

Bruns, Axel and Wilson, Jason A. and Saunders, Barry (2007) Election Flops on YouTube. In *ABC News Online: Club Bloggery*, Australian Broadcasting Corporation.

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Election Flops on YouTube

By Axel Bruns, Jason Wilson, and Barry Saunders

In an election campaign as drawn out as this, you'd have to have excellent memory to remember the hype around John Howard's use of *YouTube* to make policy announcements. Some months ago, [the media were all over the story](#) - but unfortunately for the Prime Minister, much like the widely-predicted poll '[narrowing](#)', the *YouTube* effect has been missing in action.

That's not to say that *YouTube* and similar sites haven't played a role in the campaign - but certainly not to the extent they've already featured in the U.S. presidential primaries, where debates between the candidates on either side of the political divide have [invited citizens to pose their questions via YouTube](#), and where some politicians even announced their intention to run for President on the site.

American politics has also seen the phenomenon of [ObamaGirl \(and a few less successful imitations\)](#) - a kind of virtual groupie for key Democrat contender Barack Obama which contributed markedly to highlighting differences between the fresh-faced Obama and his major Democrat rival, the experienced but (we presume) hardly politically 'sexy' former first lady Hillary Clinton.

While we might count our blessings that a JohnnieGirl or KevvieGirl hasn't emerged in the Australian campaign, the relative unimportance of *YouTube* to the election requires some further explanation. In part, it may be due to [the comparatively atrocious quality of Australian broadband](#), which generally continues to stunt the development of bandwidth-heavy applications in this country.

More importantly, however, the problem with the major parties' use of *YouTube* has been that their video messages have followed standard television formats, rather than directly addressing online video sensibilities. It seems that even in spite of the sizeable advertising budgets for the campaign, nobody has tweaked to the notion that the most successful political *YouTube* videos don't follow the tried-and-true '[politician in front of flag promising more money and fewer taxes](#)' model.

Instead, what works best are clips that are designed to be funny and a little controversial: much like ObamaGirl, these are the clips which we see republished across the blogosphere and spread virally via email between personal friends and office colleagues. In Australia, it's been the political advertising of lobby groups which has best been able to harness the *YouTube* effect - amongst the best examples is perhaps [GetUp's satirical send-up](#) of the government's 'I can do that' climate action ads, with lines such as 'Creating an ad campaign to make the government look cleaner? I can do that!'

That's not to say that Rudd and Howard haven't featured in some widely distributed viral videos this campaign - Kevin Rudd's less than refined [parliamentary ear grooming activities](#) a few years ago made it via *YouTube* even to [The Jay Leno Show](#) on American television, while [Howard's apparent lack of compassion](#) for a Penrith shopper knocked over by the media scrum following him [was the subject of much debate](#) last Friday.

Additionally, of course, the official material released to *YouTube* and broadcast on television has also been captured by a sizeable number of 'average citizens', and remixed and reuploaded in a steady stream of [more or less funny](#) and [satirical mash-ups](#) commenting on the election campaign - [a point of some concern to unnamed "senior Liberals"](#), as many newspapers reported at the end of October.

[The Prime Minister's latest foray onto YouTube](#), designed perhaps to counter the negative publicity after Penrith and to portray him in a more caring, cuddly light, may also achieve some wider distribution - if perhaps less as a result of such attributes than because of the

somewhat incongruent nature of its underlying message (prompting one user at The Poll Bludger to comment, "[he has the entire Orang-utan vote locked up now. That of course includes Ron Boswell](#)").

Ultimately, however, the lack of viral appeal in the *YouTube* content provided by Australia's major parties during this campaign points to another observation, first made by our [Youdecide2007](#) colleague [Graham Young](#): rather than resulting from a lack of understanding of what works on *YouTube*, it's likely that these online videos have been created on the basis of much more astute political calculations.

Especially early on in the campaign, launching a *YouTube* channel and releasing a few announcements through *YouTube* rather than standard PR channels was able to (briefly) capture the mainstream media spotlight - and from the [ABC](#) to Network Ten, all major television channels commented on the parties' supposedly modern approach to campaigning and repeatedly replayed those clips almost in full.

Free prime-time TV advertising, coupled with an opportunity to establish a (slightly) hipper image for venturing into the online world - this must have seemed a very attractive proposition to campaign coordinators. Even so, it was never going to be more than a gimmick - and in comparison with the *YouTube* work of participants ranging from individual [mash-up artists](#) through [DIY parody clips](#) to [the tactical advertising of GetUp](#), it serves only to point out how self-important, stale and unfunny so much of our major parties' political advertising has become.

First published at *Gatewatching*:

<http://gatewatching.org/2007/11/16/club-bloggery-7-election-flops-on-youtube/>

Also published in a condensed version at *ABC Online*:

<http://www.abc.net.au/news/stories/2007/11/16/2093120.htm>