

ELECTION LENS

SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE
360° VIEW OF ELECTIONS

Vines, memes and sound bites can make or break a president – **Angelo Fernando**



MEDIA SERVICES PHOTOFILM (ANUSH WJESINHA)

It is early November 2016, and the West Wing staff is taking down the drapes, putting away Barack Obama's golf clubs and packing the First Family's accoutrements. Meanwhile, voters are preparing for a multiple-choice exam...

The examination includes a question along the lines of: 'Would you vote for one of the following – (A) A politically-incorrect performance artiste; (B) Someone who massages the truth (C); An outsider with no hands-on experience of flying the mother ship; (D) Someone with the same surname of a former president?'

It's a tough question. Elections are trick questions, anyway. We only have information provided by the candidates and the media, to get it right.

Presently, in the US, much of it is defined by televised presidential debates. Indeed, the debates represent political theatre set up by TV networks, so the real issues are sandwiched between personal jabs. They are play-



ing to the camera, after all. No one can quite explain why the most inexperienced candidate in the Republican Party line-up of 17 (at the time of writing) – Donald Trump – is enjoying such high ratings.

One simple explanation is that he understands the camera lens better than the electorate.

I watched one of his live news conferences in Iowa, where he was interrupted by TV journalist Jorge Ramos from Univision – a Hispanic network. Ramos was clearly breaking protocol. Trump cut him short, by telling him to "go back to Univision!"

Ramos continued to ask his questions, and security arrived to escort him out of the room. There were dozens of other network cameras rolling. It made for great theatre and post-conference analysis. At least, there's a basis for this feud – Univision withdrew its sponsorship of the Miss America pageant, which is one of Trump's businesses.

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However, his crass, misogynistic attack on Fox TV host Megyn Kelly was completely unprovoked. Despite these head-shaking media moments – or perhaps, because of them – Trump is leading the Republican race. He feeds the talk shows; ergo, free media.

MORE THAN PR Technology, in general – and cameras, in particular – are determining factors in presidential runs. Ever since Richard Nixon and John F. Kennedy faced off in front of the cameras in September 1960, voters have been trained to take stock of a candidate more from images than words. But today, it is no longer Public Relations 1.0.

The groundswell of offline and online conversations fed by image-saturated new media is creating new possibilities and unforeseen problems for those in the race trying to get ahead of the pack. Today, it is possible to follow real-time commentaries on Twitter, Facebook, Instagram or Vine, while a campaign speech is being delivered.

A Vine is a mere six seconds of video recorded through an app, on a smart device that allows the video to be shared instantly. Though widely used by musicians, puppy lovers and teenagers, Jeb Bush is also one of the candidates who uses Vine and has 1,300-plus followers.

One of these Vines captures a heated exchange between Bush and Trump, over an apparent insult to the former's Mexican-born wife. This kind of spat would have been given very little play in post-debate analysis; but segmented and published in this manner, it gives Bush a much-needed image of a tough guy facing up to a bully.

As the campaigns build up, this seems to be the election where the results are determined by a more engaged voter base that is comfortable with richer, quicker media. Let's call it Media 3.0.

Media 3.0 is a unique combination of real-time sound bites, trending topics, Twitter attacks and responses (by real candidates and anonymous attack dogs), fake journalists planting questions at meetings where candidates show up, and paid secret operatives who run 'war rooms' that go after competitors, to embarrass them.

The 'fake' journalists belong to a semi-professional group called 'video trackers.' They are not new, but their video tactics have evolved. Video trackers are used by candidates to trail one another and capture hundreds of hours of footage, on the off chance that a controversial response to an audience question or a gaffe could be used as ammunition.

One recent report (by National Public Radio) noted that 17 trackers worked for a political organisation known as the American Bridge 21st Century. What the candidate says, or refuses to say, and every off-the-cuff remark even prior to the event or stage-managed press conference becomes

YouTube material. These 'reports' could be edited into out-of-context sound bites and clips that are shared by an unsuspecting public. Voters will eventually use this material to answer the important multiple-choice questions.

INFO OVERLOAD To many, it may seem that Media 3.0 and video are providing more visibility and transparency to a process that too often took place in the shadows. One did not know if a talking head on a popular TV network's report was 'planted' by a political action committee, which happens all the time in PR 1.0.

US ELECTION FACTS

- ❑ **The six-second Vine account by Jeb Bush: <https://vine.co/u/1256116007937126400>**
- ❑ **Donald Trump has more than four million Twitter followers**
- ❑ **Carly Fiorina had 554,000 Twitter followers at 18 September 2015**
- ❑ **People who listened to the 1960 Nixon-Kennedy TV debate which was aired on radio thought Nixon had clinched it – but the majority of US households that watched it on TV thought Kennedy won!**



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There was a slim chance of checking out a 'fact' or statistic cited by a candidate. If it was contested, and the revised fact or statistic made it to the news, it would get buried or neglected... because more facts and dubious claims would show up each day.

The social media eco-system in which today's elections take place offers a 360° view, with multiple camera angles, so to speak. As soon as an issue is discussed, instant fact-checking and rebuttals swirl around it, supported by visual aids such as infographics, archival footage and sound bites which could be played alongside the issue.

We are now more connected to the process, because we're allowed to play a part in it. We could become freelance video trackers and fact-checkers too, publishing them on our own feeds!

To others, this always on, instant replay video and audio-saturated election campaign represents information overload. We are still 12 months away from the US presidential election, and ordinary citizens don't always have that amount of passion for the process, or even the outcome. So despite all the richer, deeper and more accessible information, there is no guarantee that it will mobilise more voters.

Will it 'get the opinionated out?' Absolutely! Will it 'get the voters out?' That's to be seen, on 8 November 2016. Voter turnout was a dismal 54.9 percent in the 2012 presidential election, and has hovered around the 50 percent mark for the past 10 elections.

Candidates are now being cautious about what they say, and how they frame what they say, leading them to deliver well-scripted lines. Just watch Hillary Clinton! That's another way of saying that most public appearances (televised outside the debates) are dull and predictable.

THE UNSCRIPTED This is where Donald Trump comes charging in, because he's completely uninhibited and unscripted. He has the knack (or is it an uncontrollable urge?) to say whatever pops into his mind, making him a refreshing, albeit crass, personality.

He is extremely aware of the fact that the cameras are always live, and exploits this. Following his highly publicised attack on Megyn Kelly, Trump took on Republican presidential candidate Carly Fiorina with crude remarks about her appearance. It was an interview for Rolling Stone magazine, not on camera per se; but the attack generated a line made for Media 3.0.

Through his monologue, Trump may have highlighted what election campaigns are really about, and the votes they garner – it's more about personalities than policies. They do try to weigh in on issues, since that's what political pundits say people really care about. But even if they're armed with talking points about issues, these are often submerged in the non-issues.

Clinton has taken a different approach to the always on Media 3.0. She has avoided it. In the first few months of campaigning, despite a formidable social media team behind her, she has maintained a low profile. Yes, her campaign signed for a Snapchat account, and her one video was converted into a Vine (probably not by her team). The accidental Vine about 'chillin' in Cedar Rapids became a meme and parody, to boot – so much for not engaging in, or understanding, how video saturation is part and parcel of being in the race.

Since Trump is unscripted, the overexposure is making him look unprepared to deal with big issues such as foreign policy, immigration and economic growth. In a few short months, we will know which two candidates can compete in a Media 3.0 world.