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Guest Editor's Introduction

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GUEST EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

Although notable cases emerged from the campaigns of 2006, most would agree that YouTube (<http://www.youtube.com>) came into its own as a site of political campaign communication in 2008. Since its creation in 2005, the use of YouTube has spread like wildfire. At the time of this writing, YouTube is the third most popular destination on the World Wide Web (Alexa Top Sites, 2010), featuring a wide variety of mostly nonpolitical content. For most Americans, the initial association of the site with political campaigns likely came with George Allen's infamous use of a racist slur during his 2006 U.S. Senate campaign in Virginia, as well as other high-profile but largely isolated examples that year. With the pump effectively primed by these events, the 2008 campaign season would later showcase a variety of YouTube phenomena, including viral videos such as "Crush on Obama," YouTube's "YouChoose" pages, and the CNN-YouTube debates.

In keen anticipation of these developments, in the Spring of 2008, *JITP* Editor-in-Chief Stuart Shulman began organizing a special conference on YouTube and the 2008 Election Cycle and enlisted me to co-chair the event. The conference was held at the University of Massachusetts Amherst in April 2009. (For more about the conference, including information about its generous sponsors, see [http:// youtubeandthe2008election.jitp2.net/](http://youtubeandthe2008election.jitp2.net/).) The Amherst meetings were uniquely valuable for two reasons. First, the focused and timely nature of the conference made for a number of especially spirited and insightful discussions surrounding the papers, demonstrations, and keynote addresses. Second, from the start, the gatherings were designed to include an impressive and diverse mix of participants, including established and junior scholars from a variety of disciplines, political

practitioners, and computer scientists, which served to amplify the first dynamic. In this special issue of *JITP*, we offer a collection of original articles that have benefited from both feedback received at the conference and the traditional peer-review process, as well as an edited version of one of the keynote addresses delivered at the conference.

YOUTUBE'S POLITICAL IMPACT

In many ways, YouTube can be thought of as an important example of not only contemporary trends in information technology and politics, but also broader patterns in media and society as well. On the production side, YouTube enables anyone with minimal Web experience, a camera, and simple video editing software to distribute video content worldwide. In other words, it does for video what the early Internet did for text. At the same time, for viewers, YouTube offers an extremely user-friendly, interactive, and on-demand experience in which a vast world of content (or at least brief clips of it) may be summoned by a few keywords at any time, and increasingly in any place, for viewing, sharing, and comment. For these reasons, as Gulati and Williams (this issue, p. 93) suggest, though there are some notable differences, we may fruitfully explore the use of YouTube in the campaign context much as we did the adoption of the Web by political actors in years past. Moreover, we may also think about YouTube as a special case of our contemporary choice-rich, post-broadcast media environment in which traditional approaches to the study of political communication may need to be rethought (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008; Prior, 2007). Within this context, it is not surprising,

though certainly not uninteresting, to find a number of dominant themes and questions within the broader Internet and politics literature represented in the collection of articles included in this special issue.

One such theme is the enduring nature of debates between those who view new technologies largely in terms of the affordances and potentialities they offer candidates and their campaigns versus those more inclined toward a set of expectations about candidate technology adoption grounded in patterns of the offline political world. Indeed, as far as we have come, much of the research on new media and politics can still be viewed in terms of questions about whether information technology offers revolutionary potential or merely “politics as usual” when it comes to campaigning (Margolis & Resnick, 2000). For example, in their article, which won the “best paper” competition at the conference, Gulati and Williams extend their ongoing research into online campaigning to include patterns of YouTube adoption by congressional candidates in 2008; specifically, they seek to identify factors associated with the creation of a YouTube channel by candidates, as well as the amount of content posted to such channels. Consistent with some of the patterns found in earlier studies of campaign websites, Gulati and Williams conclude “that the medium has not changed the underlying campaign dynamic: the best financed candidates utilize and have more of every resource, including online video sharing,” and “competition serves to increase the variety of methods candidates employ to reach and persuade voters” (p. 106). In his article, Robert Klotz provides a thorough content analysis of YouTube videos found by entering the names of each major-party U.S. Senate candidate running in 2008 into the site’s search field at the height of the campaigns. Contrary to what technological optimists would expect, Klotz’s analysis highlights repurposed television content (particularly 30-second ads) and ultimately concludes that “YouTube campaigning has settled into a pattern that favors established political participants and traditional formats of communication” (p. 121).

Finally, Scott H. Church’s rhetorical analysis of each presidential candidate’s introduction and farewell videos posted to the YouChoose portion of YouTube also reveals familiar patterns largely consistent with Benoit’s (1999) functional theory of campaign discourse. Together, these studies of YouTube and campaigning extend and significantly refine existing research on the use of the Web by political candidates.

A second, related theme concerns broader questions about the wider political impact of new technologies like YouTube. Do they empower the mythic “lone individual with a video camera” over more established organizations? Do they challenge existing institutions such as the mass media? These questions are taken up respectively in the contributions from David Karpf and Kevin Wallsten. In his article, Karpf takes a detailed case study approach, focusing on George Allen’s infamous “Macaca moment” in 2006 and the case of Michele Bachmann, the Republican representative of Minnesota’s 6th district whose calls for investigation into potentially un-American activities among other members of congress on *Hardball with Chris Matthews* became a YouTube phenomenon in 2008. In an attempt to “bring the organizations back in” (p. 144), Karpf probes deeply into the backstories of each case, highlighting the sense in which the influence of lone videographers or site users is often exaggerated in popular understanding of these iconic examples. In his article, Wallsten also focuses on a famous example of YouTube’s political significance—will.i.am’s viral music video entitled “Yes We Can,” which paired a broad array of implicit celebrity endorsements of Barack Obama with an uplifting pop soundtrack. Drawing on data from campaign statements, blog posts, traditional media coverage, and YouTube’s counts of the video’s total views over time, Wallsten uses vector auto-regression techniques to explore questions of influence between key players in our contemporary political information environment. Although the results reveal a “complex and multidirectional” set of causal forces (p. 164), it is interesting to note that Wallsten’s time-series data suggest

that YouTube views tended to precede more than follow mass media coverage. As a pair, these articles provide richly detailed and sophisticated analyses of three high-profile cases that frequently come up in discussions of YouTube's broader political import.

Finally, no discussion of new technologies and politics is complete without consideration of questions concerning the experiences of users. In the YouTube case, this means individuals who watch and/or comment on and share campaign content posted to the site, as well as those who contribute videos of their own. Scott P. Robertson, Ravi K. Vatrappu, and Richard Medina, as well as LaChrystal Ricke provide us with two articles that probe directly into how individuals used YouTube to engage in political discourse surrounding the 2008 elections. In the Robertson et al. article, we find an interesting first look at the ways that Facebook users deployed YouTube links in online forums (specifically candidate "walls") to enrich their contributions to virtual public conversations. Probing a variety of different ways in which users incorporated links to YouTube videos into their posts, Robertson and his colleagues explore the emerging contours of the Web 2.0 public sphere. In her article, Ricke reports the results of an impressive content analysis of a representative sample taken from the thousands of user videos submitted for inclusion in the historic CNN-YouTube presidential debates. Though popular discourse often centers on the very small fraction of questions that were actually aired on television, Ricke leverages the broader pool of submissions to answer questions about whether this novel new approach to presidential debates succeeded in broadening the appeal of such events. Highlighting the proportion of video questions submitted by youth and members of racial/ethnic minorities, her results suggest an affirmative answer. These studies provide important first steps to furthering our understanding of the ways in which individuals experience video sharing in the context of political campaigns.

In addition to the articles just described, this special issue also features three contributions that fall outside of the traditional research

article format. The first of these is a review essay entitled "The Obamachine: Techno-politics 2.0," written by Cheri A. Carpenter. This article provides an excellent review of the major themes and issues raised by the 2008 campaigns in general and the Obama campaign in particular, within the context of contemporary theory concerning Web 2.0. The second is a workbench note in which Chirag Shah introduces and explains TubeKit, an incredibly useful and free tool he has created for the archiving and analysis of YouTube content. Through a simple interface, TubeKit provides practically seamless solutions to many of the basic inconveniences likely all too familiar to those who have already attempted to conduct systematic research on YouTube content. Finally, this issue also includes a reprint of remarks by Richard Rogers, who was one of two keynote speakers that attended the conference associated with this special issue. These remarks explore difficult yet unavoidable epistemological and methodological questions about Internet research and the possibilities of Internet-specific or digital research methods that go beyond the simple application of offline social science to the online world.

As a collection, the research articles and other contributions to this special issue of *JITP* offer a timely set of systematic investigations into the emerging role played by YouTube in the context of campaigns and elections. It is hoped that they may provide key benchmarks for future research on these topics, as well as useful and insightful resources for those seeking to conduct research in this domain.

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