The First YouTube Election

It's easier than ever to spread political propaganda online, but it's also easier than ever to get caught.

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AT CLOSE TO 20 MILLION video-hungry users a month — and growing — YouTube.com has become a magnet for budding filmmakers, marketers and entertainment industry executives looking for new ways to reach viewers. Now, with the campaign season upon us, political hatchet men are discovering the site too.

Candidates have been using the Web for several years as a cheap outlet for 30-second spots, a laboratory for campaign ideas and an effective tool for fundraising. The Internet's role in electioneering continues to grow as more homes get high-speed connections. YouTube offers partisans a nearly irresistible combination: It lets them post videos under pseudonyms, and it stores and plays them for free.

In May, a video skewering Al Gore's global warming movie, "An Inconvenient Truth," provided a sample of political things to come. More slick than the typical homemade video, the two-minute bit was posted by someone claiming to be a 29-year-old from Beverly Hills. But the Wall Street Journal traced it to an employee at a Washington lobbying firm whose clients include ExxonMobil Corp.

YouTube also is a tempting launch pad for political mischief because it is effectively unregulated by the Federal Election Commission, whose Internet rules apply only to paid political advertising. Videos on YouTube don't have to disclose their source or include an on-air approval from a candidate — two requirements for political TV and radio spots.

But YouTube, like the Internet in general, has a self-correcting quality not found in the broadcast media, where the high price of airtime crimps the public's ability to participate in the debate. Online, everyone's a critic — and in many cases, an investigator too.

Very few battles are one-sided, and fakes can become embarrassing once they're outed. The anti-Gore video drew more than 2,300 comments and sparked a spirited debate about global warming, which continued even after the apparent source was revealed. Several people sympathetic to Gore replied with their own videos.

That scene is likely to be repeated in numerous political campaigns this fall. Aside from the ads, the most common political postings on YouTube have been clips recorded at rallies and snippets of forgotten videos from previous campaigns. Often, they aim to show candidates being hypocritical, ill-informed or unappealing. The Internet can serve as an important memory bank for gaffes and public lapses that candidates and officials would rather citizens forgot. But because it's hard to tell real memories on the site from fake ones, it's important for voters to take what they see there with a grain of salt — just like everything else they see or hear during the campaign season.
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