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Supporting the Supporters in the 2012 Election: Video Media

The success of Barack Obama's 2008 presidential campaign can be attributed to the enthusiastic efforts of a large number of supporters, many of whom created and distributed pro-Obama video media. These media are poised to play an increasingly important role in the future, and campaigns should adopt strategies for the 2012 election to more fully support the efforts of these supporters.¹

Hip-hop artist will.i.am's "Yes We Can" video has been viewed well over fifteen million times,² the "Dear Mr. Obama" video by an Iraq War veteran has over thirteen million views,³ and Obama Girl's first video has been viewed nearly twelve million times.⁴ These videos represent only the tip of the tip of an iceberg of user-generated content relating to 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^{‡5}).

This 'long tail' of hundreds of thousands of non-viral videos might have had substantial and under-appreciated political import.⁶ In an article titled "It's the Conversations Stupid! – The Link between Social Interaction and Political Choice," Valdis Krebs observes that, "after controlling for personal attitudes and demographic membership, researchers found social networks, that voters are embedded in, exert powerful influences on their voting behavior."⁷ Imagine the video creator who spends hours on a short video with a political agenda. That person

[‡] YouTube limits search functionality to provide a limited number of results per query, and this complicates gathering more detailed information for less popular videos.

certainly wants as many people as possible to see the video, so she will email it to all of her friends and ask that they email it to their friends. Critically, for the first few times it is forwarded, the video has an increased effect on the viewer because that viewer has a social connection to the person who created it and whose opinions it represents. The enhanced 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.

The explosion of video in this 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. 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 better support the user creation of media. Although many people did have the knowledge and tools necessary to produce political content for 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 their production.

Web-based applications that run in a browser window are becoming increasingly popular for common tasks such as email, calendar 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 tools (similar to that found in a basic desktop application such as Apple's iMovie).⁸ The startup was founded in 2005, launched a public beta in April 2006, and was bought by Yahoo that October.⁹ 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. Although this would be unlikely to have an effect on the quantity or quality of the highly viral videos, it would stretch out the long tail so that even more supporters can create content and send it to trusting contacts.

In addition to providing these tools, the campaign could provide official instructional videos, help documents, and other information to teach supporters how to use them. This would further stretch the long tail to include nearly 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, supporters find clips on YouTube and then download, edit, and re-upload them as parts of their own videos. The campaign could 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 could 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, and searchable transcripts would make supporters no longer limited to what they had previously seen.

Finally, the campaign can further strengthen its existing online social network by focusing activity around this process of video creation. Online forums and chat rooms would enable supporters to discuss their videos, share tips, answer questions, and provide feedback that would refocus content to be maximally effective. In addition, it might encourage users to reframe videos that had been intended only to be humorous or to market their creators (such as Taryn

Southern's "Hott 4 Hill[ary]" Obama-Girl copycat videos¹⁰) so that they made a stronger political statement. The campaign could also attempt to replicate some of Flickr's success with groups focused around particular types of image creation by supporting groups focused on a particular video technique. Just as Flickr has groups for those interested in high dynamic range photography, groups could be created on the campaign's website for those interested in making videos that used a green screen to combine clips (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. In addition, an active community might have a moderating influence on the content of the videos so that damaging outliers (such as the pro-Obama "Sing for Change" video that was repurposed by Republicans¹¹) might be toned down before going public.

Note that the campaign would still be able to avoid direct involvement with the video creation process and therefore abdicate 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 videos that demonstrated that their creators were volunteering in additional ways. Supporters who contribute to the campaign often consider themselves to have made an investment in it, and thus it is to their advantage to further help that campaign to succeed because they want a return on that investment. The campaign should design the opportunities for supporter involvement to be mutually 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 embrace the aggregate 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. Supporters would feel more invested in getting their candidate elected to office, thus strengthening the campaign on multiple levels in a variety of social networks.

¹ “Support the supporters” phrase from unpublished articles and lectures by Clay Shirky

² “Yes We Can” - <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jjXyqcx-mYY>

³ “Dear Mr. Obama” - <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TG4fe9GIWS8>

⁴ “I Got a Crush...On Obama” - <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wKsoXHYICqU>

⁵ Youtube search for ‘obama’ - http://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=obama

⁶ The Long Tail on Wikipedia - http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Long_Tail

⁷ Valdis Krebs - <http://www.extremedemocracy.com/chapters/Chapter%20Nine-Krebs.pdf>

⁸ Jumpcut.com - <http://jumpcut.com/>

⁹ Jumpcut.com on Wikipedia - <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jumpcut.com>

¹⁰ “Hott 4 Hill - She's Hott For Hillary!!” - <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-Sudw4ghVe8>

¹¹ “Sing for Change Obama” - <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pb8ntODQha4>