How Social Media Is Shaping the Democratic Primary's Bitter End

A former digital staffer for the 2008 Obama campaign says a big difference in this election is, much of the messaging isn't coming from the campaigns themselves.

(Image Source/via Getty )

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In the season finale of Saturday Night Live, "Hillary Clinton" and "Bernie Sanders" yucked it up in a bar, over a beer. He drank the “new brand that people are flocking to,” she drank the one “no one likes that gets the job done.”

"And remember all those states like Wyoming where you beat me by a lot, but I got most of the delegates?” snorted Kate McKinnon, as Hillary Clinton.

"That was so stupid! It’s rigged!" laughed Larry David, as Bernie Sanders, maniacally.

"I know, it is so rigged!" That was "Hillary" again, laughing until she gasped.

What made this sketch so funny, so cathartic, is that it came after weeks of unspooling rancor that boiled over during a raucous Democratic convention in Nevada, where Sanders supporters, upset over delegate allocation, rushed the stage. This was followed by death threats and rape threats, conveyed by text and phone, to the chairwoman of the Nevada Democratic party.

This end-of-primary acrimony seems a fitting cap to a long slog that has played out on social media on two entirely separate channels. On one, Hillary Clinton is winning fair and square, playing by the rules, collecting 3 million more votes than Bernie Sanders. On the other, Clinton is only leading because she rigged the system, forced too-few debates, closed primaries to independents, and made it too hard to vote.

When you're absorbed in one of the channels, exclusively, you don't even know the other exists.

I first saw this phenomenon in a class of seniors at Millennium Brooklyn High School. I went there last November to talk to the class about the elections. One of the first things that became clear was where they got their information: BuzzFeed, Facebook, Reddit, Twitter.

For Hillary Clinton, almost all of the information streaming through these networks was negative: that she was too beholden to Wall Street, a latecomer on gay marriage, has no core beliefs and does everything for political reasons.

"She's not a great candidate," senior Crystal Maria told me. "And on top of that, voting for her because she's a woman is white feminism, not intersectional feminism." Not one of her classmates disagreed. Not one said they would vote for her because she might be the first woman president.
This was back in November, before it became clear that young people preferred Hillary Clinton by lopsided 80-90 percent margins. Still, I wondered about all that negative information-sharing. So just before Thanksgiving, I called up Joe Rospars, who was the digital director for Obama for America in 2008 and 2012 and asked if Hillary Clinton should be worried.

"This is the same kind of nasty stuff that was circulating in 2008," Rospars told me then. "Mostly on email chains and in comments on blogs, but also 50 years ago in anonymous broadsides and leaflets and things like that," he said by phone from London.

He seemed unconcerned.

"Having been through it we built a ton of apparatus to deal with this, we had a tool where we encouraged people to forward in the crazy chain mail messages, we had an algorithm to reply to that specific email," Rospars said. Translation: It only looks bad to you, because you couldn’t see what we could see in 2008. And we have tools to deal with things like this.

And yet, bitter partisanship is on a steep upwards slope, along with the rise in social media.

"There’s a term in psychology called the hostile media phenomenon," said Shanto Iyengar, a professor of political science and communications at Stanford University. "So anytime you get disagreeable information you say the media is out to get your side."

Eight years ago, Iyengar conducted a landmark study called Red Media, Blue Media. He and his researchers gave subjects online headlines. They presented the headline as if it came from the Fox News website. Then they took the same headline, and made it look as if it had been published by CNN, or the BBC. If it was from Fox News, people on the right would click on it. If it was from the BBC or CNN, people on the left would click on it.

"It was completely across the board," Iyengar said. "People preferred to get their news from providers they were confident were on the same page." And further, any bit of information they disagreed with, they would reject as biased. Which is a pretty good presage of our social media-bathed brains.

In 2008, only a third of us even had facebook accounts. Twitter barely existed. But now, a recent Pew poll finds, two thirds of us get most of our news from social media. Bernie Sanders has harnessed this energy. Hillary Clinton, not so much.
In his speech at the White House Correspondents Association, President Obama chided Clinton for this.

"You gotta admit," the President said, "Hillary trying to appeal to young voters, is kinda like your relative trying to sign up for Facebook." He was visibly struggling not to laugh at his own joke. "Dear America, did you get my poke. Is it appearing on your wall. I'm not sure I'm using this right. Love, Aunt Hillary."

This sentiment resonates, particularly among young people. After the New York primary, I went back to Millennium Brooklyn High School. Hillary Clinton had just won the state, decisively.

"I was very surprised, senior Gabriel Pimentel told me. "Like you could go on Facebook, you could go on social media, you see the Bernie Sanders rallies, there are thousands and thousands of people, especially young people—young and old—and people are supporting him and being very energetic and he speaks and people listen, and you know they cheer for him, but yet he loses by double digits."

This is the phenomenon I've seen so much of this primary season—how what's happening in the real world seems so out of step with what's happening online. By now I've been to scores campaign events, speeches and debates, and watched countless videos where partisans of one candidate or another not only thought what the other candidate said was wrong, but in many cases actually did not hear the words the other candidate said.

So I went back to Joe Rospars, the former Obama digital guru, and asked him if he still felt that social media hadn't spiked the negativity in the Democratic primary. Rospars is sticking with his central contention, that negative information is no more prevalent now than it was in '08, it's only more visible. And that ultimately, Democrats will pull together.

But he acknowledged, "You can get caught up in it: 'This is obviously what's going on, why isn't everyone paying attention to this?' But you are obviously just part of your own feed."

But I kept pushing Rospars on why this primary feels crazy. There was the Nevada convention fracas, or more recently, a Sanders voter in California telling the New York Times, "A dark side of me wants to see what happens if Trump is in...There's going to be some kind of change, and even if it's like a Nazi-type change...You want to see someone fighting somebody."
So I asked Rospars: "Say this was 2008 and it was Bernie Sanders and Hillary Clinton, do you think we would be seeing things like this?"

In his office in SoHo, Rospars chewed on this. "I think in 2008 a lot more of both of the campaigns was directed by the campaigns," he said, after a pause.

What's changed, Rospars said, is not necessarily the level of negativity. It's that social media creates an organization of the disorganized, heading in a direction that no one controls.