

“I’m In!”: Hillary Clinton’s 2008 Democratic Primary Campaign on YouTube

Amber Davisson
Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute
davis4@rpi.edu

In January of 2007, when New York Senator Hillary Clinton announced her candidacy for President, she said she was “In it to win it!” Clinton was far from being the first female candidate to seek the White House, but she was one of the first female candidates to voice a very real expectation that she could win. For a while, in 2007, it seemed like being elected was a very real possibility. In the Democratic Primary, Clinton received 17,267,658 votes, only 166,000 votes less than the victor. This was more votes than any candidate had received in any primary prior to 2008. Throughout the Democratic Primary, the Clinton campaign used YouTube as a tool to get the candidate’s voice out there. The Clinton campaign posted 353 videos over an 18-month period and continued to post videos after she lost the primary. This project explores the rhetorical strategies of six of Clinton’s videos using Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of speech genres to understand some of the ways the candidate made use of this technology.

The Clinton campaign videos reflect the campaign’s many attempt to find the appropriate type of speech for online communication. Appropriateness is a difficult concept because, as Bakhtin pointed out in *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays* (1986, p. 60), “each utterance is individual, of course, but each sphere in which language is used develops its own relatively stable types of these utterances. These we may call speech genres.” The deployment of various genres of speech requires a set of cultural knowledge about the form and style of speech within a communication sphere. The Clinton campaign’s stylistic choices reflect their cultural knowledge of digital technology as a communication sphere. Early stylistic choices by the campaign show a miscalculation of the technology and the culture of the space; it was not until late in the process that the campaign found an appropriate rhetorical style.

The first stylistic choice addressed in this project is the campaign as dialogue approach. This approach can be seen in two of the campaign’s early videos: “I’m In,” posted to YouTube 22 January 2007 and “Let the Conversation Begin,” posted to YouTube 13 February 2007. In these two videos, Clinton talks about her Presidential campaign as an ongoing dialogue and stresses the campaign videos as a means of interacting with voters. These videos encounter three issues that ultimately make the stylistic choice unsuccessful in the online environment. First, the videos demonstrate a conflict between the primary and secondary speech genre. Primary speech genres are simple genres that are picked up through socialization to various types of discourse; secondary speech genres are more complex types of speech such as a novel or scientific discourse. Secondary speech genres often become the setting for primary genres. In the case of the Clinton campaign videos, the secondary genre of political video, which has its own developed set of cultural expectations, becomes a setting for the primary speech genre of an intimate dialogue. Unfortunately, the nature of video as asynchronous communication causes the primary genre of dialogue to lose its authenticity. The second problem the campaign encounters is the violation of the cultural norms of the technology being used. Individuals’ previous experiences with interactive sessions online gave them a set of expectations for free and open communication that the campaign violated when filtering the interactions taking place. Finally, Clinton’s speaking style in the videos seems out of place for the communication sphere depicted in the videos. The candidate seems uncomfortable with the conversational style of the videos,

and she falls back on using the forensic style that has been comfortable for her in the past. This causes Clinton's attempt at dialogue to look more like a debate.

The second stylistic choice addressed in this project was parody. This choice can be seen in two of Clinton's later campaign videos: "Sopranos Parody," posted to YouTube 19 June 2007, and "Presents," posted to YouTube 19 December 2007. In these videos, Clinton used humor and strategic ambiguity to address two of the issues plaguing the campaign: her relationship with her husband, former President Bill Clinton, and the ongoing issue of Clinton's "inability" to conform to "appropriate gender roles." The strategic ambiguity in these texts is derived from the double-voiced discourse present in each video. When Bakhtin discussed the utterance, he noted the presence of several cultural forces acting on an utterance at any one time. Parody is the result of two active voices within a double-voiced text; the simultaneous and conflicting nature of the voices leads to what Bakhtin calls the hidden polemic. The Clinton "Sopranos" video shows the candidate parodying a popular television show about a mob family. The video offers layers of commentary on the candidate's relationship to her husband and her role as powerful "Washington Insider." The "Presents" video shows the candidate parodying a Martha Stewart type character who is wrapping holiday presents for the nation. This video comments on the relationship between Clinton's roles as homemaker and policymaker. The strategic ambiguity of these texts allows the candidate to comment on these issues, while encouraging viewers to construct their own interpretations of the texts.

The last two videos reviewed in this study can be loosely grouped together as what will be called documentary style videos. These videos are interesting because, while they were not the most popular videos Clinton released during her campaign, they demonstrate the candidate's attempt to target specific voting groups. The two videos discussed in this section were: "Nurse for a Day," posted to YouTube 16 August 2007 and "Ask Hillary," posted to YouTube 10 January 2008. These documentary style videos are some of the strongest in Clinton's campaign because they make use of two of the strongest aspects of the candidate's speaking style. The videos depict Clinton speaking in a forensic style, interspersed with clips of supporters talking about their personal relationships to the candidate and the campaign. Traditionally, this speaking style has made Clinton look too severe. However, when the forensic style is juxtaposed with images of individuals offering personal testimony, Clinton's policies seem more accessible. The combination of elements of feminine style and forensic style allows the candidate to access feminine social norms while still speaking in a form that is considered presidential.

When Clinton entered the primary race, and said she was "In it to win it," that seemed a distinct possibility. The advantage Clinton held early in the campaign was the impression that she was the inevitable winner. This impression turned into a problem later in the campaign when it appeared that she believed she was entitled to win. Many individuals began to view Clinton as part of the Washington establishment, and the focus of the Democratic Party was on moving away from the establishment. Although Clinton did not win the election, her rhetorical missteps and later adaptations to YouTube as a communication sphere offers insight to future politicians attempting to understand the culture of this space. Overall, the nearly 18 million votes Clinton received demonstrate the incredible progress female candidates have made, and her failures may offer valuable information for the women who follow in her footsteps.

*Amber Davisson is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Communication Arts & Technology at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute (RPI). This study is part of a larger research project funded by the Rensselaer Humanities, Arts, & Social Sciences Fellowship Program.