Smile, Politicians! You're on YouTube

The video-sharing website gives candidates a new audience for their campaign ads -- but also for the footage they'd rather voters forget.

By P.J. Huffstutter, Times Staff Writer
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CHICAGO — The voyeurism of reality TV has collided with the political arena, thanks to digital technologies and the broad reach of a website: Alongside clips of animal antics and goofy celebrity parodies, the gaffes of this year's candidates are being posted, watched — and ridiculed.

YouTube, founded last year as a way for friends to share digital videos, has emerged as a powerful campaign tool, used by political operatives and interested citizens to anonymously and cheaply spread messages or blow whistles.

And candidates have learned that every flip comment, facial tic and wardrobe malfunction can be captured with a cellphone camera and posted on the Web. Once there, it becomes political fodder, available for dissection and mocking, again and again.

Some see YouTube as a way to bring authenticity to the political process and attract a younger generation of voters. Others fear that it will make politicians even less spontaneous in public, and say that anonymous video postings invite doctoring to create false and damaging impressions.

At the least, the site amplifies embarrassing moments.

When Republican Sen. Conrad Burns briefly nodded off during a Montana farm-bill hearing in August, a state Democratic worker was taping him. Within hours of being posted to YouTube, the clip was drawing viewers and comments, such as "This senile old goat would probably do less damage if he slept thru more Senate hearings."

After Sen. George Allen (R-Va.) called a camera-wielding staffer from a rival's campaign a derogatory term, the footage quickly moved from YouTube to national newspapers and network TV.

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Political operatives have long tapped into emerging communication tools to sway voters. In the 1800s, candidates used the printing press to attack their rivals with satirical handbills and biting cartoons. (As New York political boss William Marcy Tweed reportedly once grumbled, "I don't care a straw for your newspaper articles, my constituents don't know how to read. But they can't help seeing them damned pictures.")

By the 1960s, candidates had turned to TV to spread their messages.

But as voters grow weary of TV ads, and cable television has fragmented the audience, candidates are taking aim at one another online.

Though campaigns turned to the Internet in the 2000 federal election cycle, strategists say the true turning point came in 2004, with Democrat Howard Dean's breakthrough online campaign fundraising.

Websites and candidate blogs, once novelties, are now common. So why has video emerged as the latest political star? One key reason: More Americans have high-speed Internet access at home.

In 2003, about 25 million U.S. consumers had a connection fast enough to easily watch videos on their computer, according to research firm Strategy Analytics Inc. Today, nearly 50 million do — which has given rise to sites such as YouTube.

As the Web's most popular video channel, the small company based in San Mateo, Calif., is trying to figure out ways to translate its free service into a profitable business model. Its fans watch 100 million clips and upload more than 65,000 videos each day, catching sports clips as well as personal videos of the Gulf Coast a year after Hurricane Katrina.

YouTube also helps some of them blow the whistle: A former Lockheed Martin employee, claiming the company had ignored security flaws when it upgraded patrol boats for the Coast Guard, last month posted a 10-minute video outlining his claims. Now the Department of Homeland Security is reportedly looking into the matter.

"Campaigns figured out pretty quickly that this offers them direct access to a new constituency," said Jennifer Duffy, editor of Washington-based nonpartisan Cook Political Report.

The site also gave campaigns a way to publish footage they already were gathering, Duffy said.

"Campaigns have used people known as 'trackers' for years to follow opponents and tape their every move," Duffy said. "But the quality of the footage was typically too poor to use on TV. Now there's an outlet for it."

California's Democratic candidate for governor, state Treasurer Phil Angelides, has several staffers whose job is to scour the Web for the latest political buzz and track blog chatter about him. They've been using YouTube to post footage of his speeches and campaign stops for several months.

YouTube has also subtly altered how the campaign rolls out its ads.

"When we have a new TV ad, we post it online the same day television audiences see it," said campaign spokesman Brian Brokaw. "We don't edit them differently. If we run something on TV, then we should also put the same thing on the Internet."

Not everyone does. Although positive ads posted by candidates usually end with the traditional disclosure statement by each candidate, some of the negative ads, or video montages of unflattering news reports about their rivals, found on YouTube don't carry the same disclosure.

The campaigns are following the rules: The Federal Election Commission has decided that free Internet ads don't carry the same disclosure requirements as TV and radio advertisements.

"The laws have not been keeping up with the technology," said Larry J. Sabato, a University of Virginia political scientist and author of "Feeding Frenzy," a book on the political implications of scandal.

"The campaigns obviously distance themselves, because there can be a backlash to such [negative] ads. But there's no penalty if they appear to be posted anonymously."

Hudson, the Republican candidate in Florida, understands this all too well.
In February, while speaking at a Christian Coalition forum, he mentioned how one of the African American soldiers in his military unit nearly drowned while training in Panama in 1984. In the middle of his tale, he added that "blacks are not the greatest swimmers or may not even know how to swim."

According to Piccolo, Hudson's campaign manager, there were only two people in the room with cameras: one a Hudson staffer, the other someone who worked for Vern Buchanan, a rival in the Republican primary coming Tuesday for the open seat in Florida's 13th District.

Buchanan officials could not be reached for comment.

"We knew this was out there," Piccolo said. "We were just waiting for this to break."

About three weeks ago, the video of Hudson's comment popped up anonymously on conservative website Redstate.com and on YouTube.

Hudson apologized for his comments.

"We can't prove anything about how it got out," Piccolo said. "It's more embarrassing than detrimental. We're hoping that it'll all go away."

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