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Deleveraging Creative Capital:
A Decade of YouTube Campaigning

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research is to improve understanding of how democratized video technology is changing the market for video communication during political campaigns. The same content analysis methodology was applied to United States senate campaign YouTube videos during both the 2006 election when YouTube first made its mark on politics and the 2016 election a decade later. The evidence does not support the theory that democratized video technology will produce new winners communicating in new ways about political campaigns. The 2016 election was marked by a slight increase in the proportion of repurposed television ads compared to the 2006 election. Over the course of its first decade, the market for political campaign communication on YouTube has increasingly struggled to attract investors of creative capital.

KEYWORDS

Civic Engagement, Internet, Online Video, Political Communication, Social Media, User-Generated Content, Video Sharing, YouTube

INTRODUCTION

"You" had a phenomenal awards season in 2006. The magazine *Business 2.0* put you at the top of its list of "Those Who Matter Most Now" (Editorial Board, 2006). This was not your only red carpet. *Time* magazine named you "Person of the Year" (Grossman, 2006). You even got your own awards show in the inaugural YouTube Video Awards for user-generated content first uploaded in 2006. A decade after you made your mark, it is appropriate to examine how your career has progressed. Specifically, this research will examine the success of the networked you in competing with establishment participants in political videos on YouTube.

Communication about politics on YouTube is a great place to examine the competition between user-generated and professionally generated content. It was an area of achievement highlighted by *Time* in justifying its person of the year. In an era of fragmented media, politics remains one facet of life that impacts everyone. While characters in modern television shows are far removed from the lives of all but a small number of people, politicians remain characters that are relevant to all. There are incentives for all to compete in communicating about a subject that affects everybody.

Communication about politics on YouTube is also a great place to examine the formats of political video. Modern video is a diverse medium. On broadcast television, however, the video format is profoundly limited by economic constraints, especially for video related to political campaigns, which is almost exclusively limited to 30-second advertisements. In contrast, YouTube allows a range of video styles. Launched as a video sharing website by former PayPal executives in 2005, YouTube first made a political splash in the 2006 US Senate elections. Most notably, the prohibitive favorite in Virginia, Republican George Allen was videotaped using an ethnic slur to disparage a college student

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at an event speech, which galvanized opponents (Karpf, 2010) and facilitated an upset instrumental to a Senate Democratic takeover. Event speeches are just one of the many formats that are largely absent from broadcast television, but can find a home on YouTube.

In revisiting YouTube a decade after it first made its mark on politics, this study will make an important contribution to e-politics. First, it will articulate a theory of why YouTube is especially well-suited to empowering new communicators and encouraging new forms of communication. The theory suggests that YouTube can change the market for video communication in politics. Nothing is more important to the market for video communication than who gets to communicate and how they communicate. Second, it will test this theory with a unique empirical design. It will use a census of the most popular videos associated with US Senate candidates in both 2006 and 2016. Rather than the snapshot perspective of previous studies, this study makes observations at two important points in time. What emerges from the study is a systematic portrait of the nature and evolution of YouTube campaign communication. It sheds insight into the theory and practice of how the market for political video is affected by democratized video technology.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

There is a compelling theory why video sharing technology will alter the nature of video campaign communication. The landscape for video communication in political campaigns beyond the Internet is fairly straightforward. It is dominated by brief television ads from candidates, political parties, and groups. Media outlets supplement this with the occasional campaign news story and television debate. There is little evidence that this landscape is a product of the desire of the electorate. Citizens generally express disapproval of the brief ads that dominate the video presence of campaigns. Rather than citizen demands, the video landscape is a product of the structure of traditional media that makes ubiquitous the 30 second-ad. Scarce ad time is reasonably affordable only to established participants like candidates, groups, and parties.

Theoretically, without the economic and regulatory structure of traditional media, both the producer and type of video content should increase in diversity. The lack of regulation will give any potential content producer the freedom to pursue the most compelling form of communication. Since YouTube resolves the logistical problem of distribution, people are free to direct their energy to the creative process. While officeholders have not pushed Web 2.0 to fundamentally change political communication (Collins & Chen, 2017), those less invested in the current system have more incentive to innovate. Writing in the *International Journal of E-Politics*, Bravo and Del Valle (2017) found that resource-challenged parties in Catalonia had higher engagement with Facebook followers than larger parties: "Although these smaller and newer parties do not have the human and material resources of the more consolidated and bigger parties, they are surpassing the more established parties since social media are not so costly and difficult to dominate as traditional media" (p. 45). Similarly, citizens with less investment in the current system may also have greater incentive to innovate in video communication.

As technological and resource barriers are eroded by inexpensive user-friendly video production, ordinary citizens will be able to compete with professional content. Indeed, this ability was critical to the famous award from *Time* magazine: "For working for nothing and beating the pros at their own game, *Time*'s Person of the Year for 2006 is you" (Grossman, 2006, p. 38). Part of the argument is that traditional gatekeepers thwarted creativity before YouTube. Eliminating these gatekeepers will allow creativity to flourish (Ricke, 2014). If technology allows ordinary citizens to come a little closer to professionals on production values, they can win the popularity battle with professionals by virtue of their greater numbers and better ability to relate to audience members. A format available to and often employed by amateurs, the face-to-camera style, has been shown to be positively related to perceived authenticity (Ferchaud, Grzeslo, Orme & LaGroue, 2018).

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