

YouTube and You: Efficiently utilizing user-generated content in the 2012 campaign season.

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A great many lessons were learned during the 2008 US presidential campaign. This is true of every campaign, so it comes as a surprise to no one, but due to the ever-changing technology and media landscape we learned a number of things that no one has been in a position to learn before. Many are still trying to come to grips with the simple existence of these technologies and mediums, so it is small wonder that figuring out how to use them for effective political action has only just begun. This paper will attempt to explain the best and most efficient ways to utilize user-generated media, epitomized by YouTube (www.youtube.com), with a specific eye toward the 2012 US Presidential Election.

The first and most important lesson, and one that few people watching the use of new media during the 2008 election would have predicted at the beginning of the year, is that user-generated media is not as effective as we had hoped. Part of this was probably overly optimistic predictions about the impact of new media, but those predictions were not based on nothing. After all, on paper, user-generated media appears as if it should deliver messages that are significantly more effective than traditional media messages. First, it follows an open-source model, allowing anyone to create anything, and while the vast majority of things created this way turn out to be poorly executed, a small percentage of it should be exceptionally effective. Second, user-generated media employs a different distribution network than traditional mass media. Instead of receiving messages from impersonal broadcasters, user-generated media is received from people with whom the viewer has some sort of relationship with. A message received by a friend or family member is likely to be given more weight than one seen on TV, and a message received from multiple, seemingly-independent trusted sources tends to be given even more weight. Third, and related to the second point, user-generated media has no official connections to the campaign. This allows such media to be far more experimental in terms of both message and presentation while allowing the campaign plausible deniability if the message backfires. Not only does this provide a way for attack style media to be produced without the

campaign appearing to employ such tactics, but it may also result in totally new classes of campaign media simply due to the breadth of available experimentation in the new media landscape.

Yet with all these advantages, early analysis of the 2008 campaign suggests that user-generated media had very little impact on the outcome. Certainly it had far less impact than many of the campaigns' other aspects, such as the way they organized volunteers or raised funds. This is because each of the three advantages of user-generated media was hampered. The advantages of experimentation and volume, which should have produced at least a few shining examples of excellent media were offset by the fact that the field is so new. The few stand-out pieces of user-generated media were stand-outs not because they were extremely effective in a field of barely effective entries, but because they were at all effective in a field of ineffective (and in some cases, highly counter-effective) entries. In fact, a large number of media endeavors backfired. Instead of helping to energize their own constituency, they ended up being utilized by the opposition to energize the opposing constituency. Many of the most effective pieces of media were produced by one side in an attempt to help a candidate, but were conceived or executed so poorly that they did tremendous harm instead. The method of distribution for user-generated media, utilizing social networks rather than centralized broadcasters, hurt the effectiveness of the media as much as it helped. While people were more likely to trust messages passed onto them by people with which they had a social connection, the reality of homophily, the tendency of social groups to be comprised of individuals who are similar in many ways, meant that people were also likely to already agree with the message being passed. Independents could not be reached with influential messages distributed in this way because the people who cared enough to tell all their friends didn't know many independents, and in those social confluences where people of different positions mingled, political discussion tended to be avoided due to the high emotions it gives rise to. This essentially limited user-generated media to attempting to excite existing supporters, as distributing messages outside of the target political base was nearly impossible.

Four years is a long time in the current technology and media environment. Conditions are

certain to change in radical and unpredictable ways. However, given the relative ineffectiveness of user-generated media in 2008, it is unlikely that it will be significantly more effective in 2012 without something unpredictably spectacular occurring between now and then. This means that it would be a mistake to devote extensive campaign resources to the development of user-generated media.

Fortunately, user-generated media is practically designed to be used in ways that require few resources.

The first thing to be done is to raise the general level of effectiveness of user-generated media. The more effective the average piece of media produced is, the more likely it becomes that the stand-out pieces will be extremely effective. There are two specific things a campaign can do to raise the general quality of user-generated media: provide media resources, and provide community. Resources are simply existing pieces of media (photos, transcripts, videos, and so on) that people producing user-generated media can utilize in the media they create. The higher the quality of the building blocks, the higher the quality of the media produced. This is a low-cost endeavor for a campaign primarily because most campaigns are already producing tremendous amounts of media for purely internal use. All that needs to be done is to release that media to the public in formats that are easy for amateurs to manipulate. Additionally a campaign may provide a central community for media production. Allowing interested people to share techniques and critiques with one another will increase their individual media producing skills and in so doing raise the general level of quality of user-generated media. Another important aspect of supporting a community like this is that it will hopefully reduce the number of poorly conceived media items, the sort that will do more harm to the campaign than good, that end up being produced and then picked up by the opposition. Considering how often the most effective pieces of media in the 2008 campaign were produced by supporters for one side while they were primarily distributed by supporters of the other side, this is a serious consideration. Again, this is a relatively low cost solution because all that is required is a central location and some sort of loose affiliation with the campaign: the members of the community can take over the work of running things once it gets off the ground. While there are certainly already communities devoted to furthering

various media production skills, the advantage of having one hosted by a campaign is that it allows supporters to get into political media production because they support a candidate rather than because they have an explicit interest in media production for its own sake.

The second problem that user-generated media faces, that of homophilous distribution, is a bit trickier. The important thing to understand here is that far from being in simple competition, user-generated and traditional media have a strongly symbiotic relationship. The most effective pieces of user-generated media of the 2008 campaign were mentioned at some point in traditional media channels, and these mentions were critical to effective distribution. Because mainstream media tends to straddle social groupings, a mention in traditional media channels tends to transplant user-generated media from one social network to another, helping to break the tendency of only being forwarded to people on whom it will have little effect. Figuring out how, precisely, a campaign can utilize this fact is difficult. While getting an especially effective piece of user-generated media mentioned in the nightly news will multiply its effect significantly, having the campaign directly associated with that user-generated media can rob it of its authenticity. There are further complications involved with associating the campaign with a piece of media if it is not in tune with the face that the campaign wants to present; virulently effective attack pieces might be an example of this. One of the defining characteristics of successful future campaigns will be the ability to successfully get the best user-generated media mentioned in mainstream media in order to spread it as quickly and widely as possible. Campaigns need to be on the lookout for ways to do this effectively.

The important thing for campaigns to understand is that these limitations of user-generated media should not deter a campaign from using that media. While this class of media is not as broadly effective as might be hoped, it has the potential to be significantly more effective in four years. Further, there are a couple of key advantages of user-generated media at its current level that should not be overlooked. First, user-generated media is produced by large numbers of people. What this means is that many eyes are looking for ways to both support a candidate and reduce support for the

candidate's opponents. Properly organized, many of these people could be turned to an effective distributed network for opposition research. If they can be kept from duplicating effort, observing the media that they produce, especially the well-researched media attacking opposition, will yield a wealth of information that most campaigns simply do not have the time or resources to discover independently with any reliability. Once that information is in hand, a campaign can shape more effective strategic and tactical approaches. The second major advantage of user-generated content is that it permits plausible deniability. Being able to attack the political opposition without being seen as “negative” is an extremely valuable tool for any campaign. One way of doing this is to limit the sorts of attacks that are made, but another is to allow those attacks to be made by unaffiliated parties. User-generated media can say things that no campaign could say without incurring severely negative impressions. By carefully watching user-generated media, and finding ways to bring that media to the attention of mainstream channels without becoming associated with it, a campaign can effectively propagate attack media without being seen as morally responsible for it, giving them a win-win situation in which their opponents' campaigns are damaged but their own are not.

While new communications technologies and user-generated media may not have “arrived” politically yet, they most certainly should not be ignored. In fact, many of the most successful tactics employed in 2008 utilized these systems. But generally effective utilization was focused around the campaign delivering centrally-produced messages in new ways rather than in effective user-generated content. The user-generated side of new media is still young and growing, and as a result has not yet become a truly effective campaign tool. This does not mean a campaign can ignore it, for things change quickly enough on the media front these days that it could become effective at almost any time. As the technological landscape changes faster and faster, campaigns must be ever more on guard against making assumptions. The question is not whether or not user-generated media will be an incredibly powerful political tool, but rather when this will happen. While it does not seem likely that this will happen before 2012, wise campaigns will be watching carefully for it to happen anyway.

Worthy of special attention is mobile phone media. No one has a very good idea of how mobile phones will find their place in the media landscape in the next four years, and it is possible that they will create a situation that makes user-generated media significantly more effective. The successful campaigns will be the ones which watch for such changes and react quickly.

Unfortunately, user-generated media does not have the impact on a campaign that many other factors, such as traditional media, volunteer organization, and good old-fashioned leg-work, have. Fortunately, user-generated media is of a nature that a campaign can support and utilize it with very small resource investment. Because user-generated media is built on the work of a distributed volunteer base, an effective campaign needs to do little more than monitor it and provide a few resources in order to make effective use of it. It would be a mistake to overestimate the use of user-generated media in the 2012 campaign environment, but it would also be a mistake to fail to make the extremely limited investment required to take what advantages are available from user-generated media as well. And the greatest mistake of all would be to write user-generated media off during the campaign in which it comes into its own.