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# **BIG DREAMS, SMALL SCREENS:** Online Video for Public Knowledge and Action

By Jessica Clark

A Future of Public  
Media Project

Funded by the Ford  
Foundation

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# **BIG DREAMS, SMALL SCREENS: ONLINE VIDEO FOR PUBLIC KNOWLEDGE AND ACTION**

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

This study describes ways in which users are employing popular commercial online digital video platforms, such as YouTube, GoogleVideo, and MySpace, to create, exchange, and comment upon information for public knowledge and action.

These new platforms provide a site to test the proposition that new publics are being created around open media spaces on the Internet. These emerging video sites are enormously popular, potentially attracting new viewers to issues familiar to advocates and potentially creating new networks of concern.

The study was executed by visiting the three most popular video platforms and examining the first two pages of search results returned in response to 10 keywords related to political and social issues, such as “net neutrality” and “bankruptcy.”

In all cases, videos made with the obvious intention to contribute to public discourse were found on these subjects within the crucial first two pages, although videos addressing public issues predictably were much less popular than videos designed for entertainment purposes. Most were produced or posted by individuals; only 33 percent of those videos examined were produced by identifiable public organizations, including mainstream media outlets, nonprofits, educational projects, and government agencies. Public Service Announcements (PSAs) were the most common format produced by public organizations. Some 4.5 percent of the other videos were produced by advertisers or film promoters, while others reside in a gray area between professional media and user-generated content (UGC).

Some public-issue, topical campaigns attracted significant attention and resulted in action, especially if they used humor, music, melodrama, scare tactics, celebrity endorsements, or personal narratives. Campaigns also evidenced the key role of interaction and response in creating new work. In public-issue work as elsewhere, users are critiquing, celebrating, or mashing up both mainstream content and the videos produced by other users.

Verification, accuracy, and legitimacy are open issues in these emerging public spaces. The quality of information ranges widely, and some clearly inaccurate and inflammatory work is showcased on an equal footing with other videos.

Early evidence of emerging public spaces within these open sites suggests that media makers, advocates, and policy experts who wish to engage new publics and encourage new voices to contribute to discussion have many opportunities. In order to use them, users need to explore successful models for “viral” videos, develop common tagging and indexing terms and methods,

and track fast-changing social networking practices among new users. As well, users concerned with public engagement may want to use commercial online sites to lead people to nonprofit online sites (see appendix), where more targeted efforts to create productive public engagement with online video are taking place.

## BACKGROUND

The rapid growth of Web 2.0—the interactive World Wide Web of blogs, online video, and user-friendly tools and platforms for social networking—has led to new communication practices, which are growing outside the increasingly stifling confines of mass media. Yochai Benkler (*The Wealth of Nations*) among others has proposed that new publics are being generated in this open environment, freed from the stuffy paternalism of traditional public media.

The rapid growth since late 2005 of commercial Web sites that host digital video created by users—YouTube, Google Video and MySpace Video are the three largest—offers an opportunity to look more closely at explicitly public practices in an open media environment. These sites are only growing in importance. Google’s purchase of YouTube in October 2006 marked new concentration; at the time, Google was the third and YouTube the 14th most-visited Web sites on the planet. In addition, PDAs, iPods, and telephones offer new screens for online video, with services such as Amp’d Mobile and Verizon V CAST leading the way.

These video sites are changing the landscape of popular media, in some cases drawing online audiences to rival television and in others being shown on television. A set of videos by lonelygirl15, a popular videologger (vlogger) who turned out to be an elaborate hoax, had been viewed nearly a million times by November 2006. In July 2006, MTV News cablecast a special report, “Iraq Uploaded,” exploring how American soldiers are using online video to tell their stories, and cable news commentators like MSNBC’s Keith Olbermann regularly feature digital videos as part of their shows. Frito-Lay and Chevrolet both sponsored ad-making contests, with winners aired during the Super Bowl.

YouTube and similar sites are becoming political tools. One deciding factor in the dramatic power shift of the 2006 elections may have been a video widely circulated on YouTube: Sen. George Allen (R, Va.) referring to an aide of opponent James H. Webb as “macaca.” Webb subsequently won the tight race. Politicians also used YouTube and related sites for campaigning in 2006; YouTube added a “Politicians” category to its list of “channel” types. Digital video-sharing sites have also become a clearinghouse for whistleblowers and citizen journalists documenting public events and eruptions such as police brutality. In November 2006 a video of campus police Taser-ing a student was posted to YouTube and quickly made its way to mainstream sources, generating national debate.

Nonprofit and media video sites were early experimenters in this space, and projects continue to grow. The Human Rights Video Hub pilot project, hosted by the international blogging project Global Voices and curated by WITNESS; OneWorld’s TV site, showcasing videos from organizations that share human rights values; Contagious Festival, hosted by political blogging site The Huffington Post; and MediaStorm, a site dedicated to multimedia storytelling are only three examples. The traffic to all of these sites combined, however, is dwarfed by the traffic for commercial zones such as YouTube.

This focused and limited study explores how people and organizations are using the newly popular open sites YouTube, Google Video, and MySpace Video to showcase information for public knowledge and action. It investigates what a potential viewer seeking information on current affairs topics, policy debates, and perennially controversial issues might find there. The study does not address many other aspects of online video's role in feeding public awareness and concern, such as the role of popular humor in stimulating debate; the larger ecology of news and social networking sites, blogs, and e-mail networks; or the copyright concerns associated with video production.

## METHODS

Researchers surveyed the most popular of three common kinds of sites that focus on hosting digital videos: a dedicated video-sharing site (YouTube), a social networking site (MySpace), and a search engine (Google Video). Popularity of these sites was determined by consulting statistics and top-10 lists from Nielsen/Netratings, HitWise, and ComScore Networks, along with popular coverage of digital video-sharing sites from Lexis-Nexis.

The sites were searched using keywords representing issues of public significance. The following keywords were selected to represent a mix of enduring social problems, stories of the day, current political debates, and social or personal issues with a public dimension: "net neutrality," "Lebanon," "abortion," "obesity," "bankruptcy," "Halliburton," "global warming," "HIV," "E.coli," and "crystal meth."

Searches that yielded the first two pages of each set of search results for each keyword on each of the three sites—YouTube, MySpace Video, and Google Video—were conducted on October 14–15, 2006. YouTube page results are served up in batches of 20; MySpace and Google Video results in batches of 10. In some cases, fewer videos were available.

	YouTube	MySpace	Google Video
Net neutrality	40	20	20
Lebanon	40	20	20
Abortion	40	19	20
Obesity	40	20	20
Bankruptcy	40	9	20
Halliburton	40	13	20
Global warming	40	20	20
HIV	40	14	20
E. coli	40	-	20
Crystal Meth	40	20	20
<i>TOTAL</i>			755

The total number of videos returned as a result of each keyword search varied widely. As a result, the percentage of the videos analyzed in each category differed:

**FIG. 2: RESULTS RETURNED FOR EACH KEYWORD**

	YouTube	MySpace	Google Video	TOTAL	% analyzed
Net neutrality	222	31	74	327	24%
Lebanon	5,386	27	1,628	7,041	1%
Abortion	1,206	19	152	1,377	6%
Obesity	975	32	198	1,205	7%
Bankruptcy	95	9	196	300	23%
Halliburton	137	13	34	184	40%
Global warming	913	154	308	1,375	6%
HIV	856	14	447	1,317	5%
E. coli	40	0	29	69	87%
Crystal Meth	85	28	20	133	60%

Researchers analyzed these results and, after viewing the videos, coded them for duplications, source, and relevance. Discussions of the most relevant videos and findings appear below.

## CHALLENGES FOR PUBLIC-ISSUE VIDEO

Public-issue video is still hard to find on popular sites. It fights for attention, as a tiny minority of online video; it frequently arises out of anonymity or false identity; it may be labeled unhelpfully or inappropriately for a searcher's concerns; and it may appear on multiple sites.

### *Small Fish in a Vast Sea*

Public-issue videos almost never appear on the front pages of these sites, where mainstream media clips, parodies, pets, and bloopers abound; common categories offered by the sites themselves include animals, comedy, music, travel, and sports. While the sites differ somewhat in their content, audiences, and interfaces, they share this orientation towards entertainment and lifestyle topics.

Because YouTube offers the most videos and attracts the most viewers, it serves as the control site for this study. A comparison of the YouTube audience numbers for the most popular videos in each of the categories searched (Fig. 3) to the audience numbers for the site's most "viral" videos (Fig. 4) provides a striking contrast.

While the most popular video on YouTube has been seen by 150 times more viewers than the most popular video examined for this study, the two lists share some commonalities: humor, celebrities, popular culture touchstones, and music all resonate with viewers. These approaches to social issues thread throughout the videos examined for this study.

**FIG. 3: TOP-WATCHED VIDEO KEYWORD SEARCH RESULTS ON YOUTUBE**

	# of viewers	Name of poster	Description
Net neutrality	232,242	Acurtis	Public Knowledge explains net neutrality from a consumer's rights perspective*
Lebanon	97,409	Polperro	Clip from a London-based newscast labeled "Sky News"—Parliament member George Galloway aggressively criticizes Israel
Abortion	50,550	Sladdi	Outtake from "Da Ali G Show": Comedian Ali G. (Sasha Baron Cohen) interviews author of <i>Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus</i> , a lesbian couple planning to attend a pro-choice march, and pro-life protestors at the march
Obesity	13,744	Spookyklr	Outtake from "The Daily Show": Dave Gorman on obesity in America
Bankruptcy	5,899	Prize	"Big Book of Porn Rap": Promotional video by author of <i>The Big Book of Porn</i> , begging viewers to buy it and save him from bankruptcy
Halliburton	80,387	Bravenewfilms	"What if Halliburton's CEO came clean?": Parody of Halliburton ad
Global warming	92,852	stopglobalwarming	"Will Ferrell on George Bush on Global Warming": Impersonation of George W. Bush talking ineptly about global warming*
HIV	7,626	Tcrockss	PSA aimed at teen girls by Garbage frontwoman Shirley Manson promoting condom use
E. coli	25,180	DamnShow	"Popeye vs Ecoli by Roger and Waco": Remix*
Crystal Meth	24,611	Thigos	"Spongebong Hemppants": Animated parody of popular cartoon, with characters as drug users

\*posted multiple times within analyzed results; views number represents first posting.

**FIG. 4: MOST-WATCHED YOUTUBE VIDEOS OF ALL TIME\***

	# of viewers	Description
#1	36,326,477	“Evolution of Dance”: Judson Laipply performs a series of dance moves to popular hits from the last 5 decades.
#2	17,587,465	“Pokemon Theme Music Video”: Anthony Pedilla and Ian Hecox’s parody of popular cartoon character’s theme song.
#3	13,227,001	“Quick Change Artists on ‘America’s Got Talent’”: Two dancers sashay across the stage, rapidly changing costumes behind an array of mobile drapes.
#4	11,322,284	“guitar”: Performer plays Pachelbel’s “Canon” on guitar at his computer.
#5	11,258,123	“Hey clip”: Two Israeli women dance and lip synch to a Pixies song.
#6	10,324,703	“Real Life Simpsons Intro”: Actors recap the beloved intro to the animated show.
#7	8,995,901	“Urban Ninja”: Stunts by Xin Sarith Azuma Phan Wuku over soundtrack.
#8	8,752,958	“OK Go—Here It Goes Again”: Music video with choreographed routines on treadmills.
#9	8,192,166	“Ronaldinho: Touch of Gold”: Brazilian soccer player Ronaldinho tries out limited-edition Nikes (guerilla Nike ad?).
#10	8,088,510	“lion sleeps tonight”: Animated hippo sings while animated dog dances.

\* compiled by Adam of FatAdam.com as of Dec. 3, 2006.

### *Unclear Provenance*

Most of the videos (62.5 percent) were seemingly produced or posted by individuals; a number were ads and film trailers (4.5 percent). Some of the videos posted by individuals were clips tagged with the relevant keyword but not germane to the debates. The following chart represents the sources of videos posted across the three sites in the 250 cases (33 percent of the total) where those sources could be clearly identified and the videos directly addressed the public debates in question. These included many “independent media” organizations—filmmakers like Robert Greenwald, public broadcasting programs like “Democracy Now!” and television networks like LinkTV—and nonprofit organizations, such as Public Knowledge and Essential Information. They also included many quotes, presumably by individuals, of copyrighted mass-media material.

Sourcing videos on these platforms is often difficult. The sources tabulated in Fig. 5 were identifiable because of text, logos, or recognizable public figures that appeared within the clips themselves or text that appeared in the video descriptions, entered by those people or organizations who posted the video.

**FIG. 5: ORGANIZATION-CREATED VIDEOS ANALYZED BY SOURCE**

	MASS	ORG	EDU	GOV
Net neutrality	19	9	-	-
Lebanon	10	3	-	-
Abortion	5	5	2	-
Obesity	6	11	14	-
Bankruptcy	6	13	1	-
Halliburton	13	1	-	-
Global warming	19	8	6	-
HIV	3	24	13	1
E. coli	24*	1	3	-
Crystal Meth	5	15	2	8
TOTAL	110	90	41	9

**KEY:**

MASS: broadcast clips or quotes

ORG: nonprofits, churches, social issue campaigns

EDU: teachers or students, for teaching

GOV: local/state/federal government agencies

\* NOTE: mostly satires or appropriations of Popeye cartoons

Individuals often posted using an alias. Even when the video is posted by a recognized organization, early-adopter individuals within those organizations often made the videos and personally posted them. For example, Robert Davis, a housing case manager at CARE, Inc., a nonprofit AIDS care organization in Jesup, Georgia, personally posted CARE videos on YouTube. Identifying information for the video “HIV 101” appeared only in the text of the final screen. “Even though I am a housing case manager for the agency, I enjoy creating videos as a hobby,” Davis said. “I heard about YouTube on a TV newscast and decided to put the ‘HIV 101’ and the ‘HIV Myths’ videos we use for our agency on YouTube. We make those available locally for education and prevention in a DVD format. I added a tag on the end of each one with our Web site address on it.”

Similarly, acurtis, who posted the most popular video examined in the course of this study—an explanation of the net neutrality debate—turns out to be Alex Curtis, the government affairs manager at Public Knowledge, a D.C.-based nonprofit advocacy group “dedicated to fortifying and defending a vibrant information commons.” Although the organization is deeply invested in the net neutrality debate, Curtis did not post the video under the name of the organization. The video itself is untitled, and the identification of the video with the organization is only apparent to those viewers who take the time to watch the clip.

Many individual posters engaging with public issues are seemingly unassociated with organizations, either nonprofits or media. For example, Steve Anderson—who teaches at the University of Southern California’s Interactive Media Division of the School of Cinematic Arts—created a satirical video that turned up in the keyword search for “Halliburton.” The video mocks an ad by the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) that chides copyright violators by applying the same logic to the Bush administration’s actions in Iraq. “To put it bluntly, I think

there are more important things than protecting the intellectual property of media corporations from teenage file-sharing,” said Anderson. “The erosion of civil liberties in this country, government violations of privacy, and the war in Iraq are all much bigger issues. Every time I rent a DVD with the the MPAA’s stupid ‘You wouldn’t steal a handbag . . .’ video at the beginning, I spend 45 seconds getting very, very angry.”

Anderson’s video arrived at YouTube via a typically viral process. He posted the video on his blog in August 2006, where it was distributed via an RSS feed and then blogged by Mark Frauenfelder at the popular technology and culture blog, Boing Boing. Anderson estimates that the video was viewed a million times in the first month.

### *Unreliable Information*

The open video platforms as yet lack accountability, either through the traditional moderating role of mass media or the self-disciplining typical of Wikipedia. The results examined here included a number of videos presenting viewpoints that are not generally seen as credible. For instance, “Nick Nack Paddy Whacked” posted on MySpace Video, draws parallels between Bush, Osama bin Laden, Hitler, Arnold Schwarzenegger, and several others purportedly involved in 9/11 and its aftermath. One amateurish “Halliburton” video details the “New World Order” as it is supposedly envisioned by George Bush Sr., with lots of images jumbled together and links to 9/11 conspiracy sites at the end; another “New World Order” video, titled “66.6 KISS TITOR RIGHT BRAINOIL,” features a kaleidoscopic slideshow of images ranging from symbols on the dollar bill to 9/11 images to pictures of the KKK, as well as the occasional Halliburton image—concluding with a picture of Bush with a forked tongue. “Amazing Secret about Global Warming,” is posted by user Larrymcperson, who claims he is an investigative reporter fired for interviews with aliens who provide the solution to global warming. (The aliens’ answer: don’t buy gas-burning cars beyond 2007.) An interview by conservative African-American cable TV host Armstrong Williams on his show “The Right Side,” features Dr. Boyd E. Graves, who argues that AIDS was developed by the U.S. government. Another video explains how AIDS was prophesied in the Bible.

### *Inconsistent Tagging and Description*

There is no consensus or standard practice yet for tagging or categorizing of videos, and the value of ranking on the video sites is limited by the relatively small pool of people watching these videos. Sorting out the useful or relevant can be challenging.

Searches for this study frequently encountered off-topic or irrelevant work, much of it intended to be funny. The search term “E.coli”—selected because in September, U.S. consumers were warned in September that packaged spinach could be the cause of a rash of E. Coli-related deaths and illnesses—resulted primarily in satirical animations of Popeye’s adverse reaction to spinach, including projectile vomiting and diarrhea. On MySpace Video, the keyword search “abortion” yielded videos with descriptions such as: “Drink a beer and enjoy some unintentionally funny Christian Right-wing public access preachers screaming about Evolution, abortion, and sin. Keep drinking, it gets funnier that way.” “Obesity” was also a source of much humor and mockery:

YouTube results featured a fat horse, a fat bunny, a fat hamster, and two fat cats. MySpace results also featured a few fat cats, along with some humorous clips.

In searching for “bankruptcy”—because a new law that went into effect on October 2005 made it more difficult for consumers to file for personal bankruptcy—results were extremely spotty. Ads from bankruptcy lawyers, discussions of state and local bankruptcy, the bankruptcy of radio station Air America, and a series of commercials for Enron just prior to their declaration of bankruptcy appeared. Also found were lectures by Canadian bankruptcy experts and questions-and-answers on bankruptcy in the UK. There were also two episodes of “Charlie Rose” on the Enron bankruptcy investigation, an ad for an Illinois bankruptcy lawyer, and a commentary on the Owens-Corning bankruptcy case.

### *Duplication*

Several of the videos appeared on more than one of the video-sharing sites examined. Video-sharing sites also allow users to post multiple copies of the same video. Such multiple versions might reflect either the popularity of the video (prompting several users to post it) or the zeal of the original poster.

## **ORGANIZATIONAL USE**

Organizations clearly are seeking out these open video platforms. The keyword searches that produced the highest ratio of relevant results included “net neutrality,” “Lebanon,” “Halliburton,” “global warming,” “HIV,” and “crystal meth.” Each of these, except for “Lebanon” (which drew many individual posters documenting the war), were related to high-profile issues that have been widely reported on in the American press and are associated with concerted activist or media campaigns.

Opinions skewed heavily toward the liberal or left-wing opinion on topical subjects, perhaps reflecting the greater interest of progressive advocates in using new technological platforms. The Save the Internet coalition, which argues against a “two-tiered” Internet, found online video to be a critically important tool in a campaign that resulted in a million-signature petition to Congress. (See pages 10–11 .) In the “Halliburton” search, anti-war, anti-Bush, and anti-corporate videos dominated the results. (See See page 14 for details.) Greenwald’s Brave New Films saw one of its clips watched almost 100,000 times online.

The debate around global warming is supported by a number of environmental organizations such as Environment Defense and the Arbor Day Foundation. Public Service Announcements (PSAs) were well represented in these results. Celebrities were solicited to create films and TV entertainment related to the topic, including Will Ferrell, Moby, Keanu Reeves, Alanis Morissette, and the Blue Man Group. The bulk of these videos warned of the dangers of global warming.

On issues relating to health, most videos focused on health education. On “HIV,” PSAs and educational, public health videos were well represented in the search results. Unlike most other searches, this one yielded a broad international sampling—from South Africa, Canada, Sierra Leone, and Swaziland as well as the United States. Along with videos by individuals, a missionary



*A professor expresses his outrage online in the net neutrality debate.*

### Net Neutrality: Viral Activism

Video in the net neutrality policy debate showcases the character of online video, which emphasizes interaction, community, and grassroots media production—creating the conditions for both issues and specific pieces of media to go viral.

The public battle over net neutrality is both complex and polarized. Large Internet companies, such as Google, are pitted against large telephone and cable companies, such as Verizon and Comcast, in a struggle over regulation of Internet access. Both have enlisted consumers and public interest advocates, but most advocates side with the Internet companies. At stake is control over communications infrastructure, including broadband cable and telephone wires and emerging wireless technologies. Infrastructure providers want to continue to be able to control access to their networks, both by competitors and by users, in order to manage the flow of data efficiently (and of course, to their business advantage). Internet service providers and users want all comers to be able to use the network at will, without restriction. The advent of video, with its huge bandwidth demands, along with the emergence of business

models that promise even greater demands on infrastructure, have exacerbated this conflict.

The debate built in 2006, with proposed federal legislation. Digital video has been a key tool in the debate, according to Craig Aaron, the communications director for Free Press—a nonprofit media reform organization and one of the key organizers of the Save the Internet Coalition.

Video production took off virally. Public Knowledge's Alex Curtis posted the first, described above. Curtis' video began to gain viewers as more and more sources linked to it. New videos began to pour into the Save the Internet site, from "Daily Show" clips to music videos, from interviews conducted in virtual gaming environments to ads by advocacy groups like MoveOn (a popular one featured singer Moby), from satirical commentaries from Internet celebrities like "Ask a Ninja" to earnest discussions by private citizens, from videos of constituents delivering petitions to their Congresspeople to a commentary by Sen. Ted Kennedy (D, Mass.) explaining his views on net neutrality.

"The quality of some of the videos was one of the most unexpected things," said Aaron, "but what was *most* unexpected was the sheer volume; at one point, we were getting 10 a day. . . . It was a reason for users to come back to the site and get updates. It was really remarkable, and we didn't pay a penny for those videos."

In response, lobbyists from the telecommunications companies developed their own videos, buying broadcast airtime and Web space as well as posting them online. One such ad, the "What is Net Neutrality?" animated video, was sponsored by the telecom and cable industry-backed site NetCompetition.org. It frames the debate in terms of "new regulations," denigrating the "socialized Internet," and promoting competition. It calls net neutrality "corporate welfare for dot-com billionaires" and "special interest" legislation "bankrolled by the eCommerce giants," accusing companies like Microsoft and eBay of shifting costs to consumers. "The best way to guard a free

and open Internet is free and open competition,” it concludes. The video—which mocked the visual conventions of amateur animations—generated a wave of backlash from the pro-net neutrality forces. As one of the few pro-telco ads in the first two pages of search results, the video proved moderately popular on YouTube, attracting 7,001 viewers by mid-October.

Individuals apparently felt a powerful connection to the issue, because it has the potential to affect their own video postings. Richard Hall posted a video on YouTube in which he reads and comments on a form letter he’d received from Rep. Joann Emerson (R-Mo.) about why she opposed proposed legislation. He provides background and interpretations of Emerson’s letter, then sends users to [SavetheInternet.com](#), among other advocacy sites, and to his own net neutrality page on his vlog site.

Hall, a professor of information science and technology at the University of Missouri, explained that he connects with the idea of vlogging and other user-created media “on an emotional level—with such a very low barrier to entry, it gave people a chance to say anything they wanted. I thought philosophically it could really be a significant and profound boost to free speech in general.” His wife encouraged him to write the letter to Emerson, and he says that the representative’s response “was so bogus—I had to do something.” After making the video, he posted it on his own site, and then when he offered it to the Save the Internet coalition, they suggested that he post it to YouTube so that they could link to it easily. He also posted it to [Blip.tv](#), a video-sharing site favored by vloggers.

Hall’s involvement was only one example of a campaign that used traditional organizing along with viral video and social networking sites to garner a million-signature petition to Congress to support net neutrality and to help defeat a bill backed by Sen. Ted Stevens that would have shot down net neutrality provisions—passing the decision on to a newly Democratic Congress. In December, AT&T

filed a “letter of commitment” with the FCC for its proposed merger with BellSouth that contained a promise to observe net neutrality principles for at least 24 months—an unprecedented concession from a company that had aggressively lobbied against net neutrality legislation. The coalition celebrated these wins and launched a more aggressive campaign for a “broadband bill of rights,” in mid-January at the National Conference for Media Reform, throwing a party featuring all of the videos related to the campaign. A compilation video titled “Save the Internet!” is now available on YouTube. “Before this campaign, I was a pretty big skeptic of the ‘netroots’ or the YouTube world to move anything—to actually affect policy,” said Aaron. “Now I’m a total believer.”

The process is much different from traditional, top-down strategic messaging. “It’s not like we were distributing talking points on YouTube,” he said. “People came up with their own analogies and descriptions and, by and large, came up with more interesting and creative ways to talk about the issue. This has totally changed the way we think about campaigns.”



*Environment Defense's online PSAs on global warming were part of a multi-platform campaign*

organization, and various nonprofits, a clip from “General Hospital” features a doctor telling one of the characters that she’s HIV-positive.

The “abortion” search reflected the highly contentious nature of public debate, in pro-life and pro-choice videos produced by individuals, churches, and campaigns. Major organizations associated with the abortion debate—such as Operation Rescue and NARAL—were not, however, represented, at least with this keyword.

### ***Public Service Announcements as Online Video***

PSAs were the most popular format for nonprofit video online. Humor, guilt, music, melodrama, scare tactics, celebrity endorsement, and personal narratives were all tactics to attract attention. Interactivity is the added value of online video; viewers are invited to visit related Web sites and are able to comment directly on the videos while on the video-sharing sites.

The Ad Council—an industry organization that works with both ad agencies and media outlets to produce and place PSAs in conjunction with nonprofits, government agencies, and advocacy campaigns—places PSAs on YouTube in order to increase exposure. A number of videos placed by the Ad Council appeared in the searches for “global warming” and “obesity,” such as those associated with the Small Step campaign.

“It’s just another avenue for us to get messaging out there,” said Barbara Shimaitis, a senior vice president at the Ad Council. The response has been “pretty good if the issue is in the news,” with views up into “the 5 digits—10,000 more eyeballs that will have seen it.” Viewers contact the Ad Council and their partner organizations for information about the issues discussed in the PSAs, comment on both the YouTube site and the Ad Council site, and visit dedicated sites related to the campaigns. The Ad Council is working on a series of interactive video PSAs, which will allow users to work through a series of options or questions in order to learn more about an issue.

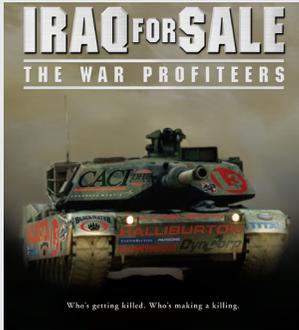
A Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation case study of one of the Ad Council campaigns demonstrates how interactivity and multi-platform campaigns can work together to engage a large number of viewers. Working with AOL, the Ad Council pushed out a series of ads related to the Fight Mannequinism campaign—aimed at increasing civic involvement and voting among 18–24-year-olds—to millions of viewers. The campaign included TV, radio, print, online, and outdoor PSAs, and the ads and a related site encouraged viewers to submit mini-films and sign up for mobile phone alerts. AOL worked with the Ad Council to develop “rich media” ads that included streaming video. Over a six-week period, a total of 153.5 million impressions were served across the AOL campaign, which extended beyond the site’s home page to its AIM buddy list as well as “passion points”—portions of the AOL site dedicated to specific topics, such as music and gaming.

On a smaller scale, Robert Davis from CARE, Inc., got a positive response to his PSAs on YouTube. Despite the obstacles, online video on public issues has demonstrated success. Davis reports his organization pleased that within five months “HIV 101” was viewed 4,824 times and “HIV Myths” was viewed 5,860 times. “We have gotten e-mail requests from places like Turkey, Malta, and a health care provider for the U.S. Navy to use the videos. It has been interesting to see a little nonprofit agency in Jesup, Georgia, helping people around the world through the Web,” he said. “I have added a downloadable link to our Web site for these resources because of such requests. They are a higher resolution than what is on YouTube. . . . Part of the vision now is to see if we can receive donations through our Web site. We are planning on having some of our HIV positive clients do video interviews to tell their story/journey and how our agency has helped them.”

PSAs exhibited a wide range of approaches. One innovative PSA by Comma Music, sponsored by the Chicago Crystal Meth Task Force, was particularly popular. In it, a single dancer creates a routine out of the tics of the crystal meth user, leading to his eventual shattering; the video points viewers to an associated URL: [crystalbreaks.org](http://crystalbreaks.org). Posted twice within the first two pages of YouTube results, the video had been watched a combined 11,818 times by mid-October 2006 and was up to 21,213 views by early January of 2007.

Several other PSAs about crystal meth produced in association with the Office of National Drug Control Policy/Partnership for a Drug-Free America also performed well, including one that features a girl obsessively cleaning with a peppy satirical song about meth in the background (4,098 views as of mid-October), another showing a Barbie doll dissolving in acid to simulate the effects of the drug (4,800 views as of mid-October), and a third featuring a girl talking nervously while her meth-related sores are revealed (4,933 views as of mid-October). A similar video offered up by the Alberta Alcohol and Drug Abuse Commission satirizes pharmaceutical ads, offering a visual of a couple fighting while a mock-serious voice intones a set of side-effects of meth use (6,807 views as of mid-October).

Personal address and celebrity appearances were also successful PSA strategies. A PSA by Garbage frontwoman Shirley Manson encouraging teen girls to wear condoms—part of a now-defunct site called [whitebedroom.com](http://whitebedroom.com)—was viewed 7,626 times as of mid-October and 12,085 times by early January. A video from the site [TransHouston.com](http://TransHouston.com) featuring male-to-female and female-to-male



*Brave News Films made online mini-movies, to promote both its film and message.*

### Halliburton: Critiques and Lampoons

Videos that were returned as a result of a search on “Halliburton” were largely but not completely critical of the company as a war profiteer and were produced by individuals, organizations, and mass media outlets.

#### *Individuals*

A four-part “mockumentary” was posted by user stevejst. Titled “Go Halliburton Go,” it features footage of Iraq war victims, snippets from mainstream and progressive reporting on Halliburton, and corporate ads, with commentary and animated screens, on-the-street interviews in Dallas, and more. Clips include Bush flipping off the camera and a bystander in New Orleans telling Cheney to “go fuck himself.”

Several performance and protest songs appeared, including a spoken-word performance by a poet named DemocracyCatalyst.

#### *Organizations*

Several clips offered or discussed footage shot by Preston Wheeler, a truck driver who was working for KBR, a Halliburton subsidiary. One YouTube clip, sardonically labeled as a training video for Halliburton employees, features an inside-the-vehicle view of a driver being shot at and cursing “I’m fixin’ to get killed, goddammit”—it is labeled “Brought to you by Military.com.” Later, the same clip appears as “Halliburton ambush,” and turns out to be footage that Wheeler shot on the job. Wheeler, who was eventually fired by Halliburton because of the injuries sustained on the job, is interviewed about his experience in an ABC News clip available on Google Video. As it turns out,

the video was first released by Halliburton Watch, a project of two nonprofits: Essential Information and the Center for Corporate Policy.

A conservative protest video posted by the D.C. chapter of FreeRepublic.com talks back to CodePink protesters. Images from the conservative protest are streamed over a score of the song “God Bless the USA” and other patriotic songs. Posted description includes: “The DC Chapter of FreeRepublic.com says that a military hospital is not an appropriate venue to voice political objections to the war. Our soldiers do not make policy, and they deserve to have a safe and peaceful place to heal away from the psychological warfare of heartless leftists.”

#### *Media*

A clip from the progressive radio/television show “Democracy Now!” reports on a prank by a group called the YesMen: Posing as Halliburton representatives, the YesMen presented at an insurance conference called “Catastrophic Loss.” At the podium, the speaker extols the benefits of natural disasters and introduces a new technology: the “Survivaball,” an absurd-looking protective suit supposedly designed to save executives from global warming.

A report from PBS’s NOW on the army ending its exclusive contract with Halliburton is available for purchase for \$1.99.

A number of the clips were related to *Iraq for Sale* and posted by user bravenewfilms; MySpace user Iraq for Sale also posted an interview by MSNBC’s Keith Olbermann with Robert Greenwald. Greenwald’s production company, Brave New Films, has created short videos specifically for YouTube and MySpace, including bonus film footage, parodies, clips from mainstream coverage, and trailers. Their most successful effort was “What if Halliburton’s CEO came clean?” a satirical ad which appropriates an ad featuring Halliburton CEO David Lasar, replacing the dialogue and adding new frames at the end. The clip was viewed almost 100,000 times in 2006.

Sarah Feely, Brave New Film’s vice president of production, said that online videos need either to refer to familiar work such as “The Daily Show” or else need to be extremely well told to work in a two-to-six-minute format. “We need to get more disciplined about how we tell our stories,” Feely said.

transsexuals talking about their experiences with safe sex falls somewhere between a PSA and an educational film; it had been viewed 6,279 times as of mid-October and 9,420 times as of early January. A PSA about HIV featuring the cast of the popular TV show “Degrassi” had been viewed 2,036 times in mid-October and 3,336 times by early January, while a longer version of the same commercial posted later had attracted 5,299 viewers by early January.

### *Interactivity is Key*

Online videos on public issues reflect the larger media trend toward participatory media and show its promise for public engagement. Mashups, critiques, comments, rankings, and video responses show the wide range of interaction options. For instance, in the “net neutrality” videos, The Fathead, a self-proclaimed Republican, responds to a video posted by another user, jasonthenerd. He asserts that a cable-telco–controlled Internet would harm current businesses like YouTube because they wouldn’t be able to afford new fees and maintain their current architecture. He urges other viewers to do their own research and “push for what they think is right.” In the “abortion” videos, several individuals weighed in on the topic with vlogger-style commentaries: user JoeBobOneHalf is pro-choice with qualms; tommy34543 is pro-life, reciting biblical verses regarding the start of life; user warren25 responded in turn to this video questioning various Christian beliefs. One of the Greenwald clips also features the filmmaker responding to Halliburton’s response to the film.

People often quote other popular culture to make their own. Stochasticprocess offers a headshot of Sen. Ted Stevens (R, Alaska) and his uninformed comments about the Internet as a “series of tubes,” overlaid with facts about his position in the Congress. A satirical song about net neutrality set to the tune of “This Land is My Land” is accompanied by animated video footage from the Elephant’s Dream open-video project, along with interstitial text commentaries. A video mashup overlays comments from progressive journalist Greg Palast on top of a song with the lyrics “Do not fight for a dying machine; it is not worth your life,” as well as war footage.

At a presentation related to the Kaiser Foundation’s forum on their PSA case studies, Joseph Jaffe, president of Jaffe, LLC, a marketing consulting firm, commented on the new media environment. “Maybe you can create a conversation; maybe you can enhance a conversation,” said Jaffe. “Maybe the best-case scenario is just to be a credible part of the conversation. That’s the many-to-many model.”

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Media producers, advocates, nonprofits, educators, and government agencies have a wealth of opportunities to engage members of the public around social issues on commercial video-sharing platforms. The early experiments documented here show both tangible successes and an open field for experiment.

However, many questions and challenges remain as public media producers navigate these noisy and commercialized media spaces. Media producers need clearer guidelines around copyright issues, a deeper understanding of tagging and indexing systems used on these sites, and support in both finding funding for video production and pursuing noncommercial alternatives for hosting, streaming, and sharing videos.

Deeper structural and policy questions affect the future of public media in an open environment. These include the question of who controls the infrastructure, and how; exercise of copyright in a digital environment and sampling culture; and questions of ownership and control over tomorrow's media.

At the same time, vigorous experiments in public media make clear the value of open networked environments for the health of democratic discourse. Those organizations and individuals who want to further seize opportunities to create public conversations using the capacities of social media, including online video and social networking, can take steps now:

- Label work that appears online as your own, so that people can network with you.
- Experiment with new spaces, and track the results.
- Find partners and interlocutors; look for conversations, not to deliver messages.
- Develop with like-minded groups a shared strategy for promotion and tagging of videos. Use as many relevant keywords as possible in the sites' tag and description fields. Develop a shared taxonomy of tags—known online as a “collabulary”—among a certain set of advocacy groups and media producers and across a range of community-driven sites, such as YouTube, MySpace (a social networking site), del.i.cious (a bookmark-sharing site), Flickr (a photo-sharing site), and Digg (a site for sharing online articles).
- Use the broad popularity of corporate sites like YouTube, MySpace, and Google Video to bring new viewers into nonprofit networks and projects, such as those documented in this report's appendix.
- Actively engage with viewers by providing points of interaction, such as e-mail addresses, related sites, polls, petitions, and chances for user-generated content production.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> According to Nielsen/Netratings, these three were the top online video entertainment sites in August based on unique visitors, with YouTube attracting 34.1 million visitors, MySpace Video 17.9 million visitors, and Google Video 13.5 million visitors.

<sup>2</sup> According to ComScore Networks, traffic to YouTube grew nearly 2500 percent from August 2005 to August 2006, to 72 million visitors.

<sup>3</sup> Between July 23 and August 23, 2006, 386 articles in major newspapers indexed by Lexis-Nexis referenced YouTube—significantly more than any other video search site. Between August 23 and September 23, another 191 articles mentioning the site had been published. GoogleVideo—a popular beta service that was officially added to the search engine’s main page in late August—came in at a distant second to YouTube in terms of generating buzz in mainstream newspapers, appearing in 36 articles indexed by Lexis-Nexis between late July and late August.

<sup>4</sup> These searches were all entered in quote marks in keeping with standard search practices to eliminate cross-searching on terms with more than one word associated with them.

<sup>5</sup> These keywords were selected in order to function cleanly as search terms, referencing specific aspects of current issues.

<sup>6</sup> According to Internet usability expert Jakob Nielsen, “Users almost never look beyond the second page of search results,” a finding he initially noted in a May 13, 2001, “Alertbox” column on his site, useit.com, and affirmed again in another “Alertbox” column on May 9, 2005.

<sup>7</sup> While all keyword searches results were conducted in mid-October, the results were saved in PDF format to allow for subsequent analysis.

<sup>8</sup> All of these video hosting/sharing sites offer community tools that allow users to rank and share videos and tagging tools that harness user energy to describe and categorize videos. However, the presentation of search results, search options, rankings, community tools, and categorization information differed significantly from site to site. While YouTube and MySpace Video are geared towards generating community and promoting video sharing, Google Video is geared toward allowing contributors to post and charge for a wider variety and duration of videos. YouTube offered the most information about the videos on the initial search page, while researchers had to dig into the results in the other two sites to find out more about viewers, sources, and descriptions.

<sup>9</sup> “New Media and the Future of Public Service Advertising” (<http://www.kff.org/entmedia/entmedia032206pkg.cfm>).

## APPENDIX: PUBLIC DIGITAL VIDEO PROJECTS

### VIDEO-SHARING SITES

#### **Cruxy**

<https://www.cruxy.com/home>

Allows independent artists to sell or promote audio, video, and art/images in open formats with low overhead and simple contract arrangements.

#### **Democracy Player**

<http://www.getdemocracy.com>

Users can download the open source Democracy Player from the Participatory Culture Foundation, a nonprofit organization. The player lets you subscribe to RSS channels, download in the background via BitTorrent, and view most video formats in full-screen resolution. The companion site, Video Bomb, offers clips.

#### **Ourmedia**

<http://www.ourmedia.org>

"The global home for grassroots media," this is an open-source, all-volunteer, not-for-profit site that allows users to upload videos, photo, and audio for free; users are encouraged to post content with a Creative Commons license.

### FOCUSED VIDEO PROJECTS

#### **Capitol Hill Broadcasting Network**

<http://www.capitolhillbroadcastingnetwork.com>

"Capitol Hill Broadcasting Network (CHBN) is a powerful, interactive, internet broadcasting platform created specifically for those with vested interests in politics and government affairs. CHBN empowers its members with user-friendly, internet video technology tools to communicate with targeted audiences and the general public."

#### **Contagious Festival**

<http://cf.huffingtonpost.com>

Hosted by the Huffington Post, this monthly contest asks users to upload their viral political videos and offers a \$2,500 prize for the entry that gets the most traffic.

#### **Crooks and Liars**

[www.crooksandliars.com](http://www.crooksandliars.com)

A fast-moving progressive vlog of video clips and related commentary.

#### **Current TV—"Seeds of Tolerance" contest**

<http://www.currenttv.com/make/vc2/sot>

Video contest rewarding videos about issues of intolerance.

#### **Diggnation**

[www.revision3.com/diggnation](http://www.revision3.com/diggnation)

Kevin Rose and Alex Albrecht host this weekly show exploring the stories deemed most interesting by users of digg.com, a site that allows participants to flag and rank articles from around the Web.

#### **Echo chamber project**

<http://www.echochamberproject.com/about>

An open-source video project about "how the television news media became an uncritical echo chamber to the Executive Branch leading up to the war in Iraq."

#### **Four Docs**

<http://www.channel4.com/fourdocs>

The UK's Channel 4 hosts this showcase of four-minute documentaries from around the world; viewers are invited to submit their own, and editors at Channel 4 are reviewing the films for possible budding filmmaking stars.

#### **FSTV featured videos**

[http://www.freespeech.org/fscm2/genx.php?name=featured\\_videos](http://www.freespeech.org/fscm2/genx.php?name=featured_videos)

Videos from this publicly supported, independent, nonprofit TV channel, which "fuels the movement for progressive social, economic and political transformation."

**Global Voices online: Human rights video hub pilot**

<http://globalvoicesonline.org/-/human-rights-video>

Human rights videos from around the world, curated by WITNESS.

**Independent Media Centers**

<http://www.indymedia.org/en/index.shtml>

This collective of independent media centers around the globe encourages grassroots journalism, describing itself as “a democratic media outlet for the creation of radical, accurate, and passionate tellings of truth.” Contributors post video, as well as audio, text, and photos.

**Listen Up!**

<http://www.listenup.org/screeningroom>

A youth media network that features the work of young video producers and provides tools for connecting them to nonprofit allies.

**MediaStorm**

<http://mediastorm.org>

“MediaStorm’s online publication is an eclectic showcase for state-of-the-art multimedia storytelling with ongoing updates. Our goal is to tell the story of today’s world in a truly in-depth manner, giving a voice to not only the narrators but also the subjects. Contributors include a diverse range of photographers, filmmakers, radio reporters, animators, writers, interactive designers and multimedia producers who share exceptional storytelling capabilities.”

**Media that Matters Film Festival**

<http://www.mediathatmattersfest.org>

A showcase for short films on social issues; a new collection of 16 films is presented each June. The site is a project of Arts Engine, Inc., a nonprofit predicated on “the belief that exemplary visual storytelling on social issues can make change.”

**Mosaic**

<http://www.worldlinktv.org/mosaic/streamsArchive>

LinkTV’s compilation of Middle East news reports; comes with a player that allows other sites to syndicate the program.

**New America Media—Netvision**

[http://news.newamericamedia.org/news/view\\_category.html?category\\_id=552](http://news.newamericamedia.org/news/view_category.html?category_id=552)

Video reporting and cultural productions from youth and ethnic media projects.

**One World TV**

<http://tv.oneworld.net>

“OneWorldTV is an open platform for sharing videos on issues affecting people around the world. Established in 1991, OneWorldTV forms part of OneWorld.net—a network of over 1200 partner organisations harnessing the Internet to promote human rights and sustainable development. The site is open to anyone to upload videos that address issues of human rights and sustainable development.”

**Open Media Network**

<http://www.omn.org>

“Media that matters.” Lets users download educational and public-service programs via a viewer, including selected content from public television and radio.

**The People Choose 2006**

<http://www.thepeoplechoose2006.org/site/video>

“The mission of The People Choose 2006 is to ‘democratize’ the 2006 midterm Congressional and Senate elections—to let American citizens help shape the nation’s election coverage and give them access to factual information about elections that includes the priorities of voters. The People Choose 2006 will enable anyone anywhere to upload videos and information about the campaigns in their Congressional district or state to a dynamic, map-based index open to the public. The videos may be included in programs broadcast nationwide on Link TV.”

**PoliticsTV**

<http://www.politicstv.com>

Original programming and news coverage of political events in D.C. and around the country—offers an emphasis on progressive bloggers as commentators.

**The Real News**

<http://www.iwtnews.com>

Launching now in beta, this will be the flagship show of the Independent World Television project, a nonprofit 24/7 video news service on the Internet.

**subMedia**

[www.submedia.tv/index.html](http://www.submedia.tv/index.html)

From *Wired*: “Culture-jamming is the agenda behind this broadside of mashed-up news.”

**The Young Turks**

<http://www.theyoungturks.com>

Public affairs programming with an attitude: Cenk Uygur, Ben Mankiewicz, and Jill Pike offer up talk, interviews, and political and cultural commentary with a progressive slant and have been broadcasting their radio program as an Internet-based television show for more than a year.

**Viral Video Chart: News**

<http://www.viralvideochart.com/more?category=news>

Tracks the most-watched news-related videos on YouTube, Google Video, and MySpace.

**CAMPAIGNS AND NONPROFITS USING VIDEO IN INTERESTING WAYS****7 Days@ Minimum Wage**

<http://sevendaysatminimumwage.org>

A vlog sponsored by the AFL-CIO featuring Rosanne Barr and the stories of seven real Americans surviving on minimum wage.

**Campaign for America’s Future**

- <http://home.ourfuture.org/hard-hitting-campaigns.html>—video ads (featuring real stories from supporters) to expose Washington pay-to-play politicians.
- <http://www.nodonuthole.com>— a public video contest to raise awareness for the need to eliminate the Part D Rx drug plan donut hole.
- <http://secure.ourfuture.org/whatisaprogressive>—a video and public contest to build awareness of what it means to be a progressive and what progressive values are all about.

**Congress in 30 Seconds**

<http://www.congressin30seconds.com>

A contest sponsored by the Sunlight Foundation, this allowed users to create mock political ads by mixing and matching selected clips, audio, and text.

**Creative Commons video fundraiser**

<http://creativecommons.org/support/videos>

Using the video-sharing site Revver, Creative Commons videos are tagged with ads; ad revenue supports the CC project.

**Marketplace of Ideas**

<http://www.drummajorinstitute.org/events/marketplaceofideas.php>

A New-York based think tank, the Drum Major Institute is posting videos and audio of presentations by fellows and guests participating in their “Marketplace of Ideas” series.

**One**

<http://www.one.org/gvideo>

Videos about and for the One campaign to eliminate global poverty.

**One America Committee**

[blog.oneamericacommittee.com/videoblog](http://blog.oneamericacommittee.com/videoblog)

John Edwards’s official vlog: Send him a question on video and he’ll post a video reply.

**Rock the Vote**

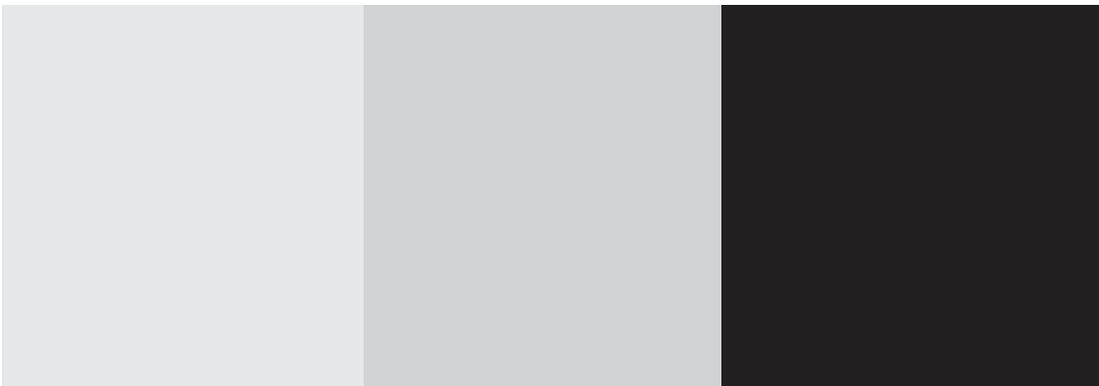
<http://uncutvideo.aol.com/events/Rock-the-Vote>

Citizen media related to “rocking the vote,” posted to a video-sharing site.

**Save the Internet**

<http://www.savetheinternet.com/=videos>

User-created videos addressing the issue of net neutrality.





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