

For the 2008 Race, Google Is a Crucial Constituency

LAST century, General Motors assembly plants were a regular stop on the itineraries of presidential candidates. This election cycle, Google headquarters in Mountain View, Calif., has become a favorite destination.

Hillary Rodham Clinton made the pilgrimage in February. Then came John McCain, Bill Richardson, John Edwards, Ron Paul, Mike Gravel and most recently, Barack Obama.

In terms of theatrical symbolism, the trip to Google is similar to the G.M. plant visit. In both cases, the visits gave the candidate the chance for a photo opportunity at the most technologically advanced edge of the economy, "signaling identification with the future," said Kathleen Hall Jamieson, a professor at the University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg School for Communication.

On a more mundane level, candidates in the pre-mass-media era were concerned with reaching as many prospective voters as possible in one place, and any large factory would do. At Google, the number of employees who can see the candidates in person is limited: the largest space at the Googleplex holds only a few hundred people.

Everyone in the 16,000-employee company can watch the event in real time over the company's internal network in their offices scattered around the globe. But Google employees, like almost everyone else, prefer the live version. At Senator Obama's talk last month, the atrium and overhanging balcony filled well in advance, and streams of employees poured into the building and then had to be turned away.

The politicians visiting auto plants could control what was said during the event. Today, candidates must place

Randall Stross is an author based in Silicon Valley and a professor of business at San Jose State University. E-mail: stross@nytimes.com.

themselves at the tender mercies of the audience. Those who go to Google sit exposed on the stage, without the protective lectern provided in a debate, answering questions for 45 to 60 minutes. But without the escape hatch of a time-keeper's buzzer, and as the only speaker, the candidate cannot evade uncomfortable questions. Eric E. Schmidt, Google's chairman and chief executive, for example, asked Senator Obama for his views on Iran, Pakistan, and Guantanamo — and that was a single question.

The proceedings at Google are not unremarkably serious affairs. Mr.

Schmidt asked Senator McCain, "How do you determine good ways of sorting one million 32-bit integers in two megabytes of RAM?" Immediately signaling that the question was asked in jest, Mr. Schmidt moved on. Six months later, Senator Obama faced the same question, but his staff had prepared him. When he replied in fluent tech-speak ("A bubble sort is the wrong way to go"), the quip brought down the house.

Among the seven visiting candidates, only Senator Obama used his Google visit to announce details of policy proposals related to technology. Until his visit, he and Senator Edwards were widely viewed among technology bloggers as the two candidates who had the strongest positions on Internet neutrality, expanded broadband access and other technology issues. With his Google visit, however, Senator Obama succeeded in drawing attention to his plans for using technology to make government more accessible and transparent with, for example, live Internet feeds of all executive branch department and agency meetings. This was old-school campaigning, organized around a company visit, done well.

Though all of the candidate sessions at Google are available on YouTube, they are not YouTube-like: they require



KIMBERLY WHITE/CETTY IMAGES

Senator Barack Obama, left, speaking to Google employees. Eric E. Schmidt, Google's chief executive, asked questions of Senator Obama.

an investment of time that, by YouTube viewer standards, is inconceivable. A 43-minute video of Senator Clinton's Google session has been available since February and has drawn only about 54,000 "views," which count as soon as the video is begun but leave unknown the more interesting number: completed views.

Senator Edwards's and Senator Obama's videos, both of which run longer than an hour, have not been up as long and have still fewer viewers. The biggest draw has turned out to be Representative Ron Paul, whose July visit has been viewed, or at least started, more than 350,000 times.

For perspective, consider the numbers that short-form videos of a less serious nature draw. Search for "Barack Obama" on YouTube and you will find that the most-viewed video is titled "I

Professor Jamieson credits YouTube with broadening the range of questions in the debates, making them more memorable by having users submit the questions in the form of personal videos, and making everything searchable afterward. In the past, she said, "if you missed a debate, you missed it."

The ability to select for playback any question in the debate and the candidates' responses provides easy, precise access to the contents, sliced and diced, that was never possible before. But it also contributes to a shortening of our collective attention span.

THIS is hardly new — we've already come a long way from the Lincoln-Douglas debates of 1858 for a Senate seat, which held the audience rapt, on one occasion, for three hours — then everyone dispersed for dinner and came back for the four-hour rebuttal. The contrast with the public's attenuated attention in the age of television, which Neil Postman pointed out in his 1985 book "Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business," was great. The contrast is all the greater today, with the advent of the short, nonlinear clips of YouTube.

It is easy to forget that this is YouTube's first presidential campaign: the company was founded in only 2005 and acquired by Google in 2006. By the time the next campaign cycle rolls around in 2011, YouTube's influence on the culture may be so complete that a 45-minute live video of a question-answer session will seem to most people to be about 43 minutes too long.

A midcampaign trek to Google headquarters in Silicon Valley may soon seem no less quaint than one to a G.M. plant in Flint, Mich. The candidates need not seek out the cameras — from now on, the cameras will always find them.