Public Opinion on YouTube: A Functional Theory Analysis of the Frames Employed in User Comments Following Sarah Palin’s 2008 Acceptance Speech

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ABSTRACT

From the communication methods to the candidates on the ballot, the 2008 presidential campaign was revolutionary. Communicating party platforms went beyond traditional media to include social media and online video services such as YouTube. These communication methods provide an opportunity to examine public feedback on candidates that ranged widely in age, race, gender, and experience. This study seeks to analyze comments posted on YouTube as a form of public opinion and determine their content and frame of reference in response to vice-presidential nominee Sarah Palin’s acceptance speech at the Republican National Convention. The Functional Theory of Political Discourse is used as a means to reveal prominent framing strategies. Results indicate a majority of YouTube user comments were negative, focused on the present, and utilized the attack function. Character also emerged as a dominant issue in campaign discussion.

Keywords: Comments, Frames, Functional Theory of Political Discourse, Political Campaign, President, Public Opinion, Sarah Palin, YouTube

INTRODUCTION

The 2008 presidential campaign was groundbreaking in many ways. From the first viable African American presidential candidate, Democrat Barack Obama and his vice-presidential candidate Joe Biden to the disenfranchised Republican Party and attempts by John McCain to revive it with an unknown female vice-presidential candidate Sarah Palin, it was a campaign full of firsts. Barack Obama broke new ground in public relations and advertising strategies to garner support. During the general election, it was estimated Obama spent $250 million on his campaign compared to only $130 million for McCain (McClellan, 2008). Short of outspending his competition and using traditional grass-roots campaign tactics, Obama also created new and innovative ways to reach supporters. Some of these included sending email blasts to 1,000,000 addresses gathered during fundraising efforts, communicating with more than 1,000,000 friends via MySpace and Facebook, using Twitter, and enjoying the wave of viral videos on YouTube, some of which received more than 60 million views (Young, 2008, p. 3).
Building upon the 2000 and 2004 presidential elections, the major political party nominees in the 2008 election used multiple media platforms, both new and traditional, to deliver their campaign messages. In 2004, candidates began to utilize interactive campaign Websites to promote their platforms and rally supporters (Hindman, 2005). The potential impact of these multiple media platforms gained recognition when Howard Dean’s infamous “I Have a Scream” speech was replayed 633 times in four days on cable news networks and the Internet (Gerhart, 2004). In the 2008 election, user-generated content services like YouTube took on an even greater role as a communication channel and opportunity for public feedback. Not only was content passed along virally, but also viewers took the opportunity to make comments and provide their opinion about the content.

Along with these non-traditional techniques, both parties still delivered speeches to the American public in an effort to solidify support and outline campaign platforms. Sarah Palin was introduced to the nation by way of her acceptance speech for the vice-presidential nomination. It was during this 45-minute speech she outlined the frames for her vice-presidential campaign in an attempt to mobilize the audience to follow. Because of online video services such as YouTube, her traditional speech was uploaded to a nontraditional medium to be viewed and commented on by thousands of people over the course of the campaign. It is this ability to view speeches and post comments that provides a research opportunity.

This study examines public opinion in the form of YouTube user comments in response to Sarah Palin’s acceptance speech at the 2008 Republican National Convention. While past research in this area has typically focused on comments posted on online newspaper discussion boards, newsgroups, websites, and blogs (Beyers, 2004; Papacharissi, 2004; Bichard, 2008; Johnson et al., 2007), these comments are often mediated by a gatekeeper such as an editor or webmaster. The current research differs in that YouTube comments are very often unmediated which allows the opportunity to examine public opinion in an organic setting. The Functional Theory of Political Discourse will also be used as the theoretical foundation of this study in order to reveal prominent framing strategies in both Palin’s speech and user responses.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Public opinion has been a topic of research inquiry for decades. The media’s role in framing and informing audience opinion has a direct application in the political arena. Candidates assert their positions and attempt to frame messages in a way that resonates with voters. With the current innovations in online technology and nontraditional media, this attempt has become increasingly complex. Graber (1994) defined political framing as “ways in which journalists and average Americans shape messages about the campaign to capture its essence” (p. 332). Entman (2003) also discussed framing as the process of highlighting some facet of information in order to promote a particular interpretation. Specifically Scheufele (1999) explored two concepts of framing by describing them as frame building and frame setting. When these concepts are culled down to the more concentrated media versus individual frames, they are referred to as “schemes for both presenting and comprehending news” (p. 106).

Frame building is referred to by Thorson and Wise (2007) as the media effects perspective, which says frames affect opinions by “making certain considerations seem more important than others” (p. 3). Media frames help organize and interpret events and help the public focus in on the main point (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989). The media chooses what is salient to help make sense of events. In other words, the media input affects the audience output.

Frame setting describes how individuals bring specific frames to mind in order to guide individual information processing (Entman, 1993; Sheufele, 1999). This definition speaks to sociological or collective action frames...
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