

New Politics Institute

A THINK TANK FOR POLITICS

—www.NewPolitics.net—



VIRAL VIDEO IN POLITICS

CASE STUDIES ON CREATING COMPELLING VIDEO

RE-IMAGINING VIDEO SERIES

By Julie Bergman Sender

January 9, 2007

NPI San Francisco
660 York St • Suite 213 • San Francisco, CA 94111
P: (415) 358-6547 • F: (415) 358-6547

NPI Washington DC
901 15th Street NW • Suite 705 • Washington, DC 20006
P: (202) 544-9200 • F: (202) 547-2929

Contributions or gifts to the NDN Political Fund are not tax deductible
Paid for by the NDN Political Fund

Preface

In the 1964 presidential election, an experimental one-minute television ad that only aired once changed politics forever. That ad was “Daisy” and it featured a little girl in a field plucking the petals off a daisy and counting, before her voice morphed into the voice of a man in a countdown that ended with the explosion of a nuclear bomb and the tagline: “Vote for President Johnson, the stakes are too high for you to stay home.”

Call it “the mushroom cloud moment” for those with any foresight in politics. In its one airing “Daisy” showed the emotional power of television and how it could be effectively harnessed for politics. All politics adapted to the thirty-second television commercial, and television advertising defined how politics was played for the next forty years.

In the recent 2006 midterm elections we had our own political “ah-ha” moment that came via the conduit of YouTube and other viral video outlets. Call it “the macaca moment.” It came in the form of a jittery digital video of Republican Senator George Allen on the campaign trail talking directly into a camera held by SR Sidarth, a young Indian-American campaign worker for Allen’s opponent. In this video Allen taunted Sidarth, welcoming him to the “real America,” and calling him “macaca,” an offensive term to many.

That one gaffe ricocheted around the internet, and was picked up in the mainstream media, tripping up Allen’s previously high-flying campaign, contributing to his eventual defeat. But more importantly, “the macaca moment” showed this nascent viral video medium’s game-changing impact. Emotionally powerful, visually complex video has finally arrived on the internet – and it’s moving fast. Those in politics will need to hustle to keep up with it.

This urgency is particularly important today, because the forty-year reign of broadcast and cable television thirty-second ads is coming to a close. Among other things, the spread of digital video recorders (DVRs) like TiVo allows an increasing chunk of Americans to skip ads altogether. By the 2008 election roughly one-third of all American households will have DVRs, and the percentage of likely voters with them will be even higher.

Understanding video also requires understanding how people are accessing video. NPI Fellow Tim Chambers tells us that “by the 2008 election, more than 90 percent of the mobile phones used in the U.S. will be internet-enabled...by 2011, 24 million U.S. cellular subscribers and customers will be paying for some form of TV/video content and services on their mobile devices.” At that point mobile video services combined would have more than 3 million *more users* than the largest cable operator in the U.S. does today.

The New Politics Institute is committed to helping progressives understand this dramatic shift in the media landscape caused by, among other things, the emergence of viral video, and devise new political strategies that take advantage of it. This report is the first of a series of them in the coming year that will keep abreast of this rapidly changing space. We’re calling the series “Re-imagining Video.”

Our first guide to this new world of video on the internet is Julie Bergman Sender, a longtime Hollywood film producer and progressive activist, who is also NPI’s most recent new fellow. Julie has been

innovating in the viral video space since the run-up to the 2004 election. She was one of the key creators behind actor Will Ferrell's now famous 2004 viral video impersonation of George Bush. She was also the producer of one of the most effective viral videos of the 2006 election, with Hollywood female stars coyly talking about their first time – voting.

In this piece, Julie talks about her professional experiences in using the best practices of Hollywood and a focus on compelling narrative to create political video for viral distribution on the internet and beyond. Her creative and practical insight should serve as a roadmap to all progressive groups and organizations as they begin to take advantage of this powerful new communications tool.

The next few years will be much like the aftermath of that 1964 media bombshell. Let the new thinking begin.

Peter Leyden

Director of the New Politics Institute



Julie Bergman Sender has spent almost two decades of work in film, producing more than 10 films. She began her career in 1982 as a film Executive at Warner Brothers. She then spent many years working as an executive and motion picture producer for director Sydney Pollack's Mirage Enterprises. She then partnered with Jodie Foster in the formation of Foster's Egg Pictures. Her films include "Washington Square," starring Jennifer Jason Leigh; "G.I. Jane," starring Demi Moore; and "Six Days,

Seven Nights," starring Harrison Ford.

Ms. Bergman Sender has been a longtime political activist, focusing on progressive issues. She was a member of the Hollywood Women's Political Committee, a PAC that was committed to raising money for progressive candidates. She was the President of CARAL, the Los Angeles based chapter of NARAL, and today sits on the board of the Southern California ACLU Foundation, among others. She is also a member of The Media Consortium, a new organization made up of many of the country's most prominent independent print, television and online journalists and media makers.

Currently, Ms. Bergman Sender and her husband Stuart Sender, an Academy Award-nominated documentary filmmaker, and two other partners run their own media consulting and production firm, The Cause Company. The Cause is based in Los Angeles and specializes in working with non-profits and select corporate clients in helping them to market their causes and brand themselves in innovative ways. Over the course of the 2004 election cycle, The Cause and Balcony Films, its production arm, produced media for clients that included ACT (America Coming Together), the Communications Workers of America, Planned Parenthood, Brett Wagner for Congress, the Sierra Club, The Apollo Alliance, and Mother Jones Magazine, among others. You can see some of the recent work of Balcony films by going to www.balconyfilms.com.

Introduction

“So Who’s in control now?...Anyone with a camera.”

—Mark McKinnon, chief media advisor to George W. Bush in the 2000 and 2004 campaigns

Much attention has been focused on the explosion of video on the web and the excitement around this new media space. Big media companies and advertisers have quickly come to understand the power and influence of online social networks that can move online video. The impact is not just being felt in the commercial media space, but in politics. A recent AP/AOL online poll found that 43 percent of likely voters get political news from the internet – placing digital video increasingly at the center of every campaign, every election.

The 2006 political cycle was filled with examples of the power of this online video revolution. Take the example of Michael J. Fox’s political ad in favor of candidates supporting stem cell research, where he is shown visibly shaking from the effects of Parkinson’s disease. Fox’s ad probably would not have traveled around the internet and over the national airwaves the way that it did if Rush Limbaugh’s cruel attacks on the authenticity of Fox had not been caught on video and uploaded to YouTube. There was something especially powerful about actually watching Limbaugh’s grotesque and heartless flailing in addition to hearing his verbal assault. Additionally, many now credit high YouTube viewership of the Michael J. Fox ad and Limbaugh’s response, and the airings of both videos on mainstream television around the country, for nationalizing the stem cell issue and helping create the victory in the Missouri Senate race that the Democrats needed to take control of the Senate.

The camera can bare witness, capture truth, and tell a story in ways that a written version of the story just can’t. Today it’s not just the written word of a journalist or a blogger that can get these everyday stories out, but powerful visual documentation. Video on the internet is a new and increasingly powerful tool, still young and evolving.

While a great deal has been written about the explosion of viral video on the web, very little has been written about how to create great content that gets virally distributed. The tools for creating the content are potentially available to all progressives, and include iMovie packaged standard on all Macs, software for creating your own flash animation, downloadable effects packages, etc. Yet knowing how to harness these tools still calls for an understanding of storytelling and how to create narrative in a visual medium. Fluency in the technology does not always translate into mastery of the medium.

Even less has been written about how progressive organizations and campaigns can create and use video content to expand the reach of their political messages. There are screens everywhere – in our homes, in our hands, even at the car wash. And figuring out how to capture the audience on all of these should be a big part of future political communications strategies. No matter what size the screen, no matter how vast the outreach capabilities through the internet, the content is still the engine that drives viral hits. And just because everyone has access to the tools doesn’t mean that there isn’t some technique, and often professional execution behind the stuff that really works.

Good viral video begins with a *good story*. There are many points of entry when trying to gain people's attention so that you have the opportunity to engage them, keep an ongoing relationship, and move them to action. You need to find a compelling way to hook them and "brand" the effort – much the same way that large corporations think about how to engage consumers and create a lasting relationship with them.

Trying to get something to "go viral" rests on one's ability to be both authentic to the mission while being inventive enough to capture people's imaginations in such a way that they feel compelled to share the video with others – immediately – and that they are also suitably impressed with the humor or the pathos of the piece that they want to dig deeper and learn about the organization or campaign that has created it.

This is why viral content is a visceral experience, not an intellectual one. People often mistake viral video for a purely informational tool, when it is more accurate to describe it as a more complex cultural tool, with informational aspects. This doesn't mean that there isn't room for important ideas to be part of the story; it means that you must be tactical about wanting to capture people, in order to show them an introduction to a longer and more meaningful dialogue.

Before there was YouTube, MySpace, and whatever the next bottom-up video phenomenon will be, we saw a first generation of online politics pave the way for the current one. It may seem like ancient history, but the 2004 presidential election was a launching pad for internet video and social networking. Over the past few years, I have spent a lot of time working in this new media space, producing films, commercials and political ads for the web, distributing them online and figuring out how to engage the larger popular culture. The bulk of my work has been in finding ways to take progressive ideas and strive to engage constituencies or "the audience" in all the places and through all the mediums where they can be found. Despite the problems with America's current "infotainment" model, we must work to find effective ways to communicate our values and ideas to a broader audience using the existing and evolving media landscape, the good and the bad.

This paper will shed some light on the process behind conceiving, executing and distributing viral video content in order to expand the horizon of how progressive politicians communicate with our known constituencies, and how this medium can even be helpful in cultivating constituencies beyond the base. What follows are case studies of previous examples of political viral video that worked. They are based on my own professional work, not because I think it is better than the work of others, but because so much of creating content is about process, and I feel more comfortable sharing my process rather than trying to climb into someone else's head and presume to deconstruct hers.

The hope is to set forth some working models of what has worked professionally, so that other professionals and growing numbers of amateurs can use these insights as we all work toward the next phase of experimentation and innovation.


“WHITE HOUSE WEST”

Starring Will Ferrell as George W. Bush

By America Coming Together

[Video Available Here: <http://balconyfilms.com/ferrell.htm>]

America Coming Together was a massive voter mobilization project launched in 2003 as a 527 partisan organization to mobilize voters in the 17 battleground states. Steve Rosenthal, the former AFL-CIO

<p>White House West</p> <p>Starring: Will Ferrell</p> <p>Written and Directed by: Adam McKay, former head writer for <i>Saturday Night Live</i>)</p> <p>Produced by: Julie Bergman Sender and Stuart Sender</p> <p>Format: Short Film</p> <p>Sponsor: America Coming Together</p> <p>Media Attention: Profiled on <i>Good Morning America</i>, CNN and in Entertainment Weekly and <i>The New York Times</i> and many others.</p> <p>Awards: Voted #1 political humor video of 2004 by politicalhumor.com</p> 

political director and an expert organizer was charged with delivering Democratic voters to the polls and he had a plan to put thousands of paid staff on the ground to knock on doors and collect data. Though Rosenthal was not connected to the media arm of ACT, which was controlled by longtime Clinton operative Harold Ickes, Rosenthal and his longtime colleague Will Robinson, of McWilliams/Robinson, understood the potential value in creating a piece of viral media that could begin to brand ACT outside traditional political advertising and perhaps even reach a different circle of activists who were living online. The hope was to drive new activists to the ACT website so they could learn about ACT’s work and become a part of ACT’s volunteer efforts on the ground. This strategy had not really been tried before.

I was asked to conceive and produce this piece of viral content for ACT. Because this was brand new territory, and because this was intended to be the beginning of a conversation, using humor seemed to be the best approach. I went to former Saturday Night Live head writer Adam McKay who, together with Will Ferrell, had written Will’s President Bush material on SNL. Will’s imitation of the President was very familiar to people and because ACT’s objective was to turn out huge numbers of Democratic voters across the battleground states, Will seemed like a

perfect fit. In addition, using a star like Ferrell was a smart way to encourage earned media attention.

The result was a 4 minute short film featuring Ferrell doing his well-known imitation of President Bush in a mock commercial slamming special interest groups like ACT for trying to get people out to vote against him. We made sure that there were references to Bush policies that ACT wanted voters to be reminded of – his failures on the environment, on the war and the economy – all of which were of importance to them based on polling and focus groups. We did not conduct focus groups with the film itself, and yet we used the prior research to infuse the comedy of the piece with some value beyond the humor. We shot the short in one day at a ranch in Los Angeles’ San Fernando valley, meant to suggest Bush’s ranch in Texas.

Remember that the joke at the time was that Bush was perpetually on vacation – another important point to reinforce.

When “White House West” was released virally on the Internet, it generated millions of hits and a lot of earned media coverage. The Sunday *New York Times* Arts and Leisure section put a picture of Will Ferrell on the cover with the headline “The Democrats Have Gotten Their Funny Bone Back.” It made Good Morning America’s water-cooler segment and the cable news circuit in addition to the entertainment news. This kind of national exposure is very expensive if you have to buy it. One appearance on “Good Morning America” delivers over 6 million impressions and would cost over \$300,000 to buy. But if you can come up with a story, and—in this case—harness the perfect messenger to marry with your message, then you can often prompt earned media attention and get results. ACT conservatively received millions of dollars worth of free media coverage based on the earned media that “White House West” was able to attract. On top of that, ACT gained approximately 33,000 people wanting to volunteer across the battleground states as a consequence of seeing the viral short and learning about ACT by going to their website.

For under \$200,000, ACT got a very good return on their investment from this one piece of media. And it is important to remember that the release of “White House West” was also in the prehistoric times before YouTube, Google Video, mobile media and video podcasts. A recent check of websites that archive video, such as Ifilm, YouTube, and other smaller political humor websites, indicate that this Will Ferrell video still receives regular hits in the hundreds of thousands.

The 2004 November 2 Campaign

Staring Stevie Wonder, Danny Glover, Malcom Jamal Warner and hundreds of Americans

By Sierra Club, Planned Parenthood, America Coming Together, NAACP Voter Fund, Acorn and many others.

[Video Available Here: <http://balconyfilms.com/wonder.htm> and www.november2.org]

A good example of a top-down, bottom-up media strategy married to a robust grassroots campaign was the November 2 Campaign, a voter registration and Get Out the Vote (GOTV) campaign created to register underserved voters in the lead-up to the 2004 election. The November 2 Campaign grew out of a decision by the NAACP Voter Fund, Acorn, People for the American Way Foundation, USAction Education Fund and other non-partisan groups, to create a new kind of voter registration and mobilization effort. The point was to find new and innovative ways to reach people not touched by traditional campaign efforts. This temporary coalition of groups called themselves National Voice. With funding from foundations such as Arca, Beldon, and Cedar Tree, National Voice hired the wildly successful ad agency Weiden and Kennedy, who previously developed campaigns for Nike, Jet Blue and Starbucks.

The agency came up with the idea of reducing the entire election effort to its date, with the simple tag line “You Decide.” The images in the commercial featured a broad cross-section of Americans, in various locations, wearing the simple midnight blue tee-shirt with the date NOVEMBER 2 in simple white block lettering across the chest. The design of the campaign was so simple that seasoned political operatives initially dismissed it. But the ads tested well in focus groups, and the grassroots organizations, for whom this media toolkit was being created, responded overwhelmingly to it, in part because the simplicity and directness of the images allowed them to retain their own individuality, while co-branding with NOVEMBER 2. This was the intention of the creators of the campaign. They knew that this loose confederation of groups was working in unison around the importance of voter registration and turnout, but they were not interchangeable and their connections to their own communities and constituencies had to be respected and not co-opted.

The NOVEMBER 2 “media tool kit” contained the 60 second video ad, and a vibrant website that became a community where people could upload pictures of themselves in the iconic NOVEMBER 2 tee-shirt, as well as download posters, banners and order other merchandise.

November 2nd Campaign

Starring: Stevie Wonder, Danny Glover, Malcom Jamal Warner and hundreds of Americans

Executive Produced and Created by: Weiden and Kennedy

Participating Producers and Media Strategists: Julie Bergman Sender and Stuart Sender

Sponsor: National Voice

Measurable Impact: Over 5,000,000 people registered to vote at November2.org

Of Note: Called best grassroots voter engagement campaign by THE NATION and many others

Partnerships: Sierra Club, Planned Parenthood, America Coming Together, NAACP Voter Fund, Acorn and many others .



Amazingly, no airtime was purchased for the ad itself. This also was by design. It was decided that in order for this campaign to be a people-powered and viral effort, we needed to distribute the content in a way that mirrored the authenticity of the message itself. As a result we were able to place the ad across the web, on websites that were more cultural than political – like Rolling Stone, MTV and VH1. The video images were projected on walls, used on jumbotrons during concerts and screened at film festivals around the country. The video became a give-away for National Voice to be used in ways that more than made up for the lack of television exposure.

The campaign spread out across the country, with billboards across 25% of Ohio carrying still images from the video ad. In New York, a “NOVEMBER 2, YOU DECIDE” flag waved outside New York’s Public Theater throughout the summer and into the fall. And the campaign partnered with cultural events across the country in the months leading up to the election. Farm Aid, Choosapalooza and other concerts integrated the NOVEMBER 2 shirts, video images and information on their summer tours. At its peak, approximately 200,000 volunteers were moving NOVEMBER 2 campaign and media materials.

This is what John Nichols of *The Nation* magazine (October 25, 2004 issue) wrote about the campaign:

Among the dozens of groups seeking to stir nonvoters to action this year, none have created quite the sensation that the nonpartisan November 2 Campaign has by reducing the whole of the political debate and the process surrounding it to a single message: the election date. And the campaign has plastered it everywhere: on buses and bus stops, billboards, television and movie theater public-service ads and across hundreds of thousands of chests. November 2 T-shirts are showing up everywhere, from coffee shops in Santa Monica to black churches in Georgia to The Tonight Show, where singer Joss Stone sported one a month before the election... But the success of the project suggests that the message is resonating louder than a lot of what the campaigns have done. Indeed, at a time when both the right and the left are pushing voter registration, progressives believe the November 2 Campaign is more than countering conservative initiatives. "There's an inspirational and optimistic quality to it, combined with real service, reminding people when to vote. It's civics with an edge," says MoveOn.org executive director Peter Schurman.

The final estimate is that approximately 5 million voters were registered or mobilized through the efforts of the National Voice coalition and the NOVEMBER 2 campaign. A NOVEMBER 2 - style campaign mounted today would have the advantage of further guerilla distribution through Podcasting, Mobile technology, YouTube and Google Video, Revver, MySpace, Facebook and other online video posting sites, none of which were in the vernacular 3 years ago. As of late in 2006, the traffic on YouTube was reported to be approximately 60,000 videos uploaded daily with visitors watching as many as 100 million clips per day.

There is also a legacy left behind by the NOVEMBER 2 campaign: Many have noted the echoes of NOVEMBER 2 in the very successful ONE CAMPAIGN to raise awareness in the fight against world poverty. The ONE CAMPAIGN is a partnership of multiple NGO’s and celebrities like Bono and Bob Geldof, launched with a series of Public Service Announcements (PSAs), an interactive website, a blog, merchandise, a text messaging campaign and a large Live Aid – style concert that was televised just days prior to the 2005 G8 Conference. More than 1.4 million registered with the campaign to receive alerts and become activists within the first 2 weeks. Today ONE.ORG has more than 20 million registrants. The One campaign is a much bigger effort than the NOVEMBER 2 campaign, but the model of a top-down-bottom up strategy that pairs high-end PSA spots, celebrity appearances, a coalition of authentic partners, with a clear and simple purpose and call to mass action is precisely the model of the NOVEMBER 2

Campaign. It is a model that works.

“WHAT IF?”

Starring Helen Hunt

By Planned Parenthood and Women’s Voices. Women Vote

[Videos Available Here: <http://balconyfilms.com/PlannedParenthood.htm>]

Also during the 2004 election cycle, Planned Parenthood was looking for new ways to reach out to women voters. An emerging group, “Women’s Voices. Women Vote,” a research-based, voter engagement organization that conducted the most extensive psychographic research on the 22 million

unmarried women who did not vote in the 2000 election, was also interested in reaching out to stimulate their targeted women and get them to the polls. Planned Parenthood and WVVV partnered on a campaign starring actress Helen Hunt that was a combination of viral and paid media.

What If?

Starring: Helen Hunt

Directed by: Matthew Carnahan

Produced and written by: Matthew Carnahan, Julie Bergman Sender and Stuart Sender

Format: Short Film and :30 spot

Sponsor: Planned Parenthood and Women’s Voices. Women’s Vote

Media Attention: Helen Hunt appeared on The View, Entertainment Tonight and Access Hollywood to discuss the important impact of single women on the 2004 election.

Awards: Telly Award – Best Political Ad



The creation of this piece of media was a hybrid between using conventional testing of message and creative license. Given the research conducted by Women’s Voice’s Women Vote, it became clear that the central theme for these 22 million women who did not vote in the 2000 election was that once they knew they were part of such a large group that *did not* do something –they felt empowered. So rather than use what they *had not* done as a negative message, we gave them a window into the kind of country they could help to shape if in fact they *did* vote.

The viral video piece starts out in black and white with Helen Hunt acting the part of a traditional wife accompanying her husband to the voting booths. It felt a lot like the 1950s until both characters step into their respective booths. When Hunt enters the booth, she

passes into a stylized series of tableaux. The video is now in color and the feel is contemporary. She watches other contemporary women emerging from their booths. We hear music and Hunt in voice-over talking about all the ways the country could improve if these 22 million women vote. The tableaux come to life - showing better health care, and education, and restoring the environment. The message by the end is how the world could be a much better place if these 22 million women did vote. They could make a real difference.

Getting the piece on mainstream television was a critical way to reach these women. Hunt agreed to make appearances with a clip of the film on “The View,” “Entertainment Tonight” and other places where the women who the piece was trying to reach would be watching. The viral piece was then married to a paid

ad campaign, also starring Helen Hunt that took the big idea being explored in the viral video and made it tighter and more concrete.

The idea was to get the material out there both through earned and paid media and communicate to these 22 million women how vital they are to the democratic process. After-election research conducted on the result of messaging to these women showed that these media pieces helped increase this demographic by 1 million votes (see the www.WVWV.org post 2004 election research).

“REMEMBER YOUR FIRST TIME?”

Starring Felicity Huffman, Angie Harmon, Lauren Graham, Jennifer Grey, Daphne Zuniga, Regina King, Marg Helgenberger and Tyne Daly

By Women’s Voices. Women Vote

[Video Available Here: <http://balconyfilms.com/WV.html>]

I was able to continue the effort to reach the 22 million single and unmarried American women in America in the 2006 election cycle by working with the group Women’s Voices. Women Vote. Building on the work we did with them in 2004, we created a new PSA campaign targeting these women again, but now we had a broader media landscape to compete in and an audience more familiar with viral video. We had gone for a pure empowerment message the first time. But this time we all felt something else was called for. The audience is now barraged with video, images and political ads. They are more cynical and don’t really pay as much attention to straight-forward political ads. This was also a midterm election without the draw of a presidential race.

So we created a campaign called “Remember Your First Time,” which featured well-known actresses discussing their first time... voting. We took this fun, sexy, provocative approach as a way to get attention, to get people to pass the video link around to their friends, to get voter engagement groups to incorporate the ads into their own independent messaging, to get TV stations across the country to place them as PSAs, and to get national earned media coverage.

To follow up on the attention grab of the ‘First Time’ spots, we also created additional ads that tell the story of the 20-million women who didn’t vote last time, engaging them with a message of empowerment that says “you don’t have to dream about the future, you can wake up and vote for it.”

In the first few days of the launch there were stories about the ads in *The Washington Post*, *Good Morning America*, *This Week With George Stephanopoulos*, *CNN*, *FOX News*, *The Note*, and *Page SIX* in the *New York Post*. The crowning sign of the campaign’s success was an attack on the campaign by Rush Limbaugh.

By the time election day came, between the earned media attention and the deliberate radio and PSA placement, the campaign had been seen by over 50 million viewers, which would have cost more than \$3 million if paid for outright. This does not take into account the viral exposure it received across the web on blogs like *The Huffington Post*, *MyDD*, *DailyKos*, *FiredogLake*, *Crooks and Liars*, or on websites like

Remember Your First Time?

Starring: Felicity Huffman, Marg Helgenberger, Angie Harmon, Rosario Dawson, Tyne Daly and Daphne Zuniga

Directed by: Stuart Sender

Produced and written by: Julie Bergman Sender and Stuart Sender

Format: Multiple :60 and :30 spots

Sponsor: Women’s Voices. Women’s Vote

Media Attention: *Washington Post*, *New York Post*, *The Note*, among others. *CNN*, *FOX News*, *This Week With George Stephanopoulos*, *Ultimate Blackjack Tour*, *Univision*, the *Soap Network*, among others.

Awards: None yet



MomsRising, UsAction, ACORN and The Nation. And we're not even counting the number of clicks on YouTube.

From a creative point of view, we shot these ads on high definition video and worked with a director of photography who shot such films as "Hustle and Flow" and "Eve's Bayou." We shot multiple PSA's, including an all-Spanish language version. And we carefully chose the actors because we were looking for women who we believed meant something to the women we wanted to reach. They included: Felicity Huffman, Angie Harmon, Lauren Graham, Jennifer Grey, Daphne Zuniga, Regina King, Marg Helgenberger and Tyne Daly.

The obvious common ground between "White House West" "What If?" and "Remember your First Time" are their calculated use of celebrity to increase the likelihood that the videos would have a viral life as well as capture earned media attention. The use of celebrity is tricky. If the celebrity is not an authentic and effective messenger on the issue, he or she can become more of a hindrance than a help. Media attention for a Progressive issue, advocacy campaign or organization can backfire if the story the media chooses to tell focuses on the celebrity alone, and the messenger can also be rejected by the constituency you are trying to reach if they don't believe or embrace that messenger.

This is why it is vitally important to be cautious when integrating the celebrity component into the long or short-term branding of a campaign or organization. The right use of talent often paves the way for further and deeper communication and branding opportunities. The sometimes-impulsive recruitment of celebrity can take you in the wrong direction.

Conclusion

The power and the value of viral video is clear. How to best use it is rapidly evolving. We know a lot more now than we did two years ago, and as we approach the next whirlwind of political activity around the 2008 Presidential election, where we sit today will seem as primitive as 2004 seems now. But there are some valuable lessons that we have learned so far about the way video production for viral internet distribution works. We should be encouraged by the emerging models and continue to build on what works. Though this is still the Wild West, with a lot of uncharted terrain, we do have the beginnings of a road map.

The 2006 election has been dubbed by many in the media the “YouTube election”. A whole new vocabulary has been created with tags like “netizens” and “Vloggers.” While amateur or user-generated content is a powerful emerging phenomenon, and with time can be designed to feed the needs of campaigns and organizations, the higher-end, often professionally produced viral content still has an important role to play. This high-end content is where the story is designed as part of a complex communications strategy, and the material is planned to be used in various distribution avenues to intentionally reach a wide audience. The use of celebrity talent and a carefully researched approach to branding a campaign does not have to be done instead of a user-generated content campaign. In fact, the best approach would be to combine both of these tools since campaigns and organizations often have multiple initiatives occurring simultaneously, and certain tactics are more appropriate for different groups. This broadening of a progressive communications strategy creates a healthy tension between old and new outreach tactics. It is about adding new techniques and expanding the means to getting the messages out.

In the end, no matter whether you use amateurs or professionals, with a top-down or bottom-up strategy, you must have compelling content that moves people, and gets them to move the message to others. One thing is certain: No matter what the size of the screen, content is still king. And whether that content is seen on a computer monitor, on mobile phones, on television screens, in elevators, or in Times Square – the content objective should be to engage all of these mediums with compelling stories that reach people, and spur them to action.