

NSF-Sponsored Workshop Proposal

"YouTube and the 2008 Election Cycle in the United States"

April 16 & 17, 2009—Amherst, Massachusetts | <http://www.umass.edu/polsci/youtube/>

This will be a two-day University of Massachusetts Amherst workshop jointly hosted by: the Departments of Political Science & Computer Science; the Science, Technology, and Society Initiative; the Center for Public Policy & Administration; the College of Social and Behavioral Sciences; the *Journal of Information Technology & Politics*; the Qualitative Data Analysis Program; and the National Center for Digital Government.

Intellectual Merit

Web 2.0 is changing the landscape of politics. Leaders of the nascent Web science field argue that the “Web is changing at a rate that may be greater than even the most knowledgeable researcher’s ability to observe it” (Hendler et al., 2008). In political science, we lack baseline measures, established metrics, integrative tools, and uniform repositories to support theory building for the “Web science” of politics in a coherent manner. The building blocks for an interdisciplinary Web science are emerging in a distributed and ad hoc manner. Presently these new tools and techniques exist in isolated industry and research labs, scattered agencies of government, and experiments on home computers. This workshop will bring together political and computer science researchers, as well as scholars and students from related disciplines, with the specific goal of studying the electoral impact of user-created YouTube content. It will boost efforts to bring basic research in computer science into the domain of politics (Cardie & Wilkerson, 2008). The task of capturing, archiving, sorting, and assessing large text and audio-visual datasets is a difficult basic research challenge. So, too, is the intellectual challenge of defining appropriate research problems and approaches across wildly divergent disciplines with dissimilar reward structures. This conference will establish YouTube as a viable “testbed” for advances on many such fronts, and it will diversify and launch new teams and networks of scholars working on related projects. It will bridge known disciplinary divides.

Broader Impacts

Pundits and scholars have proclaimed the existence of “YouTube” effects. Political science, however, struggles to make operational credible measures or tests of such effects, or to integrate them into traditional scholarship on campaigns. As a result, it is not clear how to teach YouTube in the undergraduate classroom. Much like anecdotal references to television versus radio audiences for the Kennedy-Nixon debates, so-called “YouTube moments” demonstrate the significance of a particular shift in media technology, but also highlight the need for systematic interdisciplinary efforts to understand it. This conference will demonstrate new technical and analytic opportunities and highlight where there is a need for more focused research and tool development. It will advance the cause of pure discovery by cross-fertilizing the represented disciplines and result in new teams and future proposals to the NSF. The narrow impact will be on the study of politics in the Web 2.0 phase. One broader impact is to initiate new basic research that will be fundable by both the SBE and CISE directorates at NSF. Beyond the basic research, the applications likely to result from work in this domain will make the political content and context of user-created online materials more visible, navigable, and comprehensible to lay people and scholars alike. New platforms for capturing and manipulating YouTube data will also open opportunities for teaching and learning about YouTube as well as other possible Web 2.0 effects on citizenship and democracy. User-friendly instrumentation for research, deeper scholarly networks, and lasting interdisciplinary partnerships will open up avenues for doctoral students hoping to conduct empirical dissertation research on the political impact of the Web. Published results from the workshop and special issue of the *Journal of Information Technology & Politics* will shape future political uses of YouTube by candidates and campaigns.