

## **The Sidetracked 2008 YouTube Senate Campaign**

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### **Abstract**

This article provides a systematic portrait of the YouTube presence of U.S. Senate candidates during the 2008 election cycle. The evidence does not support the theory that democratized production, editing, and distribution of video content is markedly changing the formats and producers of political content. This is apparent from the predominance of 30-second ads among both the most popular videos and the broad range of campaign videos. Although other potential forms of accountability remain unrealized, YouTube is facilitating candidates being held accountable for their own advertising. The 2008 findings are compared to 2006 findings with the same methodology.

Keywords: YouTube, candidates, elections, Internet, Web 2.0, online politics, Senate, United States

As she marched, Senator Susan Collins surely must have wondered what the Maine Democratic Party hoped to gain by filming her participation in a local parade. Yet there was a Democratic worker awkwardly moving with the parade to film her 15 months before the 2008 election. Ultimately, the Democrats did gain something from their tracking efforts: bad publicity. The editorial board (2008, p. A7) of the state's largest daily newspaper blasted the "aggressive" tactic: "There's nothing statesmanlike about having an opponent followed with a video camera." It was an inauspicious start for YouTube-motivated strategies in the 2008 Senate campaign.

Indeed, some of the wind has been taken out of the sails of the signature YouTube-motivated strategy of opponent tracking. Of course, it is hard to deny the payoff of the strategy in 2006 when the balance of power in the U.S. Senate was arguably changed by the Virginia Senate race that turned after footage of favored Republican George Allen denigrating his opponent's tracker as "macaca" appeared on YouTube. On a systematic level, however, there was little evidence that compelling opponent footage was being produced. Indeed, even later in the same cycle, the overkill of tracking was being recognized. In one 2006 YouTube campaign clip, Michigan Senate candidate Mike Bouchard speaks directly to the camera from his backyard. Occasionally the color and quality of the video changes with the shift marked by a notation that the footage was coming from his opponent's tracker. The joke is that the tracker would trespass onto Bouchard's property and invade the intimate setting. Given the determination of candidates to avoid an Allen-type misstep, it is not surprising that the 2008 Senate campaign did not produce any influential tracker footage despite a concerted effort to find it.

The potential for YouTube, however, to impact the campaign is much greater than serving as a destination for tracker footage. YouTube can host video content from many different producers in varied formats. There is a compelling theory that democratized production, editing, and distribution of video alters the landscape of political communication. Given that the vast majority of Americans felt that the country was on the wrong track and disapproved of major public officials (Cooper & Thee, 2008), the 2008 campaign provided an ideal landscape in which YouTube could motivate new formats of political communication and inspire participation from ordinary citizens dissatisfied with professional approaches to politics. The empirical question is whether YouTube did this.

In testing the theory with empirical evidence, this article strives to produce the first systematic and longitudinal portrait of YouTube content in U.S. Senate campaigns. Insight into YouTube and the 2008 election cycle in the U.S. is gained by examining the YouTube presence of a census of Senate candidates. The study highlights the formats and producers of both the most popular and broader range of YouTube videos. Confidence in the 2008 findings is raised by giving them context through a comparison with 2006 campaign findings under the same methodology.

## Literature Review

Scholars examining political content on YouTube have emphasized the rise of user-generated content. In the words of Winograd and Hais (2008, p. 133), "user-generated content suddenly became [in 2006] a far more potent campaign weapon than the slick ads created by media consultants." The rise of user-generated content and harnessing collective intelligence are part of O'Reilly's (2005) broader concept of the participatory platform Web 2.0. While using the

Web 2.0 concept to frame the field of Internet politics, the editors of the *Routledge Handbook of Internet Politics* describe YouTube as the “main event in online video” and a “significant aspect of Web 2.0 politics” (Chadwick & Howard, 2009, p. 7). They illuminate the Web 2.0 principle of collective intelligence: “The core idea here is that a distributed network of creators and contributors, the majority of them amateurs, can, using simple tools, produce information goods that may outperform those produced by so-called authoritative, concentrated sources” (Chadwick & Howard, 2009, p. 5). Using the Web 2.0 framework in their article on YouTube Finnish campaigns in the *Journal of Information Technology & Politics*, Carlson and Strandberg (2008) acknowledge the lack of consensus about Web 2.0 but find it a useful way to capture the Web’s change to more user participation.

The Web 2.0 concept has prompted disagreement about whether this is a good or bad thing for political culture. Those who find it a good thing have pointed to the way in which accountability can be furthered through YouTube. A staff (2008) article in *Phi Kappa Phi Forum* highlights how YouTube videos can facilitate candidates being held accountable for their policy positions. The ability to post videos and enhance accountability can be extended beyond the traditional media on YouTube. Gueorguieva (2008, p. 295) explains, “[YouTube] devolves the media from the power to shape perception of candidates to anybody with a PC and an Internet connection.” For his part, Nicholas Lemann (2006, p. 49) is not impressed by these efforts: “[T]he content of most citizen journalism will be familiar to anybody who has ever read a church or community newsletter.”

The increased incentive that YouTube provides for tracking opponents is probably still the biggest flashpoint in the normative debate over the impact of YouTube on campaigns. Indeed, the news and political director at YouTube himself offers such a perspective. Steve Grove (2008, p. 30) refers to YouTube as “the new frontier in newsgathering” in which “virtually every appearance by every candidate is captured on video – by someone – and that means the issues being talked about are covered more robustly by more people who can steer the public discussion in new ways.” Prominent technology entrepreneur and author Andrew Keen (2007, p. 68) offers a vastly different perspective: “The YouTubification of politics is a threat to civic culture. It infantilizes the political process, silencing public discourse and leaving the future of the government up to thirty-second video clips shot by camcorder-wielding amateurs with political agendas.”

Recognizing the importance of online video, scholars have begun to examine YouTube campaign content. A notable systematic work in the United States by Williams and Gulati (2007) found that only 10% of Senate candidates established YouTube channels in 2006. Interestingly, some of the first systematic findings are from outside the United States. Examining YouTube content in the Finnish elections of 2007, Carlson and Strandberg (2008) found that content was mostly positive and unlikely to be a repurposed TV ad. Reflecting on the visibility of minor players in their study, Carlson and Strandberg (2008, p. 173) close with the following statement: “[T]he new technology makes it easier for citizens to produce and disseminate political information and thereby play a role in postmodern election campaigns.” In his convention paper “RooTube,” Rob Salmond (2008) finds that the YouTube content of minor parties was more lengthy, policy focused, and positive than the content from major parties in Australia’s 2007 federal election.

One undercurrent of the literature is the expectation of huge growth. Looking at the 2006 campaign, it was common to say that YouTube would be exponentially more important in the next cycle. Journalists Cillizza and Balz (2007), for example, project YouTube politics going from rogue videographers in 2006 to a central strategy in 2008. Gueorguieva (2008, p. 297) ended her scholarly article with a suggestion that My Space and YouTube would go from “having a presence” in 2006 to being a “necessity” in 2008.

### Research Question

A compelling theory emerges that technological change motivates production of political video content from new sources. Specifically, citizens are empowered by the democratization of video editing, production, and distribution. Amateur videographers may not be able to equal the professionals, but if they can come close enough their work will resonate more with viewers for having been produced by someone more like themselves. With the barriers to producing quality video content breaking down, citizens will want to communicate through video about the subject of politics which is important to their lives. Through sheer numbers and harnessing collective intelligence, the citizenry can affect how politics is communicated. In capturing this phenomena, Winograd and Hais (2008, p. 153) highlight the sheer volume of possible communication: “[E]ach 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.” Ultimately, in the words of Vassia Gueorguieva (2008, p. 295), YouTube and online video sharing can “weaken the level of control that campaigns have over the candidate’s image and message since anybody, both supporters and opponents, can post a video and/or create a page on behalf of the candidates.”

A corollary to this theory is that technological change can promote different formats of political communication. Certainly, ordinary citizens may look at politics differently and undertake new communication formats. These citizens would, for example, have less of a stake in preserving the attack ad format. Beyond citizens, even the campaign participants themselves have an incentive to find new ways to communicate. Without prescribed formats of campaigning, candidates can pursue a rich variety of formats to communicate with voters. Established political participants will be affected by the opportunities and expectations of the online video-sharing environment. Writing in *Wired*, Clive Thompson (2009, p. 40) makes the case for new formats on YouTube: “We’re developing a new language of video - forms that let us say different things and maybe even think in different ways.”

One characteristic of formats that technological change may encourage is greater length. The 30-second format that dominates contemporary American politics is a product of the institutionalized media market. There is certainly no evidence that this length facilitates parsimonious explanation of politics. On the contrary, it is an insufficient length for explaining or offering solutions to the profound challenges facing the American polity. Removed from the institutionalized 30-second media environment, candidates, the media, and ordinary citizens can use the opportunity provided by technological change to engage in longer forms of communication. Although lengthier discussion is not sufficient, it is necessary for a debate that reflects the nature of the challenges facing America.

While a compelling theory, it is an empirical question whether this captures what is really happening on YouTube. If supported, we would expect to find a YouTube environment

characterized by innovative formats of communication and substantial citizen participation. If not, and user-generated sites reflect a normalization ascribed to the earlier Web (Margolis & Resnick, 2000), we would expect to see a campaign dominated by candidates repurposing existing communication for use on YouTube. To test which of these outcomes best captures the landscape of YouTube politics, this study will answer several empirical questions about YouTube communication. They are: 1) What is the balance between user-generated and candidate content? 2) What formats are being emphasized in the YouTube campaign? 3) Are communicators taking advantage of the potential for longer messages? 4) What is the balance between positive and negative content? The answer to these questions will provide a systematic portrait of YouTube politics.

### Methodology

In order to provide a systematic portrait of campaign content on YouTube, this study uses a unique research design. It strives to be the first YouTube campaign research that is empirical, systematic, and longitudinal. The research design recognizes that historical context can improve understanding of YouTube and the 2008 election cycle. Thus, the same content analysis methodology is applied to the YouTube campaigns of both 2006 and 2008.<sup>1</sup> Since, however, this article's principal purpose is to illuminate the 2008 YouTube campaign and capture contemporary use of the venue, the most comprehensive results and tables are dedicated to the 2008 campaign with the 2006 results incorporated where they can best provide context for the 2008 results.

In each campaign, the YouTube presence of all major-party Senate candidates was assessed. Ten days prior to the election (24 hour period centered on October 28, 2006, and October 25, 2008), a keyword search was done for the candidate's name in YouTube. For each of the Senate candidates, the ten most popular (highest page rank) videos related to the candidate were identified. Fortunately, the high prominence of Senate candidate names meant that minimal filtering was needed to eliminate videos associated with another individual having the same name as the Senate candidate; unfortunately, the only major exception required filtering out videos from the fandom of the Backstreet Boys, who coincidentally have a member sharing a name with Wyoming Democratic Senate challenger Nick Carter. For 2008, videos must have been uploaded in the last year to increase the likelihood that uploading had some plausible campaign motivation. Not all candidate searches located 10 videos. Ultimately, the search identified 496 videos for the 66 candidates in 2006 and 633 videos for the 69 candidates in 2008.<sup>2</sup>

Each of the videos was then analyzed for key features. First, the length was identified in total seconds. The number of page views was also recorded. The provider of the content was then categorized. The focus was entirely on who produced the content, not who uploaded the video. Thus, if a candidate's campaign uploaded a segment from a local TV news station, it was coded as content produced by the local television news station. Next, the format (ad, speech, debate, etc.) was identified. The classification system was based on factors such as context, production values, and length. To provide the most complete picture, 30 unique categories were established. Since the categories are largely self-explanatory, elaboration is deferred to the results where specific examples are illustrative.

Lastly, videos were coded for valence. Although a subjective measure, this has been a major concern of early YouTube content analysis including two medical journal articles on whether YouTube videos portrayed immunization in a positive, negative, or neutral way (Ache & Wallace, 2008; Keelan, Pavri-Garcia, Tomlinson & Wilson, 2007). I coded the videos based on whether the principal impression was promoting a candidate, criticizing a candidate, or a mixed impression. This approach is similar to the author (Carlson & Strandberg, 2008) classification of Finnish campaign content as “positive” or “negative” in the *Journal of Information Technology & Politics*.

An additional step was taken to identify the Top 12 most popular YouTube videos each year. As shown by Carlson and Strandberg (2008), special attention to the most viewed videos during a campaign is a very effective approach for capturing the main thrust of the YouTube campaign. They found that the ten most popular videos in the Finnish election accounted for half of all views. Thus, special care is taken to consider the most popular videos each year. The day before the election, the candidate names were searched again to get updated viewership figures. The Top 12 videos across all candidates were identified. For 2008, videos related to presidential politics were ineligible for the Top 12 list but remained in the full results. Without this exclusion, videos called up by Joe Biden and John Kerry searches would have dominated the list but revealed nothing about Senate politics.

## Results

### *Most Popular Videos*

The most popular videos convey much about the YouTube campaign experience. The twelve most popular videos in 2006 accounted for about two-thirds of all video views. In other words, the total number of views for the Top 12 videos was equal to the views for all the other 484 videos added together and doubled. In 2008, the most popular dozen had declined to one-third of all page views, but still represent a large share of YouTube activity. Table 1 depicts the Top 12 most viewed videos of each campaign.

The list of most popular videos provides strong evidence to reject the notion that citizens are competing in any meaningful way with professional, institutional participants. In 2008, nine of the twelve videos were produced by the candidates and parties. The other three were an interest group ad, a flattering floor speech by a candidate, and a press conference clip. Candidates actually might have more control over the messages in these twelve clips than they would on the typical local television station where mediated news stories about the campaign supplement paid candidate messages. Indeed, the content of a television station may better resemble the 2006 YouTube campaign when the news media had a little higher profile.

Despite the increased variety of content producers in 2006, the year was still dominated by the campaign combatants themselves. The assessment is strengthened by recognition that the amateur videographers who caught the Allen and Burns gaffes were opponent staffers. They were amateurs, yes, but amateurs functioning as part of the institutionalized campaign who presumably used information from their organization to facilitate opponent tracking. Ultimately, that would leave as the only two truly independent citizen generated clips an 18-second message by a citizen wishing Michael J. Fox well irrespective of his role in the Missouri Senate campaign

and a mashup of Fox and Limbaugh media clips. Overall, the presence of these two clips on the list conveys more about citizen interest in entertainment celebrities than in competing with established players for campaign messages.

Description of the video	Page views
2008:	
Dole 30-second ad attacks Hagan for atheist support	305,227
NRSC 30-second ad attacks Hagan as liberal smearing Dole	240,696
NRSC 30-second ad featuring Hollywood actors attacks Franken	180,350
Udall 30-second ad in which he is praised by disabled veteran	163,492
Novick 30-second ad in which he uses artificial arm to open beer	161,471
Coleman press secretary doesn't answer lobbyist gift question	154,873
Hagan 30-second ad attacks Dole for atheist implication	112,470
Senate floor speech by Mitch McConnell supports oil drilling	104,438
Cornyn praised in music video for getting things done	83,528
MoveOn 30-second ad attacks Dole as in pocket of big oil	76,748
DSCC 30-second ad attacks Dole as ineffective	76,558
Slattery 30-second ad attacks Roberts for supporting big oil	62,583
2006:	
McCaskill 30-second ad with Michael J. Fox attacks Talent	2,161,385
Katie Couric interviews Michael J. Fox about stem cells	466,128
Allen denigrates opponent's tracker as "macaca"	291,825
Citizen wishes Michael J. Fox well in Parkinson's struggle	272,423
RNC 30-second ad attacks Ford for attending Playboy party	247,456
Kennedy talks to camera about Net neutrality	236,630
Local TV story about Allen staff removing protestors at rally	181,344
Lamont 30-second ad mocks negativity by admitting messy desk	145,363
Citizen mashup critique of Michael J. Fox and Rush Limbaugh	143,466
Vote Vets 30-second ad attacks Allen for troop funding	138,727
Person-on-street interview of Ford about Playboy party	132,837
Congressional hearing footage of Burns failing to stay awake	106,625

The most popular videos also provide little evidence to support the theory that technology is providing incentives for new formats. More than half (13 of 24) of the most popular YouTube videos were repurposed 30-second television ads. The dominance of television ads among the most popular videos is especially great in 2008 when they represent three-fourths of the Top 12 list compared to one-third of the list in 2006. The ads are all either harshly negative ads or positive ads featuring a compelling disability or both in the case of Parkinson's-suffering Michael J. Fox criticizing Jim Talent's position on stem cell research. One positive ad portrays a candidate bringing his prosthetic arm out from under a table to pop open a beer bottle, which demonstrates that the candidate is resourceful and someone with whom you would want to share a beer. The other positive ad shows a disabled veteran praising Mark Udall through voice-assistance technology. The negative ads include some colorful ads such as Jim Slattery's gigantic establishment figure hosing regular people with gasoline. With Republican celebrities like Victoria Jackson and John Ratzenberger telling viewers not to think poorly of Hollywood

because of Al Franken, an NRSC ad in Minnesota prompted left-leaning bloggers to try to top themselves in denigrating the celebrities as B, C, D or E list.

One other characteristic of some of the most popular ads is that they may have crossed the line into unethical campaigning. In 2006, voters flocked to YouTube to view the RNC ad that attacked Tennessee candidate Harold Ford. While there, they could decide for themselves whether the ad had racist undertones as some had suggested. In 2008, the most viewed Senate campaign video was the Elizabeth Dole ad attacking her opponent Kay Hagan for raising money from an atheistic organization. People could make up their mind own mind whether Senator Dole crossed the line by juxtaposing Hagan's face with another person saying "there is no god" at the fundraiser. The same controversy also prompted the seventh most popular 2008 video when Hagan rebutted the Dole ad.

Many of the other popular videos are repurposed content from traditional campaign events such as speeches or debates between the candidates. Some videos, however, do suggest YouTube-motivated content. There is one point-counterpoint mashup on the list. Of course, it hardly took a mashup to link Michael J. Fox to Rush Limbaugh since Limbaugh criticized Fox and news stories covered the conflict. YouTube and the webcam also clearly have increased the face to the camera talk format, such as the citizen and Kennedy clips on the list. There is, however, nothing new about head-on approaches, which have long been more popular in other countries (Holtz-Bacha, Kaid, & Johnston, 1994). Thus, YouTube may prompt candidates to forego more traditional American style campaigning for a less glamorous, more earnest communication format.

Although music videos are not new, YouTube does seem to increase the incentive to produce them for political use. The format is represented on the list by a music video produced by the 2008 John Cornyn campaign. The video uses the familiar music refrain "Big Bad John" to present Cornyn as a tough Texan. The lyrics emphasize that Cornyn will fight for the people of Texas: "The Senate wasn't ready [for Cornyn], said pay your dues... Ya se I'm from Texas where we do things quick and the way this place is run is about to make me sick. Big John. Big Bad John." Although this is a rare example of a campaign producing unconventional content, it is difficult to give the Cornyn campaign too much credit for looking ahead. After all, a self-congratulatory music video would seem ripe for the time honored Internet technique of parody. Indeed, the campaign workers of opponent Rick Noriega were even relieved of the burden of having to write a new chorus. They could work with "Big Bad John." By changing the intonation of "bad," it was no difficult task to evoke the more common meaning in their parody video criticizing Cornyn. The Noriega campaign video about big, bad, ineffective John Cornyn missed out on the Top 12, but was viewed more than 25,000 times.

The list gives room for debate about the value of the signature YouTube strategy of videotaping gaffes. Although one cannot know for sure the extent to which George Allen's misstep captures an actual character flaw, it does reveal how YouTube can expose candidates who speak differently to different audiences and articulate candid thoughts about politically relevant matters. The clip of Conrad Burns sleeping at a hearing is less clear as what can be taken for a lack of interest in a key issue affecting Montana might be better seen as a product of a demanding travel schedule that could affect anybody regardless of interest in the issue.

A close cousin of videotaping gaffes is filming the response of a candidate to being unexpectedly approached on the street. The value of this person-on-the-street interview format

would seem to depend on whether the goal is roll-the-tape accountability on a politically relevant subject or the type of celebrity inquiry featured on TMZ. The format is represented on the Top 12 list by a clip of Harold Ford being approached on the street for an impromptu response to a question about his attendance at a Playboy Super Bowl Party. Ford's response suggests that the clip can be safely characterized as TMZ politics: "I like football and I like girls and I have no apologies for that."

The most popular videos provide little evidence that YouTube is providing an incentive for longer messages. In fact, the 30-second length dominates the list and two other videos are actually shorter (Ford comment and Fox well wishes). Overall, nine of twelve videos in 2008 and five of twelve in 2006 were 30 seconds or less. Length probably has the most impact on the press conference clip in which Norm Coleman's press secretary refuses to discuss a lobbyist gift scandal. While a news story might show only the first refusal to answer the question, YouTube could show the same question asked many different ways with the same refusal repeated for 3 minutes 43 seconds in a way that reveals that the reporters really want to ask and the press secretary really doesn't want to answer the question. The only clip longer than 4 minutes is the over seven minute 2006 interview of Michael J. Fox by Katie Couric, who remained prominent on YouTube in 2008 with her Sarah Palin interview.

### *All Videos*

Examining all the videos in the study, the YouTube presence of candidates is still dominated by content created by the establishment political culture. Table 2 shows the content producers of all YouTube videos in 2008. The candidates themselves are far and away the most frequent content producers with responsibility for one-third of videos. The second largest content producer is the opponent of the candidate for whose name the search was conducted. Combined with the party of the opponent, the voice of the opponent is represented by about 21% of the videos. Another 20% of the videos are from conventional television stations whether local, national, or C-SPAN. Combined, then, the candidates, their parties, and the media represent at least three-fourths of all videos.

The residual one-fourth share substantially overstates the role of nontraditional participants. Some of the balance represents interest groups and non-television media outlets. In almost every case, the 4.1% of other candidate views are not from minor parties. Rather, they are produced by failed major party candidates from the primaries. The virtual absence of third party candidates should not be dismissed as merely an artifact of not searching for their names although that methodology certainly worked against them. Third parties and their candidates could have been part of the 20% of opponent-produced videos, but they were not.

Ultimately, the number of truly independent videos is very small. While the number of ostensibly unaffiliated videos is a noticeable 12%, many of these are produced at the behest of established institutions but are not identified as such. There are many reasons why the producers are not identified. The candidate may not have an official YouTube channel and it's just easier to encourage staffers to use their own channels. Attaching formal credits to a video adds an extra editing step that may be omitted for convenience. Of course, the candidate may also want the material to look independent. Strong evidence for these explanations is the intimacy of many of the independent/unidentified clips in which candidates are shown in private discussions or

Table 2  
Content Producers of YouTube Senate Campaign 2008 Videos

Content Producer	Percent (n=633)
Candidate	33.0
Opposing candidate	12.3
Independent/Unaffiliated	12.2
National television station	8.7
Opponent's party	8.5
Local television station	6.8
Other candidate	4.1
Interest group	3.8
Candidate's party	3.3
C-SPAN 2.5	
Talking Points Memo	1.6
YouTube corporate	.8
AM/FM radio station	.8
Hotline/politico/politicstv	.6
Entertainment entity	.5
Think tank	.3
Local newspaper	.2

closely held meetings that would have required high levels of candidate cooperation. Also many of the unaffiliated clips are public events in which the actual content producer is unclear but the candidate largely controlled the event.

Overall, content produced by ordinary citizens was rare and undistinguished in 2008. Looking at the scattered assortment of independent videos, it is difficult to classify their contribution to the campaign as anything other than minimal. Perhaps the most compelling and easily the most popular clips were comedy sketches associated with the YouTube presence of Joe Biden and John Kerry that originated in Presidential politics. Although some amateur Sarah Palin comedy sketches were identified by searches for Joe Biden and Ted Stevens, they were not nearly as good or popular as the ones produced by the professionals at “Saturday Night Live.” Indeed, it was “Saturday Night Live” and Tina Fey that dominated YouTube viewership in the presidential campaign (Snider, 2008). An independently produced video in the Michigan race does take a citizen’s approach to physics: “[Carl Levin] is the guy whose nose is so long from all the lies he’s been telling that it’s created its own gravitational pull that just sucks his glasses right off his face.” Failed promise is also evident on the so-called Wall Street bailout about which the public had a different view (opposed) than establishment politicians (supported). Unfortunately, the YouTube campaign contribution on the bailout was a 29-second face-to-the-camera statement by a citizen punctuated by profanity directed at Max Baucus. Although this may have captured how many citizens felt, it hardly advances the debate. Another of the few citizen contributions was a 45-second mashup of Republican Jim Risch that was “enhanced” by morphing a dunce cap on him and distorting his voice. Indeed, the low quality of independent videos precludes offering a model for how these contributions can elevate the campaign.

The landscape of ordinary citizen contribution was marginally more vibrant in 2006 when the Senate election did not have to compete with the presidential election for citizen attention. Even so, the overall balance of content providers in 2006 was quite similar to 2008. Candidates were the top content producers. They exceeded opponents by more than 2 to 1. In 2006,

television stations were a slightly higher percentage than in 2008, a decline that can be at least partly credited to greater copyright enforcement, especially by Comedy Central. The videos of independent producers appear slightly more prevalent in 2006. There were some music videos that showed creativity and involvement in the campaign. A number of citizens also created point-counterpoint presentations using titles to link opposite viewpoints. By 2008, the old-style titles that gave rise to a more policy focus had largely disappeared. There were also a few earnest face-to-the-camera testimonials about the Senate contests.

Examining the format of all 2008 videos, it is clear that YouTube generally has not motivated new formats of political communication. In fact, the YouTube presence of candidates is dominated by the same ad format that dominates the spending and visibility of candidates outside YouTube. As shown in Table 3, the brief ad format (one minute or less) represents about half of the YouTube presence of Senate candidates. Although the study did not verify that ads ran on television, their frequent labeling as the nth TV ad and conformity to broadcast regulation give little doubt that most represent repurposed TV ads.

Format	Percent (n=633)
Brief advertisement	44.1
Candidate event speech	8.4
Long advertisement (>1 minute)	6.0
News story	5.8
News interview	5.5
Candidate face-to-camera talk	5.4
Debate between the two candidates	4.6
News debate	3.5
Music video	2.8
Personal testimonial	1.9
Congressional floor proceeding	1.6
Comedy sketch	1.6
News conference	1.3
Person on the street interview	1.1
Subject documentary	1.1
Biographical sketch of candidate	.9
Canvassing	.9
Participation plea	.6
News commentary	.6
Event ambience	.6
Congressional hearing	.5
Doctored slam	.3
Comedy news talk	.2
Ad parody	.2
Private interview	.2
Protest	.2
Travelogue	.2

The dominance of brief ads is symbolic of a YouTube campaign that largely failed to motivate new formats of political communication. The YouTube presence of candidates is almost entirely repurposed material from communication that originated outside of YouTube. Perhaps the most compelling case for YouTube-motivated format is the 5.4% of videos in which

the candidate faces and just talks to the camera. Although the format existed before YouTube, fewer of these videos would have been produced without it. Candidates seem to be drawn to the authenticity of this low-tech format on YouTube, even if their TV spots gravitate toward higher production values. In any event, this format is a long way away from ordinary citizens using democratized production and editing to compete with professional content.

A variety of other YouTube-motivated content represents a small portion of video formats. Another format dominated by candidates themselves is the long ad of more than a minute. Sharing production values with their shorter counterparts, these ads represent 6% of the videos. An additional one percent of the videos are biographical sketches of the candidate. Other YouTube-motivated formats were shared by candidates and ordinary citizens. The most elaborate music video was a 3 ½ minute video produced by the Republicans featuring animated Democratic Senate candidates. The repeated refrain suggests that getting people in the Christmas mood was not the major purpose of the song 12 Days of Christmas: “On the third day of Christmas, the liberals gave to me, Al Franken ranting, two liberal Udalls and a tax hike for every family.” Other YouTube-motivated content includes personal face-to-camera testimonials (1.9%), comedy sketches (1.6%), person-on-the-street interviews (1.1%), and doctored slams (.3%).

While YouTube motivated little new content, the repurposed videos do reflect diverse forms of political communication. The second most common format was the event speech (8.4%). News media products also obtain heightened availability on YouTube. 5.8% of the videos represent a news story run by broadcast journalists. YouTube also features interviews with the candidate alone (5.5%) or as part of a debate with multiple guests (3.5%). Although all these formats were originally created for another purpose, repurposing content that interests voters can enhance the campaign environment.

As with content producers, the 2008 data on format is similar to 2006. The share of brief ads in 2006 was virtually identical to 2008 (43.5% vs. 44.1%). Just as in 2008, no other format reached even 10% in 2006 and the difference between years was never more than a net 5%. The most noticeable difference was the point-counterpoint critique, which accounted for 3% of videos in 2006, had disappeared by 2008 as the technology of titles became passé. Overall, it seems that in 2006 people were having a little more fun with politics as the more amusing formats of music video, ad parody, comedy sketch, and Letterman-type comedy news talk together accounted for 9.2% in 2006, but only 4.8% in 2008.

It also appears that arguably the two most pernicious YouTube-motivated formats have declined. The most important is the person-on-the-street interview which declined from about 2% in 2006 to 1% in 2008. Of course, accosting candidates on the street can be an effective technique to get a genuine candidate response to a question. It is also prone to abuse. The best example is 2006 when a person dressed in a gorilla suit confronted a candidate with a question. It is hard to be distinguished addressing a person in a gorilla suit. Indeed, in 2008, there was much debate about whether Democratic Presidential candidates looked distinguished answering a snowman’s question about global warming in the 2008 YouTube presidential debate.

Fortunately, the format that I call the “doctored slam” represents less than one percent each year. The format uses technology to distort the appearance or voice of a candidate for the purpose of mean-spirited ridicule. This format is far from its humorous cousins like JibJab that use caricature for humorous effect. It is one thing to circulate a candidate gaffe that actually

happened, but quite another to use technology to exaggerate a candidate's misstep. A lowlight for this format is a video multiplying the debate stumbles of Ben Nelson.

The evidence about whether YouTube is motivating longer formats of communication is mixed. The dominant length in 2008 was the 30-second format, which accounted for one-third of all videos. The 60-second length is a huge drop to 5.2% of all videos.<sup>3</sup> Beyond the dominance of the brief ad format, the results indicate a willingness to pursue lengthier communication. Looking at the length quintiles, 20% of all 2008 videos were 30 seconds or less, 40% of all videos were 36 seconds or less, 60% of all videos were 99 seconds or less, 80% were 222 seconds or less. There were very few long videos. Only 1.6% of all videos exceeded 10 minutes in 2008. These 2008 findings are comparable to the lengths in 2006. In 2006, the quintiles were: 20% of all videos were 30 seconds or less, 40% were 32 seconds or less, 60% were 70 seconds or less, and 80% were 175 seconds or less. As in 2008, long videos were rare in 2006 with only 1.2% of the videos exceeding 10 minutes in length. Combined, these figures show that communication exceeding 30 seconds receives some visibility on YouTube. A voter looking for sustained issue discussion, however, would still be better off with a full televised debate than anything available on YouTube.

Although the videos are short, they are not overwhelmingly negative. The well-established subjectivity of valence advises caution about exact percentages, but the distribution of 2008 videos as 36% positive, 22% neutral, and 42% negative gives little doubt about the big picture. All valences are well represented on YouTube. This was also true in 2006 when all valences were also above 20% and negative was the most common category. It is hardly surprising that much of the negativity is from repurposed TV ads, the neutrality is from media content, and positive content is from promotional ads and speeches.

The results further indicate that YouTube is a very favorable environment for Democrats. In 2008, the search for a Republican candidate name was more likely to generate Democratic-produced videos (29.6%) than videos produced by the Republican candidate or Republican Party (26.1%). Searches for Democratic candidates, in contrast, generated videos produced by the Democratic candidate or Democratic Party 46% of the time compared to only 12.6% for Republican-produced videos. Beyond the Democratic advantage in creating videos, little difference was seen between the parties in either format or valence. In short, the major party difference is that Democratic candidates enjoyed greater control over their YouTube presence than Republican candidates. While the empirical evidence clearly shows a Democratic advantage in YouTube content, it doesn't necessarily support the theory that the Democratic ideology is more closely aligned with the technology. After all, the advantage could result from the Democrats spending more on Web campaigning than the Republicans (Winograd & Hais, 2008) in a good electoral year for Democrats.

Finally, the common assumption of dramatic growth in the importance of YouTube campaigning receives limited support from the evidence. First, the 2008 Senate election on YouTube had no equivalent to 2006 when the role of YouTube almost certainly changed the race in Virginia and may have changed the outcome in Montana. Obviously, in 2008, anything could account for the narrow difference between Coleman and Franken in Minnesota, but there is little evidence to suggest that YouTube was decisive. The most likely impact was in North Carolina where YouTube enhanced accountability for television ads. The North Carolina and other popular 2008 clips, however, could not compete with the viewership for 2006 videos. Outside of

the most popular videos, there is evidence of some growth in campaign video views although it pales in comparison to the broader increase in YouTube views. The median number of views for the population of 10th most popular videos (i.e. the last video to get in the study for each candidate) increased from 131 views in 2006 to 998 views in 2008.<sup>4</sup> The overall median of videos in the study increased from 1,640 views in 2006 to 3,197 videos in 2008. This gap closes as one moves up to the 90<sup>th</sup> percentile for which the 36,286 views in 2008 was only a 43% increase over the 25,296 views in 2006. This modest growth and low impact in 2008 is strong evidence for rejecting the assumption of dramatic growth in YouTube campaigning.

### Conclusion

The 2008 Senate campaign on YouTube provides little evidence to support the theory that democratized video editing, production, and distribution motivates new formats and producers of political communication. Rather, YouTube has broadened access to repurposed communication from campaign participants. This is the conclusion from a content analysis of both the most popular videos and a much broader range of campaign videos. The strong similarity between 2006 and 2008 adds greater weight to the results. YouTube campaigning has settled into a pattern that favors established political participants and traditional formats of communication.

There is certainly no evidence that democratized video is prompting new ways for ordinary citizens to hold Senate candidates accountable for their policy choices. Even the exuberant claims of accountability through YouTube in 2006 weren't policy based, but more generally raised questions about fitness to govern in a diverse society. If there were a subject primed for policy accountability in 2008, it would have been the government program to buy troubled financial assets. The opinion of citizens differed sharply from politicians, especially Senators who ostensibly required deficit-raising add-ons to pursue the goal of saving the financial system. Although the parties agreed (mostly) not to campaign on the issue, the open field for citizen involvement was occupied by a 29-second rant.

The strongest case for accountability being promoted by YouTube might be holding candidates accountable for their ads that may have crossed the line into unethical campaigning. While YouTube has famously held candidates accountable for thoughtless comments, there is an even greater imperative to hold candidates accountable for decisions made after thought. As a decision made after at least some thought, running an ad is much closer to the type of decisions that Senate candidates will make as officeholders. This potential for holding candidates accountable for their ads is more significant since candidates may have quickly pulled their ad after a controversy arose. Further, in the fragmented media market, many people are not exposed to television ads at all either as broadcast ads or in news story ad watches. Having ads on YouTube allows people to go back and make up their own mind whether the controversy represents fake outrage by the opponent or poor judgment by the candidate.

Overall, the findings must be comforting to candidates, especially Democrats, who have kept more control over their message on YouTube than they might have thought possible. The YouTube presence of Senate candidates is dominated by candidates themselves communicating in traditional formats supplemented by the familiar products of the mainstream media. Through two election cycles, candidates have shown an ability to effectively repurpose communication

for use on YouTube. There is even a little irony in people choosing to view 30-second ads that have historically had the gotcha appeal of providing accidental exposure to undesired messages. There is more irony in candidates happily repurposing 30-second ads that often convey the message that the people know best how to solve the nation's problems without the added inconvenience of citizens taking some control of the debate. If ordinary citizens had any insight into the profound challenges facing the Senate electorate in 2008, they weren't sharing it on YouTube.

#### Notes

1. The study is open to replication. The methodology uses only publicly available videos and viewership figures. The SPSS dataset is available on request.
2. In the rare instances when the same video appeared more than once for a given candidate, only the most popular was included to avoid repeats. Conversely, an accurate appraisal of the YouTube presence of candidates required allowing the possibility that the same video would occasionally appear once on each of the two competing candidate lists. Independent Democrat Joseph Lieberman is included. Richard Lugar in 2006 and Mark Pryor in 2008 did not have major party opposition.
3. To account for buffers, the 30-second category includes videos from 30-34 seconds and the 60-second category includes videos from 60-64 seconds. Thus, brief ads are less than 64 seconds long.
4. The 10th most popular video for the 22 candidates in 2006 and the 8 candidates in 2008 whose name did not produce 10 videos is considered to be 0 for purposes of this calculation. This relatively open field for any video, even one with no measurable viewership, to get into the study provides some empirical, systematic assurance that an unreasonably high popularity threshold is not a major contributor to the minimal presence of citizen-generated videos. It remains possible, however, that the less popular excluded videos could systematically differ from the more popular included videos for selected candidates with a high YouTube presence.

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