

Chapter 29

Alternative Online Videos in the 2008 U.S. Presidential Election: Multiple Mix of Media Attributes Approach to Grassroots Mobilization

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines a new form of popular political mobilization—online videos. Revising a “mix of attributes approach” to media effects (Eveland, 2003), grassroots participation is included as the Internet’s new attribute, which renders a more sociopolitical impact of the medium. Furthermore, to examine its sociopolitical impact, the author suggests a “multiple” mix of attributes approach, which considers extrinsic attributes of audiences’ media consumption contexts as well as intrinsic attributes of media configurations. In this regard, the author examines the grassroots participation attribute by interrogating how ordinary people participate in an online public sphere (www.dipdive.com) where they shared and reinforced their support for Obama by producing alternative videos. When it comes to the importance of individuals’ critical appropriation of the Internet for political participation, through alternative video production, the potential of transformative human agency by shaping personal narratives toward a better future is realized. In online videos for the Obama campaign, identity politics and the democratization of campaign leadership as extrinsic attributes are enhancing the Internet’s network politics for political mobilization. Nevertheless, there is ambivalence of online video’s practical impact on society depending on each user’s specific motivations and objectives of using it as seen in many cases of destructive, anti-social deployment of the Internet throughout the globe. Therefore, as an educational initiative to implement the multiple mixes of media attributes approach, this chapter concludes by proclaiming that it is a crucial issue for critical pedagogy practitioners to envisage Feenberg’s (2002) “radical philosophy of technology” which demands individuals’ active intervention in shaping technologies’ social applications, as well as its redesign for a more egalitarian purposes. With critical media pedagogy as a premise of the strategic deployment of new media technologies for social change, common people can become leaders of democratic, grassroots political mobilization as well as active, popular pedagogues by producing alternative online videos.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-60566-792-8.ch029

INTRODUCTION

With cutting-edge online video-sharing technology, everyday authors, camera savvy users, production proficient videographers and lay individuals have much broader space now to engage in sociopolitical matters. By producing more effective audio-visual messages on the Internet, they can participate in the increasingly widening public sphere in which they realize the essence of grassroots democracy and discuss their concerns, interests, and agendas over the nation's political governance. Alternative forms of political mobilization on the Internet are also ever more available for ordinary citizens rather than the conventional political campaign advertisements grasping the public attention nowadays. Especially, with the success of the popular video-sharing website, www.youtube.com, grassroots online videos have become an important player for political campaign during the 2008 U.S. presidential election. During the 2008 campaign, many on-line users vigorously produced alternative campaign videos and distributed them via social network websites such as www.facebook.com and www.myspace.com. Considering Benjamin's (1934) belief that a "reader is at all times ready to become a writer" (p. 225), new digital media technologies can possibly contribute to a revival of the grassroots, egalitarian public sphere, which can lead to a more direct democracy. Yet, we must conceptualize Internet technologies in terms of their "embeddedness in the political economy, social relations, and political environment within which they are produced, circulated, and received" for a more correct understanding and limitations (Kellner, 1995, p. 2). While emergent technologies provide the marginalized with more liberating, counter-hegemonic politics of participation as a means of self-empowerment, they are also imbued with conformist limitations, that is, their embeddedness in the dominant social and political system that generate social reproduction. In this chapter, I argue that media technologies like YouTube, com-

bined with a transformative pedagogy, can help realize the Internet's potential for democratization.

There have been many efforts to understand how the potential of the Internet can contribute to grassroots based egalitarian democratic governance in society. More specifically, advanced modes of online political communication have been vigorously investigated since the groundbreaking Internet-based strategy of Governor Howard Dean in the 2004 presidential election (Gillmor, 2006; Trippi, 2004). In this regard, Kellner (2005) stresses that the "result of the 2004 election has been the decentering and marginalizing of the importance of the corporate media punditocracy by Internet and blogosphere sources" (p. 306). However, there was not much effort to incorporate voluntary grassroots participations in elections prior to 2008; rather, candidates set up their own campaign Web sites mainly to raise campaign funds, publicize their policies and consolidate more voters online (Sundar, et al., 2003; Williams, et al., 2005; Xenos & Foot, 2005). With the breathtaking speed of the Internet's technological advances and its ubiquity throughout society, the campaign environment for the 2008 presidential election can be characterized as the first major Internet-oriented election.¹ More accurately, the election was a manifestation that substantiates transformative power of the Internet with the critical mass of people trespassing dividing lines between online and offline, pop culture and civic value, and new media and old for a sociopolitical cause.² However, there is still a dearth of research on how daily Internet users and a largely wired population make use of a relatively new video-sharing Internet technology in order to recruit, organize and mobilize fellow citizens for major election campaigns.

Among other things in the 2008 election, the sensational popularity of YouTube and the rise of the Democratic Party's nominee, Senator Barack Obama, are major indicators of the complex interconnections between Internet technologies, alternative online videos, grassroots political

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