In YouTube Clips, a Political Edge

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It starts off like a typical negative ad, with swelling music and pictures of John McCain: "Flip-Flopper? Yes. Waffler? Yes."

But then the Internet spot takes a strange turn: "Eh, whatever. He should still be president," the graphics say. "John McCain 2008. He's Not Hillary."

This is one of the 60,000 videos added each day to YouTube.com, a shoot-it-yourself Web site that has exploded in popularity over the past year. And while many of the most widely viewed videos are merely intended to entertain or titillate -- rants, parodies, pet tricks, soccer brawls, singing, dancing and booty shaking -- company executives say politics is on the rise.

The site's sixth most popular group -- as measured by the number of people who click to subscribe -- is titled "Bush Sucks," with 2,018 members and 741 videos. Also near the top is "Nedheads," with 841 members signing on to a group created by activists backing Ned Lamont in his Democratic primary race against Sen. Joe Lieberman in Connecticut.

While bloggers played a role in the last presidential election, most advertising and message delivery still comes from campaigns, political parties and interest groups with enough money to bankroll a television blitz. But the YouTube revolution -- which includes dozens of sites such as Google Video, Revver.com and Metacafe.com -- could turn that on its head.

If any teenager can put up a video for or against a candidate, and persuade other people to watch that video, the center of gravity could shift to masses of people with camcorders and passable computer skills. And if people increasingly distrust the mainstream media, they might be more receptive to messages created by ordinary folks.

"YouTube is a campaign game-changer, shifting the dynamics of how to reach voters and build intimate relationships," says Julie Supan, senior marketing director for the small, California-based firm, which by one measure now runs the 39th most popular Web site. "YouTube levels the playing field, allowing well-backed and less-known candidates to reach the same audience and share the same stage."

Even the seemingly simple act of posting footage of a politician's interview on "Meet the Press" or "The Daily Show" has a viral quality, because it can be seen by far more people than watched during a single broadcast.

The 18-month-old site, which makes its revenue from banner ads, is free for viewers and contributors. The company says 80 million videos are viewed every day. Each video, group or page is placed in easily
searchable categories, and those who subscribe to the groups are automatically notified of new content.

The networks are just starting to awaken to the power of these citizen video sites. After feuding with YouTube for illegally showing a clip from "Saturday Night Live" earlier this year, NBC realized the power of such online promotion and recently struck a deal with the site to publicize its fall lineup. Hollywood studios are interested as well.

Contributors to YouTube seem to lean to the left. There are videos of verbal stumbles labeled "Stupid Bush" and "Bush Screwups," along with "President Bush Drunk," a bit on CBS's "Late Late Show" that slowed down a tape of the president so it appeared as if he were slurring his words. Another shows Bush, in his Texas days, extending his middle finger. (One positive video features a group called the Right Brothers singing "Bush Was Right.")

Any registered user can form a group, and the site includes one called "Support George Bush," which says, "Don't be afraid of your beliefs -- most campuses nationwide have a liberal bias anyway . . . as does the media." But it doesn't crack the top 100 in terms of membership, unlike "Bush Sucks," which is designed "for everyone who hates Bush and all his Republican cronies."

A video about Virginia's junior senator is titled "George Allen (R-Exxon)." It turns out to be an old commercial slamming Allen's votes on energy by Democrat Harris Miller, who lost a primary bid to oppose Allen.

Not everything is serious business. Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney is razzed with a song parody called "Gay Wedding Bell Blues," to the tune of an old Fifth Dimension song: "I've heard your rants, I wish you'd quit / Just listen to you and hear your passion against gays / (Oh, but you're never gonna take my wedding day)."

And Rudy Giuliani would probably not choose to appear in drag, being nuzzled by Donald Trump, as he does in the video of a six-year-old press roast.

Democrats don't get a free ride on YouTube. While one supporter put up footage from "Imus in the Morning" on MSNBC with the title, "John Kerry goes on the offensive against the right wing smear machine," other videos were titled "Kerry's Lost Again" and "Senator 2 Face Kerry." And several people posted anti-Kerry commercials from the 2004 campaign by the Swift Boat Veterans for Truth.

Former senator John Edwards has his own page, or "channel," but elsewhere on the site, someone has posted footage of Edwards in the makeup chair, titled "Pretty Boy John Edwards / Watch as the ambulance chaser pretties up for the camera."

Hillary Rodham Clinton gets skewered in such videos as "The Scariest Monster," "Hillary Clinton's Campaign Frauds," "Hillary's Plantation," "Hillary Goes Nuts" and "Ken Mehlman on Hillary's Anger!," reprising an ABC interview with the Republican Party chairman. A video by a draft-Clinton group -- which flips through images of previous presidents and ends with the former first lady -- has been seen just 351 times, compared with 5,404 views for a draft-McCain video.

Politicians are increasingly joining the party. Former Virginia governor Mark Warner, a Democrat who is weighing a White House bid, has posted a two-minute video, which has been viewed 426 times. House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi has a channel featuring C-SPAN clips of various Democrats. (Readers can
offer comments; one called her "the biggest windbag in the House.") Krissy Keefer, a Green Party candidate challenging Pelosi, also has a channel, which includes a taped endorsement by a San Francisco street poet named Diamond Dave.

YouTube does not verify the identities of the posters. Supan says political campaigns often put up their ads and speeches under unknown screen names but have begun doing so more openly. (Of course, little-known operatives can also post videos mocking opposing candidates.) Television networks have the right to demand that their clips be deleted when posted by people who have no rights to the material, but Supan says such complaints are declining as the major broadcast and cable networks -- all of which have held talks with YouTube -- have recognized the importance of not alienating their viewers.

While the site's amateur contributions range from nasty to uplifting to downright silly, they also restore a measure of fun to politics -- precisely what might appeal to younger people turned off by traditional speeches, ads and rhetoric. Supan says the modest viewing levels for politicians' pages reflect the pedestrian content of standard speeches and ads -- and will likely remain that way until they come up with behind-the-scenes footage or other eye-catching fare.

"At the end of the day," she says, "it's all about entertaining."

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