

THE LIVING ROOM CANDIDATE

PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN COMMERCIALS 1952–2008 ★★☆☆

Lesson Seven

CAMPAIGNING AND THE INTERNET

Objective

Students will achieve an understanding of the Internet as a medium for campaign ads and other forms of video. By examining the main candidates' websites, as well as Web-only advertisements produced by the campaigns and by independent groups, and by seeing how candidates are using new forms of social media such as YouTube and Facebook, students will see how the Internet now rivals television as a campaign advertising medium.

Overview

The first websites for presidential candidates appeared in 1996. (The Clinton/Gore and Dole/Kemp websites are archived [here](#).)

In 1996 and 2000, candidate websites were composed almost entirely of text and still images. The growth of broadband access by 2004 saw a corresponding growth in the use of Web video. With the advent of Flash Video, social networking, and other technological advances, the Internet in 2008 is a robust medium for many forms of moving images.

Students will look at how the Obama and McCain campaigns are using commercials and other forms of video on their websites, and on YouTube and Facebook. They will also be asked to understand the stylistic and contextual differences between Web ads and traditional television commercials. Often, students are not selective or critical users of Web-based material. Thus, the idea (similar to television) that “if it’s online, it must be true” is quite common. You may want to start with a discussion or writing activity to determine students’ awareness of this issue and the broader issue of truth in media.

Preliminary Discussion

How is getting information from the Internet different than getting it from television or a newspaper?
How does the interactive nature of the Internet affect our relationship to the material that we view online?

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Procedures

Discuss the responses to the question above. Explain that politicians, like everyone else, have had to develop new ways of communicating with people since the advent of the Internet. Help students learn to recognize and evaluate some of the unique characteristics of Web-based information. Have students log on to the homepages of the websites for the two main candidates for president: www.barackobama.com and www.johnmccain.com.

(If Internet access is not available, print and distribute paper copies of the homepage of each candidate's website.)

Now spend some time searching the websites. What kinds of video are available? What information is available, about such things as campaign donations, volunteering, events, news, and candidates' positions on the issues? Compare the Obama and McCain websites. Which is more effective? Which is better organized? What do the websites tell you about the candidates? After examining the websites, look at the pages that each campaign has set up on YouTube and Facebook. What type of material is available here? How is the interactive nature of the Internet used by each campaign?

In addition to the official campaign websites, encourage students to look at independent news sites such as Tech President (www.techpresident.com) and The Page (<http://thepage.time.com>), and at the website for *The Daily Show* (www.thedailyshow.com), which offers satirical coverage of politics. Have the students discuss the variety of material available on these sites, and suggest other sites that provide politics-related video.

Now ask students to look at two pieces of Web video: the McCain Web ad "Obama Love" and the independently produced music video "Yes We Can." How are these different in style, tone, and substance, than TV campaign ads?:

Assessment

Students should have begun to grasp the differences between television and the Internet as media for expressing political messages. Encourage them to consider factors of accessibility, frequency/duration of use, and possible censorship restrictions.

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Extension Activities/Homework

1. In your opinion, which candidate's website seems more likely to organize supporters successfully? Explain in detail why, giving specific examples of features that you found appealing and effective.
2. Compare and contrast a television ad with a Web-only ad. Identify at least three differences and/or similarities between the two types of ads. Which medium do you think is better for conveying a political message? Why?

Curriculum Standards Addressed

New York City English Language Arts: E1c, E3d, E5a

New York State Social Studies: 5

To View

["Kerry's Coalition of the Wild-Eyed"](#) (2004, Republican) and ["Coalition of the Loud-Mouthed Jerks"](#) (2004, Music for America).