

The New York Times March 17, 2008

THE MEDIA EQUATION

Sound Bite That Has Some Teeth

By [DAVID CARR](#)

On Jan. 31, Derrick Ashong, a 32-year-old musician, dropped off his pal, Shaunelle Curry, at the Democratic primary debate taking place at the [Kodak Theater](#) in Hollywood. After shrugging off her suggestion that he join her in carrying a sign for [Barack Obama](#) outside the theater — his band was leaving on tour the next day — he reconsidered and walked back to join her.

Carrying a sign saying “¡Sí, se puede!” (Yes, we can!), he joined a throng that was milling around in the background of the live CNN shot focused on the anchor Wolf Blitzer. Then a guy named Mike carrying a video camera came walking by and began peppering Mr. Ashong with a series of skeptical and very pointed questions.

“So why are you for Obama?” he asked. It was clear from his approach that he expected a dimwitted answer, an expectation that he was about to talk to another acolyte smitten by Senator Obama’s rock star persona.

But, as it turned out, Mr. Ashong, who was raised in Ghana and elsewhere, was glad to be asked. For almost six minutes — about a century in broadcast television years — Mr. Ashong, who has an immigrant’s love of democracy and the furrowed brow of a Brookings fellow, held forth on universal health care, single-payer approaches and public-private partnerships.

“A lot of these H.M.O.’s are publicly traded companies anyway, but I don’t think we want to create a market for health care per se, like we don’t want to create a futures market in health care,” he said. And so on.

Cute stuff. Highly informative. But not the kind of political discourse that generally captures a wider audience.

But here's the weird part. On Feb. 2, the interview of Mr. Ashong was posted on a YouTube channel called "The Latest Controversy," where supporters of both Senator [Hillary Rodham Clinton](#) and Senator Obama are asked very aggressively to justify their choice of candidates. The video blew up, drawing more than 850,000 views. And after that huge response to his policy analysis, Mr. Ashong decided to double down and explain the emotional component of his support for Obama in a [follow-up video](#) that was posted Feb. 11 and received 300,000 views.

Taken together, that means a guy who was looking to (anonymously) show a little love for a candidate was able to look into the camera for more than 13 minutes combined and draw in more than a million clicks with an impassioned but reasoned pitch.

At a time when politics and popular culture are still in an awkward mating ritual, Mr. Ashong inadvertently tapped into the youthquake that is shaking up the campaign. While the clip could have been lost among some of the popular rubble at YouTube ("Let me see, do I watch a tutorial on health care or Tori Spelling on 'Jimmy Kimmel?"), [Andrew Sullivan](#) at The Atlantic blogged about it, as did Think on These Things, a political blog. Then The Economist chimed in, which led to an editor at The New York Times hearing about it and — well, you get the idea.

Part of what is under way has to do with a subversion of expectations. Watch broadcast news and you will see any number of man-on-the-street interviews. In this trope, a person with good hair solicits an enthusiastic sound bite from a supporter, pats her on the head and then moves on. But in this instance, neither party played by the rules. The journalist is never seen and is extremely aggressive in asking questions, while the subject, Mr. Ashong, does not so much take the bait as reel in the guy setting it out there.

“What you have here is two amateurs who are not acting like what they represent,” said Lee Rainie of the [Pew Internet and American Life Project](#). “The ‘reporter’ is very probing, and then the ‘subject’ gives as good as he gets. It is a classic viral moment.”

Since the phenomenon surfaced, some people on the Web have suggested that Mr. Ashong, with the trade dress of a hip-hop star (he is actually an M.C. who performs as D.N.A.) and the predilections of a wonk, was a plant by the Obama campaign or that the interview was a setup. But Mr. Ashong says he had never before seen or talked to Mike, the interviewer behind “The Latest Controversy” (a message left for Mike on his YouTube site was not answered). And Mr. Ashong said he had not been in touch with the Obama campaign before the interview and has not been since.

Not that Mr. Ashong is some sort of naïf. The son of a pediatrician, he grew up in Ghana, Brooklyn, Saudi Arabia and Qatar. In addition to performing with his band Soulfège, Mr. Ashong is a public speaker, an actor who had a role in “Amistad” and an entrepreneur who is putting together a media company called Take Back the Mic, which is an effort to use niche marketing to bring music and other media to a global market.

In a tidy bit of coincidence, his spontaneous interview on the street demonstrated the power of viral marketing in a way he is hoping to replicate with his band and his company.

“It’s weird, because right when this happened, our song was named Billboard’s hip-hop song of 2007, but this was so much bigger,” Mr. Ashong said by phone from Costa Rica, where he is speaking at a conference.

“Certain types of discourse are better suited to the Web,” he said. “There has been so much talk about how this campaign is all about style and no substance, and this video contradicts that. There are reasons that we support Obama, and it has to do with the issues. You can’t get that on CNN right now,

you can't get that on MSNBC right now, and young people saw it on YouTube and they took it."

Mr. Ashong followed up his sidewalk bulletin to the world with a direct address to the camera, an impassioned seven-minute soliloquy about democracy that would not be out of place in the "John Adams" miniseries unfurling on [HBO](#).

"I have a lot of friends who were born and raised here who take what we have for granted," he said by phone. "Immigrants who come here fall in love with the concepts and principles this country was founded on, even if America does not always live up to them."

David Burstein, 19, who made a documentary about the current youth engagement in the political process called "18 in '08," said Mr. Ashong's popularity is a vivid reminder that young audiences show up to this election with a different set of needs.

"Now that the campaigns are getting into this back and forth, young people are tuning out all the sniping," he said. "They want meat and potatoes, and that's why TV ads have not played as much of a role in this election. They want to see their peers, people who are not part of the punditocracy, talking about what this election means to them. I don't think the interest in this video is all that surprising."

Peter Levine, director of Circle, which promotes civic engagement among young people, said a friend of his who is a state legislator was quite taken by the video. "She had an emotional interest in Obama, but she watched it all the way through and took some notes on the issues so she has some talking points to back it up."

Speaking of subverting expectations, three of the dozen most popular videos on YouTube this month are about Barack Obama, not Paris or Lindsay or Britney. Many long-held beliefs are taking a beating during this election, chief

among them the idea that if you want to connect with young people, you'd best keep it short, funny and stupid.

Mr. Ashong, with an audience of more than a million so far, thinks he knows what made the difference for him. "My ears, I have really cute ears," he said.

They do stick out a bit, along with the space that lies between them.