

## Viral Videos and Political Participation

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In convening this panel on “Viral Videos and Political Participation,” I hoped to address the role of YouTube and similar video sharing sites in mediating political campaigns. Asking these questions before the 2008 election would seem to carry with it some amount of risk, in that interpretations of political campaigns are usually determined, in large part, by the outcome of the election, the narrative closure that is continually deferred during the election season. However, I think we can raise some questions about how web videos have functioned thus far, particularly when it comes to how online videos have been described as revitalizing the democratic process by inviting more people to participate or to see themselves as actively involved in the political process. At the same time, I want to be attentive to the discursive and political limits of web video as it has functioned during the 2008 election. In fact, I’ve become increasingly tempted to conclude that viral videos have had little effect on campaign discourse other than to reinforce pre-existing campaign narratives.

From my perspective, the more compelling user-generated videos have been those that have offered an implicit or explicit critique of the election coverage as it has been practiced on television. While much of this critique runs the risk of, yet again, turning television into the “bad object,” in the best cases, these videos can provide strategies for reading political campaigns and talking head punditry against the grain. Certainly, many of the videos are inspired by techniques perfected on television parody shows such as *The Colbert Report* and *The Daily Show*, allowing many of the better political parodists, Andy Cobb’s Public Service Administration (PSA) in particular, to interrogate many of the narratives reinforced on cable news shows and in political advertising. PSA’s criticism of Hillary Clinton’s “3 AM” ad, for example, sought to parody the use of fear in political advertising challenged not only the advertisement’s specific attacks on Obama but also, and more importantly, the use of fear as a campaign tactic.

Many of these videos build from what amounts to YouTube’s “citational” function, in which clips from debates, speeches, cable news shows, and other sources are used to reinforce or challenge popular narratives about the candidates. Most famously, a number of liberal blogs circulated a video in which Virginia Senate candidate George Allen used the word “macaca” to refer to a Jim Webb campaign worker. Webb’s defeat of Allen may still be the only election to have been measurably affected by a YouTube clip. More recently, a number of sources, including Talking Points Memo, posted a clip from MSNBC featuring Republican operatives Peggy Noonan and Mike Murphy criticizing vice presidential pick Sarah Palin, particularly because she embodied the cynical reliance upon what Noonan called “bullshit political narratives” Significantly Noonan had earlier praised the selection of Palin in a column. While the segment likely did little to demythologize Palin’s public persona, it could be used to direct a critique back onto the political pundits who are at least somewhat responsible for the perceptions of the presidential race. This “citational” use of YouTube can run into problems, however, in that some cable networks—Comedy Central in particular—tend to police the use of clips

from their network and often demand that copyrighted clips be removed, sometimes having the effect of silencing critical or oppositional positions.

While I am more interested in how web videos have offered new forms of political participation, even for non-citizens, I think it's also worth addressing how campaigns have used web video to shape perceptions of the candidates. For the most part, it appears that online video has become a crucial means for the major political campaigns to rally their base rather than to reach out to new voters. Hillary Clinton's *Sopranos* parody, for example, used the HBO show's ambiguous ending to build suspense for the song that her supporters had chosen for her campaign theme song. Similarly, John McCain's "The One" initially appeared virtually incoherent to most viewers who were not part of McCain's religious, conservative base; however, a closer look at the video reveals that it was meant not only to further align Barack Obama with the celebrity meme but also to identify him with Messianic imagery. Like the "user-generated" parodies, these videos likely circulate most extensively among strong supporters through email lists and blog links. Ultimately many of these videos eventually appear on television, usually on cable news shows, providing the candidates with what amounts to free advertising. While the videos are often presented as objects of analysis or scrutiny, it is not surprising that many elements of these videos go ignored or unrecognized in the analysis, raising questions about how these cable news shows function in identifying some political messages as "relevant" while ignoring others. At the same time, such analyses reinforce the logic proposed by McCain campaign manager Rick Davis that the election would be more about personalities than about issues. So, right now, I'm left with more questions than answers about how viral videos are affecting campaign discourse. Are these videos helping to clarify the political stakes of the election or are they being swallowed back into the political spin machines? What role, if any, does web video serve in ensuring increased political participation?