YouTube enters the 2008 fray

Instead of asking for political statements on the site to be regulated, candidates should answer them in kind.

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ACLEVER COMMERCIAL attacking Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton (D-N.Y.), the front-runner for the Democratic presidential nomination, is sending a ripple through the Washington political establishment — and it hasn't even been broadcast.

The ad, which was posted on YouTube earlier this month by someone identified only as ParkRidge47, raises hackles more for what it portends than what it contains. A remix of a famous "1984"-themed commercial for the first Apple Macintosh computer, it shows an iPod-toting supporter of Sen. Barack Obama (D-Ill.) smashing a giant image of a Big Brother-esque Clinton as a legion of riot police descend on the scene.

That's hardly "Swift Boat Veterans for Truth" material. Yet some political analysts warn that the ad is merely the first wave of anonymous, untraceable attacks that will be pumped out online. The clip even worried some Obama backers, who feared it would trigger a backlash against their candidate.

Clinton's reaction was more appropriate. "I haven't seen it, but I am pleased that it seems to be taking away attention from what used to be on YouTube and getting a lot of hits, namely, me singing 'The Star Spangled Banner,'" she said in an interview on a New York television station.

The limitless supply of free online time (as opposed to broadcast airtime) ensures that the public will learn much, much more about the former first lady by the time Democrats pick a nominee in 2008. Some of what's said about her online will be true, and some won't be. Much of the material is likely to come from Clinton herself, as was the case with the "1984" ad, which included clips snagged from Clinton's website.

The beauty of the Internet is that speech is free. It costs virtually nothing to create an ad for or against a candidate and put it on YouTube for the world to see, so the exchange of ideas (and insults) is refreshingly brisk. Not long after the Clinton slam caught fire, someone did an anti-Obama version of the same piece. Meanwhile, other clips praising or slamming the candidates proliferate on the website.

The potential for anonymous potshots and dirty tricks online is real and always will be. But the answer isn't more regulation.

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