

# Web video poised for central role in 2012 election

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When Texas Gov. Rick Perry launched an attack of Mitt Romney's health care plan last week, he did not call a news conference, give a big speech or take to the air waves.

Perry's campaign turned instead to [YouTube](#), posting a Web video that caught media attention and prompted Romney's campaign to quickly respond.

Six decades after Richard Nixon's famous "Checkers speech" propelled television to a central role in political campaigns, Web video could be poised for a similar breakout in 2012.

Every major presidential candidate maintains a channel on YouTube, the dominant Web video site. YouTube recently started a politics page that tracks and highlights the most viewed campaign videos each day.

A slick clip on the economy posted by Perry a few weeks ago has drawn about 2 million views. Herman Cain first rolled out his now-ubiquitous 9-9-9 economic plan on YouTube. Romney has posted dozens of documentary-style videos, portraying the former Massachusetts governor as sympathetic to voters' hardships.

"We're seeing a paradigm shift," said Mindy Finn, a digital strategist who worked on Republican Tim Pawlenty's campaign this year, as well as Romney's 2008 bid. "When it comes to Web video, campaigns used to be a coalition of the wide-eyed. Now, senior campaign managers are not

shocked at how this (technology) can drive a narrative for an entire campaign."

Web video became widespread with the 2005 launch of YouTube, which is now the second most searched website, behind [Google](#). It's never been easier to access, create or share, so Perry and his GOP presidential rivals are spending more time and money to craft Web-only clips meant to influence the buzz about the campaign, respond to criticism and rally donors.

There is a potential downside, too. Video messages may excite true believers, but they are often not circulated enough to have a big impact on swing voters. Expensive television ads are still required to reach the masses. And when a video portraying a candidate negatively goes viral, it is hard for a campaign to answer.

But YouTube is a natural fit for campaigns. It is popular, free and accessible on computers, smartphones and other digital devices. Creating high-quality video is a cinch, and video can touch off visceral reactions that press releases or statements on websites cannot. And it lets candidates broadcast a message without media skepticism.

"A candidate's message is so much more powerful if it comes from their lips than if you read about it. And Web video is such an immersive experience," said Peter Pasi, a consultant for Rick Santorum's campaign.

Campaigns can instantly track each clip's popularity, and supporters can help spread the message by emailing and posting videos. Despite Perry's recent dip in the polls, his videos in recent weeks have attracted more views than any other candidate, including President Barack Obama, according to YouTube.

Michael Cheney, a senior fellow in government and public affairs at the

University of Illinois at Springfield, compared the potential effect to Nixon's speech, when the flagging vice presidential candidate used an emotional appeal to bypass the press. Nixon denied misusing campaign funds and included a heart-tugging reference to a dog named Checkers given to his family.

By turning to television, Nixon was able to take his message over the heads of the press directly to voters. The tactic worked: His speech drew an outpouring of support and compelled the GOP to keep him on the presidential ticket.

"More and more, candidates are using YouTube and the web to circumvent the normal gatekeeper functions of reporters and the media," said Cheney, who studies politics and the Web. Perry's campaign did not respond to requests for comment for this story.

Traditional advertising still dwarfs online spending. Campaigns are expected to spend up to \$3 billion on political ads this cycle, most for TV ads and direct mail, said Ken Goldstein, president of the Campaign Media Analysis Group, which tracks advertising.

But by some estimates, spending to create YouTube and other Web spots is up 10 fold since 2006. And strict dollar figures are an incomplete measure of the Web's impact because distribution of video clips is essentially free.

As with television spots and direct mail, targeting audiences on YouTube is a subtle art. Campaigns aim some videos toward the masses and others toward supporters or specific constituencies, said Eric Frenchman, a digital strategist for Michele Bachmann's campaign.

For instance, Obama has launched a series of clips chronicling his campaign's push to overturn a potentially unfavorable voting law in

Ohio.

"Internet video is a terrific way to mobilize people who already agree with you," Frenchman said.

Campaigns also have achieved a new standard in production to give their Web ads broader appeal.

Some of Perry's latest videos resemble Hollywood action movies. One of Bachmann's kickoff videos comes off like an Oscar-winning biopic.

Almost all the candidates are now posting in high definition. Frenchman said the most sophisticated web clips can cost as much, if not more, than a well-produced television spot.

"If Perry's ads looked like they were made by some guy living in someone's basement eating Cheetos, then it's probably something the free media is less likely to write about," Goldstein said.

Of course, YouTube clips occasionally become stories in themselves. And web stardom does not always translate into success.

During her unsuccessful Senate bid last year, California Republican Carly Fiorina drew many clicks, and much criticism, when she portrayed her opponent as a demon sheep in a Web video.

And then there is the potential damage of viral YouTube videos that are not controlled by the campaign.

John McCain stirred controversy in 2007 when an audience member at a speech recorded the Arizona senator joking about bombing Iran. Former Sen. George Allen, R-Va., was captured on video using a pejorative term to describe an Asian-Indian staffer of his opponent, sparking an uproar.

Both campaigns spent weeks dealing with the fallout.

And in the end, Goldstein said, campaigns are always looking for one thing: attention.

"The goal of all of these YouTube ads is to generate free media," he said. "These candidates could be saying the exact same thing in press releases and in speeches, and no one would have covered it."

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