

Chapter 9

Sources and Formats of Campaign Information on YouTube

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ABSTRACT

This chapter empirically, longitudinally, and systematically examines U.S. Senate campaign information on YouTube over three election cycles. The Internet broadcast yourself world of YouTube offers some sharp contrasts to the television broadcast world. Unlike on television, candidates and the traditional news media are being challenged by citizens in shaping their video presence on YouTube. Interest groups that leverage financial resources to force viewers to watch broadcast advertisements are marginalized on YouTube where accidental exposure is limited. While the broadcast world converges on a few video formats, YouTube campaign videos exhibit substantial diversity of format.

INTRODUCTION

One dimension of political campaigns in the information age is the competition to shape the video presence of candidates. In the broadcast world, candidates and the news media have enjoyed a privileged position through televised ads, news stories, and debates. As software improvements are democratizing video production and YouTube is democratizing video distribution, there is now the potential for the video presence of candidates to reflect a greater diversity of producers and formats. Whether this potential is being realized is an empirical question.

To answer the question, this study examines the video presence of U.S. Senate candidates over three election cycles. A systematic portrait of YouTube politics emerges. Candidates and the traditional news media face greater competition from citizens in shaping their video presence on YouTube than on broadcast television. Free from the economic constraints of the broadcast world, campaign communicators are utilizing a range of video formats to communicate about politics. YouTube is changing how campaign video messages are communicated.

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BACKGROUND

Election campaigns are a competition to convey a preferred message to potential voters. The major competitors are candidates, political parties, the news media, special interests, and citizens. These competitors convey their message in various formats in different media. Depending on the medium of communication, different competitors and messages are favored.

The broadcast world of political campaigns is probably most favorable to the traditional news media. Journalists working in the traditional news media have substantial discretion in assembling news stories about the campaign. Over time, broadcast journalists have done an increasing amount of the talking during campaign news stories (Patterson, 1993). The communication of journalists has come primarily at the expense of the candidates whose communication has been relegated to brief sound bites. Shanto Iyengar (2011) explains, "The most visible symptom of interpretive journalism is the disappearance of candidate speech from the news cycle" (p. 3). The length of the candidate sound bite on television news appears to be converging on about 8-15 seconds in a number of advanced democracies (Esser, 2008). In a meticulous study of four recent presidential elections in the United States, Grabe and Bucy (2009) find that the individual candidate sound bites on the national news are about eight seconds long while journalists talk over candidate images for about 23 seconds per story about the campaign. Scholarly studies consistently show that strategic and horse race frames are common in news stories about political campaigns (Flowers, Haynes, & Crispin, 2003).

Traditional news media are also big winners in the broadcast world by selling campaign related advertisements on television and radio stations. Broadcast stations offer to sell scarce airtime to campaign participants who would like to convey their message through advertisements. Campaigns become profitable events for broadcast stations

which find eager buyers of their advertising time. Local television stations routinely earn more ad revenue during election years, including 2010 when congressional campaign advertising gave stations a big lift during an economic slowdown (Steinberg, 2011).

Candidates also have significant advantages in the broadcast world. They are legally guaranteed the lowest advertising rates and can often raise the money to pay for them. As the subject of news stories, candidates build the name recognition that is key to election. Candidates can also shape the news coverage that they get in the "free media." They can try to influence what the media talks about as a way of priming the importance of their preferred issues (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987). Candidates have also been successful in generating free media coverage from ad watch stories (Iyengar, 2011) about the campaign advertisements that they pay to run in the first place.

Special interests, especially well-funded ones, also appear to be a big winner in the broadcasting world. Their campaign contributions can help provide access to candidates and political parties who need money to pay for expensive broadcast advertising. Well-funded special interests are also able to purchase advertising to independently convey a message during a campaign. Like candidates, interest groups have experienced success in converting their paid advertising into free media stories about the ads (Iyengar, 2011). Well-funded national groups can quickly become the big fish in little election ponds through buying advertising.

A great example of the preferred position of special interests in the broadcast world occurred in the 2010 campaign for the Maine State Senate. Although they have some presence on the radio, state legislative campaigns in Maine are all but invisible on television. Numerous state legislative elections in small districts are challenging subjects for news stories on large media market stations. Cash-strapped political parties have a limited ability to purchase television ads in media markets that dwarf legislative districts. Candidates,

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