The Intermittent YouTube Electoral Presence of Citizens and Candidates

Robert Klotz
University of Southern Maine
rklotz@usm.maine.edu

Prepared for delivery at the 70th Annual Conference of the Midwest Political Science Association, Chicago, IL, April 12, 2012.
ABSTRACT

The study empirically and systematically examines the YouTube presence of candidates during the 2012 Republican presidential nomination campaign. The Internet broadcast yourself world of YouTube offers some sharp contrasts to the television broadcast world. Unlike on television, candidates and the news media are being challenged by citizens in shaping their video presence on YouTube. Interest groups that leverage financial resources to force viewers to watch broadcast advertisements are marginalized on YouTube where accidental exposure is limited. While the broadcast world converges on a few video formats, YouTube campaign videos exhibit substantial diversity of format.
One dimension of the modern grassroots political campaign is the competition to shape the video presence of candidates. In the broadcast world, candidates and the news media have enjoyed a privileged position through televised ads, news stories, and debates. As software improvements are democratizing video production and YouTube is democratizing video distribution, there is now the potential for the video presence of candidates to reflect a greater diversity of producers and formats. Whether this potential is being realized is an empirical question.

To answer the question, this study examines the video presence of candidates during the 2012 Republican presidential nomination campaign. A systematic portrait of YouTube politics emerges. Candidates and the news media are facing significant competition from citizens in shaping their video presence on YouTube. Free from the economic constraints of the broadcast world, campaign communicators are utilizing a range of video formats to communicate about politics. At least in presidential politics, YouTube is changing how campaign video messages are communicated.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Election campaigns are a competition to convey a preferred message to potential voters. The major competitors are candidates, political parties, the news media, special interests, and citizens. These competitors convey their message in various formats in different media. Depending on the medium of communication, different competitors and messages are favored.

The broadcast world of political campaigns is probably most favorable to the traditional news media. Journalists working in the traditional news media have substantial discretion in assembling news stories about the campaign. Over time, broadcast journalists have done an increasing amount of the talking during campaign news stories (Patterson 1993). The communication of journalists has come
primarily at the expense of the candidates whose communication has been relegated to brief sound bites. Shanto Iyengar (2011, p. 3) explains, “The most visible symptom of interpretive journalism is the disappearance of candidate speech from the news cycle.” The length of the candidate sound bite on television news appears to be converging on about 8-15 seconds in a number of advanced democracies (Esser 2008). In a meticulous study of four recent presidential elections in the United States, Grabe and Bucy (2009) find that the individual candidate sound bites on the national news are about eight seconds long while journalists talk over candidate images for about 23 seconds per story about the campaign. Scholarly studies consistently show that strategic and horse race frames are common in news stories about political campaigns (Flowers, Haynes, and Crespin 2003) and certain kinds of other news stories (Wessel and Williams 2000).

Traditional news media are also big winners in the broadcast world by selling campaign related advertisements on television and radio stations. Broadcast stations offer to sell scarce airtime to campaign participants who would like to convey their message through advertisements. Campaigns become profitable events for broadcast stations which find eager buyers of their advertising time. Local television stations routinely earn more ad revenue during election years, including 2010 when congressional campaign advertising gave stations a big lift during an economic slowdown (Steinberg 2011).

In the broadcast world, candidates and their parties enjoy some opportunities for conveying their message, but are not as well positioned as the traditional news media. Candidates have their messages distilled by traditional news media into brief sound bites often framed as strategic decisions. Candidates and parties seeking unmediated communication must pay for advertisements. For largely economic reasons, campaign advertising typically takes the form of 30-second ads. While 30-second ads are capable of some informing (Patterson and McClure 1976), the format precludes in-depth discussion of issue positions. The format, however, is well suited to sharp attacks on opponents through
oversimplifying an alleged weakness. Bob Gifford, co-host of NPR’s On the Media and columnist for Advertising Age, uses stronger language: “By and large advertising is essentially truthful except for political advertising which... is just the artful assembling of nominal facts into hideous, outrageous lies” (PBS 2003). This artful form of communication, the negative ad, has come to represent about half of the televised spots in presidential elections (Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1995). The proclivity to go negative is even stronger for political parties and interest groups than for candidates (Magleby 2000).

On the other hand, candidates do benefit from communication through the traditional news media. Candidates are legally guaranteed the lowest advertising rates and can often raise the money to pay for them. As the subject of news stories, candidates build the name recognition that is key to election. Candidates can also shape the news coverage that they get in the “free media.” They can try to influence what the media talks about as a way of priming the importance of their preferred issues (Iyengar and Kinder 1987). Candidates have also been successful in generating free media coverage from ad watch stories (Iyengar 2011) about the campaign advertisements that they pay to run in the first place.

Special interests, especially well-funded ones, also appear to be a big winner in the broadcasting world. Their campaign contributions can help provide access to candidates and political parties who need money to pay for expensive broadcast advertising. Well-funded special interests are also able to purchase advertising to independently convey a message during a campaign. Like candidates, interest groups have experienced success in converting their paid advertising into free media stories about the ads (Iyengar 2011). Well-funded national groups can quickly become the big fish in little election ponds through buying advertising.

A great example of the preferred position of special interests in the broadcast world occurred in the 2010 campaign for the Maine State Senate. Although they have some presence on the radio, state legislative campaigns in Maine are all but invisible on television. Numerous state legislative elections in
small districts are challenging subjects for news stories on large media market stations. Cash-strapped political parties have limited ability to purchase television ads in media markets that dwarf legislative districts. Candidates, of whom about 80% accept public financing and face spending limits around $25,000 for a state senate campaign, could not afford television ads even if they were not overwhelmingly viewed by voters outside the district. On the other hand, a well-funded national interest group essentially had the television broadcast world to itself when it bought advertising in five state senate races in 2010 (Mistler 2011).

Ordinary citizens appear to be the losers in the broadcasting world. Those who seek to convey a message find it difficult to make it into stories written by traditional journalists who favor elite sources (Bennett et al 2004). Ordinary citizens cannot afford to buy expensive advertising time in broadcasting media. As consumers, ordinary citizens are inundated with gotcha 30-second ads purchased for the accidental exposure they generate. Citizens hoping to learn about the campaign must conform to the time and space limitations of media coverage.

The broadcast world’s comparative advantages and disadvantages, however, may not apply in a different media environment. Each medium poses different challenges and opportunities to those seeking to convey campaign messages. The competitive balance may change. A change could occur even in the same type of communication if technology fundamentally changes production and distribution. Such technological change has occurred in video. Better software has greatly simplified the production and editing of video footage. Increased bandwidth has facilitated distribution.

The most prominent outlet for online video sharing is YouTube. The website was founded in 2005 by three twenty-something former employees of PayPal. A huge spike in growth is attributed to distribution of the December 2005 Saturday Night Live clip “Lazy Sunday.” Resource-based constraints were mitigated when YouTube was purchased for $1.65 billion by Google in 2006 (Cloud 2006). The
website has subsequently emerged as an Internet juggernaut where millions of videos are uploaded and watched daily. The website’s slogan is “Broadcast Yourself.”

YouTube is so important that it is worthy of study as its own campaign environment. In the United States, YouTube has no serious rival in the online video market and is almost synonymous with online video sharing. The scope of its use is staggering. YouTube (2012) estimates that over three billion videos are viewed daily on YouTube by over 800 million unique monthly visitors. Although politics is far from the primary subject of YouTube videos, politics has a substantial presence on YouTube. In 2008, 45% of all American Internet users watched a political video online during the campaign (Pew Internet & American Life Project 2009).

The broadcast yourself world of political campaigning may have a different competitive balance than the broadcast world. Indeed, there is a compelling theory that YouTube may function as a video environment in which ordinary citizens are favored over elite communicators. Citizens are empowered by the reduced technological barriers to video editing, production, and distribution. Even if ordinary citizens cannot match the quality of the professionals, they can come close enough to capitalize on their better ability to relate to other citizens. Former television producer Charlotte Risch suggests that reality television has accustomed people to accept “low quality” video in an age when “professional and big budget equals a sales push [while] indie and raw equals honest” (Fernando 2009, p. 11). Ordinary citizens may be able to change how politics is communicated.

This potential has been articulated by scholars. Hanson, Haridakis, and Sharma (2011, p. 7) explain, “A video clip by an ordinary user has equal footing in the YouTube world with a clip from the most popular network entertainment program.” Thus, as explained by Winograd and Hais (2008, p. 153), “Each voter can become his or her own campaign office and flood the nation’s political speech with unfiltered ideas from every corner of the country.” Gueorguieva (2008, p. 295) envisions a
YouTube environment that “weaken[s] the level of control that campaigns have over the candidate’s image and message since anybody, both supporters and opponents, can post a video.”

Empirical research has provided modest support for this theory. Marketing strategist Angelo Fernando (2009, p. 11) observed that in the 2008 YouTube presidential campaign “ordinary people came up with powerful messages rivaling those created by advertising and PR agencies.” Vernallis (2011, p. 88) noted that the “groundswell of citizen videos” in the 2008 campaign was highlighted by hundreds of mashups of the “Yes We Can Video.” Looking more systematically, however, Ridout, Fowler, and Branstetter (2010) found that ordinary citizens were responsible for only 2% of the videos on YouTube that used edited video to support or oppose a candidate during the 2008 presidential contest. Even if not producing videos, citizens can participate on YouTube by adding comments, which Edgerly et al (2009) found to enrich political discourse about Proposition 8 on same-sex marriage in California.

Other scholars have emphasized the potential of YouTube to alter the balance between traditional media journalists and candidates in favor of candidates. Candidates, like citizens, benefit from democratized distribution. Candidates can reach citizens directly on YouTube without the need for the traditional media which have edited their words and charged for their advertising. Shanto Iyengar (2011, p. 4) explains, “The advent of video sharing technology and the rapid growth in the reach of social networking sites thus opened up vast new possibilities for direct candidate to voter communication.” Some of this unmediated communication on YouTube can even serve as a rebuttal to news media coverage (Iyengar 2011). Of course, YouTube also gives candidates another way to try to shape news coverage by making video clips available to the media, which has prompted Internet strategist David All to proclaim “Web ads are the new press release” (Harder 2008).

Scholars have found some empirical support for the weakened position of the traditional news media in the YouTube environment. In a study of over 600 YouTube videos associated with the 2008 Senate campaign, candidate produced videos outnumbered news media videos approximately 45-20%
(Klotz 2010). A study of food safety videos on YouTube found that the news media account for only 16% of videos (Rhoades and Ellis 2010). Another perspective on the news media as a loser in the YouTube environment is an innovative case study by Wallsten (2010) about the popularity of the “Yes We Can” video in the 2008 campaign. Through meticulous statistical analysis, Wallsten finds that viewing spikes of the “Yes We Can” video are better explained by blogger links and candidate promotion than by the traditional media. Thus, Wallsten characterizes the news media as YouTube “followers” of other “leaders.”

In their effort to become YouTube leaders, candidates and parties have quickly acquired a YouTube presence. Scholars have observed this presence in a variety of geographic areas. In the United States, Gulati and Williams (2010) documented that 72% of Senate candidates and 28% of House candidates established their own YouTube channel. Ridout, Fowler, and Branstetter (2010) found that candidates produced 93% of video ads while parties produced only 2% of video ads in the 2008 presidential campaign. Beyond the U.S., scholars have documented the growing use of YouTube in campaigns in countries such as Finland (Carlson and Strandberg 2008), Canada (Chen and Smith 2011), and the Netherlands (Effing, van Hillegersberg, and Huibers 2011). In contemplating the adoption of President Obama’s social media innovations by European politicians, Ren and Meister (2010, p. 19) caution that just having a YouTube presence for the sake of it is “futile” or even negative as evident by the “Gordon Brown YouTube debacle” on the expense scandal.

The impact of YouTube on interest groups has received the least scholarly attention. Undoubtedly, interest groups will choose to compete in the YouTube environment. Yet, their advantages in the broadcast world are largely muted. Their ability to leverage money into forced broadcast viewing is all but eliminated on YouTube. They enjoy nothing like the monopoly they might enjoy on television in some local elections. The strongest empirical support for this theory probably
comes from Ridout, Fowler, and Branstetter (2010) who found that interest groups produced only 2% of all YouTube ads related to the 2008 presidential campaign.

A corollary to the theory that technological change can alter the competitive balance of participants is that it can alter the formats of political communication. While the broadcast world limits the flexibility of those hoping to convey a campaign message, YouTube offers few constraints on how something can be communicated. Without prescribed formats on YouTube, communicators can experiment with a range of formats to convey their message. At the least, campaign communicators might gravitate toward formats longer than the 30 second ad that is hopelessly inadequate for articulating a vision for leadership and policy. In a Wired article, Clive Thompson (2009) predicts that YouTube will motivate new formats of communication: “We’re developing a new language of video – forms that let us say different things and maybe even think in different ways.”

Scholarly research on YouTube provides some evidence that YouTube is altering the formats of campaign messages. Communicators, for example, have been taking advantage of the potential for developing longer messages on YouTube – although just barely. Data on over 600 YouTube videos associated with the 2008 Senate candidates showed that the median video was about one minute long (Klotz 2010). Ridout, Fowler, and Branstetter (2010) found that the average edited persuasive video appeal in the 2008 campaign was about two minutes long. Beyond campaigns, Rhoades and Ellis (2010) found that the average length of a random sample of food safety videos on YouTube was 3.5 minutes.

The potential for unconventional video formats on YouTube has drawn scholarly attention. Vernallis (2011, p. 90) extols the virtue of mashup formats in conveying campaign messages: “Placed alongside foreign material, previously unrevealed meanings come to the fore, but a knowledge linked to the original fragment still also projects forward, perhaps in a purer form - as a kernel of truth, an essence preserved even as it has been recast.” Tryon (2008) documents how the proliferation of parodies of Hillary Clinton’s “3 a.m.” and John McCain’s “Celeb” ad challenged candidate narratives.
Hess (2009) observed how people on YouTube responded to anti-drug public service announcement videos with parodies and humorous dialogue. While Hess (2009, p. 427, 229) ascribes great importance to pseudonyms conferring a “flippant and anonymous comportment” that limits “serious discussion” on YouTube, there really is not much difference between videos uploaded by rperry2012 and jdoe2012. Virginia Heffernan (2009, p. 15) explains, “In the eclectic YouTube interface, all videos – the parodies and the propaganda alike – can simply look like news.”

**RESEARCH QUESTION**

The theoretical and empirical insights from early YouTube scholarship suggest that technological change can disrupt existing patterns of video communication. Video production, editing, and distribution have been democratized. This can shift the competitive balance among campaign participants. At the least, the institution that enjoys a privileged position in the distribution of video broadcasting – the news media – will find its position weakened relative to its campaign competitors on YouTube.

On the production side, theoretically any of the campaign competitors could potentially create video content that resonates with voters. Through sheer numbers and having a status that resonates with the audience, ordinary citizens can be expected to have a position on YouTube far more favorable than their virtual exclusion from the broadcast world. Previous research suggests, however, that ordinary citizens will not be able to eclipse their elite competitors who leverage advantages from the offline world (Margolis and Resnick 2000).

Technological change is also expected to alter the incentives for the types of video formats that communicate campaign information. Based on previous research, the 30-second ad will continue to maintain a visible position on YouTube. After all, many participants are already investing heavily in broadcast ads, which can be easily repurposed to YouTube. It is expected, however, that 30-second ads
will be accompanied by a much greater variety of formats on YouTube. Set free from broadcast economics, campaign participants can adapt to YouTube other ways that they are already conveying their campaign messages or even experiment with new formats of communication.

Beyond testing these expectations, this research strives to provide a portrait of the contemporary YouTube environment. What is the competitive balance on YouTube among those trying to convey a campaign message? What formats of communication are most prominent during the YouTube campaign? How does the broadcast yourself campaign differ from the broadcast campaign? The most satisfactory answer to these questions will have the social scientific virtues of being empirical and systematic.

**METHODOLOGY**

In order to understand the contemporary YouTube campaign environment, this study performs a content analysis of YouTube videos associated with candidates competing for the Republican presidential nomination in 2012. Presidential nomination politics has proved a fruitful place to examine technological advances in politics (e.g., Davisson 2009; Hanson, Haridakis, and Sharma 2011), in part because the visibility of the campaign attracts interest from the public and innovative campaign professionals. Candidates were identified based on participation in the October 11, 2011, debate sponsored by The Washington Post at Dartmouth College that constituted the final field of announced candidates as a result of practical limitations for ballot qualification and the announcement of New Jersey Governor Chris Christie that he would [really] not be running for president. Not coincidentally, the participants were identical to a September Reagan library debate that has been emerging as one of the traditional kickoffs to the Republican campaign. The candidates include Michelle Bachman, Herman Cain, Newt Gingrich, Jon Huntsman, Rick Perry, Mitt Romney, Ron Paul, and Rick Santorum. Each candidate’s name was inputted into the advanced search function of YouTube to identify the “most
viewed” videos. Videos in which either the first or last name of the candidate is referenced in the title of the video were identified as part of the YouTube presence of the candidate. Although a few videos were omitted, this objective way to distinguish the subject of the video was necessary to eliminate large numbers of search results that have nothing to do with the candidate (since candidate names are used to attract viewers to videos unrelated to the candidate). All videos with the candidate name in the title did indeed relate to the candidate, which shows that compliance with YouTube’s community guidelines against “misleading” characterization is high with respect to misleading titles that are easy to detect and the target of enforcement efforts. Campaign proximity was ensured by eliminating videos that were uploaded more than a year ago. Excluding repeats of the same video clip, the ten most viewed videos associated with each of the eight candidates are included in the study (n=80).

The pool of videos represents a snapshot of the YouTube campaign on one seminal day of the campaign. All videos were identified on January 3, 2012, which was the day of the Iowa caucuses. This day marked a critical juncture in the campaign. The campaign was in high gear and had been receiving substantial media attention for months. Indeed, more than a dozen debates between the candidates had already been held. On January 3, 2012, the second stage of the campaign began with votes actually being cast. Thus, the study is designed to capture the YouTube environment left by months of intense competition at the precise moment when Republicans started voting for the nominee.

Videos were first coded for the producer of the content. The major distinctions reflect the main categories of competitors described in the literature review. These include participants (candidates and parties), traditional news media, nontraditional media (ordinary citizens and nontraditional news organizations), and special interests. In identifying the producer, the defining concern was who actually generated the video footage, not who uploaded the video to YouTube. Thus, if an ordinary citizen uploaded to YouTube a TV station’s story about the campaign, the producer was identified as the TV station not the citizen. If however, the ordinary citizen were to alter the video in some meaningful way,
the ordinary citizen would be identified as the producer since their voice has now framed the mashup video. The motivation for this coding choice is the importance of whose voice is being heard communicating a campaign video message, not whose YouTube channel gets credit for an upload.

The format of the videos was also identified. Classification was based on a combination of production values, length, and context. The major distinction is between brief ads and other formats. Similar to Ridout, Fowler, and Branstetter (2010), the ad format is interpreted broadly to include edited video footage that tries to convince the audience to vote for or against a candidate. The ad category, however, does not include videos in which a full song is developed (music video), another ad is parodied (ad parody), or candidate discussion is framed as part of broader political commentary (news commentary). To be considered a brief ad, the video must be one minute (65 seconds with buffer) or shorter in length. Since other categories are largely self-explanatory, elaboration is through examples in the results section.

RESULTS

The data show a striking parity between traditional and non-traditional media producers. Aggregating the specific categories in Table 1, the traditional news media organizations (national TV, local newspaper, wire service, C-SPAN) account for 29 of the 80 most viewed videos during the campaign. Topping the list are Fox News with 9 videos and CNN with 6 videos. The nontraditional media category (citizen, online news program, blog, aggregators, comedy troupes) account for 28 of the 80 videos. At least during the presidential nomination campaign, nontraditional media sources are able to compete on an essentially level playing field with traditional news media organizations on YouTube.

There are a few instances in which the categories are blurred. The one video advantage for traditional media includes a video about Rick Santorum from a major Taiwanese news organization. It, however, is from the fairly unconventional animation subdivision of the company that is perhaps best
known in the United States for its reenactment of the Tiger Woods scandal (Kilgannon 2011). On the other side, the nontraditional media category includes three videos by the Young Turks. While producing a daily Web news commentary program that qualifies as a nontraditional media source, the Young Turks also trace their origins to a satellite radio show, produce a show for Current TV, and include a member who frequently guest hosted on MSNBC (Rainey 2010). The aggregator Buzz Feed, which features videos on all subjects, hired Politico’s Ben Smith in December 2011 and expects to provide more original content (Stelter 2011). As demonstrated by Hindman (2009), popular bloggers often have traditional journalistic training and elite backgrounds. Classified as a comedy troupe, Second City Network is a nontraditional media source for politics, but is a well-established comedy training school.

Candidates also have a prominent presence on YouTube. They account for nearly one-fourth of the videos. All but four of the candidate videos represent instances in which the YouTube presence of the candidate was composed of their own videos. This represents an impressive ability of candidates to keep control of their YouTube presence away from competing candidates. The major exception is that the Ron Paul campaign produced three videos that were part of the YouTube presence of Newt Gingrich.

Special interests and political parties are the big losers. Interest groups account for less than 4% of the YouTube videos at a time when they were dominating television advertising in Iowa. Two of the three special interests were so-called Super PACs associated with candidates. Parties fared even worse as a Democratic attack on Romney accounted for the lone party video. In contrast to the finding about special interests, the significance of the lack of parties is minimized by the fact that this was a nomination campaign in which the Republican Party did not express a preference.

Turning to the common formats used by video producers, the most striking finding is the great diversity of formats being utilized. No single format accounts for even as much as 20% of the content. Variety flourishes. Free from the economic constraints of the broadcast world, producers seek to utilize
many different ways to communicate their message. The results provide strong evidence to support the theory that technological change has altered the incentives for different types of communication.

The list, however, is topped by two formats common in the broadcast world. Debates were the most common format accounting for about 16% of the videos. These were mostly debate segments capturing candidate answers to one question in the debate. Debates were followed closely by the news interview format in which one candidate is being interviewed. Piers Morgan was the only interviewer to land two interviews among the top videos. The majority of the interviewers were from traditional media, such as interviews by CNN’s Gloria Borger and Fox’s Bret Baier, but a blogger and teenager were also able to land a news interview on the list.

Comedy formats constitute nine videos. These are primarily from producers for which politics is mostly an incidental subject. This format ranges widely from a stand-up routine to a technologically sophisticated animated film. Five of these are the same format from BadLipReading in which candidate video images are given an audio track in which nonsensical things appear to emerge from the lips of the candidates.

Long and short ad formats do not appear until fourth and fifth on the list. These videos use typical broadcast ad formats. The ads are divided between nine videos that lasted more than one minute and six videos that were one minute or less. Only two of the short ads were essentially thirty-second advertisements. One of the two ads was a 30-second ad that had stopped running, but was posted with the intent of holding the sponsoring candidate responsible for running the ad in the first place.

A rich variety of formats account for the remaining 36 of 80 videos. Formats with multiple videos include the news commentary, speech, candidate face to camera testimonial (two were candidates announcing intent to run), music video, person on the street surprise, town hall, ad parody, photo slideshow, and news media clip compilation. Notable for its absence is the news story. One of
the hallmarks of the broadcast world, not one news story was among the most viewed campaign videos. Another format designed to gain coverage from the news media, the press conference, was also absent.

   The videos vary in length. Clearly, the short 30-second or less format is not popular. Only four videos were 31 seconds or less. The results provide evidence to support the theory that technological change and reduced scarcity of space increases the incentive for longer formats of communication. That is not to say, however, that videos are long. The median video was two minutes and forty eight seconds long. Videos that are five minutes or longer constitute only about one-fourth of the videos. It is clear that communicators are voluntarily choosing brevity since the ordinary YouTube account holder during this period was allowed to upload videos up to a maximum of 15 minutes in length.

CONCLUSION

   Based on evidence from the 2012 presidential nomination campaign, YouTube is realizing some of its potential for creating a diverse campaign environment. YouTube changes the competitive balance in video messages from the broadcast world. While elite communicators maintain a preeminent position, they encounter more competition on YouTube than on broadcast television, especially from ordinary citizens. The conventional formats of broadcast television also find stiff competition on YouTube. In short, YouTube is making a contribution to political campaigns by allowing diverse communicators to use varied formats to reach potential voters.

   Consistent with the expectations of scholars, YouTube appears to favor candidates in their competition with the news media. Able to bypass the news media on YouTube, candidates are taking the opportunity to produce video communication and some of their videos are resonating with the electorate. The most prominent clips produced by the traditional news media on YouTube are those in which journalists have less control over the message. These are debates and news interviews in which candidates have significant control, at least after a journalist asks a question. The format in which the
media voice is dominant, the news story, is absent from media-produced videos. The major subjects of news stories during this part of the campaign (strategic horse race stories and allegations of sexual misbehavior by Herman Cain) did not resonate on YouTube. The most viewed media-produced videos on YouTube are ones in which candidates are not reduced to sound bites that support media frames. Sound bites, however, are not dead, but live on in other formats through their inclusion in news commentary, compilation clips (which may feel like a blooper reel), and advertisements in which other participants adapt media clips for their own purposes. Of course, some of the reduced presence of traditional media companies on YouTube is voluntary as they assert copyright protection to remove videos from YouTube as a way of encouraging potential viewers to visit their own websites where they can sell their own advertising.

The big loser on YouTube appears to be special interests, especially well-funded, non-membership organizations. Special interests that win in the broadcast world by using money to force people to view their political messages are struggling to compete in an environment where people voluntarily choose what messages to hear. When given a choice, people seldom choose to view messages from these groups. There are several reasons why the messages from these interests might not resonate with the YouTube audience. Clearly, the quality of special interest videos may limit their appeal. Special interests, especially those without significant membership, also lack the social network that other campaign communicators use to get links to their videos from blogs, emails, and social networking pages. Relatedly, interest groups, who cannot legally coordinate with candidates, often lack the accountability that might motivate the electorate to view a message that can facilitate vote choice. For whatever reason, special interests had difficulty getting their video messages heard on YouTube during a campaign in which they dominated the airwaves for weeks in the run-up to the Iowa caucuses that overlaps this study. In fact, studies show that Super PACs outspent candidates on television during this period (Eggen 2012). The lack of special interest ads on YouTube is probably a credit to the YouTube
environment since special interest television ads are often “insidiously inaccurate” like the December 2011 Romney Super PAC ad that earned the most disgraceful four Pinocchio rating from The Washington Post for multiple lies about Gingrich (Kessler 2011).

Video-producing ordinary citizens, on the other hand, appear to be winners on YouTube. While largely absent from traditional news media except in their aggregate responses to poll questions, ordinary citizens are conveying a broad range of political messages on YouTube. In some videos, citizens are acting as citizen journalists who conduct candidate interviews, offer news commentary, or film campaign events. Two videos were cases in which students challenged candidates (Bachmann and Santorum) in student town hall forums that may have put candidates in a more defensive position than in interactions with adults. The well-documented potential for citizens to film campaign gaffes was not present as the major gaffes during the time period were made during a nationally televised debate (Perry “oops” by failing to name the third federal agency that his plan eliminates) and at a meeting with the editorial board of a newspaper (things “twirling” in head prevent Cain from articulating Libya policy). Given the personalized campaigning in the Iowa caucuses, it is surprising how little contribution citizens made through videos that capture one-on-one informal interaction with the candidates. Indeed, the only video of an “adult” engaging in one-on-one informal interaction with a candidate involved the dumping of a large bag of glitter on Newt Gingrich at a book signing, which served only to demonstrate Gingrich’s admirable composure. One-on-one interaction between a child and candidate, however, accounted for the single most viewed video in the study as 3.8 million viewers strained to hear a small boy whisper to Michelle Bachmann that she should not try to cure his lesbian mother.

Citizens also contributed to the flourishing of humorous videos during the YouTube campaign. Through campaign ad parodies, citizens can produce a campaign message that intentionally mirrors the candidate format, but conveys a different message. Indeed, the ad parody was one of several comedy formats accessible on YouTube. Three of the BadLipReading videos join the Bachmann whisper and an
actual Rick Perry ad as the five most viewed videos. The BadLipReading (2011) video format, however, does not really convey a campaign message since the lip synched audio is essentially gibberish that does not relate to a candidate, such as Ron Paul’s ostensible claim to be “a leprechaun farmer who’s a gambler.” This assessment is affirmed by the anonymous citizen creator of BadLipReading who told The Washington Post that the videos have “zero political agenda” and “make no commentary” on politics (Bell 2011). Thus, although the ad parody format continues to show promise, this study must be regarded as inconclusive in assessing the perspective of Jones (2010) that humor can advance political discourse and Hess (2009) that the frequently playful environment of YouTube limits its usefulness as a political forum.

During the 2012 campaign, perhaps the most significant development was how the YouTube environment marginalized the 30-second ad that is ubiquitous in the broadcast world. Only 2 out of the 80 most viewed videos were 30-second ads. One of these was uploaded in an effort to hold a candidate accountable for a discontinued ad through preservation and enabling the comment feature, which candidates are often tempted to disable when uploading a video. The paradigm of gotcha ads in a format being driven by the economic constraints of broadcasting is being undermined in an environment in which people can choose what to view and time is less constrained. Of course, longer is not always better. It, however, is a good start since thirty seconds is hardly enough time to articulate a vision of leadership or a solution to the major problems facing America.


Edgerly, Stephanie, Emily Vraga, Timothy Fung, Tae Joon Moon, Woo Hyun Yoo, and Aaron Veenstra. 2009. “YouTube as a Public Sphere: The Proposition 8 Debate.” Presented at the Association of Internet Researchers conference, Milwaukee, WI.


Thompson, Clive. 2009. This is Your Brain on Video.” Wired, January, p. 40.


Table 1: Producers of YouTube Videos Associated with 2012 Republican Presidential Candidates

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Producer Type</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>National TV Station</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Candidate</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ordinary Citizen</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blog</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online News Program</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interest Group</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aggregators</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comedy troupe</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C-SPAN</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local newspaper</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political Party</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wire Service</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>(n=80)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Format</td>
<td>Count</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------</td>
<td>-------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Debate</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>News interview</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comedy skit</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Long ad (&gt;65 seconds)</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Short ad (≤ 65 seconds)</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>News commentary</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speech</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Candidate face to camera</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Music video</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Person-on-street surprise</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Town Hall</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ad parody</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Photograph slideshow</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clip compilation</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Congressional hearing</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>(n=80)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>