

YouTube PR: A Brief Look at Campaign 2008

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YouTube (www.youtube.com) has set aside a section of its site for campaign 2008. In this section called "YouChoose '08", YouTube has collected short videos from 15 presidential candidates. Each video is posted with the day the video was placed on the site and the number of times the video has been viewed. We examined the data for 20 of the most recent videos for each of three candidates – Barack Obama who joined 10 months before the analysis, Hillary Clinton who joined the site 11 months before the analysis, and John Edwards who had joined a year before. These are the three longest participants in YouTube among candidates listed. Data examination was done on July 3 and July 5, 2007.

What surprises one immediately is the low viewership for most of the videos.

Candidate	No. of videos	Average days on YouTube	Average no. of views/day
Edwards	20	10	1,641
Obama	20	5	359
Clinton	20	26	2,442

The number of voters in the 2004 presidential election was 126 million. The number of registered voters in the US was close to 197 million. (see <http://www.census.gov/prod/2006pubs/p20-556.pdf>) Something doesn't compute. There appears to be more going on than lack of general interest in early stages of primary campaigning. The extent to which such videos have low viewership is emphasized by the fact that two Clinton videos were tied to a publicity stunt – selecting her campaign song – . which garnered high numbers. When those two videos are subtracted from the average, daily viewings of Clinton videos dropped to estimated 719, ahead of Obama but behind Edwards. This count does not include an independent video contribution from a young woman under the title, "I got a crush... on Obama." (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wKsoXHYICqU>). This video clip scored an average daily viewership of 99,260 over 21 days. Nor does it include Hillary's video that launched her campaign because it occurred well before the sampling period.

All three candidates have posted clips from speeches and news events on YouTube. Clinton, however, used a successful publicity stunt to garner high viewership. Obama posted videos of campaign contributors that have

garnered mostly low viewership. Edwards posted a mix of news and speech-related videos and self-produced offerings.

Political campaigners have been quick to adapt YouTube to their tactics, but the analysis indicates the public might not be ready for video campaign clips. In spite of mainstream media noting the rise of YouTube politics, outcomes thus far are less than what they are bruted to be. (See http://www.economist.com/world/na/displaystory.cfm?story_id=9392751 and http://www.usatoday.com/tech/webguide/internetlife/2007-07-05-youtube-election_N.htm) Viewership indicates that right now mostly loyal supporters are looking at most of the videos and probably, opposition researchers.

There are several possible reasons for low viewership. The simplest is that videos are not easy to find. One goes to YouTube, clicks “Channels” on a top tab, then clicks “YouChoose ’08” on the left hand menu column. However, that explanation is facile. There are only two steps to traverse to find the videos. It is difficult to believe that among millions of YouTube viewers only a handful daily would discover the Channels tab and campaign link.

A second explanation is that overall viewership for most of the videos on YouTube is low. There is truth to this in that hundreds of videos are posted to YouTube weekly and most get a low number of views. On the other hand, sorting YouTube for the most-watched videos, reveals that within a day, popular videos are viewed far more than 100,000 times – a rarity for the political videos examined. And, that is what happened with “I got a crush... on Obama” and Clinton’s campaign launch video.

Another explanation is that YouTube is a new untested and untried technique. Campaigners are still trying to figure out what to do with the medium. There is a degree of truth to this explanation when one riffs through campaign video clips. Production is poor in several video clips, messages are presented by talking heads and repurposed news and speech clips are frequent. Hillary Clinton’s publicity stunt was a breakthrough in this regard. It used YouTube for well-produced viral videos that gained attention in traditional media and among YouTube watchers. Other candidates have yet to catch up.

Still another explanation is that the populace doesn’t care much about political campaigns and campaign videos. This may be because of general apathy among citizens toward politics or because it is early in campaign 2008 and viewership will rise as the campaign heats up. This explanation is plausible. Voters in general are not greatly motivated by presidential primaries, especially since campaigns in a few states have until recently determined candidates for the general election without input from the most populous states. This, however, will change in 2008 with primaries being moved up. It

is too early to tell whether shifting primary dates will affect viewership on YouTube.

A final explanation is that YouTube is the wrong forum for political videos. People are looking for entertainment and not serious discussion – e.g., Hillary’s campaign song. This explanation is plausible when one looks at the range of videos posted online. Most are entertainment-oriented. That is certainly the case with “I’ve got a crush... on Obama.” It’s cheesecake, and it emphasizes that with an end title of “Barely Political” and web site that leads to enticing photos of the young woman selling “Crush on Obama” clothes. Few political videos reach the rank of “most viewed” or “most discussed.” That doesn’t mean, however, that YouTube is solely for ephemera. It does mean political candidates who want to use YouTube to get the word out about themselves need to be more creative in their approaches than they are now.

Is it worth continuing? Is YouTube a suitable venue for issues?

The answer to this appears to be it is worth continuing only if issues are presented entertainingly. Talking heads are a no-no. Production is a must. Some campaign videos are so dark, it is hard to see the person speaking. Videos need professional production. The Clinton campaign is notably good at lighting Hillary well.

A philosophy that viewings are cumulative is suspect given the low numbers. There would have to be substantial increases in viewings per video clip for one to say that the cumulative effect of viewings made much of a difference. Total viewings for the 20 clips examined of each candidate were Clinton, 1.2 million; Obama, 39,000 and Edwards, 328,000. Consider that many of these viewings were probably the same individuals looking at the clips and the actual number of voters reached was small. Consider too that Clinton’s largest viewings were for a publicity stunt and it is difficult to conclude that issues had much to do with the number of views.

The gain from using YouTube at this time is marginal at best and a waste of time and money at worst. On the other hand, the cost of creating and posting clips to YouTube appears to be minimal (with the exception of Hillary’s viral videos.) So, it appears that campaign managers are using YouTube now as a medium they feel they have to include in their portfolios in order to seem *au courant*. They don’t know yet what to do with it, which means they need to keep production costs down.

What this says, however, is that creative campaigners have an opportunity to make YouTube an effective political tool, if they spend the time and resources to learn to use it. There is still a long way to go in Campaign 2008 for the presidency. It is not too early to envision sharper use of YouTube when

candidates are filtered down to two. It is not a reach to predict that videos will be more entertaining and virally oriented.

We will be watching the progress of using YouTube during the current election because it will be a factor in how corporations and marketers use it going forward.

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Research results follow

YouChoose '08

As of 7/5/2007

Video

Clinton

	Time on Site (days)	Viewings	Average
Bush commuting sentence	0.5	234	468
With Warren Buffet	3	1932	644
HillCam	4	2814	704
Aids	4	4306	1077
Maya Angelou	14	25048	1789
Ia Dem Hall of Fame	28	3027	108
Message from Pres Clinton	28	14748	527
Arianna Huffington	28	24093	860
CNN Blog report	28	13897	496
Hillary Hypothetical	28	22015	786
Hillary Iraq	28	21549	770
Jim McGovern	28	12981	464
Dick Cheney and Diplomacy	28	140080	5003
Shared prosperity	30	5615	187
Pick my campaign song - Rnd 2	30	317576	10586
New Hampshire Day of Action	30	2574	86
I need your advice - campaign song	30	620488	20683
Health Care- All Children	30	10584	353
Calif Democratic Convention	60	14761	246
Continuing the four corners	60	10073	168
SUBTOTAL	519.5	1,268,395	46,003.54
Average	26	63,420	2,300
Average: Viewings by Day and Average		2,442	2300

OBAMA

	Time on Site (days)	Viewings	Average
Lloyd Porter	3	1682	561
Teno Villareal	3	1030	343
Michelle Obama - Harlem	3	2130	710
Mario Bonifacio	4	1210	303
John Madden	4	1349	337
San Antonio	4	1180	295
Gregory Smith	5	7130	1426
Iowa Ads - Carry	5	2090	418
Jayne Chapman	6	1037	173
Barbara Rubin	6	976	163
Iowa Ads - Choices	6	2645	441

Carlos Odio	6	3053	509
Sarah Baker	6	2254	376
Lauren Dula	6	555	93
Melanie Taylor	7	1174	168
Carolyn James	7	2167	310
Amber James	7	4130	590
Steve Wilmarth	7	2160	309
Val McCall	7	643	92
Deborah Fordham	7	579	83
SUBTOTAL	109	39174	7697
AVERAGE	5	1959	385
Average: Viewings by Day and Average		359	385

Edwards

	Time on Site (days)	Viewings	Average
NEA: Wages and Pensions	2	694	347
NALEO conference	4	2114	529
Defending the message	5	1190	238
Fighting back	7	4699	671
Conversation with John and Elizabeth	7	3354	479
Anne Coulter	7	265001	37857
Strength of America	7	22762	3252
Reno Town Hall	7	2577	368
New Orleans	7	3362	480
Cooper Union	7	2639	377
Take Back America: Global Warming	14	2709	194
AFSCME Forum: Unions	14	1434	102
AFSCME Forum: Katrina	14	1032	74
Made in the USA	14	1142	82
Kids on the Road	14	1175	84
Eventful.com contest	14	6750	482
Sinking Swiftboaters	14	2241	160
J& E Edwards - Trivia	14	1633	117
Elizabeth Edwards - City Year Annual Conv	14	758	54
Elizabeth Edwards- House party	14	921	66
SUBTOTAL	200	328187	46012
Average	10	16409	2301
Average: Viewings by Day and Average		1641	2301