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**Campaigning on the internet**  
**Of slips and video clips**

Mar 15th 2007 | WASHINGTON, DC  
From *The Economist* print edition

**Candidates for 2008 are racing to master a new medium**

DURING the presidential campaign of 1800, partisans harnessed high-speed technology to spread their message. Like today, that message was often scurrilous. Unlike today, the technology they harnessed needed real harnesses. When Thomas Jefferson's enemies wanted to distribute pamphlets accusing him of atheism and adultery, or to spread a premature report of his death, they used horses, which could outrun even the most rapid rebuttal.

Candidates for the presidency in 2008 have a wider range of media through which to spread dirty but memorable sound-bites, or even to discuss the issues. On their websites, all the serious candidates have posted footage of themselves endeavouring to sound presidential yet approachable.

At [HillaryClinton.com](http://HillaryClinton.com), for example, you can watch a "Hillcast" in which the junior senator from New York calls for "a new GI Bill of Rights" so that wounded American troops are treated less bureaucratically. If you find the message inspiring, you can join like-minded people discussing it at [blogHillary](http://blogHillary.com), her campaign blog. ("Another wonderful speech," gushes a typical supporter; another advises Mrs Clinton to work on her body language.) Then you can join the "Hillraisers" who are busy raising money, or find a Hillary-supporting event happening near your home, or download the necessary tools to organise one yourself.

From a candidate's point of view, the great advantage of the internet is that you can send a lot of information to a lot of people at minimal cost. The downside is: so can your opponents and anyone else with a keyboard or a camera phone.

Go to [YouTube.com](http://YouTube.com), a free website for sharing video clips, and the most popular Hillary-related items are unflattering. Over 1m people have watched and heard her caught on an open microphone singing the national anthem out of tune.

Many others have browsed snippets with titles such as "Hillary goes nuts". And someone called "ParkRidge47" has posted a stylish but nasty video showing Mrs Clinton as a dictator addressing brainwashed peons in drab uniforms. The video then urges viewers to support Barack Obama so that 2008 won't be like 1984.

Who is "ParkRidge47"? "It could have been anybody," says Carol Darr, director of the Institute for Politics, Democracy and the Internet at George Washington University. And that is a sign of things to come. Whereas people used to put anonymous fliers under windscreen-wipers at malls, now anyone can mount an



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Hillary Clinton (see also her flat rendition of the national anthem and "Hillcast"), Mitt Romney and John McCain can all be viewed in an unflattering light on YouTube. See also the Institute for Politics, Democracy and the Internet.

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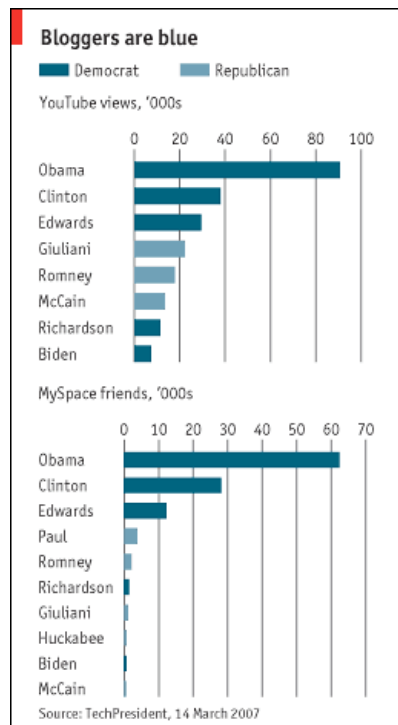
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anonymous attack nationwide. Of course, it has to be attention-grabbing to “go viral”—ie, for everyone who sees it to link to it on their blogs or e-mail it to their friends. “It will be the meanest, snarkiest and funniest stuff that will get an audience,” says Ms Darr. And lots of people are working on it.

Video clips are a good way of making candidates look two-faced. Opponents of Mitt Romney, a Republican who stresses his belief that abortion and gay marriage should be banned, have dug up footage from a Senate race in Massachusetts in 1994 in which he said the opposite. Mr Romney says his change of heart is sincere, not opportunistic. But potential supporters, watching him declare that “you will not see me wavering” from positions he has since abandoned, may waver.

Critics of John McCain, another leading Republican, have posted clips of him saying contradictory things about Iraq, gay marriage and the preacher Jerry Falwell, whom he once called an “agent of intolerance” but now courts. An honourable man can change his mind, but when you compress each flip into a few seconds and add shots of Mr McCain promising always to tell the truth, the result is armour-piercing.

To use the internet effectively, candidates need to create “communities”, argues Joe Trippi, a former adviser to Howard Dean, a Democrat whose web-based campaign briefly soared in 2004. It is not enough just to have a blog where the candidate lays out his views. Supporters must be inspired to write their own blogs, talk to each other and devise their own ways of raising money. The candidate who does this best could raise half a billion dollars, says Mr Trippi.



So far, the most effective candidate on the web has been Mr Obama. More than twice as many people watch videos about him on YouTube as his nearest Democratic rival, Mrs Clinton, and four times as many as the top Republican, Rudy Giuliani (see chart, above). On social networking sites popular with young people, such as Facebook and MySpace, he reigns. As of March 14th, 62,801 people had signed up as his “friends” on MySpace. Mrs Clinton had barely half as many cyberpals, while the Republicans were nowhere. Their most popular candidate, by this measure, was Ron Paul, an obscure outsider from somewhere in Texas.

John Edwards, a populist Democrat, is also doing well. His website has all the details of his plan for a national health-care system. His campaign blog is quick to jump on the latest Republican outrages, and has lively chats between people who say things like: “Can anyone view this photo of John Edwards...and not see his compassion, and yes, even love, for the elderly woman to whom he is speaking?” But he, too, has found that he cannot always control the message. He hired two professional bloggers, only to discover that they liked foul language and despised the

Catholic Church. (In the ensuing hoo-hah, they resigned.) And for all but the most ardent fans, the enduring image of Mr Edwards from this campaign is one of him spending a full two minutes primping his hair before a television interview, posted on YouTube to the tune of “I Feel Pretty”.

How important is all this? Mr Trippi thinks the internet will have “an explosive impact” on the campaign. It will allow candidates to reach young voters, who are growing less apathetic about politics. It will allow the most committed (and extreme) activists to organise themselves, with minimal guidance from the candidate they support. It may also coarsen the tone of political debate, worries Stuart Rothenberg, a political analyst. Bloggers, especially lefty ones, use swear-words the mainstream media shun.

But steady on, says Larry Sabato, a political scientist at the University of Virginia. “The occasional hot YouTube video will be seen by one or two million people, but these are people who are already getting political information from 10-20 sources every day,” he says. “The essence of politics has not been transformed. It’s still about whether people like your candidate and believe his [message].” Plus, there

is still nearly a year to go before the primaries. That is a long time in politics and an eternity on the internet.

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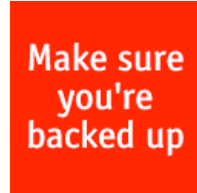
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