 56% to 44% (*USA Today*, 2006).

When it comes to the political ideology of visitors, a general Liberal bias is found. “Bush Sucks” is one of the most popular user groups, and *New York Times* reported an increase in anti-American videos posted to YouTube in the fall of 2006, many concerning the war in Iraq. While certainly not a precise measure of political ideology, 4,794 videos are found with the search word “Liberal,” while only 2,705 emerge with the term “Conservative” (YouTube.com, Accessed December 1, 2006). Videos are also available that are supportive of less mainstream political ideals, including pro-Hitler and openly racist ideologies. A quick search for the term “Hitler” nets 4,632 “hits,” while “white power” comes up with 1,275 “hits.”

The Politics of YouTube

In terms of internal policies, YouTube does not allow the uploading of pornography, but violence is acceptable, as long as it does not depict an actual incident of harm. Videos that contain “adult” content (e.g., violence and cursing) are only accessible to visitors over 18 years of age. A content analysis of types of videos on YouTube has not been conducted, and if one were available, it would be out-of-date within a week given the rapid pace of new video uploading. A casual perusal of the site’s most popular videos indicates great variety in the types that are popular: from clips of David Letter and other late night comedy shows, to footage from crash tests, personal video blog entries, and different humorous, obviously staged, situations. Snippets from *The Daily Show* and the *Colbert Report* frequently make the most popular video list.

Political Implications of YouTube

YouTube has the potential to revolutionize elections in America, despite the dismal voter turnout of Generation Y. The sheer size of this group (it's larger than the Baby Boomers!) dictates that it will comprise 25 percent of the electorate within a decade. Video sharing sites will become an increasingly important medium for reaching voters as a greater proportion of the electorate logs on. YouTube will influence elections by extending the reach of campaign materials; enabling candidates with little funding to get "face time;" reaching young people through entertaining, visual means; democratizing political information while diminishing candidate's ability to control their message; increasing attention to negative advertising; and putting scandals on the agenda and/or extending their shelf life. Each of these is addressed in turn.

YouTube enables candidates, political parties, and interest groups to reach an extended segment of the population with minimal cost. This will likely increase the number of candidates in races, especially the presidential election, where early exposure and momentum are crucial. YouTube allows more candidates to follow in the footsteps of "Howard Dean" and use the Internet to gather "underground" momentum. While it is unlikely that little-known presidential candidates will have a large audience on YouTube, those with some name recognition will benefit from having their ads accessible to the general public without expensive media buys.

The visual nature of YouTube makes it particularly appealing to Generation Y, the first generation to be marketed to cradle-to-grave (Schor, 1999). The influence of popular media appeals with this generation was evident in the 11 percent jump in turnout among young voters from the 2000 presidential election to 2004 (Hugo Lopez, Kirby, Sagoff, 2005). This voter surge was fueled by P. Diddy's "Vote or Die" campaign, popular rapper Eminem's "Mosh" Video, MTV's "Choose or Lose 2004" project, and the "Smackdown Your Vote!" movement that teamed professional wrestling with the League of Women Voters. YouTube has the potential to make politics more entertaining for Generation Y, and this will likely increase election interest and participation.

In addition to the format of YouTube, the democratization of political information no doubt appeals to the anti-marketing sentiments of Generation Y. On the flipside, it will become increasingly difficult to candidates to control and "spin" their image when their campaign videos can be altered, parodied, combined

with other videos, or critiqued by “everyday” people. The voices of politicians will be unwittingly altered or drowned out in a veritable sea of other video voices that may hold more credibility for young voters.

Another potential implication of YouTube in politics is a propensity for viewers to watch negative rather than positive ads. In a conventional campaign, each camp determines voter exposure to negative ads through media buys, but with YouTube, the consumer determines the saturation. YouTube played a key role in the remarkably negative 2006 congressional campaign season where ads included accusations of candidates calling phone sex lines, visiting the Playboy mansion, strangling their mistress, having connections to a serial killer, wanting to abort Black babies, funding research on masturbation, and paying for sex, to name a few (Grunwald, 2006).

In addition to increased voter access to negative advertising, YouTube puts scandals on the agenda that would otherwise go unnoticed, and extends the shelf life of scandals by making video evidence accessible after its exhausted the typical news cycle. The 2006 election is replete with examples of scandals that were helped along by YouTube. West Virginia Senator George Allen’s infamous reference to a man who incessantly followed him around with a video camera as “macaca” was immortalized on YouTube where it has been viewed over 100,000 times. Allen lost the election, and some pundits attribute this to the video being so widely accessible (Fairbanks, 2006). Likewise, the Republican National Committee advertisement that featured a scantily clad white woman posing as a Playboy bunny, imploring black senate candidate Harold Ford, Jr. to call her, was viewed by over 250,000 YouTube visitors. This version of the ad ran for less than a week, but viewers continued to have access to it through YouTube. The ad conjured racial fears about black men being intimate with white women, and likely cost Ford his relatively comfortable margin and the election.

In closing, in the future YouTube nation, campaigns are nastier, but a lot more entertaining. Scandals spread like viruses and linger like a nagging cough. Critics follow candidates relentlessly with video cameras, just looking to catch them in some indefensible act. And once damaging footage is available, it lives on indefinitely. Campaigns are in on the act, too, posting videos that appear to be from an “average” person. These effects will be amplified in the next decade or so as Generation Y asserts its voice in the political chorus.

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