

## Viral video infecting political landscape

By: Andrew Rasiej and Micah L. Sifry  
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For the second time in three months, a voter-generated political video about the presidential race has made it past the million-view mark on YouTube. First came Phil de Vellis' "Vote Different" mashup of Apple's "1984" ad with an unflattering message about Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton (D-N.Y.). That video took about three weeks to percolate online, hitting around 300,000 views before the mainstream media paid attention and vaulted it skyward.

Last week, the "I Got a Crush ... on Obama" video topped a million views in just four days, according to our partners at TubeMogul.com, which tracks online video viewership. It didn't hurt, of course, that "Crush" features an attractive and scantily clad young woman, as well as an annoyingly catchy and funny song. That was catnip for cable news, which has played "Crush" over and over.

It's understandable why traditional media would mainly pay attention to the most popular online political phenomenon; in the few minutes or pages that they can devote to politics, they don't have the space to cover the horizon. But if you look at only super-popular videos like "Vote Different" or "Crush," you will miss what is really going on with the new political world online.

Unlike the political discussion in print or on television, where space is scarce, there are no limits to what or how much can be posted online. Thus a conversation that was once dominated by former New York Times columnist Russell Baker's "Great Mentioner" (the unnamed Washington wise man who supposedly decided which presidential wannabes had the right timber), and more recently channeled by the "Gang of 500" (coined by Mark Halperin, late of ABC's "The Note"), is now wide open to everyone and anyone.

Today, most people tune out paid marketing messages as fast as they can. Big media entities don't fare much better. We're far more likely to trust something a friend or acquaintance shares with us. So if someone posts a video with a statement about the campaign and shares it with 10 friends, who each tell 10 more, those 100 people may be more influenced by that one person than by any other political messenger they may encounter.

The same is true of the political blogosphere, where a handful of blogs may appear to have the lion's share of attention but a closer look shows that there are literally tens of thousands of sites that have at least 20 other sites linking to them. The amount of conversation going on in that arena is richer and, by sheer traffic alone, far larger than what you would find if you look at only the top 50 or 100 sites.

This is the "long tail" of online politics, and it is becoming as big in the videosphere as it is in the blogosphere. Chris Anderson of Wired magazine wrote the seminal article (and book by the same title) about this phenomenon, and his ideas as applied to commerce hold just as well for politics. In the world of bricks and mortar, where shelf space is scarce, retailers by necessity stock mainly best-sellers (the head of the long tail). But an online retailer like Amazon or Netflix can sell millions of titles, and the cumulative sales of all those little, unknown books or movies can be quite substantial.

The same is true with the conversation about politics on the Web. For example, so far the major presidential candidates have posted about 900 videos to YouTube, by our rough count, garnering perhaps 10 million total views. According to Dabble.com, which has a database of more than 12 million videos gathered from hundreds of video-sharing sites, people have posted more than 2,500 videos tagged with Illinois Democratic Sen. Barack Obama's name alone. The voter-generated conversation about presidential politics is far bigger than candidate-generated

messaging.

Some people may respond to this new flowering of political participation by throwing up their hands and saying, "You can't drink from a firehose!" -- not realizing that there are all kinds of tools for finding, filtering and tracking content online. And others (ranging from New York Times columnist David Brooks to the editors of Mother Jones magazine, oddly enough) have taken to complaining that popular bloggers like Markos Moulitsas Zuniga of Daily Kos or Josh Marshall of Talking Points Memo are the new "bosses" or "gatekeepers" of online politics, not realizing that this is a realm where there are no longer any gatekeepers.

Instead, what is emerging is the most robust democratic and participatory political arena in America in perhaps two centuries. Not since the days of Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Paine and the myriad printer-pamphleteers have there been this many vibrant voices engaged in the national political debate. Unlike in Franklin's day, all these new participants can connect laterally to each other, and by networking together can spread a message as effectively as any top-down entity. Though it is tempting to focus on the people making the biggest splash online -- be they someone with a viral video or a popular blog -- we need to recognize instead that collectively we are all swimming in a vastly changed political environment.

Andrew Rasiej and Micah L. Sifry are, respectively, the founder and editor of [Personal Democracy Forum](#) , a daily website and annual conference on how technology is changing politics.