

## Online Video as What Kind of Tool

by Alexander Reeder  
for Election 2008

I would like to state openly I am affiliated with neither party, although for the 2008 election I support Obama.

Obama clearly carries youtube in the number of videos made in his support. However, I found two pro-McCain videos of varying quality and tone to be the most interesting. These are offset by an Obama gaffe; such slipups are likely to plague both candidates. I end my discussion with a reflection on the ability of online video to effect swing voters in the 2008 election.

*Dear Mr. Obama* [1] is a classic. It has been viewed almost 10 million times since it was posted August 27, 2008. It was posted by a user, "weneedmccain", who is obviously pro-McCain, and has made several other videos promoting the presidential candidate. I imagine *Dear Mr. Obama* was conceived by weneedmccain, but the man reading the commentary in the video seems to be unrelated. Three weeks ago *Dear Mr. Obama II* was released by weneedmccain, and has already accrued nearly 200,000 views and multiple video responses.

*Dear Mr. Obama* is simple, has a strong message, and comes from a speaker whom viewers are likely to trust. It will certainly reinforce the pro-McCain constituency, and has a patriotic message which will reach independent, even democratic voters. However, weneedmccain's positioning, his username alone, may actually detract from the message's strength, as independents who disdain party preference will immediately raise their defenses. Despite these facts, the video is still a strong information bite which is making its rounds.

It is difficult to tell whether the video started spreading through email or blogs. We can track links, but not emails. Several blog posts seem to be cut and pasted from email, suggesting that was the links' origin. A quick google search shows over 500 linking pages, mostly blogs, several of which are high profile. The linking sites are both Republican and Democrat. For example, on E! Online a thread [2] was started with the title, "McCain/Palin= 4 MORE YEARS of Bush! Is this what we want?" The conversation is a free for all, and has hundreds of comments. During the discussion a link is made to *Dear Mr. Obama* as reference material.

The comments for *Dear Mr. Obama* on youtube have been turned off due to weneedmccain being unable to keep up with moderation, "We have over 700 comments posted now, and approving each one has been laborious and interesting. I promised this man's father I would ensure that no disrespectful posts would be approved. I have kept my word. But I have more commercials on the issues I want to create so I have to shut down the comments section. In all, about 75% of the comments were positive and supportive, 15%

were disagreeing but respectful, and 10% were ugly, demeaning, rude, and hateful.” The comments on youtube did not lead to conversation.

An article on WorldNetDaily [3] claims to have interviewed Bob Cook, the father of the speaker in the video, about the making of the video. He states his family was “contacted by a private party” about making the video while his son, Joe, was recovering from a lost leg in the hospital. It is difficult to pinpoint who is responsible for which parts of the video creation process. Is weneedmccain, described as 52, in fact Bob Cook or someone else? Bob Cook states the purpose of the video is to show support for our troops, glossing over the strong anti-Obama theme.

Now to the nasty. Since its posting in April 8, 2008, *A Video Portrait of Barack Hussein Obama* (here after referred to as *A Video Portrait*) [4] has received over 7 million views on eyeblast, and overall more if you add the youtube version. It is a 13 minute piece produced by Illuminati Pictures. Illuminati has not only made this video, but a site, nohussein.org, which is an involved flash application. The creators obviously mean to discredit Obama’s character, and profit at the same time. nohussein.org has a link to donate to their “media fund”, and also sells t-shirts amongst other goods. A whois search on the nohussein.org domain reveals the site is registered to Scott Walden, based out of Fort Worth, Texas. Illuminati Pictures hails from Durham, North Carolina. The venture is obviously national.

The video is unlikely to sway Democrat or Independent voters, but has excellent qualities to spread FUD and reinforce pro-McCain voter’s anti-Obama sentiments. Not only does Illuminati promote their political views, but also seek to profit from exposure and sales on actual goods. While I believe the goal is to regain loses from producing the content, and further exposure, it is a masterful hijacking of the 2008 election machine.

While *A Video Portrait* has been viewed fewer times than *Dear Mr. Obama*, it has over 1000 link backs according to Google. The video is used in the footer of user postings, trolled in different blogs and posted in political discussions. I noted several car related sites and a few game sites with references and comments. Often the threads which had been created focusing on *A Video Portrait* were considered off-topic in the forums, and were removed, viewable only via Google’s cache feature. Fight the Smears [5] was developed by the Obama campaign to combat media exactly like *A Video Portrait*. The domain was registered on June 1, 2008, after *A Video Portrait* and other videos starting popping up. To reverse a “Swiftboat” effect, which harmed the Kerry campaign, Fight the Smears makes direct responses and provides links to supporting evidence in trusted media sources.

There are a tremendous number of comments on *A Video Portrait*, but of exceedingly low quality. Many are posts from Obama supporters attempting to point out the video is factually incorrect, often in an inappropriate manner. No moderation is attempted, and there is no meaningful conversation. Comments found on other blogs tend to be more coherent, as they are usually posted deep in pro-McCain, anti-Obama territory.

Finally, consider *Obama Claims He's Visited 57 States* (here after referred to as *57*) [6]. It only has 1.5 million views from May 9, 2008, insignificant compared to the other video clips already discussed. *57* represents the George Allen Macaca effect, where small mishaps on normally local media are spread through the internet to adverse results. While *57* isn't a racial slur, it is short and sweet. The type of media which Republican, Democrat or Independent alike might view. Unlikely to sway those with their minds made up, I believe these mistakes, in numbers, could sway undecided voters, and are potentially effective weapons.

This video seems to be pushed mainly through blogs. I found an excellent post in the Digital Rules blog of Forbes.com, titled "How to Beat Obama" [7]. There are over 50 comments, mostly pro-Republican, discussing different aspects of the question. *57* was framed as evidence of Obama's incompetence, and the only video quoted. I believe the quoting of video such as this will become more and more prevalent, developing into the online version of annotation. Video is a sugar coated way to consume tidbits of information, compared to page 52 of a book in a library 15 minutes away.

After reading through many comments, it seems the least polarized of the videos, *57*, garnered the most coherent discussion. I imagine *57* and *Dear Mr. Obama* as the most likely to sway independent voters. *A Video Portrait* is of a breed which reinforces partisan beliefs, and stokes the embers of their opponents. If anything, it is effective at spreading FUD through word of mouth, where the charged nature of the video is lost and only juicy sound bites remain in the subconscious.

I am doubtful user produced video, such as youtube, will effect the decisions of swing voters. The Hispanic minority is being framed as a swing group, so I looked into videos and online content generated for a Spanish speaking audience. My research came up mostly empty, which says to me discussion is mostly happening offline, or at least not on the web. Another group are people over 50 who don't own a television. These voters are also unlikely to come across one of the videos mentioned above, leading me to question their effectiveness as swing generators. On the other hand, we must keep in mind the chain-reaction of partisan interest the videos may generate, perhaps giving volunteers enough energy to make another 50 calls, thus reaching out further and making a difference, but that is difficult to measure.

## References

[1]

Dear Mr. Obama

<http://youtube.com/watch?v=TG4fe9GIWS8>

[2]

E! Online

<http://boards.eonline.com/Insider/Boards/thread.jspathreadID=65732&start=105&tstart=0>

[3]

WorldNetDaily

<http://www.worldnetdaily.com/index.php?fa=PAGE.view&pageId=75092>

[4]

A Video Portrait of Barack Hussein Obama

<http://www.eyeblast.tv/public/video.aspx?RsrcID=2036>

[5]

Fight the Smears

<http://fightthesmears.com/articles/14/sermononthemountmears.com/>

[6]

Obama Claims He's Visited 57 States

<http://youtube.com/watch?v=EpGH02DtIws>

[7]

Forbes.com, Digital Rules

<http://blogs.forbes.com/digitalrules/2008/06/index.html>