

From obscurity to prime time: Viral political videos can spring from non-political sites

October 23 2010

What's the mechanism that makes a political video go viral? What causes a video clip to spread from a few people to millions, sometimes in a matter of hours? Is it a top-down process led by elite gatekeepers or bottoms up, driven by people at the grass roots? And how do blogs affect the life cycle of a viral video?

Common wisdom might suggest that a posse of political blogs triggers virality, but research from the University of Washington indicates it often springs from just two elite blogs followed by top general interest outlets that aren't considered political.

A team led by Karine Nahon, an associate professor in the UW Information School, found that two elite blogs -- The Huffington Post and the Daily Kos -- are often the first to trigger distribution of particularly interesting videos. Top general blogs, such as TechCrunch, Laughing Squid or blogs associated with major publications, like Wired or The New York Times, then post the videos, and from there, they often go viral.

"In the blogosphere, elite and top general-interest blogs set the political agenda, frame the arguments and drive the viral process. The other political blogs then take their cues, looping the information farther outward," Nahon said. Her team's paper will be published in the journal *Policy & Internet*.

The team gathered data on 9,765 blogs linking to the 65 political videos

that received the most exposure during the 2008 presidential election.

In eyeball counts, the top three videos from March 2007 to June 2009 were "Yes We Can," "Crush on Obama," and "McCain's YouTube Problem Just Became a Nightmare."

The researchers delineated four groups:

- **Elite blogs:** Those that had the highest percentage of blog posts linking to the top political videos. The Huffington Post linked to 98 percent of the top videos, and The Daily Kos, to 75 percent. These two blogs consistently posted ahead of other political blogs.
- **Top general blogs:** These had more than 250,000 unique visitors from March 2007 to June 2009.
- **Top political blogs:** Until now, most researchers have looked at political blogs as one group. Nahon's team found that Huffington Post and The Daily Kos were outliers, and therefore constituted their own elite group. Other top political blogs, such as Talking Points Memo and American Thinker, then became a group.
- **Tail blogs:** They included all other blogs that linked to the viral videos but lacked the authority that comes with high viewer counts. Such blogs prolong interest in a video.

"Tail and top political blogs serve as followers," the researchers write in their paper. "They are far less influential than previously thought." "And though there are thousands of tail [blogs](#)," the researchers add, "they are not powerful enough to create or sustain the viral process alone." Rather, they prolong interest.

Besides Nahon, other authors of the paper are doctoral students Jeff Hemsley, Shawn Walker and Muzammil Hussain. The paper is available at <http://ekarine.org/wp-admin/pub/FifteenMinutesOfFame.pdf>

Their project won a Google Research Award. The program supports cutting-edge academic research aimed at improving information access.

Provided by University of Washington

Citation: From obscurity to prime time: Viral political videos can spring from non-political sites (2010, October 23) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2010-10-obscurity-prime-viral-political-videos.html>

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