Steven Lehrburger

Instructor: Clay Shirky

Election 2008: Social Software and User Generated Media

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Supporting the Supporters in the 2012 Election: Video Media

The success of the Barack Obama's 2008 presidential campaign can be largely attributed to the enthusiastic efforts of a large number of supporters. These efforts took a variety of forms - a well-organized network of millions of volunteers campaigned from the beginnings of the primary season, small donors gave approximately half of Obama's more than $600 million in donations,[1] and tech-savvy supporters made and distributed pro-Obama media. These media are poised to play an increasingly important role in future elections. I will begin with a discussion of how these media, and video media in particular, were created and distributed by supporters outside of the campaign's official channels, and then I will propose a strategy for the 2012 election in which a campaign more fully supports the efforts of these supporters.[2]

Hip-hop artist will.i.am's "Yes We Can" video has been viewed well over fifteen million times,[3] the "Dear Mr. Obama" video by an Iraq War veteran has over thirteen million views,[4] and Obama Girl's first of several videos has been viewed nearly twelve million times.[5] These videos represent only the tip of the tip of an iceberg of supporter-generated content for the 2008 election. A small number of videos have reached this uppermost level of popularity, a larger number have been somewhat less popular, and a huge number have only hundreds or even dozens of views (a YouTube search for "obama" returns 784,000 results[‡6]).

These three videos all relied on primarily emotional, as opposed to fact-based, appeals to

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[‡] YouTube limits search functionality to provide only 1,000 visible results per query, and this complicates gathering more detailed information.

make their political arguments. It can be difficult to use video to make a fact-based argument because videos created with a specific political agenda outside of the official campaigns or traditional media organizations are perceived more critically by viewers who are accustomed to questioning the information they find on the Internet. Thus the creators of political content face a substantial credibility hurdle when making their argument to unknown YouTube users. Sources for factual claims can be cited during the video, but users are unlikely to examine them until after the video ends, if at all. Consequently, it is common for videos to include clipped audio/visual content from either the candidates themselves or from established reputable media organizations. For example, the use of primary sources in Talking Points Memo's mash-up of Sarah Palin interview clips[7] makes the video arguably more effective than John Cleese's interview,[8] even though both videos are making similar points about Palin as a candidate.

Although many of these videos were created with the intent of getting a particular candidate elected, this was not the primary intent for all videos. A future campaign might be able to redirect these efforts to its advantage if it understood the non-political reasons that people, both supporters and others, might have for creating politically focused videos. Some of the videos are produced instead for the purpose of acquiring social capital, and individuals might create humorous content to amuse their peers rather than help their candidate. Others are produced to bring fame and media attention to the creator – Taryn Southern's "Hott 4 Hill[ary]" Obama-Girl copycat videos seem to primarily serve a personal marketing goal rather than a political one.[9] Still other videos, such as "Sing for Change"[10] and "Obama Youth - Junior Fraternity Regiment"[11] were originally community projects that were produced and posted with insufficient thought given to the potential negative effects that they might have on the broader campaign.

Email forwarding also served a prominent role in this election, and information (both true and false) about both candidates was distributed widely. The email rumor that Barack Obama was Muslim, for example, was spread so effectively that an "election-eve poll in Texas showed that nearly one-quarter of voters there believed it."[12] The spread of such false information in particular provides insight into this credibility problem faced by YouTube videos. These political emails were usually sent by someone whom the recipient knew personally, and recipients are more likely to believe something that was (re)told by a friend rather than by some unknown person with a video on YouTube. In forwarded emails, explicit citations and sources matter less because the sender implicitly vouches for the content. It did not matter that Barack Obama was not actually Muslim, because the recipients of the email each had a trusted friend who insisted that he was.

This suggests, then, that the 'long tail' of the hundreds of thousands of political YouTube videos (i.e. the huge number of videos with relatively few views) might have had substantial and under-appreciated political import.[13] Imagine the video creator who spends hours on a short video with a political agenda. Clearly that person wants as many people to see the video as possible, so she will email it to all of her friends and ask that they in turn email it to their friends. Critically, for the first few times the email is forwarded, she does not face the same credibility problem as the random user on YouTube – everyone who sees the video has a friend who can implicitly vouch for its factual content. Even if only a few dozen or hundred people see it, those people that do see it *believe it*, and this is something that cannot be said for the viewers of the videos with millions of views. The effects of these relatively unpopular videos can be aggregated over the huge number of them that constitute the long tail, and this aggregate results in electoral influence that a campaign can use to its advantage.

This explosion of online video content in the recent election occurred for two primary technological reasons: first, there are free online forums such as YouTube for the hosting, searching, and sharing of video media; and second, the computers used to make these videos have become easier to operate and less expensive to purchase. YouTube did not exist until after the 2004 election, and computers then were slower and less powerful. The digital landscape will change again before the 2012 election, and it would serve a campaign well to anticipate (and potentially direct) these changes to enable it to better support and manage user creation of media. A campaign wants its supporters to produce and send convincing video media to contacts whose trust they have, and there are a number of specific things a campaign should do to enable this. Although many people had access to video-production tools and technical savvy necessary to produce political content prior to the recent election, many did not. A campaign can provide these tools, information about how to use them, primary source content that can enrich them, and a community to encourage production.

Web-based applications that run in a browser window (rather than desktop-based applications installed on a hard drive) are becoming increasingly popular for common tasks such as email, schedule management, and document editing. Although often less powerful than their desktop counterparts, they have the significant advantage that users do not need to download or install any software. Jumpcut.com is a web application that offers free video hosting services (similar to YouTube's) and free video editing services (similar to that found in a basic desktop application such as Apple's iMovie). The startup was founded in 2005, launched a public beta in April 2006, and was bought by Yahoo that October.[14] If a campaign licensed the use of this functionality from Yahoo or hired developers to recreate it, then it could empower all of its supporters with Internet access (either at home or at a public location) to create and distribute

political videos, and not just those with a sufficient computer and sufficient software. Although this would be unlikely to have an effect on the extremely viral videos that get produced, it does have the ability to stretch out the long tail so that even more supporters can create content and send it to trusting contacts.

In addition to providing the tools, the campaign could provide official instructional videos, help documents, and other information to teach supporters how to use the tools. This would further stretch the tail to include *all* supporters interested in creating content, regardless of hardware/software ownership or pre-existing technical skill.

The campaign can further facilitate the media creation process by providing easily accessible source content. Currently, clips are found on YouTube, downloaded, edited, and re-uploaded as parts of other videos. The campaign could instead provide original, high-quality versions of all candidate speeches, interviews and other appearances, thus saving supporters time that was previously spent searching through YouTube videos for quality source files. To further facilitate finding this content, the campaign can offer searching of not just videos but also the transcribed text of those videos. It is currently very difficult for a supporter to find an instance of a candidate discussing a particular issue if that person does not remember where or when the candidate spoke on the topic (if at all), and searchable transcripts would make supporters no longer limited to what they had seen previously.

Finally, the campaign can further strengthen its existing online social network by focusing activity around this process of video creation. Video editing is often a solitary task, and the campaign can design the editing/hosting interfaces to be more social. Online forums and chat rooms would enable supporters to discuss the videos that were making, share tips, answer questions, and provide feedback. This feedback from a diverse group of supporters would help

video creators re-focus their content to be maximally effective, and might help re-frame some of the aforementioned videos that were created without intent to make a political argument so that they included one. The campaign could also attempt to replicate some of the success that Flickr has had in supporting groups focused around particular types of photography by supporting groups of videos on a particular topic and focusing discussion around these groups. Just as groups exist on Flickr for the perfection of techniques relating to high dynamic range photography, groups could be created on the campaign's website for videos using a green screen to superimpose user images onto candidate appearances (as in the Obama Girl videos).

Furthermore, the situating of supporters' video editing activities within the context of the campaign's website allows the campaign some degree of message direction. Decisions about page design, the wording of instructions, and the choice of example videos can all set the tone that the supporters will be working within when making their own videos. Furthermore, an active community might have a moderating influence on the content of the videos, so damaging outliers (such as the "Sing for Change" video) might be toned down before going public.

Note that the campaign could and should still avoid direct involvement with the video creation process to avoid direct responsibility for problematic content. The campaign should also be careful not to give supporters the impression that creation of media is a sufficient substitute for other forms of involvement (such as canvassing or phone banking). Instead, the campaign should highlight supporter-created videos that demonstrated that their creators were volunteering in additional ways and encouraged others to do so as well. Supporters who contribute to the campaign in one way often consider themselves to have made an investment, and consider it to their advantage to further help that campaign succeed because they want that investment to be successful. The campaign should design the opportunities for supporter involvement to be

self-complimentary, encouraging supporters to become actively involved in multiple ways.

      In conclusion, a 2012 presidential campaign should take advantage of existing

frameworks and upcoming technologies to support its supporters in producing political video

media. The campaign should, taking note of comparisons between 2008 video and email

distribution trends, embrace the electoral importance of the long tail of supporter created videos.

Specifically, campaigns should offer free online video editing and hosting services so that as

many supporters as possible can make a contribution. The campaign should also provide

supporters with information about how to use these video creation tools, the source content

necessary to make their arguments, and a social community in which to discuss their creations.

Not only would these actions facilitate the establishment of a positive public image of the

candidate, but they would also make supporters feel more invested in getting that candidate

elected to office.

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[1] http://www.politico.com/news/stories/1108/15497_Page2.html
[2] "support the supporters" phrase from unpublished article by Clay Shirky
http://twitter.com/cshirky/statuses/992446146
[3] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jjXyqcx-mYY
[4] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TG4fe9GlWS8
[5] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wKsoXHYICqU
[6] http://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=obama
[7] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NrzXLYA_e6E
[8] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jMyNk8J1c8g
[9] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-Sudw4ghVe8
[10] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pb8ntODQha4
[11] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LSvBCBnulLs
[12] http://www.boston.com/bostonglobe/editorial_opinion/oped/articles/2008/11/08/ups_and_downs_of_a_digital_age_campaign/
[13] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Long_Tail
[14] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jumpcut.com