

YouTube Politics: YouChoose and Leadership Rhetoric During the 2008 Election

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During the election cycle of 2008, YouTube launched YouChoose, a viral forum designed for each candidate to share his/her respective messages and platforms with potential voters. In the somewhat rare extant literature on YouTube, initial portrayals of its political influence appear to be positive: for example, Tan (2007) reported that 70% of voters believed that YouTube could influence the results of the 2008 election. Due to this media- and technology-saturated political atmosphere of the new millennium, an analysis of the political dimensions of YouTube is warranted.

The intent of the present study was to utilize YouTube to discover the common characteristics of each presidential candidate's choices of leadership rhetoric as expressed through his or her video clips posted on YouChoose. The findings that emerged were then critically analyzed to glean an understanding of the influence of YouTube upon these rhetorical choices. The following research questions guided the study:

RQ1: What common characteristics of leadership are expressed by the presidential candidates in their respective video clips on YouTube?

RQ2: Which leadership characteristics occur most frequently in these clips?

RQ3: What do these findings indicate about a) the format of each candidate's video clips, b) the YouTube consumer who views these clips, and c) the medium of YouTube itself?

Method

Both qualitative and quantitative research methods were employed to examine the YouTube video clips from the sixteen candidates who competed in the 2008 presidential race. The introduction and farewell videos of each candidate were analyzed for leadership utterances. Categories were formed through a grounded theory approach, while frequencies of the leadership traits were discovered through a content analysis of the data. Intercoder reliability (Cohen's *kappa*) for the categories was calculated at .90, and was thus considered acceptable for the study.

Results

The analyses revealed the following categories of sixteen leadership traits, by descending order of frequency: candidate as advocate for the people (39 mentions, 14% of total mentions); moral accountability (38, 14%); courage (35, 12%); unification (30, 11%); persistence (23, 8%); crisis management (20, 7%); change (15, 5%); hard work (13, 5%); diplomacy (12, 4%); foresight (11, 4%); experience (11, 4%); service (10, 4%); love of America (7, 2%); optimism (7, 2%); family (6, 2%); and hope (4, 1%). Overall, the video clips posted by the candidates appeared to be more character-driven than experience-driven.

Implications

These results confirm, in part, Benoit's Functional Theory, which posits that each candidate's discourse would focus on two topics: issues (policies) and character (Benoit et al., 2005). However, unlike Benoit's (2003) finding that policies are more important to the voter than character, the present study suggests that candidates use more discourse about character than policy. This phenomenon may be due to the medium of YouTube facilitating the emergence of a new perception in politics: that of the postmodern constituency. On YouTube, "politics is no longer bound by the

traditional barriers of time and space” (Grove, 2008, p. 28). Nor is politics bound by barriers of convention: The short, amateur and sometimes controversial videos on the site defy more predictable and often censored traditional media. Additionally, they are viewed as self-contained and out of context by the audience. The length of the video clip on YouTube is one indication of the medium’s more fragmented approach to politics: Because the allowable time is scarce, the candidate needs to choose the most salient topics to his or her campaign to include in the clip, as well as grab the attention of the user. As *Time* magazine stated, “Web video is like a pop single: an attention-getting hook is important” (Poniewozik, 2006, p. 74). Consequently, the candidates may try to accommodate the postmodern constituency on its own terms; as of March 2008, Barack Obama’s campaign was posting two to three videos on YouTube every day, for example (Grove, 2008). While not every candidate may hold this perception, it is ubiquitous enough to influence his or her choice of message; the findings of the present study suggest that the candidate is mindful that utterances about character may resonate more with the YouTube audience than about policy.

The unfiltered nature of YouTube presents another implication; unlike television political broadcasts, YouTube contains no commentary by political pundits. This is significant in light of Steeper’s (1980) findings demonstrating the influence of political commentary on the public in shaping its attitudes following presidential debates. After viewing the videos on YouChoose, users may draw different conclusions about the candidates than they might have from watching the candidate solely on television. By virtue of its unfiltered dimension and absence of political commentary, YouTube could present a paradigm shift in future political ads and videos.

Finally, with the emergence of YouChoose, political candidates now find themselves as willing participants in YouTube politics, a ‘buffet-style’ variety of politics. When these candidates are placed next to each other in the same forum for equal consideration, this enables the casual voter—the postmodern constituent who may find appearance, likability, or the character of the candidate more appealing than that candidate’s basic policies—with a new political alternative from other media. This also allows for less of a commitment from the user than actively searching for each candidate’s official campaign Web site. Consequently, this new style of YouTube politics promotes *passive* voter engagement rather than active engagement. Were the findings from Lazarsfeld et al.’s (1968) seminal study applied in this context, the user who visits the Web site of the candidate is likely already a supporter of that candidate; thus the medium only “reinforce[s] the partisan.” However, the user who visits YouChoose to compare candidates may still be undecided or indifferent. Perhaps, YouTube will reinforce the findings of Lazarsfeld et al., and “activate...the indifferent...and convert...the doubtful” (p. 101).

References

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