



**Under the Radar and Over the Top:  
Online Political Videos in the 2004 Election**

INSTITUTE FOR POLITICS  
DEMOCRACY & THE INTERNET  
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# Acknowledgements

**Under the Radar and Over the Top: Independently-Produced Political Videos in the 2004 Presidential Election** is a publication of the Institute for Politics, Democracy & the Internet, which is administered by The George Washington University's Graduate School of Political Management (GSPM). The principal investigator is F. Christopher Arterton, Dean of the school.

Carol Darr, director, and Julie Barko, deputy director, are the principal authors of this report. Portions of this report were drafted and edited by Joseph Graf, project director, and research assistants Allison Block and Gautam Raghavan.

Cover, textual and graphic design were created by Allison Block.

Lanny Cardow and Kevin Wells, research assistants, Robert Hoopes, senior advisor, and Albert May, journalism professor at GW's School of Media & Public Affairs, provided invaluable assistance in the development of this report.

We would like to thank Adrienne Skinner of Yahoo!, Arthur McKinley of Hitwise, Tom Acquaviva of Nielsen/NetRatings, and Brad Fay of NOP Worldwide for their assistance in collecting and analyzing data.

The Institute is a research and advocacy initiative to promote the development of online politics in a manner that upholds democratic principles and values. One of the Institute's main goals is to help establish the Internet as a locus for trustworthy information and civil discussion of public affairs, with an initial emphasis on campaigns for elective office in the United States.

For more information on the Institute's activities, please visit our Web site at [www.ipdi.org](http://www.ipdi.org).

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## About IPOI

In the spring of 2002, the Institute for Politics, Democracy & the Internet at the Graduate School of Political Management was chartered by The George Washington University. Formerly called the Democracy Online Project, the Institute is funded primarily by grants from The Pew Charitable Trusts. The mission of the Institute for Politics, Democracy & the Internet is to promote the development of U.S. online politics in a manner that increases citizen participation and upholds democratic values.

The Institute for Politics, Democracy & the Internet has three principal goals:

1. The establishment of a research base for the study of online politics, especially with respect to American campaigns and elections.
2. The design, testing, refinement and promotion of appropriate standards of practice for the conduct of online campaigning.
3. The creation and public promotion of an online public space where good campaign practices and democratic values may thrive.

Since the debut of the World Wide Web, we have learned that networks of computerized media can accommodate as much and as many kinds of communication as we care to bring to them. Many things can, and will, happen online. There is room enough in the exceptionally malleable and decentralized multimedia environment referred to, for simplicity's sake, as "the Internet" for a variety of political voices to be heard and for a profusion of political entities (parties, interest groups, personal followings) to coexist. To a great extent, the pandemonium that is contemporary politics will be replicated online.

However, if the history of technology is a reliable guide, a general template for what occurs online will be stamped for most Internet users during the next few years. Corporations and governments will consolidate their presence and set a pace, tone, and context for politics. Consumer tastes and habits will form; production standards will be established; and myths will spread about an election winner here and advocacy group there who prevailed "because of" their online prowess.

To what extent will the "norm" which emerges in this formative period be harmonious with the values we have associated with democratic communication at its finest? Freedom of expression. Universal access. Government accountability. Social tolerance. Public deliberation.

The time to raise expectations about political discourse as it develops online is, as the orators would say, now. It is far easier, and far more effective, to create institutions and practices in a new medium than it is to reform them in an old one.

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# Summary

The 2004 presidential campaign has been transformed by the Internet. By lowering the financial barriers to entry into national politics and political commentary, the Internet has re-energized political activists and given rise to new voices. But the same lowered barriers that have facilitated the participation of responsible citizens have made it easier for less restrained individuals and groups to make their voices heard as well.

During the last 12 months press coverage of Internet politics has focused primarily on the positive aspects of the new technology. News stories of record-breaking numbers of small online donors and unprecedented Internet-based grassroots organizing have dominated press coverage. Bloggers across the political spectrum have brought unique perspectives to the campaign discourse.

But along with reinvigorated civic participation there exists a darker and angrier side of the political Internet. Some of the most telling evidence can be found in the rash of independently produced political videos that have added a distinctly sharper edge to this year's already polarized election campaign.

Spurred by the advent of inexpensive digital film equipment and widely available broadband, amateur videographers have discovered a new and particularly effective vehicle for venting their political spleens. Described in one news article as "the successors to pamphleteers of the past,"<sup>1</sup> these activists have produced fiery and sometimes downright vicious political commentary.

Some independently produced Web videos that we found used heavily edited photographs or film from campaign events or news stories, juxtaposing sometimes graphic and emotional images with news headlines, voting records and political statements.

Others were animated, a format that some video producers feel increases the humor of their work and makes their scathing commentary all the more lethal. As videographer and political cartoonist Mark Fiore commented, "It's interesting how hard-hitting a message an animation can get away with when a silly song is on the soundtrack."<sup>2</sup> These animations are heavily symbolic and yet, as cartoons, they are somewhat detached from reality, allowing producers greater leeway to frame their arguments with images or metaphors that may be too disturbing, offensive or otherwise inadequately expressed on film or in photographs.

Several videos took a different track, solemnly displaying photographs of dead babies and bloody soldiers killed in the Iraq war. These inflammatory videos, both the funny and the solemn, have the capacity to make an already partisan election more polarized, and the obscene ones surely coarsen the political debate.

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<sup>1</sup> Bob Kemper, "Websites spoofing Swift Boat ads proliferate," *PalmBeachPost.com*, 1 September 2004, <[www.palmbeachpost.com](http://www.palmbeachpost.com)> (15 October 2004).

<sup>2</sup> Dave Astor, "Taking cartoons to another dimension," *Editor & Publisher Magazine*, 27 October, 2003.

The Institute has collected approximately 75 Web videos produced by the so-called 527 committees, other groups, and individuals who are, or at least appeared to be, independent of the two presidential campaign committees. These videos can be viewed on our Web site, [www.ipdi.org/videolibrary](http://www.ipdi.org/videolibrary). Approximately a third of these videos are anti-Kerry, and approximately two-thirds are anti-Bush. Only the two videos produced by JibJab.com skewered both candidates equally.

We also collected approximately 75 additional videos produced by the two presidential campaigns and the national party committees. The focus of our study, however, is the independently produced political videos. We want to determine with more precision the effects that these videos are having on the electorate, how popular they are and their impact on the election.

Links to these videos have crisscrossed the Internet, been forwarded from one e-mail inbox to another, and posted on blogs. A few have been broadcast on network television, attracting wide audiences. But for the most part, they have spread virally below the mass media radar.

We suspect that the effect of these independently-produced videos is amplified by the fact that the majority of individuals who find and forward them tend to be "Influentials," a term coined by the survey research firm RoperASW (now NOP Worldwide) to describe opinion makers. As we noted in our earlier study, *Online Influentials in the 2004 Presidential Election*,<sup>3</sup> these Influential online political citizens, as we called them, have large networks of family, friends and colleagues in their e-mail address books, and a penchant for forwarding email. It is thus very likely that these individuals are playing a key role in introducing and spreading this new form of partisan political content.

These Influential activists are themselves more ideologically extreme than average citizens to begin with. As noted in the book, *The Influentials*, "They are less likely than the norm to describe themselves as middle of the road,"<sup>4</sup> and are more likely to describe themselves as conservative or liberal, and very conservative or very liberal, than the general adult population. The facts that 69 percent of the online activists are Influentials and that they spend a more time online than average Americans suggests that the political Internet may be a more ideologically extreme forum than generally recognized. This means that the reds are redder and the blues are bluer on the Internet.


If these funny but sometimes mean-spirited videos are being spread by Influential activists who already veer toward the political extremes, their effects may be disproportionately great. Yet because most of the activity takes place outside public view, via e-mail, these Internet videos have largely escaped the scrutiny that the political press has given to negative television and radio political commercials.

Part of the reason for the press's lack of attention is the difficulty in determining the Internet traffic these videos have received. Indeed, in conducting this analysis, we have

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<sup>3</sup> *Political Influentials Online in the 2004 Presidential Campaign*, Joe Graf and Carol Darr, (Washington: Institute for Politics, Democracy & the Internet, 2004).

<sup>4</sup> Ed Keller and Jon Berry, *The Influentials* (New York: The Free Press, 2003), 38.



found it difficult to quantify. And without an objective measure of their reach across the Internet, it is difficult to calibrate the effect the videos are having on the electorate.

Nonetheless, we believe this phenomenon bears further scrutiny. First, it is clear that these video have received widespread attention, and we believe that they are coming first to the attention of people who are intensely political and communicate a lot.

Second, anonymous videos are just around the corner. Most users cannot e-mail an actual video to someone else. Instead, the recipient must link back to the Web site of the person or group that produced the video and from there download the video. This inhibits the production of anonymous videos, and indeed we found none in our initial research. But this situation will quickly change as broadband becomes more powerful and as e-mail programs accept larger files. When this happens, the specter of anonymous, scurrilous and possibly fake political videos racing around the Internet becomes a possibility, indeed a probability.

Third, the technology makes it possible to edit actual footage of candidates in such a way that their words and meaning can be grossly distorted, but seem accurate. One video we collected, "Bush Sou Redux," contains an almost seamlessly spliced speech by President Bush that makes him appear to be uttering cruel and belligerent statements.

Fourth, most innovations in politics start at the presidential level and trickle down to state and local campaigns. Presidential elections command the most attention, and attract the most sophisticated political operatives. While this study focuses on political videos that were produced by persons other than the two presidential campaigns and the national party committees, many of the creators, while apparently independent of the campaign, have impressive political resumes that brand them as serious political actors. Thus, it is not unfair to consider them and their creative work a feature of the presidential campaigns, broadly defined.

For these reasons – the expected increase in bandwidth that will facilitate anonymity, the fact that innovations tend to trickle down the ticket to state and local elections and that many of the apparently independent creators of these political videos are well-connected political operatives – we expect that these independently-produced partisan political videos will grow in popularity and become more of an issue in future elections across the country.

# Background

In 2000 the Democracy Online Project, the predecessor to the Institute for Politics, Democracy & the Internet, conducted a poll that showed that over half the online public sent or received a humorous e-mail about the elections. Included in the material were several humorous videos. While the lack of broadband limited their graphics to relatively simple and unsophisticated images, their novelty made them especially forward-able. One video that made the rounds, for example, was a picture of a slot machine that featured, in place of the traditional spinning pictures of cherries, oranges and other fruit, the head of George W. Bush superimposed on hula dancers, flying geese, WWII fighter pilots, dog-paddling swimmers, and other jarring but amusing images.

The break-out moment for Web videos occurred, however, in 2002 when the Democratic National Committee posted on its Web site a picture of President Bush shoving an elderly woman in a wheelchair down what looked like stair steps, but what was in reality a diagonal and downward-pointing graph of the stock market. In the video, the woman crashes at the bottom of the stairs and explodes in a puff of smoke. The Republican National Committee publicly complained about the Web video, providing a hook for the media to report the story. When the video appeared on a nightly news broadcast, the publicity sent so much Internet traffic to the DNC's Web site that its server crashed.

In October 2003 the popularity of political Web videos took another leap forward when MoveOn.org announced that it was sponsoring a national contest for homemade 30-second commercials challenging the Bush administration. Over a thousand videos were submitted from around the country and posted on MoveOn.org's Web site. Many were clever, funny and well produced. Members of Moveon.org were asked to vote on the 14 finalists, and hundreds of thousands responded. A controversy erupted, however, when two videos comparing President Bush to Adolf Hitler were posted on the Web site. An embarrassed MoveOn.org removed the offending videos and apologized to the Republicans, who were furious.<sup>5</sup>

## 2004 Videos

This year a highly polarized electorate, a closely contested election and the divisive issue of the war in Iraq has mobilized activists and provided the incentive for many of these political videos. But much of this election energy would be channeled elsewhere without the appearance of new technology that has made the production of online videos well within the reach of middle-class Americans and small political organizations. This is true at both ends of the process: Inexpensive, easily operated digital video recorders and inexpensive software such as Flash permit virtually anyone to make a short movie at home. Broadcast-caliber videos can be produced by slightly better funded individuals, political campaigns and issue groups for under \$7,500.<sup>6</sup>

On the receiving end, Web video players, such as Windows Media Player, Apple Quicktime and Real One, enable television-quality images that are downloadable for free and available to anyone with an Internet connection. Most important, however, is a high speed Internet connection; for without it, downloading movies is prohibitively slow. For

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<sup>5</sup> Noelle Straub, "GOP condemns online ads comparing Bush to Hitler," *Boston Herald*, 6 January 2004.

<sup>6</sup> Dan Manatt, "Web Videos," *Campaigns & Elections Magazine*, June 2004.

the first time, more than half the population – 51 percent – of Internet users now go online with a broadband connection.<sup>7</sup>

Several videographers who tried to post political videos in the 2000 election failed to take into account that this critical mass did not yet exist. Gregg and Evan Spiridellis, the now-famous brothers who formed the film making company JibJab produced an online animation for the previous presidential election that received little attention.

### **JibJab.com**

What a difference four years have made. This year JibJab's political Web video, "This Land," has attracted a national and even international audience. As one reporter described it, the parody is a "musical mud sling between George W. Bush and John Kerry to the tune of Woody Guthrie's "This Land is Your Land."<sup>8</sup> Judged by the standards of the other amateur political videos, the content of "This Land" is relatively mild, but by television standards it is edgy. The Republican cartoon candidate accuses his opponent of being a "sissy" and a "liberal wienie," and the Democratic candidate retorts that the other is a "right-wing nut job."

The two-minute online animation film spread virally online – from one e-mail inbox to another – before breaking in the mainstream media in mid-July. In the third week in July, according to the Boston Globe, "parts of the video have shown up on the 'Today' show, 'The Early Show,' MSNBC, CNBC, and 'NBC Nightly News with Tom Brokaw.'" The attention overwhelmed JibJab.com. "We had like a core meltdown," said Evan Spiradellis. "Our traffic just shut down our servers."<sup>9</sup> Although precise numbers are hard to come by, and one published report<sup>10</sup> states that it has been viewed by as many as 65 million people, a reliable estimate is one provided by the E-Business Briefing that uses comScore data to estimate that 50 million people have seen it.

Karen Jagoda, president and founder of the E-Voter Institute called "This Land" a "watershed moment." She said, "TV-obsessed ad strategists don't get the fundamental shift JibJab portends for political programming. This change means that a couple hundred thousand dollars spent wisely online could translate into a windfall for

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<sup>7</sup> Nielson//NetRatings, "U.S. Broadband Connections Reach Critical Mass, Crossing 50 Percent Mark for Web Surfers, According to Nielson//NetRatings" ([www.nielson-netratings.com](http://www.nielson-netratings.com)), 18 August 2004.

<sup>8</sup> S. Jennifer Hunter, "In this election, how about none of the above?" *Chicago Sun-Times*, 20 August 2004, 57.

<sup>9</sup> Lauren Smiley, "Parody Video Clip Poking Fun at Bush and Kerry is an Internet Phenomenon," *Boston Globe*, 22 July 2004, D1.

<sup>10</sup> "Spoofers Unspool Sequel," CBS 2 – New York News, Associated Press, 7 October, 2004.

candidates equal to a TV buy in the millions. That is, if you do it right.”<sup>11</sup>

Recently JibJab produced a follow-up parody “Good to Be in DC” that debuted on “The Tonight Show with Jay Leno” on October 7, 2004. The sequel is edgier still. Building on the success of its predecessor, JibJab’s second creation continues to poke fun at the Presidential candidates and this time includes their running mates in the fun. Set to the tune of “Dixie,” this animation contains references to many of the scandals and stories of the recent months, such as former President Clinton’s heart surgery and the “Rathergate” fiasco involving CBS anchor Dan Rather and forged documents. “DC Land” also alludes to recent “outing” of New Jersey Governor MacGreevey, casts John Ashcroft as gay and depicts Senators Kerry’s and Edwards’ professional relationship in a romantic context.

The enormous popularity of “This Land” and its successor, “Good to Be in DC,” put them in a class by themselves, But even for JibJab.com, Internet traffic numbers are difficult to pin down. One reason is that a Web page that hosts a video must reach a certain threshold of traffic in order even to be picked up by companies such as Nielsen/NetRatings, comScore Media Metrix and Hitwise that report Web traffic and analyze Internet audiences. Additionally, each company relies on different technology and methods of measurement.

For example, according to comScore Media Metrix, 10.4 million unique visitors visited the JibJab Web site in July, more visitors than viewed the Web sites of the two presidential candidates combined.<sup>12</sup> Nielsen//NetRatings, however, estimated that 4.6 million people visited the JibJab Web site during the week ending July 25.<sup>13</sup>

ComScore reports that over the period from July 9 to the first week of October “This Land” it has been viewed over 50 million times.<sup>14</sup> Other sources put that number closer to 65 million.<sup>15</sup> By comparison, Nielsen/NetRatings does not report the number of times the animation has been viewed.

JibJab’s new animation, “Good to Be in DC,” also appears to be attracting a sizeable audience. On October 15, 2004, Nielsen/NetRatings sent out a press release announcing

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<sup>11</sup> Zachary Rodgers, “On the Online Campaign Trail,” Clickz.com A 527 group in Colorado appears to have followed such a strategy recently. The group, Colorado Families First, which was formed by a well-connected group of political insiders, including the former Democratic Party chairman Tim Knaus, launched two parodies in late September attacking the incumbent Congresswoman Marilyn Musgrove. The videos, which aired on locally and were available on their Web site, featured a pink-suited actress portraying the congresswoman as snatching a watch from a corpse in a funeral home and stealing the wallet of a soldier engaged in fiery combat. According to the *Denver Post*, the group spent about \$30,000 to produce each spot and bought \$320,000 in air time to run the ads. The videos were so outrageous that they were mentioned on the DrudgeReport, which in turn caused such a spike in their Web traffic that their server crashed.

<sup>12</sup> Zachary Rodgers, “On the Online Campaign Trail,” Clickz.com ([www.clickz.com/features/insight/article.php.3410371](http://www.clickz.com/features/insight/article.php.3410371)) 20 September, 2004.

<sup>13</sup> NetRatings, “JibJab.com and Atomfilms’ Web traffic skyrockets 493 and 341 percent, respectively, as visitors flock to see second Bush-Kerry animation, according to Nielson//NetRatings,” 15 October, 2004.

<sup>14</sup> E-business Briefing: October 2004, E-consultancy ([www.e-consultancy.com/newsfeatures/newsletter/](http://www.e-consultancy.com/newsfeatures/newsletter/)) October 2004.

<sup>15</sup> “Spoofers Unspool Sequel,” CBS 2, New York News, 7 October, 2004.

“Political Parody Site Ranks as Fastest Growing Site as Presidential Election Nears.” JibJab.com, they reported, attracted over 2 million unique visitors during the week ending October 10<sup>th</sup>. Significantly, the second-fastest growing Web site, they noted, was the site that hosts “Good to Be in DC,” AtomFilms, which saw its at-home Web traffic spike 341 percent to 2 million unique visitors.<sup>16</sup> Combined, these two sites attracted over 4 million people in a single week.

### **Swift Boats Veterans for Truth**

The Internet video produced by Swift Boat Veterans for Truth, a 527 group formed by financial supporters of President Bush, has also been featured in national news stories, both print and broadcast, and as a result has achieved national prominence. Using the strategy described by Karen Jagoda, the group produced a video, then spent approximately \$500,000 “for a small but effective advertising buy in the battleground states of Ohio, West Virginia and Wisconsin,” according to the *Washington Post*.<sup>17</sup> The resulting whirlwind of publicity “knocked the Democratic nominee’s campaign off stride” as the video was discussed on programs on cable channels and in conservative blogs, then finally reported by major television networks and newspapers.

According to the *Post* report, “during the week ending August 8, 966,000 people visited the anti-Kerry group’s Web site, 34,000 fewer than those who visited Kerry’s official site, according to Nielsen/NetRatings.”<sup>18</sup> The *Post* also reported that in August, during the height of media attention to the Swift Boat ads, the group claimed to have raised nearly \$500,000 from 10,000 donors, although other organizations report different amounts.<sup>19</sup>

### **The Other Internet Videos**

The other independently-produced political videos have received only minimal attention from the traditional media and not surprisingly, have received substantially less Internet traffic than those of JibJab.com or the Swift Boat Veterans for Truth. These videos, including “Kerry and Edwards in Love,” “Sellout,” “The Emperor’s Apprentice,” “Flipper,” “Campaign Jukebox: John Kerry” and “Kerry Workout,” run a gamut of sophistication, humor and negative tone. As noted below, however, many of these videos, including those of Eric Blumrich, have been featured on several prominent blogs.

Eric Blumrich has created some of the most disturbing and outrageous (some would say scurrilous) content in any of the independently produced videos, including “Idiot Son of an

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<sup>16</sup> Nielsen/Netratings, e-mailed press release, “JibJab.com and AtomFilms’ Traffic Skyrocket 493 and 341 Percent, Respectively, as Visitors Flock to See Second Bush-Kerry Animation, According to Nielsen/Netratings,” October 15, 2004.

<sup>17</sup> “Kerry Says Group is A Front for Bush; Democrat Launches Counterattack Ad on Combat Record,” Lois Romano and Jim VandeHei, *Washington Post.com*, August 20, 2004.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> Other news accounts provide different sums, however. In an interview with United Press International on October 14 entitled “Swift Vets and POWs air two new ads,” the group claimed to have raised more than \$13 million and spent \$3.14 million to run new television spots in swing states and on cable television. Open Secrets.org reports that the group has received only \$158,750 -- based on records released by the Internal Revenue Service on October 10, 2004 ([www.opensecrets.org/527s/527events](http://www.opensecrets.org/527s/527events)).

Asshole,” “He’s a Nazi” (about Rush Limbaugh), and several anti-Iraq war videos, “Liberation” and “Bombs Away.” Blumrich says his motivation for producing his Internet videos is “the removal of George Bush as president of the United States. It is just that simple.” In an e-mail interview with the Institute for this report, he said, “I just felt like I needed to do whatever I could to put alternative viewpoints out. I started producing the animations right before the recent invasion and occupation of Iraq. I created them because every media outlet at the time was basically acting as a mouthpiece for the Bush administration. Everyone was convinced of everything the government was telling them, simply because opposing viewpoints weren’t given the airtime or column inches.”<sup>20</sup>

David Counts, creator of the Web site, [www.toostupidtobepresident.com](http://www.toostupidtobepresident.com), expressed a similar sentiment. “I guess my goals are to be funny, to make a compelling case and most importantly, to say something amid the smothering, uniform, corporate media messages.”<sup>21</sup> He said that in any given month people arrive at the Web site from 6,000-8,000 different sites. Many of them have little to do with politics, he offered.

John Wooden ascribes to his Web site, [whitehouse.org](http://whitehouse.org), goals that are less lofty, or at least more modestly and certainly more humorously stated: “A sickening repository of tasteless and self-congratulatory garbage, produced by a detestable clique of New York City losers, who toil needlessly in abject poverty and well-deserved obscurity.”

### **How do people find out about these political videos?**

For most of these independently produced political videos, information about them travels about the Internet like a rumor through a crowd. Some people post videos on popular Web sites. According to AP reporter Juliana Barbassa, “sites such as Newsground.com and politicalhumor.com link to dozens of these animations, [some of] which can get over 20,000 hits a day.”<sup>22</sup> As noted below, blogs constitute a significant source of information about Internet videos by posting links, announcements and commentary. And viewers e-mail their friends, who forward those e-mails in a giant chain letter of political information. In other cases, people have discovered them by reading an article in a newspaper, seeing a story on a broadcast, or hearing about a video on the radio. Finally, as noted earlier, certain creators of the political videos such as Swift Boat Veterans for Truth purchase radio and TV time to publicize their videos.

There are also several online archives that have collected videos

- Mock the Vote at <http://atomfilms.shockwave.com/af/home/>
- PBS’s 30 Second Candidate site at [www.pbs.org/30secondcandidate/](http://www.pbs.org/30secondcandidate/)
- IPDI site at [www.ipdi.org/videolibrary/](http://www.ipdi.org/videolibrary/)
- The Living Room Candidate at [www.livingroomcandidate.movingimage.us/desktop/index.php?nav\\_action=desktop&nav\\_subaction=intro/](http://www.livingroomcandidate.movingimage.us/desktop/index.php?nav_action=desktop&nav_subaction=intro/)

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<sup>20</sup> Interview of Eric Blumrich conducted via e-mail between August 5 and 9, 2004, with Kevin Wells, researcher for Institute for Politics, Democracy & the Internet for this report.

<sup>21</sup> Interview with David Counts, conducted via e-mail on August 9 and 11, 2004, with Kevin Wells, researcher for Institute for Politics, Democracy & the Internet for this report.

<sup>22</sup> Juliana Barbassa, “Animators provide interactive commentary on Iraq war, aftermath,” Associated Press State and Local Wire, 7 May, 2003

It is possible to track some of these methods of transmission and thereby get a rough estimate of both the popularity of some of these political Web videos and their relative popularity to each other. In a few instances it is also possible to trace how someone found out about a video, as when detailed data from Hitwise indicates the previous page that a visitor to a Web site viewed (e.g., a blog) before coming to the video itself.

### Web Traffic of Other Videos

Information about the Internet traffic of the independently produced Internet videos that lie outside the range of the national media is necessarily anecdotal, and sometimes at odds with the numbers that appear in the few news stories that have been written about them. For example, during e-mail exchanges with the Institute, the creators of some of the videos reported the following traffic numbers:

- CrushKerry.com reported an average of 75,000 unique visitors per week.<sup>23</sup>
- TooStupidToBePresident.com reported an average of 56,000 unique visitors per week.<sup>24</sup>
- Dan Noe reported that his Web site, which hosts “Edwards and Kerry in Love” video received 46,537 unique visitors per week.<sup>25</sup>
- Eric Blumrich reported 45,500 unique visitors per week.<sup>26</sup>
- Whitehouse.org reported 50,000 per week to the Institute,<sup>27</sup> although the Web site’s creator stated in an interview that appeared on March 6, 2003 on Salon.com, “On average we get about 30,000 people a day, almost a million a month, which is really good.”<sup>28</sup>
- Music for America, which produced a video called “Dick Cheney’s Alive,” reported 37,500 unique visitors per week.<sup>29</sup>

Unfortunately, we have been able to glean traffic numbers for the other videos only from news stories. These numbers are also open to question as the reporters seem to have relied on estimations of traffic numbers provided by the creators of the videos.

- An August 6, 2004 article by *Boston Globe* correspondent Jessica E. Vascellaro, stated that Kerrycore.com, a site which parodies the Democrats, “receives 20,000 unique visitors a day.”<sup>30</sup>
- According to an October 27, 2003 story by Dave Astor in *Editor & Publisher Magazine*, the animations of Mark Fiore, each receive “an average of

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<sup>23</sup> From an e-mail with Patrick Hynes, 7 October, 2004.

<sup>24</sup> From an e-mail with Citizen Twain, 7 October, 2004.

<sup>25</sup> From an e-mail with Dan Noe, 7 October, 2004.

<sup>26</sup> From an e-mail with Eric Blumrich, 7 October, 2004.

<sup>27</sup> From an e-mail with John Wooden, 7 October, 2004.

<sup>28</sup> Farhad Manjoo, “White House vs. whitehouse,” Salon.com, 6 March, 2003.

<sup>29</sup> From an e-mail with Josh Koenig, 8 October, 2004.

<sup>30</sup> Jessica E. Vascellaro, *Boston Globe*, “Humor websites prove valuable in partisan warfare,” 6 August, 2004, A12.

230,000-plus visitors on the sites for which Fiore has traffic numbers.”<sup>31</sup> (The period of time over which the traffic occurred was not stated.) Astor reported that the animations created by Fiore, formerly an editorial cartoonist for the San Jose Mercury News, run on eight sites, including SFGate.com (affiliated with the San Francisco Chronicle), VillageVoice.com, and Salon.com.

- According to a story by Zachary Rodgers that appeared on Clickz Network, “During the third week of August, a site called ScaryJohnKerry.com brought in 410,000 [unique visitors].”<sup>32</sup> (This suggests that the site receives 1.6 million unique visitors a month, the most commonly used metric, and a figure that would attribute to the site more traffic than received by the Web sites of either presidential nominee.)

He also stated, “Other 527 sites enjoying massive influxes include Townhall.com, FreeRepublic.com and MoveOn.org, according to the analytics company Hitwise.”<sup>33</sup>

If accurate, these numbers reflect definite patterns of traffic and interest, but in some cases they exceed the traffic numbers reported by the candidates themselves, and are therefore open to question. For example, Rodgers cited traffic estimates provided by Hitwise for John Kerry’s site for the week ending August 22 as 648,000 unique visitors and the Bush/Cheney site’s at 428,000 unique visitors.

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<sup>31</sup> Dave Astor, “Taking Cartoons to another dimension,” *Editor & Publisher Magazine*, 27 October, 2003.

<sup>32</sup> Zachary Rodgers, “On the Online Campaign Trail,” ClickZ Network, 20 September, 2004.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

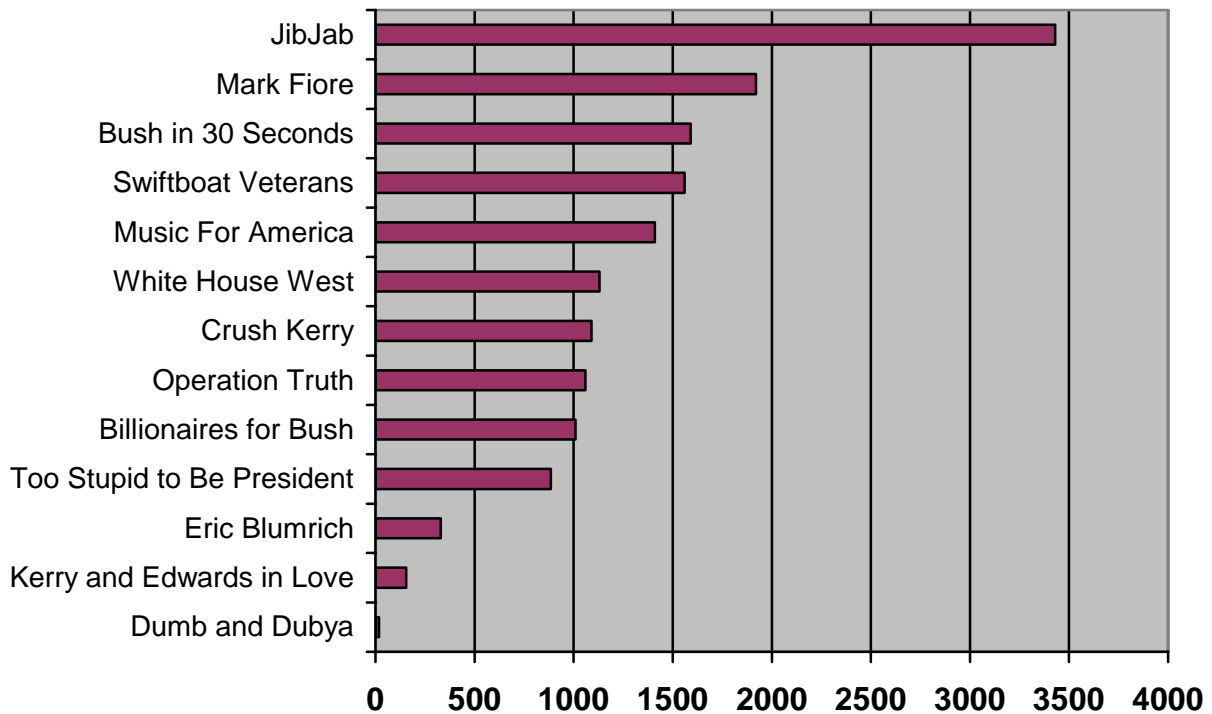
# Relative Popularity of the Videos

It is easier to determine the relative popularity of one video to another than it is to determine the actual viewership of each video. To determine their relative popularity, we performed searches on Google, Yahoo, Technorati and Lexis-Nexis to find out how often each video was mentioned on another Web site, a blog, or in a news story in a major newspaper.

## Google Links to the Videos

We tracked the popularity of the political Internet videos by keying in the name of each video into the Google search engine using the “link: function” and counted the number of links to each of them. Such a methodology, conducted on October 17, 2004, yielded the following results:

### Independent Videos - Google Links (10/17/04)

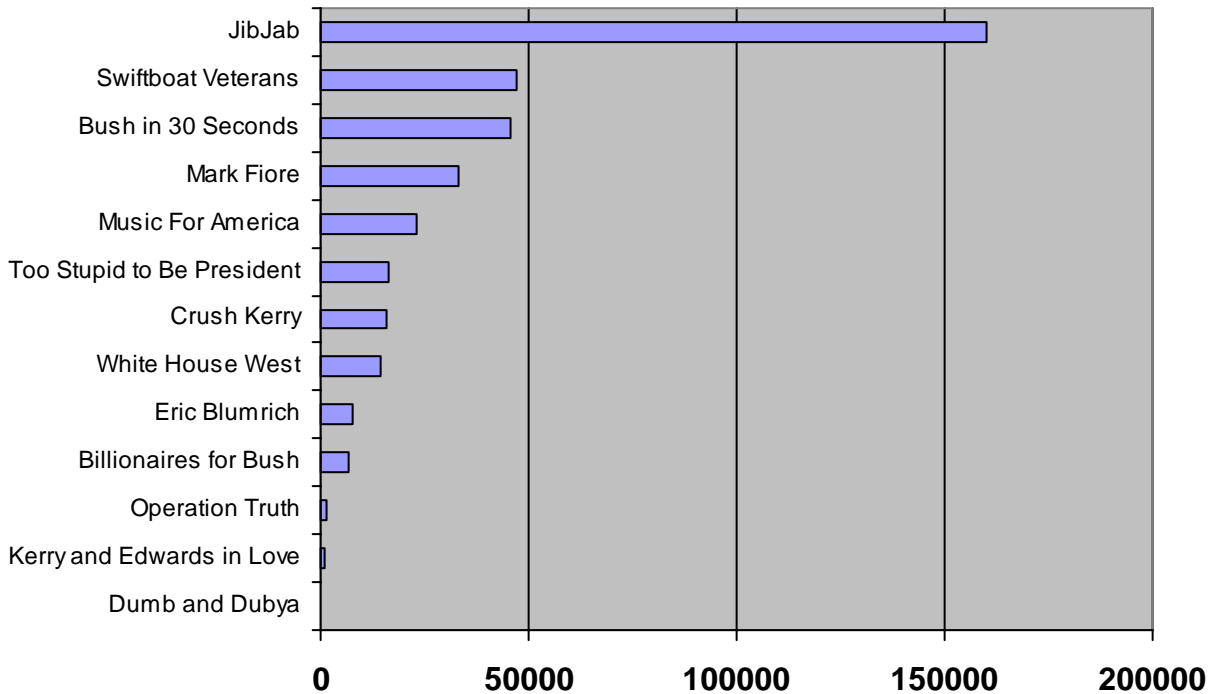


As this chart indicates, jibjab.com was the clear leader in the number of Google links it has with about 3400 total links from a Google “link” search. Coming in second with approximately half of the links (1900) was the animated site of Mark Fiore, a political cartoonist. In third place was the Bushin30seconds.org (MoveOn.org) site with 1160 links. Just behind the Bushin30seconds.org site was the Swift Boat Veterans site. Not surprisingly, of the 13 sites that were surveyed, two of the four sites that ranked highest in Google links also received the most media coverage.

### Yahoo Links to the Videos

We performed a similar search by keying in the name of each video into the Yahoo! search engine and count the number of links to each of them. Such a methodology, conducted on October 17, 2004, yielded the following results:

### Independent Videos - Yahoo Links (10/17/04)



As indicated by these two charts measuring the number of hyperlinks on pages detected by Yahoo and Google, the most popular political Internet video sites are JibJab, Swiftboat Veterans for Truth, Bush in 30 Seconds, and Mark Fiore.

Of these, JibJab is clearly the most popular political web video. This conclusion is also reflected in the chart below showing the number of references to political web videos by major newspapers. Of course, in the context of candidate and party Web sites, JibJab is much less linked-to than either Bush or Kerry's campaign sites (roughly by a factor of three).

Similarly, these charts show the popularity of "Bush in 30 Seconds" and "Swiftboat Veterans for Truth" sites, evidenced by a high number of links. This data is roughly in line with the number of press references these sites have received.

However, these charts also present a more detailed look at the audience penetration of political web video sites. Specifically, they show that *several of these independently*

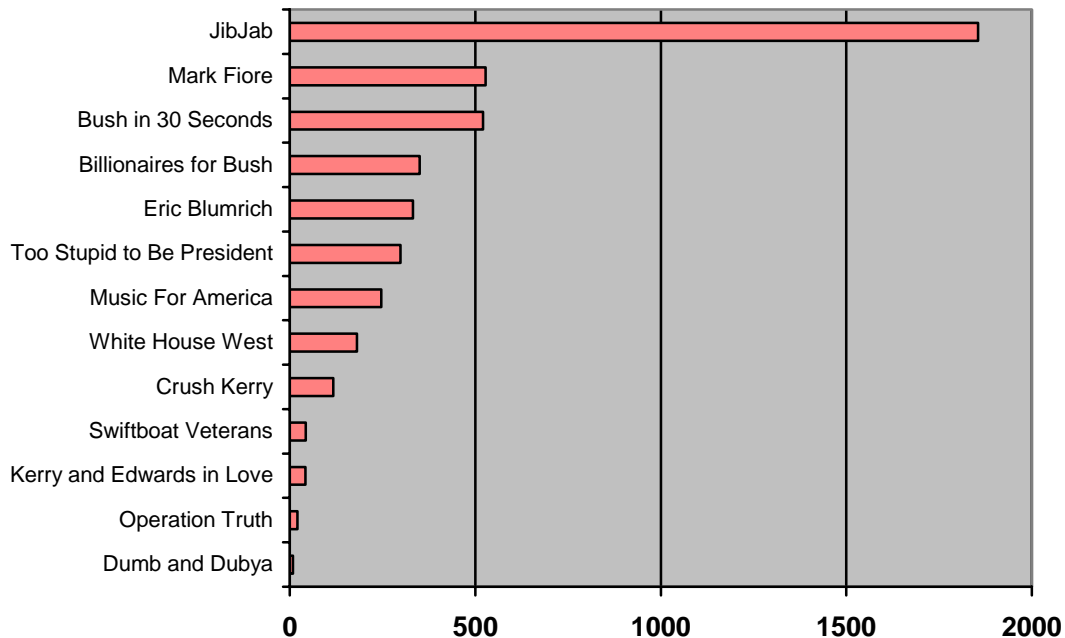
*produced web videos do have a meaningful presence on the web that is not necessarily reflected in the number of press references.* Whereas JibJab, Swiftvets, and Bush in 30 Seconds virtually monopolize the press references, the web popularity of these sites indicates that many of the videos *are* in fact being accessed by and disseminated among Internet users.

For instance, these charts show that despite a lack of press references, the websites for Mark Fiore's animations and Music For America are actually relatively popular. Indeed, according to Google data, Mark Fiore, a professional Flash cartoonist, has the second most-linked-to web video site. In both sets of rankings, Music For America follows in fifth place with White House West and Crush Kerry ranging between sixth and eighth.

### Technorati

A Technorati search further indicates that political web videos that have escaped the radar of the press nonetheless have a substantial Internet presence. Technorati monitors more than four million blogs. Thus, looking at the number of references to political web video sites through a Technorati search provides a better sense of web video popularity in the blogosphere.

**Technorati: Blog Links (10/17/04)**



There are two things of note in this chart:

1. The absence of the Swiftboat Veterans for Truth and Operation Truth sites among the most linked-to websites. According to Yahoo and Google data, the former is

widely linked to among all Internet sites; it is also one of three web video sites to be picked up by the press, with seven press references in the month of August. The latter, Operation Truth, a nonpartisan war-education effort spearheaded by soldiers that have returned from Iraq, has recently become newsworthy (a Google or Yahoo News search returns dozens of recent articles). Operation Truth is essentially a web video site, as it features “TV ads” that have not actually been aired on television, but its popularity in the blogosphere does not match up with its popularity among the press media.

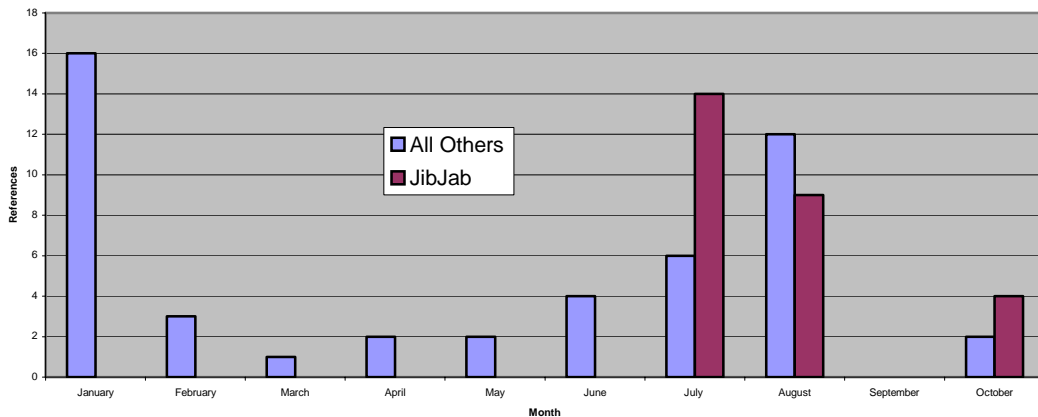
2. The presence of the Billionaires For Bush, Eric Blumrich, and TooStupidToBePresident sites in the top six. While Google and Yahoo link data place these sites at the bottom, a Technorati search reveals that they are relatively very popular with bloggers.

Essentially, this chart shows that blogs, serving as “alternative media,” are paying attention to sites that have escaped the traditional media’s radar. In particular, highly partisan and extremist web video sites appear to do significantly better in the blogosphere than they do in general on the Internet. For example, TooStupidToBePresident and the Eric Blumrich site “Bushflash,” two anti-Bush sites with extremely antagonistic and highly critical videos, score far higher on a Technorati search of the blogosphere than they do on Yahoo! or Google rankings.

### Newspaper references

Another way to track the popularity of the political Web videos is to conduct a Lexis-Nexis search of major newspapers<sup>34</sup> to determine which videos received the most mentions. This search, performed on October 15, yielded these results:

**Newspaper References to JibJab and 14 Other Internet Videos**



<sup>34</sup> The major newspapers sampled for this chart include the following: *New York Times*, *Boston Globe*, *LA Times*, *Christian Science Monitor*, *Washington Post*, *Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, *Hartford Courant*, *Newsday*, *SF Chronicle*, *Minneapolis Star-Tribune*, *Seattle Times*, *Chicago Sun-Times*, *Baltimore Sun*, *San Diego Union-Tribune*, *Miami Herald*.

As measured by the number of references to videos and their Web sites by major newspapers, this chart indicates that the majority of Internet political videos do fly “under the radar” and receive very little press attention. According to the sample in this chart, only a few videos ever receive meaningful publicity in the traditional media. Of the 20 most popular and publicized 2004 campaign web video sites, only two really drew the attention of the press media: JibJab and “Bush in 30 Seconds” (a MoveOn.org site).

The runner-up in major newspaper references, MoveOn’s “Bush in 30 Seconds” site, is the only other political web video site to receive significant attention from the press. However, as shown in the next chart, the bulk of newspaper references to this site took place in January 2004, when the site drew attention from both parties for its involvement with a controversial video entry comparing Bush to Hitler.

Beyond these top two, most web video sites only received an occasional mention in the press, often in the context of articles looking at extremism in the 2004 campaign. The two small exceptions are the Bush-Cheney ’04 and Swiftboat Veterans for Truth sites. The former was mentioned on occasion because of its high number of anti-Kerry videos including “Kerry’s Coalition of the Wild Eyed,” the Bush campaign’s response to the “Bush in 30 Seconds” Hitler video. The latter was only referred to by the press in the month of August, when the Swift Boat allegations first hit the media.

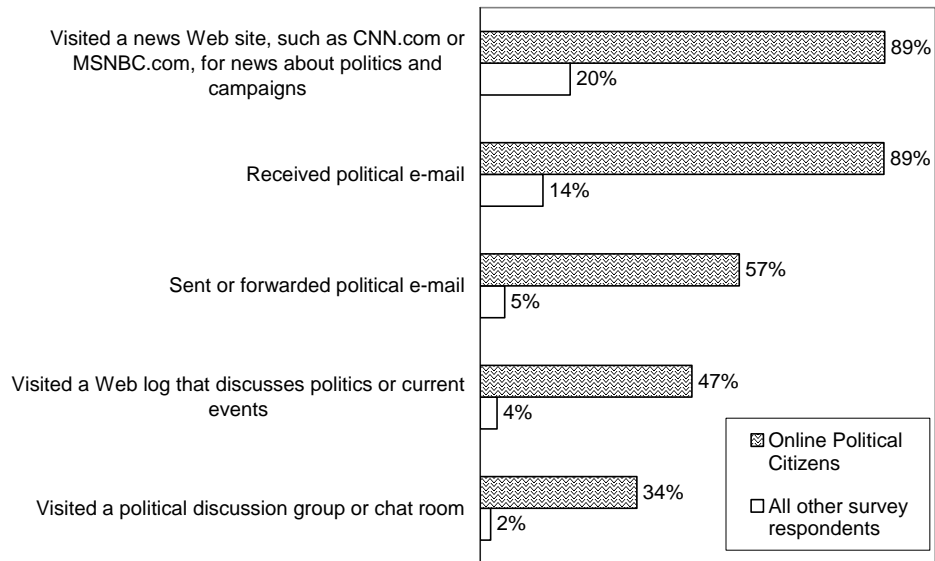
A surprising fact to emerge from this survey of major newspapers is the lack of references to America Coming Together’s “White House West” video featuring Will Farrell. This popular video circulated by e-mails and blogs. However, compared to another humorous video like JibJab, it has failed to attract the attention of the press.

### **Influential Online Political Citizens, Who Find and Forward Links to These Videos**

As we noted in our earlier study, *Online Influentials in the 2004 Presidential Election*, these online activists, or online political citizens as we called them, are disproportionately “Influentials,” a term coined by the survey research firm RoperASW (now called NOP Worldwide) to describe opinion makers who tell the others “who to vote for, what to buy, and where to vacation.” Among the general population, 10% to 12% of American adults fall into this category. Among online political citizens, a whopping 69% rank as Influentials.

Moreover, as our study also noted, 89% of these Influential online political citizens receive political e-mails, and 57% say they forward political e-mails. Thus, in finding these videos and in forwarding links to them to their large social networks, the Influential online political citizens are key to introducing and spreading this new form of political content into the general population.

Figure 18B: Online habits: A comparison of Online Political Citizens and all other respondents



Source: RoperASW national telephone survey Nov. 21-23, 2003 (n = 83 Online Political Citizens and 946 other survey respondents).

These Influential activists are also more ideologically extreme to begin with. As noted in the book, *The Influentials*, “they are less likely than the norm to describe themselves as middle of the road.”<sup>35</sup> The March 2004 data from NOP Worldwide,<sup>36</sup> which is the most recent, indicates that compared to the total adult population, Influentials skew to be more left wing and to the right right-wing than the public at large. The following chart shows the differences.


	Party Affiliation			Very Conservative	Conservative	Moderate	Liberal	Very Liberal
	Dem	Ind	Rep					
Influentials	31%	42%	25%	18%	51%	19%	30%	14%
General Adult Population	36%	38%	22%	12%	38%	35%	21%	5% <sup>37</sup>

Given that 69% of the online activists involved in the 2004 presidential election are Influentials, and that these individuals spend a more time online than average Americans suggests that the political Internet is a more ideologically extreme forum than generally recognized.

<sup>35</sup> *The Influentials*, page 38.

<sup>36</sup> E-mail from Brad Fay, NOP Worldwide, October 15, 2004.

<sup>37</sup> Results were mistakenly reported for the “Very Liberal” category and were corrected 26 October 2004.



The more extreme political views of Influentials may also have roots in a well-documented sociological phenomenon that Cass Sunstein discusses in his essay, “Echo Chambers,” a follow-up to his book, *Republic.com*. Sunstein, a professor at the University of Chicago Law School and the Department of Political Science states that

Although it has received little attention in law and political theory, group polarization is one of the robust findings in social psychology. The central point here is that the outcome of a group deliberation tends to be a more extreme version of the initial predisposition of group members. Deliberating groups thus move not toward the middle, but toward within-group extremes. For example, a group of people who tend to oppose affirmative action is likely, after discussion, to oppose affirmative action with more vehemence than before.<sup>38</sup>

This tendency toward extreme views, Sunstein notes, is caused by two social influences. First, individuals respond to the dispositions of others with whom they agree, and thus the argument pool skews in that direction. Secondly, people represent their views in accordance with how they wish to be perceived by the people around them in order to gain acceptance. If they are opposed to the viewpoint being expressed, they may not speak out. Or if they tend toward the viewpoint being expressed, they will move in the direction of even more enthusiasm in order to stand out or one-up the speaker.

In either case, social influences as much as factual information may cause people to shift their beliefs on an issue. The fact that Influentials participate in more organizations and have stronger ties to those groups than do average Americans may contribute to their tendency to veer towards the political extremes – to be more conservative or more liberal -- than their peers.

Thus, the already-ideologically extreme group of Influentials may be having a disproportionate effect on the wider electorate when they spread these funny/mean videos, either by posting them to blogs or by finding them on blogs and forwarding them to their large personal networks.

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<sup>38</sup> *Echo Chambers: Bush v. Gore, Impeachment, and Beyond*, Cass Sunstein, Princeton University Press (New Jersey, 2001), p. 7.

# Conclusion

The Institute for Politics, Democracy & the Internet drafted this report and sponsored the accompanying forum to open the door for serious consideration of what appears to be a trend, and one that is bound to proliferate. Millions of Americans have already watched “This Land” and “Good to Be in DC” by JibJab, which have gained extraordinary attention. A few other videos have received some attention from the mainstream media, but most have been largely ignored. Among those who are politically active, however, these independently-produced videos have received a surprising amount of attention.

In the 1870’s, Congressman William M. Tweed, more popularly remembered as Boss Tweed of Tammany Hall, complained about the acid drawings by Thomas Nast that appeared in *Harper’s Weekly*. Because many of his immigrant constituents were illiterate, he was less concerned about unfavorable articles, but “We gotta stop them damned pictures,” he privately complained.<sup>39</sup> Tweed was certainly not alone in recognizing that pictures have power far exceeding the written word, a fact all the more true if the pictures are moving.

Americans have been lambasting political candidates since the first American presidential election when George Washington was accused of war crimes and monarchical ambitions.<sup>40</sup> But 2004 is different. We are at the beginning of an era in which disturbing and powerful videos can be produced by anyone with \$1000 worth of equipment and software and moderate technical skills. Judging by the current crop of independently-produced political videos, their likely effect will be to further exacerbate the partisanship of an already polarized electorate.

Some of the producers of these videos would surely disagree. They believe that they offer a much needed antidote to the homogenized news and information provided by large media conglomerates and elected officials. Moreover, however offensive some may find the creations of these independent videographers, the First Amendment guards their political speech – as it does everyone’s -- with a particular ferocity, and rightly so.

The views of those who consider these videos scurrilous and the views of those who hail their fresh perspective are not necessarily mutually exclusive. And neither should find solace in the fact that the videos must abide by the weak constraints imposed by libel and defamation laws, especially as they apply to public figures, and by the even weaker campaign finance laws. It is fair to say that these laws, not to mention the patience of our civil society, will surely be tested as this phenomenon continues to grow.

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<sup>39</sup> Anecdote.com.

<sup>40</sup> *Feeding the Beast: The White House Versus the Press*, Kenneth T. Walsh, Xlibris Corporation (2002).



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The Institute for Politics, Democracy & the Internet

The Graduate School of Political Management

The George Washington University

805 21<sup>st</sup> St., NW

Suite 401

Washington, DC 20052

1.800.367.4776 toll free

[ipdi@ipdi.org](mailto:ipdi@ipdi.org)