

Hillary Clinton's Use of Campaign Video: Engendering Political Participation(?)

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All the Presidential candidates and their supporters engaged with (and through) new media technologies in profoundly unique ways during the most recent primary season: “The Obama Girl video, a short of Edwards getting a haircut to the tune of ‘I Feel Pretty’ and a clip featuring McCain joking about bombing Iran all received heavy mainstream media coverage this summer. In a Pew Research Center study, more people said they had heard about or seen the videos on TV than online” (Gallaga, 2007, p. A01). Indeed, the 2008 Presidential election is remarkable for the emerging interactions between candidates, voters, mainstream media, and consumer-generated media.

My response focuses attention on Hillary Clinton's unsuccessful campaign for the Presidency and how she utilized video technology in interesting and participatory ways. In particular, her use of video highlighted connections between democracy and issues of gender. Clinton faced the unique and daunting task of perpetuating a feminine style while simultaneously asserting her toughness in dealing with terrorism and national security in a post-9/11 world – a difficult task faced by all female politicians (see Bystrom, 2004; Fridkin Kahn, 1993; 1996; Fiber and Fox, 2005; Niven, 2005; Trent and Friedenber, 2000).

One attempt to address this balance was the Clinton campaign's innovative use of video in concert with traditional and participatory functions. In terms of the traditional use of video, one of Clinton's most intriguing videos was entitled *The Politics of Pile-On*, and accused fellow male candidates of collaboratively challenging her during a debate. In this sense, Clinton used

the video to capitalize on her marginalized position as the only female Democratic candidate. She also used campaign videos in ways that encouraged her supporters to get involved – at least, technologically. For example, she requested constituents to choose a campaign song by voting through her website (this also allowed her campaign to track voter emails and responses and was a savvy way of collecting information).

When the voting was concluded, Clinton released a video to announce the chosen song. The video was a spoof of the series finale of *The Sopranos*, wherein Hillary Clinton played the role of Tony Soprano. Pundits contend that the video “humanized her, and that was something she really needed at that time in her campaign” (Michael Cornfield, cited in Gallaga, 2007, p. A01). Cornfield also credited Clinton's videos with boosting her poll numbers. I would suggest that Clinton’s video also worked to position her as a strong leader via the not-so-subtle metaphor of Tony Soprano: tough, yet family oriented, thus, an appropriate choice.

A second campaign video, entitled *Caucusing is Easy* mocked Clinton’s off-key performance of the Star Spangled Banner. The clip of her voice had been viewed about 1.2 million times on YouTube (cited in Kranish, 2007). Opening with Bill Clinton running on a treadmill with the caption “Exercising is Not Easy,” then fading into the “Singing is Not Easy” scene, the video could be interpreted as an attempt by Clinton to counter her image as cold and distant through the use of self-deprecating humor. The video also served two further purposes. First, in a converged media environment, traditional media often disseminate popular videos to wider audiences. The videos worked to increase favorable mainstream media coverage of Clinton. Exposure to the videos encouraged constituents to visit her website to view these humorous renditions.

Second, in both videos Bill Clinton was subordinated to his wife. In the *Sopranos* spoof, Bill is dismayed to learn that Hillary has ordered him carrot sticks – the grimace on his face indicates he would've liked another choice. Similarly, the opening scene of *Caucusing* humorously illustrates Bill running on a treadmill, motivated by a gigantic cheeseburger on the television screen. The final scene shows an empty treadmill and a happy Bill consuming the juicy burger. These videos seek to position Hillary Clinton as strong, independent, and in control, suggesting she does not need her husband's political clout. At the same time, the videos illustrate her role as compassionate wife and mother, seeking to protect her husband from poor dietary choices. The videos are a remarkable visual display of her balance between traditionally feminine and masculine traits.

Ultimately, the videos sought to re-brand Hillary Clinton. Humor and self-deprecation, along with the visual representation of control worked in tandem to resist traditional narratives of feminism such as submissiveness to one's husband (this being especially salient when one's husband is a former President). Concurrently, Clinton effectively appropriated and creatively played with those same narratives to advance her political agenda, reinforce her leadership abilities, emphasize her motherly instincts, and counter widespread negative mediated discourses surrounding her personality. Indeed, Clinton's use of new media technologies both reified existing feminine communicative and behavioral patterns and laid the groundwork for innovation in the future by challenging gender-based politics.

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