

YouTube becomes political battleground

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WASHINGTON (AP) -- When Republican Sen. Conrad Burns briefly struggled to keep his eyes open at a Montana farm bill hearing last Thursday, a state Democratic party operative was right there taping it. Within hours, the video of Burns was on YouTube and available to viewers around the world.

"It speaks to the faster pace of campaigns in the Internet world," said Matt McKenna, spokesman for Jon Tester, Burns' Democratic opponent. The operative, 23-year-old Kevin O'Brien, follows Burns and tapes him whenever he can. If the video is good enough, the Tester campaign will post it on YouTube, the popular video-sharing Web site.

While viewing the video of an apparently sleepy Burns, YouTube visitors are given a menu of several other videos posted by the Democrats, including Tester's campaign ads. None of Burns' ads appear on the site.

"We direct people to our Web site, not YouTube," said Burns spokesman Jason Klindt. He characterized the YouTube posting as a "gotcha" video, saying Burns had gotten little sleep the night before the farm hearing because a flight had been canceled.

YouTube has become yet another Internet tool to rouse party activists, political junkies and office procrastinators. Strategists say it's an entertaining new way to directly connect with voters.

Campaigns "have always used video cameras, but the difference this cycle is that YouTube allows information to get uploaded and out to the public a lot faster than it has in the past," said Phil Singer, spokesman for the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee.

Singer won't say if there's an orchestrated Democratic campaign to use YouTube, but a user named "DSCC2006" has posted several Democratic campaign ads and news clips favorable to party candidates. That alias belongs to the director of online communications for the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee.

Republicans appear to have fewer postings on the site, and National Republican Senatorial Committee spokesman Brian Walton said the party has not made a specific effort to use YouTube. He said Republicans have used the Internet in other ways, including Web sites that mock Democratic congressional candidates.

Mocking and poking fun are part of the new campaign age, said Democratic consultant Jenny Backus.

"The Internet has proven there's an audience for funny and weird," she said.

The YouTube videos could be considered "video press releases" that have a better chance of making the evening news than traditional campaign missives, Backus added.

"It's a way to break through," she said.

One YouTube video has caused major difficulties for the re-election campaign of Sen. George Allen, R-Va. In the video, Allen calls a rival's campaign staffer "Macaca" and tells him, "Welcome to America."

The staffer, S.R. Sidarth, a native Virginian of Indian descent who works for Democratic challenger Jim Webb, has been following and videotaping Allen. After the campaign posted footage of Allen's remark on YouTube, it soon made its way to cable news shows and newspapers, provoking an outcry from Indian-American groups.

Minnesota and Missouri have also become YouTube battlegrounds.

Users in Minnesota have posted critical clips of Democratic Senate candidate Amy Klobuchar and her Republican opponent, Mark Kennedy, on the campaign trail.

Roy Temple, a veteran Missouri Democratic strategist who runs a political blog, has posted several videos critical of Republican Sen. Jim Talent, who is up for re-election this year.

Temple says online video isn't going to replace television ads, but it's a new way to communicate.

"It's an enormous opportunity for the public to get access to, in some cases, less filtered information," he said. "Video is fascinating."