YouTube, Facebook, MySpace put candidates and voters side by side

by Dana Wilkie

WASHINGTON - Barack Obama is looking awfully presidential in his crisp dark suit, pumping hands at a University of New Hampshire rally, grinning at the cheers of an adoring audience of coeds.

Right next to him is a college-aged dude named Ian - sloppy T-shirt, unshaven, and clearly on a first-name basis with the Illinois senator and Democratic presidential candidate.

"Hey, Barack," says Ian. "Even if you're president- we can talk and there's no fear of, like, getting shot."

Whoa. How did this guy get past security?

Actually Ian and Obama are side by side on the video-sharing Web site known as YouTube, one of the latest Web-based venues presidential contenders are using in hopes of luring the attention - and votes - of America's younger set.

With voter turnout among young people rising from 36 percent in the 2000 election to 47 percent in 2004, the 2008 White House candidates are signing on to youth-oriented Web venues with a vengeance. They're posting their campaign positions on YouTube.com, chronicling campaign stops on the heavily trafficked hangout known as MySpace.com and promoting campaign rallies on Facebook.com, the social networking Web site with some 10 million users.

"This age group is poised to be the age group that makes a winning difference in a close presidential race," said Heather Smith, director of Young Voter Strategies at George Washington University. "And, to engage these young voters, a campaign must communicate about issues that matter, through mediums that are familiar."

In late February, YouTube announced a new voter-education drive - "You Choose '08" - allowing political candidates to showcase their own videos. All the major presidential candidates have posted videos on the site, giving them at least some control over less flattering information about them - profiles, spoofs, critical tirades - that can be viewed on YouTube.

Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., has also created an online social network called McCainSpace where his supporters can craft their own pages and connect with one another. One Facebook group backing Obama, which has more than 300,000 members, helped lure several thousand people to a recent Obama rally at a

Virginia university.

Not only are YouTube and other networks free, they can be a source of campaign cash. Obama, for instance, urges Facebook followers to make a small campaign contribution.

Whether the candidates can keep the attention of younger voters remains to be seen. While polls show young voters care about the war in Iraq, the cost of higher education, the minimum wage and global warming, more than half of Americans age 18 to 24 who are eligible to vote typically don't go to the polls Election Day. About 70 percent of Americans who are 45 or older cast ballots, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

YouTube started two years ago as a personal video sharing service, but it's since blossomed into an entertainment destination with videos of current events, hobbies and most recently the voter-education effort - a one-stop shop of candidate-created videos about their speeches, rallies, TV appearances and public policy positions.

The site also allows your average Joe to post his two cents - using homemade videos to respond to candidates or converse with other Web visitors.

That can make for some interesting exchanges.

For instance, a young man calling himself "James" uses a homemade video to lodge some complaints about the YouTube postings of Rep. Duncan Hunter, the Alpine Republican running for president.

"The web is not like television," lectures James, noting that Hunter's videos had received fewer than 500 viewings. "Candidates should post videos specifically to engage with the YouTube community. The people won't come to your message. That means it's time to bring your message to the people."

And then there's Ian, who used his homemade video to effuse about Web sites that can put a presidential candidate such as Obama, and a regular guy such as himself, in touch: "We have the potential for, like, you and I to have a video conversation, even if you're president," Ian says. "We can talk and there's no fear of, like, getting shot. There's no need for Secret Service - it takes the fear out of the communication, this technology."

Because it is a free-for-all, however, some YouTube postings can be eyebrow-raising, or even downright X-rated.

One video is a cartoon spoof of Hunter's tough stance on illegal immigration, modeled on the hit TV show "All in the Family." The video depicts Hunter as an Archie Bucker-like character coming home to a clueless Edith Bunker.

"Oh, Duncan," says the Edith character. "You're home from Washington. You've been gone so long, we thought you forgot where you lived!"

Replies the Hunter character: "Yeah, well I barely recognized the place. It's full of Mexicans."

When first asked about YouTube's content earlier this year, a Hunter spokesman said he pulled the congressman's video from the site after taking a closer look.

"We linked our web site to YouTube initially," said the spokesman, Roy Tyler. "I was not happy with some of the content that played next to our videos, so we discontinued the link."

But about a month later, Hunter was back on the site with dozens of videos - standing beside the border's double fence, discussing trade with China, talking about his anti-abortion stance, announcing his candidacy. That, even though Tyler admitted he was "still uncomfortable with some of YouTube's content."

Perhaps the most notorious YouTube political clip so far was the one posted by a Barack Obama supporter that attracted more than 1.5 million viewers: It casts Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton, D-N.Y., as Big Brother and depicts her supporters as unthinking drones.

Ben Unger of the Public Interest Research Group warns that candidates cannot rely too heavily on the Web to woo young voters.

"If there is a pitfall, it would be that candidates think that YouTube is the only way to reach out to young people," said Unger, who is field director for PIRG's New Voter Project. "These candidates can and should be doing more - talking to young people about the issues they care about, coming to campus, spending their advertising money in youth markets."

YouTube, Facebook, MySpace put candidates and voters side by side by Dana Wilkie