

Technology

Election debates hit YouTube

What looks like a victory for democracy may not be so egalitarian
| Joseph Wilson

The political arena in the states is gearing up for the presidential election in 2008, but first the two heavyweight parties need to choose their candidates.

Social networking sites are at the heart of the most forward-thinking campaigns, and were first used extensively in John Kerry's almost successful bid for the presidency in 2004. Since then, **Friendster** and **Meetup.com** have been supplanted by **YouTube**, **MySpace** and **Facebook** as the sites of choice for engaging youth.

Barack Obama's campaign got on Facebook early and has built a healthy network of support through dozens of Facebook groups and a well-travelled YouTube channel. After a slow start, Hillary Clinton's team has also begun to capitalize on the opportunity provided by such platforms. Her team has launched a contest inviting YouTube members to create a 30-second television ad that will air for the first time during a Democratic presidential debate scheduled for July 23 in Charleston, South Carolina. The difference between the 2004 campaign, where such ventures were peripheral marketing gimmicks, and 2008's is that the technology is now seen as legitimate and has been adopted by the establishment. The July 23 debate, interestingly, is co-sponsored by CNN and YouTube.

In a drastic change to conventions, this debate will consist of viewer-submitted questions in video form taken from the YouTube channel at www.youtube.com/contest/DemocraticDebate. A similar process will provide questions for the Republican candidates on September 17, and both events will be streamed live on the Internet.

As I'm writing this article, the last few hours have seen the number of submissions to Democratic Debate climb from 900 to over 1,000 and shows no signs of slowing down before the cut-off July 22. The CNN political team will then choose videos to their liking and play them for the candidates next week, when their responses will be watched by millions.

The inclusion of questions from a user-driven site like YouTube is at first glance a triumph of democracy. People from all over the U.S. have submitted video queries on everything from health care to education to the war in Iraq. Ages vary, too, from grandparents wondering about the strength of social security for their grandkids to a 14-year-old scared of terrorists.

Their inclusion adds new dimensions to the questions usually asked, and some people have been creative in their use of the medium, increasing the impact of their questions by editing in title cards, music, clips from CNN, even photographs of the genocide in Darfur. One 10-year-old asks about the future of endangered animals from a zoo.

But don't cheer too hard quite yet. Reliance on technological savvy and editing distorts the ideal of egalitarian access desired by YouTube users.

First of all, simple access to the Internet is a problem for over half the population of the U.S. Also, entries filmed in dorm rooms and basements are unlikely to make it to the debate by virtue of their tawdry production values. Joining them on the cutting-room floor are those questions deemed indelicate by CNN, including the clever video submitted by a stuffed animal with his arm in a sling who asks the candidates about access to health care.

Another question you're only likely to see on the Web is one posed by a Viking in full dress who makes some great points about the history of immigration in the U.S.

So make sure you check out the original videos on YouTube before they get filtered beyond recognition by the CNN crew charged with making the lives of the candidates easier as the race for 2008 approaches.

