Watching Big Sister

'1984' Takeoff on YouTube Is a Sign Of Why 2008 Won't Be Like 2004

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It's the first viral attack ad of the 2008 presidential campaign: a clever idea, visually arresting images, the sound of Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton's voice and, all too fittingly in this YouTube age, an anonymous filmmaker.

The 74-second spot has been viewed more than a million times online, making it far more popular than any of the official videos posted by the presidential contenders. It's a "mash-up" of Ridley Scott's 1984 Super Bowl commercial that portrayed IBM as an Orwellian Big Brother and introduced Apple's Macintosh as the bright new vanguard of computing. But now it's Big Sister, Clinton, vs. the upstart, Sen. Barack Obama.

Interspersed with speeches from videos on Clinton's official site, the clip shows a horde of ghostlike followers droning on. It closes with an altered Apple symbol -- the Apple's now an O -- and the Web address BarackObama.com.

And just as the young blond athletic woman in the video causes a massive explosion by hurling a sledgehammer at a giant screen with Clinton's image, this ad's reach blows up any notion that candidates and mainstream media outlets can control the campaign dialogue. Especially online.

Obama campaign officials say they have nothing to do with it. The senator called it "pretty extraordinary" on CNN Monday night. Apple Computer declined to comment. Clinton said she liked having attention diverted from the oft-viewed clip of her off-key rendition of "The Star-Spangled Banner."

The video's creator -- who claims on YouTube to be 59 years old and goes by the name ParkRidge47 -- isn't talking.

The clip, titled "Vote Different" and posted on YouTube on March 5, is one of the most watched on the video-sharing site. On Monday it had more than 500,000 views. By yesterday, after a day of mainstream media attention, it had passed a million, with text comments and video responses pouring in. Online pundits agree that it's a brilliant piece of agitprop, expertly produced.

Said Mike Krempasky of the Edelman public relations firm, who blogs on the conservative site RedState.com: "One of the reasons it's so good is that it's really creative and entertaining. People look at it and say, 'Wow, that's really cool.' If we find out that this was some college kid who lives in the Bronx, it's going to teach people a lesson: Anybody can be a producer here."

And that fact, said Micah Sifry of TechPresident.com, which tracks the candidates online, "shows that voter-
generated content is going to be the wild card of 2008. It should strike fear in the hearts of traditional political consultants because it shows that you don't need lots of money to make a viral message spread."

Jeff Jarvis, the veteran journalist who examines online video through his site PrezVid.com, said the YouTube clip is analogous to the television ad paid for by the Swift Boat Veterans for Truth, who parlayed a modest television buy into a media firestorm for Sen. John Kerry, the Democratic presidential nominee in 2004. The difference is, Jarvis pointed out, the group of Vietnam veterans were upfront about their identity.

"There are a lot of things happening here, and it's all about identity and trust and anonymity. So was this attack made by Obama's campaign? They say it's not. But then who?" Jarvis said. "Anonymity is a part of the Internet. But the problem now is attacks could come from anywhere, and I fear that we're going to have more and more Swift Boating. With the help of the Web, it's low-cost and easily spreadable."

For David Weinberger, former senior Internet adviser to Howard Dean and a fellow at the Berkman Center for Internet and Society at Harvard Law School, the video is a "meta-comment" of the Clinton campaign.

"It's expressing frustration and unhappiness with the level of control that her campaign is exerting. It's no more controlled than any other traditional campaign. It's not especially controlled by previous standards. But it's tightly controlled by the standards of the Web. And for a big part of the population, the standards are the Web standards," Weinberger said.

To regain her footing online, the New York senator "should go off-message and her talking points" and post videos and blogs that show "that she doesn't have the answer to everything, that she's made mistakes, that she can talk like another human being." As such the video, Weinberger added, "is particularly effective because it draws the parallel that's apparent to so many people -- that Hillary is to the campaign as PCs are to computing."

Obama, for his part, made no attempt to distance himself from the video that uses his name. Clinton is similarly taking a hands-off approach.

On "Larry King Live" Monday night, Obama said: "One of the things about the Internet is that people generate all kinds of stuff. In some ways, it's the democratization of the campaign process."

Asked if the clip should be taken down, Clinton yesterday told the cable channel NY1: "You know, that's for somebody else to decide. . . . I don't have an opinion one way or another. I think anything that drives interest in these campaigns and gets people who otherwise are not at all interested in politics, I think that's pretty good. . . . I thank heaven for small favors and the attention has shifted and now maybe people won't have to tune in and hear me screeching about 'The Star Spangled Banner.' "

In the video, the young blond woman is wearing an iPod as she runs from security guards. Obama's circular campaign logo is on her shirt. Clips of Clinton's speeches are edited into the ad -- "One month ago, I began a conversation . . . I intend to keep telling you exactly where I stand on all the issues . . . I don't want people who already agree with me . . . "-- and by the end, the tagline reads: "On January 14, the Democratic primary will begin. And you'll see why 2008 won't be like 1984." Though it makes no specific charges against Clinton, she is presented as the monotone voice of the political establishment. In an e-mail to TechPresident, ParkRidge47 said the video was created was a response to a New York Times article about the Clinton campaign and "its bullying of donors and political operatives after the [David] Geffen dustup." Geffen, formerly a Clinton supporter, hosted a Hollywood fundraiser for Obama.
In the Wild West atmosphere of the Web, there is nothing to stop cinematic entrepreneurs -- or shadowy political operatives -- from making false or questionable charges in a video posted on Google's YouTube or other user-generated sites. In classic fashion, the video has now spread to television, where "NBC Nightly News," "CBS Evening News" and cable news channels have aired segments on it.

And everyone's been wondering who ParkRidge47 is. Several e-mails contacting ParkRidge47 through YouTube weren't returned.

As it happens, Clinton was born in Park Ridge, Ill., in 1947.

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