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By traditional measures, the CW's "Gossip Girl" captures relatively few viewers on television. But it's considered a hit because it [generates tremendous online buzz](#) and millions of downloads each week. Fans then follow blogs that report on everything from the show's fashion to the actors' personal lives.

How that buzz spreads mirrors how gossip spreads on the show. Every action can be instantly captured for everyone else to read about within seconds. It happens in the fake world of a television show and *to* the television show, and this kind of cyber-connectedness is reshaping the very real world of our participatory democracy.

But viral video in the world of politics has yet to fully realize its promise.

On video and democracy

The upside, of course, is that political participation in our media landscape is revolutionizing democracy. The instant message, instant coffee, instant replay society we live in makes taking part in political conversation quick and easy. Our democracy's conversation has gone from voices of only white male property owners to anyone with a connection.

Political videos that go viral show how political communication has gone from a "top down" to a "bottom up" model, and that is inherently democratic: More people are participating in political discourse. A [Pew Internet Project study](#) of the 2008 election shows 35% of Americans say they have watched online political videos this year -- nearly triple the number in 2004.

But in some ways, the more media changes, the more the purest democratic principles have stayed the same. Benjamin Franklin's "marketplace of ideas" concept holds that democracies are best served with access to as much information as possible, and with that, a community can arrive at the truth. Today's instant access shows the relevancy of Franklin's concept. But we've yet to reach his ideal when it comes to political conversation online.

First, it's unclear how internet popularity how effectively internet popularity translates into votes.

Ron Paul: Internet sensation.

Delegates won in the primary: None.

"Clearly you can raise money and mobilize a base of supporters on the Internet," says [John Lapinski](#), political science professor at the University of Pennsylvania. "What's not clear is whether [these efforts] can get people to vote who never have."

Viral video's potential

Political videos may go viral, but so far they have yet to deepen the political discourse. The marketplace of ideas model calls for self-policing communities -- they arrive at what's right based on an abundance of information to make decisions. But our most popular videos don't feed viewers with much information at all.

The most viral of messages instead prey on the kind of politics that many argue is cheapening discourse -- "gotcha" politics, in which gaffes are exposed ([George Allen's "macaca" moment](#)) or candidates parodied ([Obama girl](#)), leaving politicians to become even more rigid and impersonal and leaving voters with political communication devoid of substance. These also get picked up by mainstream newspapers and television, which allows the video to reach part of the electorate that isn't as dependent on the web.

There's hope. When effective uses of the medium are spread to voters, a practice that is increasing, it can

help replace the traditional mainstream media by placing a check on what our leaders say. An example of this is a [segment about Republican hypocrisy in the wake of Sarah Palin's debut](#), on Comedy Central's "The Daily Show." Video of Karl Rove praising Palin's experience as the mayor of Wasilla, Alaska, was juxtaposed against video of Rove trashing Virginia Gov. — and former Richmond Mayor — Tim Kaine's executive experience, listing all the cities that are bigger than Richmond and calling such a pick "political."

To borrow from [Will I Am's viral video](#), "yes, we can" find good examples in the margins. But the viral videos that have been attributed to a measurable political effect ("macaca," Conrad Burns falling asleep, perhaps) are just gotcha moments, so far.

Online videos and the mainstream

As for the influence on traditional "mainstream" media, online video works like "Gossip Girl": Buzz creates more buzz. Mainstream media report on a viral video. That makes it legitimate in more voters' minds.

But if the videos that go viral are mostly fluff and traditional media follows because that's what has the voters' attention, then traditional coverage is dumbed-down. It's too easy for mainstream reporters to get distracted by ephemera like whatever gaffe is caught on tape, leaving less time for more important stories.

The effect of the YouTube-ization of the media universe means that the way buzz about a television show like "Gossip Girl" spreads is the same way political speak spreads.

Marshall McLuhan fathered the "[medium is the message](#)" idea decades before YouTube. But if the medium IS the message, consumers are receiving both entertainment (racy teen TV shows) and political news (required in a republic to influence change) through the same medium and process (buzzworthy videos going viral).

The audience increasingly receives politics *and* entertainment in the same way – blurring the line between a leisurely exercise and a deadly serious responsibility.

Where does that leave us?

As Mike Myers' character Linda Richman said on "Saturday Night Live", "Discuss".*

*If you are unfamiliar with that skit, it's available for free viewing on www.hulu.com. <grin>