Obama ad hints at things to come in cyberpolitics

Internet video shatters mold

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It may be the most stunning and creative attack ad yet for a 2008 presidential candidate -- one experts say could represent a watershed moment in 21st century media and political advertising.

Yet the groundbreaking 74-second pitch for Democratic Illinois Sen. Barack Obama, which remixes the classic "1984" ad that introduced Apple computers to the world, is not on cable or network TV, but on the Internet.

And Obama's campaign says it had absolutely nothing to do with the video that attacks one of his principal Democratic rivals, New York Sen. Hillary Clinton. Indeed, the ad's creator is a mystery, at least for now.

The compelling "Hillary 1984" video recently introduced on YouTube represents "a new era, a new wave of politics ... because it's not about Obama," said Peter Leyden, director of the New Politics Institute, a San Francisco-based think tank on politics and new media. "It's about the end of the broadcast era."

But some say the ad is just the latest attempt by outside activists to influence political campaigns -- or the newest way for campaigns to anonymously attack their opponents.

The video is a sophisticated new take on director Ridley Scott's controversial Apple ad that caused shock waves with its premiere during the 1984 Super Bowl and shows the same blond young female athlete running with a sledgehammer toward a wide screen -- where an ominous Big Brother figure drones to a mass of zombielike followers.

But this time, the woman is wearing an iPod -- and has her candidate's slogan on her chest. And the Big Brother -- whose image she defiantly smashes with a wave of her sledgehammer -- is Clinton, the Democratic presidential front-runner. The tag line for the attack: "On Jan. 14, the Democratic primary will begin. And you'll see why 2008 won't be like 1984."

An updated Apple symbol -- transformed into an O -- is followed by the dramatically emerging logo: BarackObama.com.

Veteran San Francisco ad man Bob Gardner, whose work has included political campaigns for former President Ford, said the video is "very powerful" in its efforts to call for a generational change in politics.

"It puts Hillary spouting cliché nonsense to the drones -- while a fresh face breaks through," he said.
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says. "It's old versus new."

That theme -- reflecting a generational change in the relationship among media, politics, candidates and voters -- suggests that "Hillary 1984" could have the iconic power with the 21st-century political generation that another classic political ad called "Daisy" represented to baby boomers, Leyden says. That 1964 spot for President Johnson -- featuring images of a child plucking a daisy, which morphed ominously into a nuclear mushroom cloud -- battered GOP presidential candidate Sen. Barry Goldwater because it, too, portrayed "a shattering of the whole world" in both political leadership and media.

Bill Burton, a spokesman for Obama, said he is aware of the "Hillary 1984" video and has gotten calls from reporters on it -- but he insisted that the campaign is not connected to it. "It's somebody else's creation," he said, declining to comment on the ad's biting content.

Burton said he doesn't know who created the spot, but it shows "there is a lot of energy for Senator Obama on the Web, in communities all over the country ... and frankly, that energy will manifest itself in a lot of ways."

But in the weeks since its early March debut, the expertly created video remix -- called a mashup in blogosphere circles -- has "changed the zone" between political campaigns, their followers and the Internet, said Simon Rosenberg, president of the Washington-based New Democrat Network, an influential party advocacy group.

With presidential campaigns now poised to spend hundreds of millions of dollars in advertising that will blanket television before November 2008, this seemingly home-produced video -- created with software and a laptop and likely without the benefit of a team of expensive political consultants -- opens a new window, Rosenberg said.

It has dramatized a brave new world in which passionate activists outside the structure of traditional campaigns have the power to shape the message -- even for a presidential candidate.

The ad is proof that "anybody can do powerful emotional ads ... and the campaigns are no longer in control," Rosenberg said. "It will no longer be a top-down candidate message; that's a 20th-century broadcast model."

It also dramatizes that today, political activists with the Internet as their ammunition have gone from being "just donors to the cause," he said, "to being partners in the fight. And they don't have to wait for permission."

But while the medium is clearly more grass-roots, political campaigns have not been averse to having an outside or independent voice -- witness the efforts of the Swift Boat Veterans for Truth in the 2004 presidential race against Democratic Sen. John Kerry -- delivering ads that are tougher and meaner than the candidates might launch on their own.

Eric Jaye, a San Francisco political consultant and key adviser to Mayor Gavin Newsom, said the sophisticated "Hillary 1984" effort is the "best example yet" of a crop of videos that have blossomed on the Internet.
over the past 18 months.

But Jaye predicted such efforts are bound to become attractive tools for political campaigns, which will "orchestrate these videos on the down low to communicate negative messages -- without having to own them in public."

Jaye noted that Obama's campaign -- even as it insists it has no connection to the production -- reaps a clear benefit from the mashup video: "They get to call Hillary Clinton a pabulum-spewing pseudo-fascist, without having to own it."

And he says the individual video efforts popping up on the Internet, however creative, come with risk for political campaigns -- especially presidential runs, where nuance and caution usually win out over edginess when it comes to shaping messages that appeal to wide swaths of voters

"They tend to be more entertaining -- but they tend to be nastier. You used to have a series of apologies for what campaign bloggers said. Now you have to have a series of apologies for what people with a video camera and software editing and a laptop do."

Still, Jaye said, there's a clear benefit in the energy such efforts create.

"If people take the time to make a campaign ad, it helps generate more excitement, more laughs. It's fresher," he said. "But it also generates more issues. You have people making ads you don't authorize."

Gardner said the success of "Hillary 1984" means that now "every candidate will have to worry about some guy with a video camera and a Mac being able to do whatever he or she wants."

At the Obama campaign, he added wryly, "they are probably calling their consultant and saying, 'Why couldn't you guys come up with something as brilliant?'"