

Political 'Tracker' Is Looking for Err Time

Video cameras are now a valued campaign tool. A foe's gaffes can land on YouTube in a flash.

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HAVRE, Mont. — Kevin O'Brien was there in June when U.S. Sen. Conrad Burns, a Republican running for a fourth term with a tough stand on illegal immigration, joked that the roofers working on his house might be illegal.

O'Brien was there with his video camera in August when Burns halted in mid-speech to take a call on his cellphone from the "nice little Guatemalan man" painting his house.

O'Brien was there when Burns appeared to nod off at a farm bill hearing.

And O'Brien was here in this north central Montana rail town last week when Burns strode into the Duck Inn for a luncheon appearance.

"Hello, Kevin!" Burns boomed across the room.

"He's with the Democrats," Burns explained to the small crowd. "Everywhere we go, he goes."

The 24-year-old, baby-faced O'Brien is a "tracker" — a videographer who follows an opposing candidate, hoping for a gaffe, an awkward moment, a bit of hypocrisy or inconsistency that could be campaign fodder.

Trackers — using inexpensive hand-held cameras and having the ability to post clips almost instantly on YouTube and other video-sharing websites — have become a major element in several campaigns.

The most notable tracker moment this year came in Virginia when Republican Sen. George Allen used the word "macaca" to describe his Democratic tracker, a 20-year-old Indian American man.

Allen's critics say the word was a racial insult; Allen says it was a "made-up word" that intended no offense. The senator nonetheless apologized, and the issue dominated news coverage of the campaign for days.

In some ways, the work of trackers is not new. Opposing campaigns have long followed what the other guy was saying, trolling for a slip or worse. In 1987, for instance, Sen. Joseph R. Biden Jr.'s presidential campaign was torpedoed when opponents unearthed the Delaware Democrat's use of bits of speeches lifted from other public figures.

But back then, opposing campaigns had to either persuade the news media to pick it up or invest in a campaign ad to get their message on the air, said Michael Cornfield, vice president at ElectionMall.com, a nonpartisan campaign-technology firm.

With YouTube and related technologies, publicizing material now is much less cumbersome — and less expensive.

"In the past, people were assigned to shadow campaigns and had cameras or tape recorders, but they never had a way to instantly post what it is they came up with," said

Cornfield, who is also an adjunct professor of political management at George Washington University.

Although candidates of both parties post their television advertisements on YouTube, the Democrats appear more inclined — so far — to use the technology.

In the Montana race, Republicans have periodically tracked appearances of Burns' Democratic opponent, state Senate President Jon Tester.

But the GOP has posted only one: a recent call by Tester to repeal the Patriot Act.

"It's fair to say that their campaign is more into YouTube than ours is," said Jason Klindt, a Burns spokesman.

Several of the Burns moments captured by O'Brien have worked their way into the Montana news cycle and fed discussion about Burns' reputation for verbal miscues and worse. In the past, the senator has apologized for using racial epithets.

According to YouTube, video of Burns getting sleepy — taped by O'Brien on his Sony Handycam camcorder and dubbed "Conrad Burns' Naptime" — has been watched more than 75,000 times.

That is not bad audience response for a southside Chicago native who had never operated a camera professionally before joining the Tester campaign.

And despite racking up more than 16,000 miles in his gold Nissan Sentra with its Illinois plates, O'Brien has not really captured a "macaca' moment" on the Montana campaign trail.

Barreling down U.S. Highway 87 the other morning, O'Brien, a state Democratic employee, said his job was consuming, exhausting — and a lot of fun.

"I think this is sort of a pretty-early-in-your-life kind of thing," explained O'Brien, who said he had seen his girlfriend only twice since April: She's busy too, working as a field director in the Senate campaign of Sheldon Whitehouse, a Rhode Island Democrat.

"It means I'm on the road a lot," he added, noting proudly that he had been to 50 of Montana's 56 counties.

O'Brien recounted one 6 a.m. start in the summer, with about 700 miles of driving in front of him, when he crested a hill and saw a herd of antelope running across the eastern Montana range.

O'Brien, who majored in political science and history at Illinois State University, is clearly a political junkie.

Raised in a staunchly Democratic family, he has an impressively encyclopedic command of Senate and House races this year, and enough savvy to go off the record when asked his assessment of potential presidential candidates for 2008: Why risk offending a potential employer?

He volunteered for the U.S. Senate campaign of Barack Obama, an Illinois Democrat who went on to win, and worked as a field operative in Ohio for Democratic presidential nominee Sen. John F. Kerry.

After that campaign, he migrated to Washington for a job with the nonprofit Wal-Mart Watch. But when the opportunity came up to work for the Montana Democrats, O'Brien said: Why not?

Tracking Burns is just one of many duties for O'Brien, who typically works 14-hour days and has his base in a windowless basement office in downtown Helena, the state capital. He earns \$2,750 a month and lives in a nearby studio apartment.

When Burns is in Washington, or otherwise does not have a public campaign appearance, O'Brien performs routine campaign communications chores.

But almost anytime Burns appears in public, O'Brien is there with the camera. Unlike Burns, however, he does not have access to an airplane, so occasionally O'Brien has to leapfrog events in different cities, relying on a local volunteer to record a Burns appearance in between. He estimated he had about 50 hours of Burns tape, with several hundred hours of travel time put in to get it.

Burns, said O'Brien, "has always been very nice to me," though occasionally Burns' supporters have hissed at him or tried to block his camera angle when the senator has pointed out that there is a Democratic operative afoot.

O'Brien, who often dresses in jeans and a button-down shirt, said he had made a point of being "professional" in his dealings with Burns. He usually does not tape the senator's one-on-one conversations with voters, even though he could argue for the right to do so because they occur in public.

His future after the Nov. 7 election is up in the air. O'Brien would like to reunite with his girlfriend in Washington, and a Tester victory could certainly lead to a job offer on the new senator's staff.

Just what effect O'Brien's work will have on the race may not be clear until the ballots are counted.

It's possible, of course, that his presence lessens the chance of a Burns gaffe. The senator seems to be watching himself more closely as the campaign nears the last stretch.

As he was speaking at the Duck Inn here last week, the senator's cellphone started chirping. Burns reached into his jacket pocket and, casting a split-second look at O'Brien that contained the hint of a grin, snapped the call off without answering.

Burns, 71, said he believed O'Brien was a "nice young man," and he regularly makes a show of offering O'Brien food at campaign rallies, claiming that the Democrats aren't feeding him well enough. (O'Brien ritually declines. "It's kind of hard to eat anyway when you're holding a camera," he said.)

But Burns added after an appearance at a gun show in Great Falls that he didn't like what O'Brien was sent there to do.

"It's 'gotcha' politics," Burns said in an interview. "This is an adult country, and our politics should be at an adult level."

He did concede there was a possible upside in having the young man present.

"Kevin helps me to be more articulate," said Burns, "which sometimes I am not."