

Obama's YouTube Bounce

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In all the hubbub last week over who made the "Hillary 1984" video on YouTube and whether it would help or hurt the Obama and Clinton campaigns, the political cognoscenti missed a potentially bigger development: The number of people visiting Sen. Barack Obama's official video channel on YouTube apparently skyrocketed from about 100,000 just before the "1984" story broke in the mainstream media in mid-March to more than 2.7 million a week later. Meanwhile, the number of views to all the other candidates' YouTube channels has stayed almost flat.

Assuming these numbers represent real viewers (more on that knotty question in a moment), why is this important? Because viewing a video online is fundamentally different than watching a television commercial. Communication on the Web is about people pulling information toward themselves, not pushing information at them. Unless they're political junkies, people generally don't choose to watch political ads on television, so campaigns buy huge and expensive chunks of airtime to make sure couch potatoes and voters won't miss them. Even so, proving a television ad's impact based on gross ratings points is an inexact science; just because Nielsen says someone was watching your ad during a break in "American Idol" doesn't mean the viewer paid any attention.

The Hillary 1984 Video on YouTube

This is why all the hand-wringing about the "Hillary 1984" video misses the point. It is not a harbinger of a new wave of Swift Boat-style attacks on the candidates, with highly paid consultants deviously injecting anonymously made smear attacks into the political bloodstream via YouTube. Astroturf campaigns aren't going away, but it's pretty hard to push people to watch a message on the Web and even harder to get them to pass it along to their friends. The Internet is littered with expensive "viral" campaigns that went nowhere.

The Web is obviously a new political battlefield, but the difference is that online, the voters are much more in

control. We choose what content we want to look at online, and our attention quickly moves to anything one click away that seems to be more interesting. To watch an online video represents a voluntary devotion of time. To be sure, the numbers showing up so far on YouTube's new "YouChoose" page, on which all the top candidates are participating, are still smaller overall than the typical nightly audience for the cable news channels. But those numbers indicate the grass-roots interest in the candidates, like a big crowd at one booth at the state fair. So if Obama has already gotten 2.7 million views to his channel on YouTube while the other candidates haven't

even cracked 100,000, something important may well be happening.

Or is it? Our own experiment in posting a video and setting our browsers to refresh the page every few seconds showed that it was very easy to artificially pump up the numbers. In 12 hours, we tallied 1,251 views. ([Click here to see for yourself.](#)) So count us as skeptical at the moment that Obama is really enjoying such a huge burst of attention online. None of Obama's other metrics on YouTube have undergone such a big and inherently suspicious surge, however.

His videos have been viewed three times as often as the next contender's, he's got about three times as many subscribers to his channel (these are people who choose to be notified whenever he posts a new video), and he has almost three times as many average viewings of his videos.

Is this just a sign that people are curious about the freshest face in the race? Obama has been drawing huge crowds to his rallies, but these could be the curious more than the committed. Or do his YouTube numbers show that his campaign supporters are faster at gaming the system than the other candidates' supporters? Either way, this is the tip of an iceberg that will come into better view as the dollars roll in, the volunteers show up and the votes are tallied.

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