

WINNING ESSAY BY:
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Magic Mirror: YouTube and its Implications for Democracy

“But I think, in an odd way, this is the most democratic of all possible structures.”

—CNN'S SENIOR VICE PRESIDENT DAVID BOHRMAN, REGARDING A U.S. PRESIDENTIAL DEBATE WHICH ALLOWED YOUTUBE USERS TO ASK QUESTIONS OF CANDIDATES¹.

Canada is currently in a privileged position: we have the opportunity to observe our neighbour, the world's superpower, enter a volatile new era in political sideshow. This burgeoning platform shows candidates on an equal footing with opponents, endorsers and detractors, their constructed characters exhibited parallel to their unfiltered humanisms. The medium, YouTube, is arguably the truest example of democracy in action, and its effects on the 2008 presidential election can show us how this experiment in media and politics has world-wide implications for the political process—provided we pay attention.

For the first time, individuals have been given the opportunity to have their voices heard as clearly as the voices of those with near-unlimited resources, and to have influence as far-reaching as a master-minded campaign. YouTube allows users (anyone from an organization to a student with a webcam) to upload videos, which other users can view by searching for terms and genres that apply. In the true spirit of democracy, YouTube makes no effort to endorse any specific content; rankings and placement are based purely on public votes and popularity.

Begun in February 2005 by three young Silicon Valley entrepreneurs, YouTube's potential influence on culture and public opinion is difficult to exaggerate. In August of 2006, *The Wall Street Journal* reported that YouTube had roughly 500,000 registered users and was hosting over 6 million videos². At the beginning of this year, there were almost 79 million users who watched over 3 billion videos in the month of January alone³.

To put this in perspective, *The Globe and Mail* has a weekly readership of just over 985,000⁴, *The Wall Street Journal* has a daily circulation of approximately 2 million⁵, and CNN's most watched show, Larry King Live, has an audience of slightly over 1 million⁶.

It is admittedly difficult to determine how many of these 79 million are Canadian, as YouTube does not track its users by nationality. However, we can estimate relatively high usage based on the fact that

Canada is one of the most Internet-enabled countries in the world, with two-thirds of its people receiving access.

Success on YouTube may soon be a major factor in shaping public opinion, with the power to make or break a celebrity, politician or idea. What is harmless entertainment when the story is an 'Internet phenomenon' chasing his or her 15 minutes of fame, becomes less so when the matter is politics. It is important that we analyze the potentially manipulative effects of YouTube, and to be aware of them as we approach our own election next year.

Case in point: featuring a shapely model cavorting around New York City, "I Got a Crush... On Obama" is a music video by "Obama Girl" (Amber Lee Ettinger, a member of online political comedy group Barely Political) espousing presidential hopeful Barack Obama as her choice for office and apparent love interest. What is most interesting is that a YouTube search for "Obama" brings this video up first, a video which has been watched an astounding 7.5 million times⁷. Compare this to Obama's own endorsed campaign videos (of which there are 836), where the nearest contender in popularity is a speech he gave in Philadelphia with just over 3.5 million views⁸. Clearly, YouTube represents a new political wild card; while it would be unacceptable for politicians to hire buxom models to help their campaign gain recognition, third parties are not so constrained.

If that third party chooses to use sex to sell candidates as if they were a piece of clothing or a beverage (and in the process happens to generate more attention than the actual campaign itself), so be it.

What might be the effect of this kind of endorsement, given the low youth voter turnout in the U.S. (about 36% for ages 18-24 in 2000⁹)? Is it possible that mass appreciation for "Obama Girl" will translate into political support for Obama (or any other politician blessed with the fickle attention of YouTube's massive user base)? Politicians are clearly beginning to understand the power of this new medium, as evidenced by the number of U.S. candidates who have made videos specifically for the YouTube audience, featuring intentionally choppy jump cuts and poor camera framing so as to make them appear more authentic (see for example "Barack Obama YouTube Spotlight"¹⁰).

Examples like these highlight the need for a healthy scepticism about the authenticity of what appears on YouTube. By the time of the next Canadian federal election, YouTube is likely to form an integral part

of a well-organized campaign. It may be very difficult to tell the difference between an amateur video shot by kids with too much spare time, and one quietly funded by the campaign itself. One can only imagine the effect a fresh-faced vixen from Winnipeg would have on Canada's own miserable youth voter turnout (22% for those aged 18-20 in 2003¹¹) if she were to proclaim her fondness for Stéphane Dion, perhaps while wearing a skin-tight parka and only ankle-high snowboots.

How will we react when the inevitable unflattering (and often trivial and irrelevant) footage of our own politicians surfaces? Will we react in the future as we did in August of 2000, when then-Prime Minister Jean Chrétien was struck in the face with a cream pie by a protestor while at the Charlottetown Civic Centre on Prince Edward Island? In typical Canadian fashion, newspapers reported on the act with a degree of levity, some of them headlining the story "Pie Minister"¹². While this incident made front-page news at the time, it did not indelibly affix itself to Jean Chrétien's image in the way that John Edwards' "hair video" recently did in the US.

A search for John Edwards results in 16,100 videos, and his own official campaign "channel", where there are 375 videos posted with almost 784,000 views among them¹³. This pales in comparison to the attention given to a single video entitled "John Edwards Feeling Pretty", with over 1,142,000 views. Lasting approximately two minutes and shot before an interview, it shows Edwards and an assistant fixing his hair with copious amounts of spray and much fawning over his image in a small, circular make-up mirror. It is this video that appears first with a search of his name.

IN CONTRAST, A SEARCH FOR JEAN CHRÉTIEN IN YOUTUBE RESULTS IN 193 VIDEOS, MOSTLY OF SPEECHES, INTERVIEWS AND COMMENTARY¹⁴. A VIDEO OF THE PIE INCIDENT HAS RECEIVED LESS THAN 20,000 VIEWS¹⁵, AND DOESN'T EVEN SHOW UP ON THE FIRST PAGE OF RESULTS.

John Edwards responded to the hair video on WNYC Radio's Brian Lehrer Show, where he was asked "That video of you and your hair is, I think, the number two on YouTube right now when you search "John Edwards". That doesn't demean your presidential candidacy?" Edwards replied "No, no, I'm human like anybody else"¹⁶. Interestingly,

at the time of this writing, the video of this interview had been seen less than 8,000 times.

For many, this kind of content will be nothing more than an idle distraction. While impressionable youth may be seduced by lowest-common-denominator appeals, more mature voters will be justly unmoved. It is for the motivated observer that YouTube affords the greatest power, providing literally thousands of interviews, speeches, and broadcasts to sift through. This has made it much easier for citizens to filter out smear campaigns and attack ads, and to look at original footage of press conferences to see exactly what was said by politicians at various stages of their careers. Users wanting to make a difference in the minds of others can use the simple video editing tools that come with most new computers to produce thoughtful (or not) political statements of their own.

“The Truth About Stéphane Dion” is an 8 minute video by a user named “pesoliv”¹⁷, and is a response to the “Not A Leader” Conservative attack ad released in January of 2007¹⁸. In it, pesoliv has organized footage from a January 12, 2006 press conference and outlines Dion’s accomplishments regarding Canada’s plans to deal with climate change and implementation of the Kyoto agreement. Another video, put together by “agwnblog” using Global National footage, is self-described in this way: “Stéphane Dion takes a childish potshot at Stephen Harper, making fun of his weight, only moments after saying personal attacks are not his 'style'.”¹⁹

Not only has YouTube given the public a powerful new tool to assess political double-talk, it has thrust these linguistic discrepancies into full view, a practice that may have at one time been considered “bad form”. Take for example Hillary Clinton’s embarrassing claim of running from sniper fire while touring Bosnia in 1996. CBS video from that trip shows her walking cheerily with her entourage, stopping to hug a young girl and posing for photos (this video has received almost 1.7 million views since being added on March 24, 2008)²⁰. Or the Iowa student who revealed she had been told by Clinton staff members to ask a soft-ball question about climate change at a public forum, as her original question about energy policy would be too difficult²¹. In the days when the only information available to us came from major media outlets, these instances may have been quietly swept under the rug as just part of the

political game. Today, they are analyzed by millions of eyes and turned into phenomena which may very well have an impact on global politics.

Canada’s next federal election may not have videos of comparable popularity to those of Obama Girl or Edwards’ hair primping (or Clinton’s factual embellishments) for a number of reasons. There is the obvious difference in population size, Canada having just over one-tenth that of the US. Also, Canada is seen as less of a global force, so naturally there is less worldwide interest in who will be the next Prime Minister as opposed to the next President. It may also be that Canadians do not have the same appetite for celebrity culture, reducing the market for videos depicting the deification (or demonization) of our politicians. But we should be conscious of the rapid changes that are taking place, and recognize that YouTube represents a seismic shift in the information landscape, with potentially huge consequences for the political process. Like the “magic mirror” from fairy tales, YouTube’s capacity to show us anything we desire is just as powerful, and we need to recognize that power in order to avoid being mesmerized or manipulated by it.

NOTES:

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- 8 Video "Obama Speech: 'A More Perfect Union'" <http://youtube.com/watch?v=pWe7wTVbLUU>
- 9 Levine, Peter and Lopez, Mark Hugo. "Youth Voter Turnout has Declined, by Any Measure". Sept 2002. http://www.civicyouth.org/research/products/fact_sheets_outside.htm
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- 13 YouTube Channel "JohnEdwards". <http://youtube.com/user/johnedwards?ob=1>
- 14 YouTube Search "Jean Chrétien". http://youtube.com/results?search_query=Jean+Chr%C3%A9tien&search_type=
- 15 Video "pie assassins of canada". <http://youtube.com/watch?v=Afp9H1tLmro>
- 16 Video "John Edwards: YouTube is Very Good for Democracy". <http://youtube.com/watch?v=qMWGdHgLmPk&feature=related>
- 17 Video "The Truth About Stéphane Dion". http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r1I_lIcOx4&feature=related
- 18 Video "Not A Leader". <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9oGj6U2InwU&feature=related>
- 19 Video "Stéphane Dion mocks Stephen Harper's weight". <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PLgROKejBGo&feature=related>
- 20 Video "CBS Exposes Hillary Clinton Bosnia Trip." <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8BfNqhV5hg4>
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and
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