CHAT THE VOTE

How Snapchat, Amazon and Facebook Messenger Reimagined Civic Engagement in the 2016 Election

INTRODUCTION

For U.S. tech companies leveraging their platforms to drive voter registration, 2016 was a pivotal year. Facebook's Election Hub alone registered over 2 million voters, provided information on polling locations and encouraged people to schedule a time to vote with friends. Twitter ventured into the land of chatbots, prompting users to direct-message an @Gov account to get information and links to register based on ZIP code.[1]

Google launched a special tool for users who type "register to vote" to deliver information on deadlines, requirements and links to voter registration forms. It also launched a "Find Your Polling Place" Google Maps integration that was prominently displayed on Election Day.

Tinder launched Swipe the Vote, an interactive poll where users express views on key issues before being matched with a candidate and clicking through to register to vote.

Major chat apps were also eager to do their part in the voter registration effort. Snapchat was by far the most active platform, offering extensive election news coverage, ads and content from the candidates, plus the opportunity to register—prompting some in the media to call 2016 "the Snapchat election." A variety of other chat apps such as Facebook Messenger, Kik, Viber and LINE also dipped their toes in the election waters—experimenting with chatbots, stickers and collaborations with news companies to engage and sign up young voters.
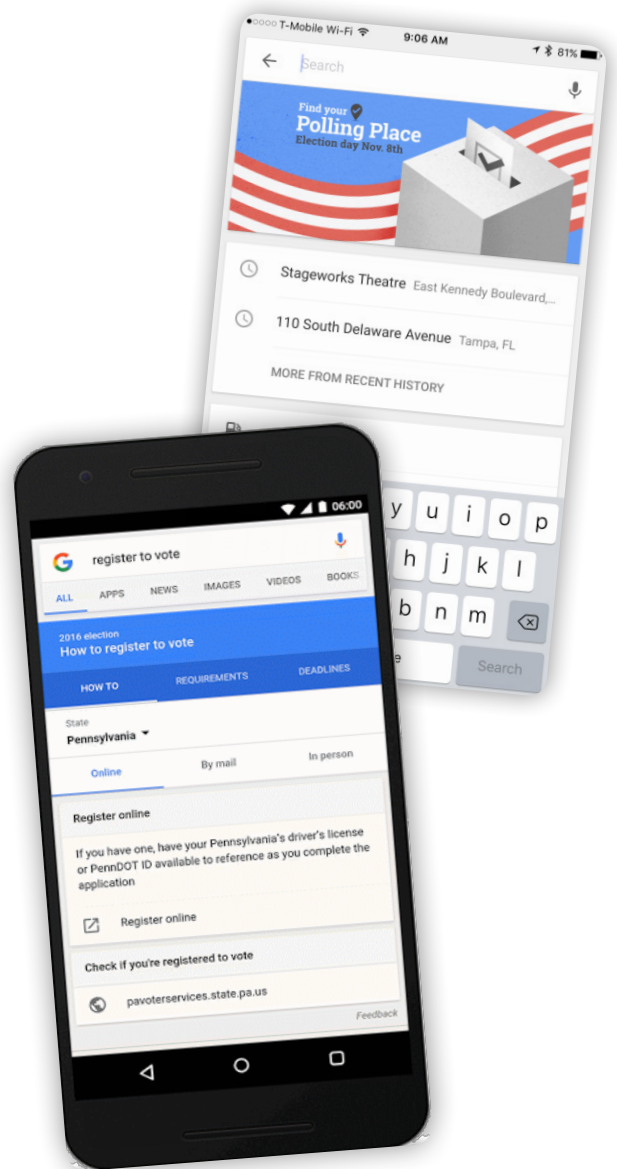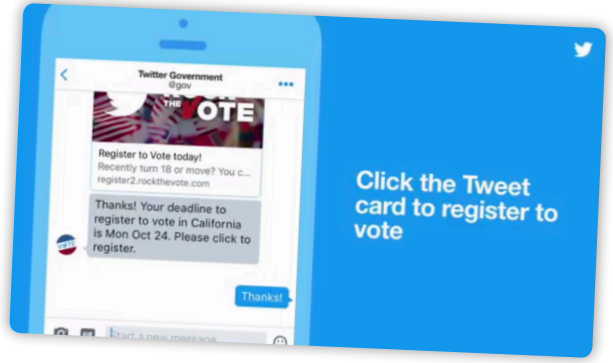
1   Richard Nieva, "Facebook Says It's Helped Register More Than 2 Million Voters," CNET, October 25, 2016.

SNAPCHAT REIMAGINES ELECTION COVERAGE FOR THE MOBILE ERA

While Facebook was historically reluctant to see itself as a media or news company, Snapchat openly pursued the mantle of media powerhouse from early on. In a blog post announcing the launch of Discover in January 2015, the company deliberately distanced itself from "social media" companies in both name and approach to media distribution:

Social media companies tell us what to read based on what's most recent or most popular. We see it differently. We count on editors and artists, not clicks and shares, to determine what's important. [2]

With those ambitions clearly stated, it's no surprise that Snapchat viewed the 2016 U.S election campaign as an opportunity to flex new media muscle with users and advertisers. It did so with a range of products and campaigns—including voter registration interactive pages, Live Stories, geofilters, lenses, and Discover channels and shows. The company also courted major candidates, who launched official Snapchat accounts and contributed exclusive content throughout the campaign.

"Snapchat has reached a point here in the U.S. where we can't ignore it anymore, and it's definitely earned a line on every campaign budget," Tim Cameron, digital director of the National Republican Senatorial Committee, told Bloomberg. "We're really using demographics to reach a larger audience. It's not as specific as other tools but it works." [3]

2   "Introducing Discover," Snap.com official blog, January 27, 2015.

3   Nicole Piper, "Snapchat Lures More Campaign Spending as Candidates Court Young Voters," Bloomberg Technology, August 25, 2016.

TurboVote 'Swipes Up' on Voter Registration

Snapchat teamed up with Democracy Works' TurboVote on a three-week public service campaign (Sept. 15-Oct. 7) featuring interactive videos that Snapchatters "swipe up" to access voter registration web forms. The videos ran as ads in the Stories and Discover sections of the app and featured Jared Leto, Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson, Ryan Seacrest, Jimmy Fallon, Ciara and other celebrities urging users to register.
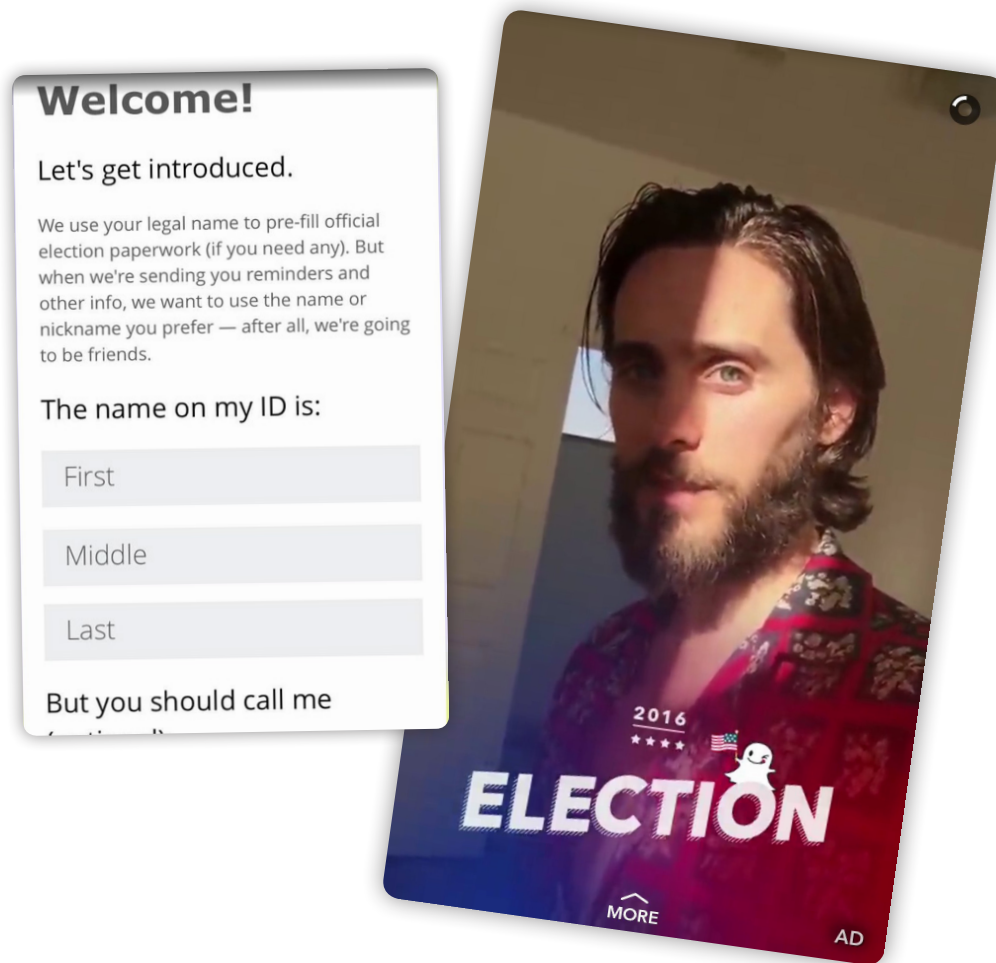
Snapchat's massive millennial audience positioned it to have a major potential impact on turnout among younger voters. Nielsen found that on any given day Snapchat reaches 41 percent of all U.S. 18- to 34-year-olds, while Pew Research Center reported that only 46 percent of millennials voted in 2012. [4, 5]

4   Nielsen Media Impact, Reach Duplication, Nielsen Total Media Fusion/GfK MRI Survey of The American Consumer 9/1/2015-9/30/2015 (Television, Internet, and Mobile).

5   Richard Fry, "Millennials Match Baby Boomers as Largest Generation in U.S. Electorate, but Will They Vote?" Pew Research Center, May 16, 2016.

"Our country's democracy thrives on participation. But you can't participate unless you register to vote," a Snapchat spokesman told Mashable. "We hope this effort amplifies our community's voice come November." [6]

The Donald Trump campaign experimented with a similar interactive video ad, urging voters to swipe up to "add your name and get involved!" Snapchatters who swiped were brought to a webpage hosted by the Trump campaign that opened in Snapchat's native browser and prompted users to fill out a signup form.

6   Kerry Flynn, "Now You Can Register to Vote in Snapchat," Mashable, September 22, 2016.

Snapchat Introduces Shows With Peter Hamby's "Good Luck America"

Peter Hamby left CNN in 2015 to become Snapchat's head of news, but his role soon transitioned to focus on "Good Luck America," a Discover show he hosts exploring different facets of American politics. Episodes typically run several minutes in length and open with a simple, down-to-earth voice-over introduction:

> *I'm Peter, I'm a reporter. I've been covering politics for a really long time. I've crushed beers with Hillary Clinton, flipped burgers with Mitt Romney, and argued with very important people on television. We're now in the middle of the weirdest election I've ever seen. Let me show you the people and places that really matter.*

More than any political effort on Snapchat, "Good Luck America" took a bold point of view. While it can't be described as partisan, it often offered an unabashed critique of traditional media and establishment politics—taking a playfully snarky tone that syncs with millennials' well-documented growing mistrust of institutions. The tagline "Let me show you the people and places that really matter" also acts as a dig on other media outlets, implying that "Good Luck America" pulls back the curtain for an unvarnished view you can't find elsewhere.

Although Hamby spent most episodes on the campaign trail talking to voters, candidates and staffers, he also used the show in part to speak about the importance of voting. "But here's the deal" he said in one episode. "This isn't 'House of Cards'; this is real life. This election will be determined by your vote. First things first, go register to vote."

# Pop-up Discover Channel "We the People" Delivers Daily Election News

As a complement to "Good Luck America," which aired relatively infrequently, Snapchat launched "We the People," a daily election news Discover channel built by Now This in collaboration with Politico co-founder Jim VandeHei. The channel features a mix of articles, video and interstitials and will run through the presidential inauguration on Jan. 20.

Candidates and Users Creat Crowdsourced Election Live Stories

Snapchat seemed to capitalize on every potential opportunity it could find to highlight crowdsourced election "Live Stories" (users at specific events submit snaps, which Snapchat editors may include in a video montage). The coverage included debate nights throughout the primaries and general election, notable primary and caucus dates, as well as rallies and protests.

To imbue these dramas with a narrative arc, Snapchat often created playful educational geofilters to highlight key narratives or candidate positions. It also enlisted the candidates in contributing user-generated content, often speaking directly to the camera and giving behind-the-scenes glimpses into life on the campaign trail.
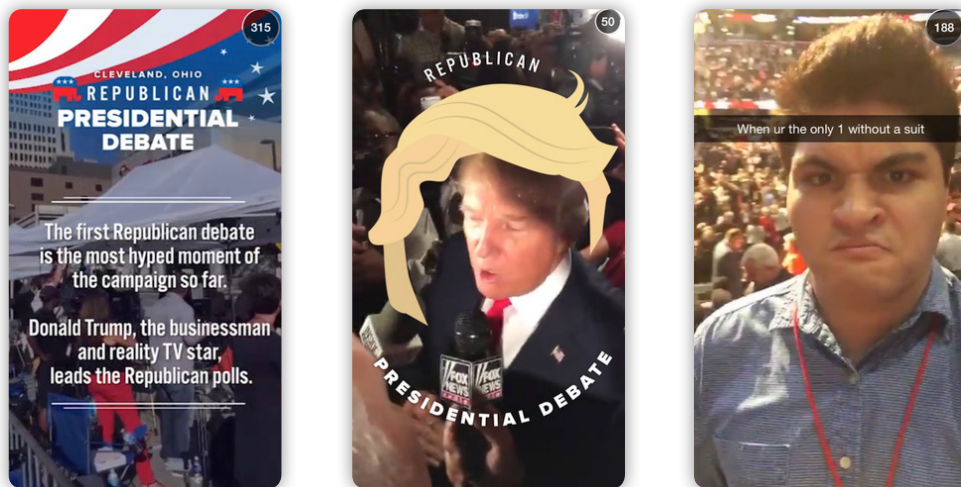
Reflecting on election night, Mashable wrote that Snapchat offered an emotional look at Trump's victory. In its "Election Reactions" Live Story, Snapchat juxtaposed videos of users in tears with others in celebratory ecstasy. In a second "Trump Wins" Live Story, Snapchat curated a diverse range of viewpoints, including a woman in a hijab in Times Square declaring "I'm in Times Square and seeing a lot of 'Make America Great Again' hats, and I'm scared." Offering a counterpoint, a user in Richmond said she would "rather have a racist, arrogant, womanizing president any day of the week than a criminal." [7]

7   Kerry Flynn, "Snapchat provided the rawest look at election night 2016," November 9, 2016, Mashable

While Snapchat doesn't release performance metrics for its political Live Stories, users were able to see how many views their snaps received once they were selected for inclusion in a montage. Based on screenshots of the statistics some users shared online, it was common for election-themed stories to receive millions of views in a 24-hour period.
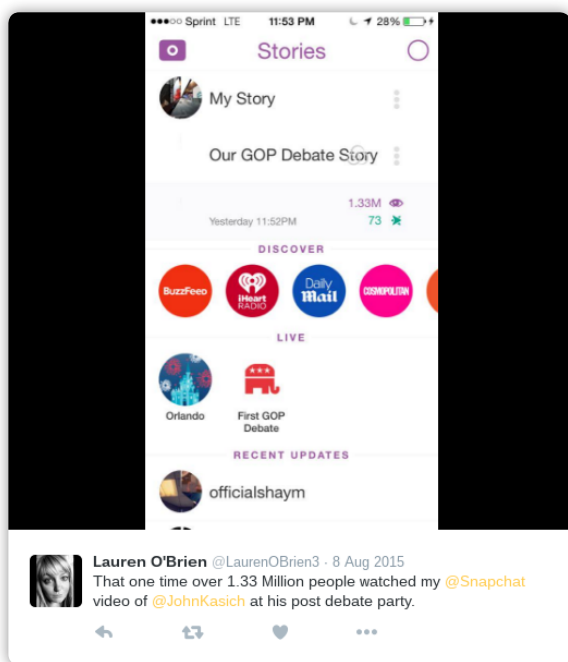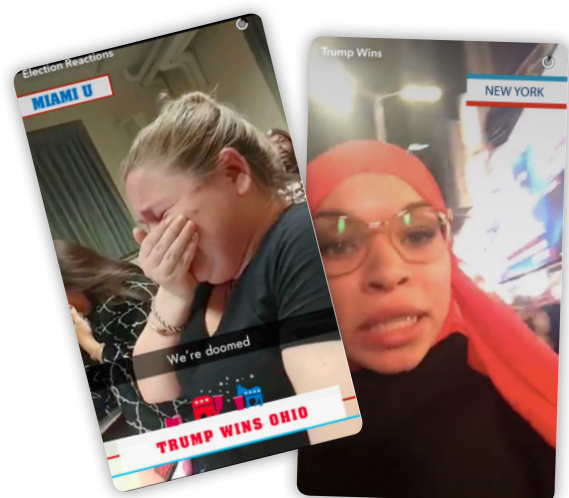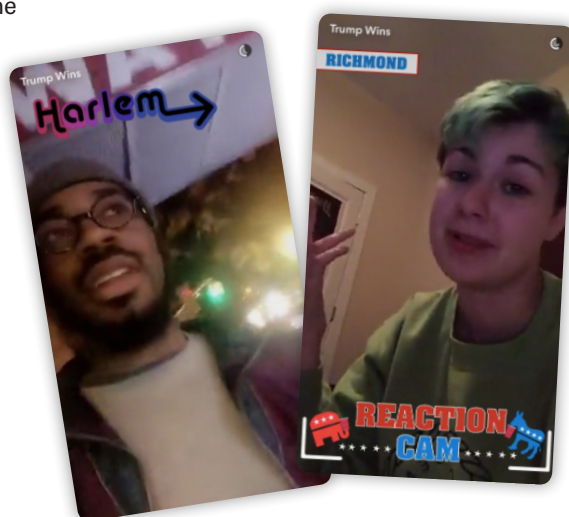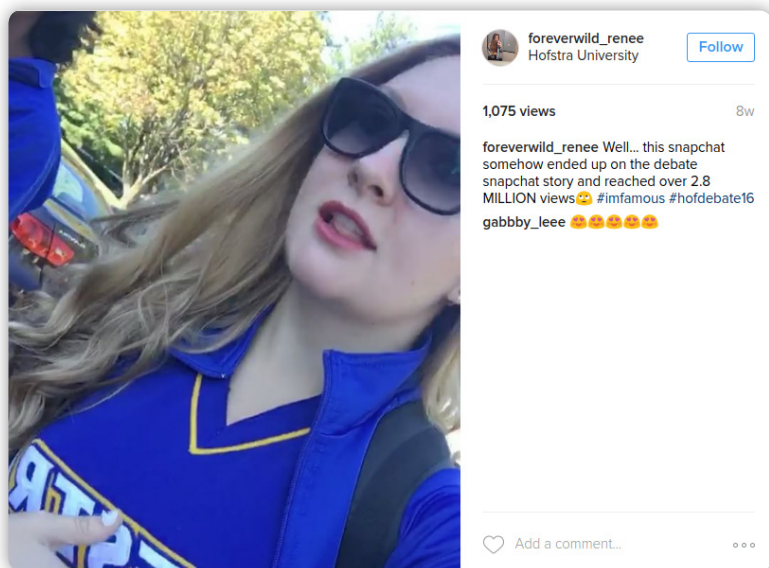
Snapchat "Geofilters" Attract GOTV Advertising and Potshots From Candidates

Snapchat debuted geofilters—location-based overlays that users can apply to their snaps—in 2015, and Secure America Now was the first political organization to run geofilter ads. That campaign encouraged Ohio residents to express disdain for the Iran nuclear deal and succeeded in amassing 2.5 million impressions [8] and 179,000 geofilter shares in one day. [9]

In September 2015, John Kasich became the first presidential candidate to run a Snapchat geofilter campaign—a bacon-themed design that was also the first day-parted geofilter ad buy (it ran during breakfast hours). "Budget pork isn't our taste but who doesn't love bacon and, of course, who doesn't love Snapchat?" campaign spokesman Scott Milburn quipped in an interview with Time magazine. Other Republican candidates Ted Cruz, Rand Paul and Marco Rubio soon followed suit, with Rubio running a notable geofilter campaign to encourage early voting in Florida. [10]
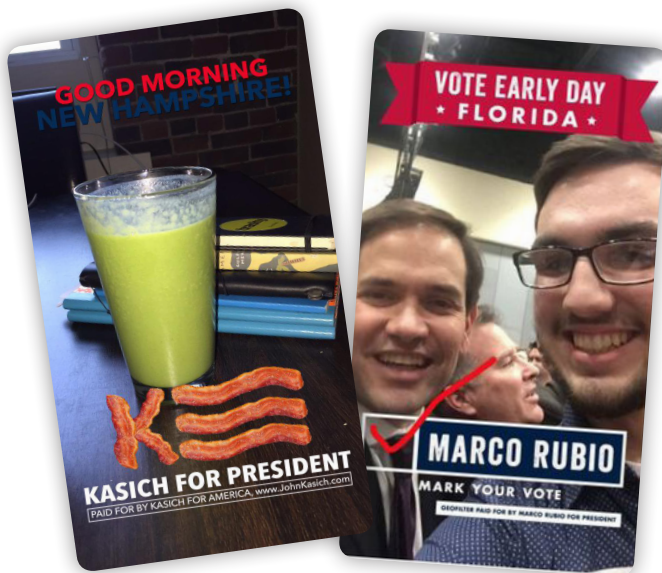
8   Impressions defined as number of people who view a geofilter regardless of whether they then choose to use or share in a post.

9   Paresh Dave, "Snapchat Digital Sticker Ad by Foes of Iran Deal Gets 2.6 Million Views," Los Angeles Times, August 11, 2015.

10   Zeke J. Miller, "John Kasich Takes Presidential Campaign to Snapchat with Bacon Filter Ad," Time, September 2, 2015.

During the primaries, Bernie Sanders was the candidate most active in leveraging geofilter ads to encourage turnout. His campaign targeted users in multiple states, customizing imagery for each market to remind people to go to the polls. In Iowa, Sander ran a nine-day geofilter campaign that refreshed creative each day, leveraging copy such as "Feel the Bern: One Week Until Caucus Night!" and "Feel the Bern in 5 Days!"

"As Sen. Sanders says regularly, if there's a high voter turnout with a lot of young people at the polls, we're going to do well," Kenneth Pennington, the Sanders campaign digital director, told Advertising Age. "Our aim with these advertisements is to remind people that today they get to cast their ballot for Sen. Sanders." [11]

11   Nat Ives, "Sanders Buys Snapchat Geofilters to Get Out the Vote on Primary Day in New York," Advertising Age, April 19, 2016.
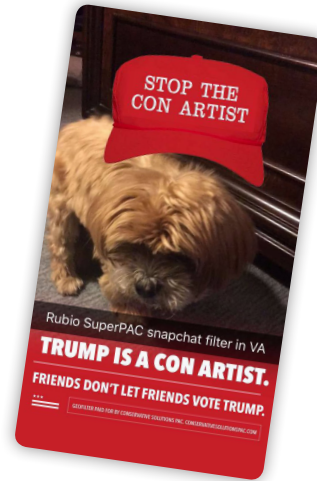
The Clinton campaign was more reserved on geofilter efforts, but had some fun trolling Republicans with a geofilter at the Republican National Convention highlighting a 2008 Trump quote: "I know Hillary, and I think she'd make a great president . . ." The Democratic super PAC Priorities USA also created a geofilter with "Deport Trump" emblazoned on the iconic Trump red baseball cap to critique his positions on immigration. (The Rubio super PAC Conservative Solutions took a similar approach with "Stop the Con Artist" on the cap.)

Donald Trump became the first candidate to purchase the national geofilter—a placement reaching every user in the country, which Snapchat limits to one sponsor per day. On the day of the first presidential debate, the campaign ran different images throughout the day, starting with a "Crooked Hillary" filter, graduating to an image of Trump parachuting from "Trump Force One" and ending the night with a post-debate declaration: "TRUMP WINS BIG LEAGUE." Politico reports that the geofilters were viewed 80 million times over the course of the day. [12]

Both candidates also ran national geofilter campaigns in the final days of the campaign:

Lastly, Snapchat tested a novel geofilter that pulls in real-time election results as votes are tabulated. This is similar to the approach the company takes with live sports events where users can overlay the current score of the game.
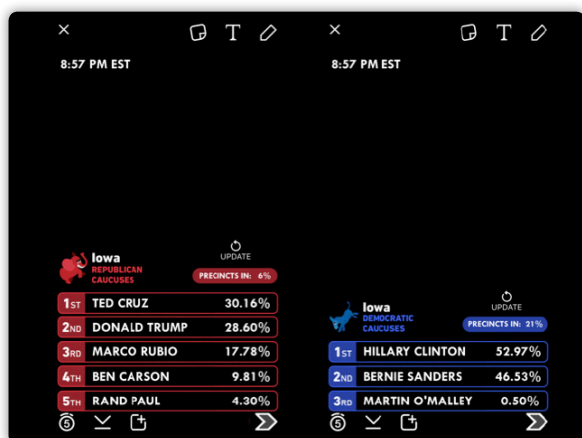
12   Shane Goldmacher, "Trump's Debate Day Snapchat Filter Viewed 80 Million Times," Politico, September 30, 2016.

Snapchat "Lenses" Inject Augmented Reality into Already Surreal Election Year

Lenses are real-time augmented reality special effects and sounds Snapchatters add to their snaps. They have become especially popular with users and brands. Gatorade made headlines when its February 2016 Super Bowl day lens garnered 160 million impressions in one day (more than 115 million people who tuned in to the game)—proving that the right creative execution can yield tremendous returns. [13]

Brands reportedly spend high six-figure or low seven figure expenditures and significant time to create and distribute lenses, so it's no surprise that Trump, Clinton and the super PACs all waited for the final days of the campaign to launch activations. Priorities USA ran a pantsuit-friendly lens the day before the election that gave users the Hillary look and proclaimed that "Love Trumps Hate Tomorrow!"

On Election Day, Snapchat launched its own lens to remind people to vote—a pair of "VOTE" shaped sunglasses followed by a cascade of celebratory ballots streaming across the screen. Comedy Central's "Daily Show" also promoted its evening election coverage via donkey- and elephant-themed lenses that included Clinton and Trump hairdos.

13   Garett Sloane, "Gatorade's Super Bowl Snapchat Filter Got 160 Million Impressions," Digiday, February 2016.

CHATBOT DEVELOPERS TEST VOTER REGISTRATION ON FACEBOOK MESSENGER

Messenger unveiled its chatbot platform in April 2016, and with 1 billion active monthly users, the app enticed several developers, nonprofits and political campaigns to experiment with voter registration and civic engagement chatbots. [14]

HelloVote Reinvents Voter Registration Experience for Chat Interfaces

HelloVote, an effort from nonprofit Fight for the Future, was the first product to market and offer users in every state the ability to register to vote via chatbot. Built in partnership with Twilio, the product was nonpartisan and open source, and it promised to let users "register to vote in 10 text messages (2 of them are about your name) and never have to touch a website or state form to do it."

On the back end, HelloVote leveraged the Vote.org API to register users and allow them to check their voter registration status. In states that offer digital registration, users completed the entire process without leaving the chatbot conversation. In states that require submission of registration forms by mail, the chatbot sent users completed PDFs along with instructions for where to mail the signed document.

At its core, HelloVote's product reinvented the familiar digital voter registration web form by introducing a conversational interface. That said, the bot eschewed chitchat or "personality" and takes a decidedly utilitarian approach to asking for the necessary personal information to efficiently complete registration.

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14   "Thank You! Messenger," Facebook Newsroom official blog, July 20, 2016.
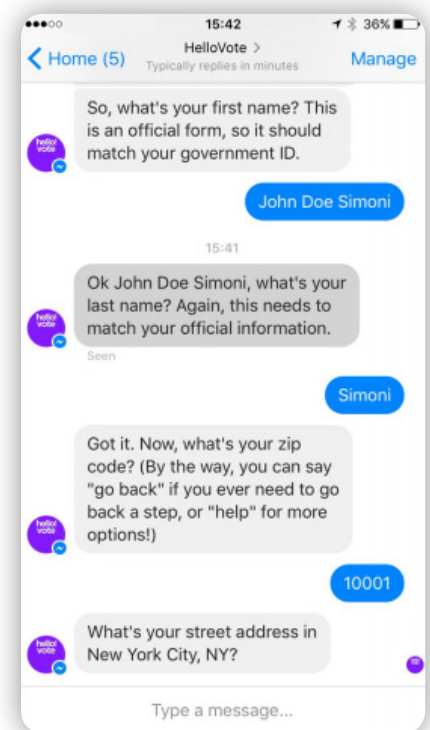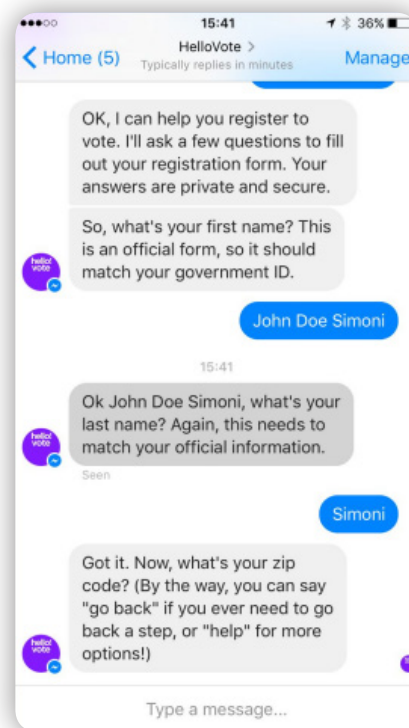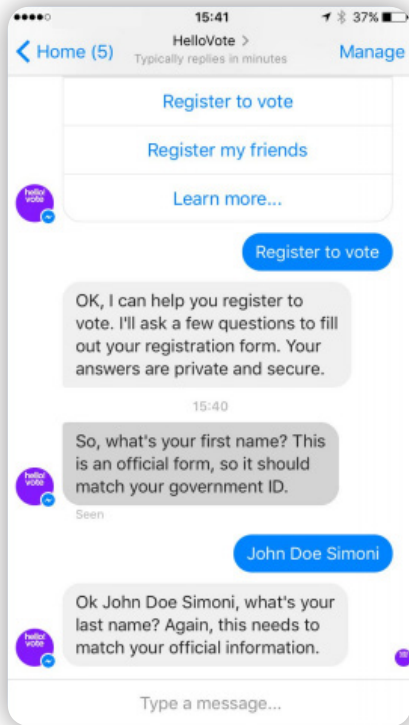
It's important to note that HelloVote was deployed to SMS as well as chat apps, with the goal of reaching as wide an audience as possible. The organization also extended its reach through a variety of partnerships with Rock the Vote, HeadCount, Genius and other nonprofits and media outlets—providing custom widgets and webpages those organizations could leverage to register their audience to vote via text.

HeadCount enlisted over 200 musicians—including Mac Miller, Wilco, Panic! At the Disco, Jack Johnson, Killer Mike, Ani DiFranco, Lil Dicky, The Indigo Girls, Michael Franti and members of The Grateful Dead— to promote the text-to-register via social media on National Voter Registration Day.

As a first-of-its-kind experience, HelloVote received extensive press coverage, with feature stories on Fast Company, CNN, Glamour and numerous other media outlets. A variety of politicians and celebrities, including Bernie Sanders and Ellen DeGeneres, also endorsed the platform and encouraged users to register via text.

In total, HelloVote registered over 50,000 voters since its Sept. 22 launch, with more than 125,000 people engaging with the bot (some users merely checked their registration status) in its first three weeks. As a second phase of the campaign, HelloVote turned its attention to get-out-the-vote efforts, by delivering information on polling locations and voter identification requirements and by encouraging users to share a selfie with a custom "I Voted" filter. [15]

15   Pavithra Mohan, "Finally, HelloVote Gives You a Legitimate Reason to Take a Selfie," Fast Company, November 7, 2016.

Ad Council and R/GA Introduce Playful GoVoteBot to Reach Younger Voters

In contrast to HelloVote, the Ad Council and ad agency R/GA launched a more playful, cheeky voter registration Messenger bot in October named GoVoteBot. Built by chatbot technology firm Reply.ai, it took on a persona akin to a proud parent seeing his or her child vote for the first time.

Like HelloVote, the bot was nonpartisan and open source, but rather than register users within the chat conversation, GoVoteBot shares links to outside voter registration webpages. In an interview with Adweek, Dzu Bui, the Ad Council's vice president of campaign development, confirmed that the intention was to reach younger voters, as well as to address the specific challenge of orienting potential voters who recently moved to a new neighborhood. [16]

Facebook directly supported the project by donating free advertising space—used in part to target users who indicated a recent change of city in their profile information. The Ad Council and R/GA also partnered with brands such as Pepsi and Jet, which encouraged their social media fans to chat with GoVoteBot.

16   Marty Swant "This Voter Registration Chatbot from R/GA and the Ad Council is Removing a Barrier to Voting." October 2016, Adweek.

# 'BFF Trump' Chatbot Takes Aim at Trump's Rhetoric

Ad agency SS+K and bot startup Dexter launched one of the most popular election themed chatbots—"BFF Trump"—on Facebook Messenger in August. That experience delivered a mix of Trump quotes and multimedia content in an effort to "bring attention to the hateful rhetoric of Donald Trump with the goal of engaging people to vote their values in the 2016 election."

In a blog post introducing the world to "BFF Trump," SS+K stated its strategic marketing rationale for focusing on Facebook Messenger as a way of connecting with younger voters:

*Facebook is the number-one Political News Source for Millenials*

Engagement algorithms are Increasingly Driving the Social Audience Further Apart in Their Beliefs and Values

The Average Number of Apps a Smartphone User Downloads is Zero, While Our Audience is Spending More Time in Messaging Apps than Anywhere Else, Online or Offline
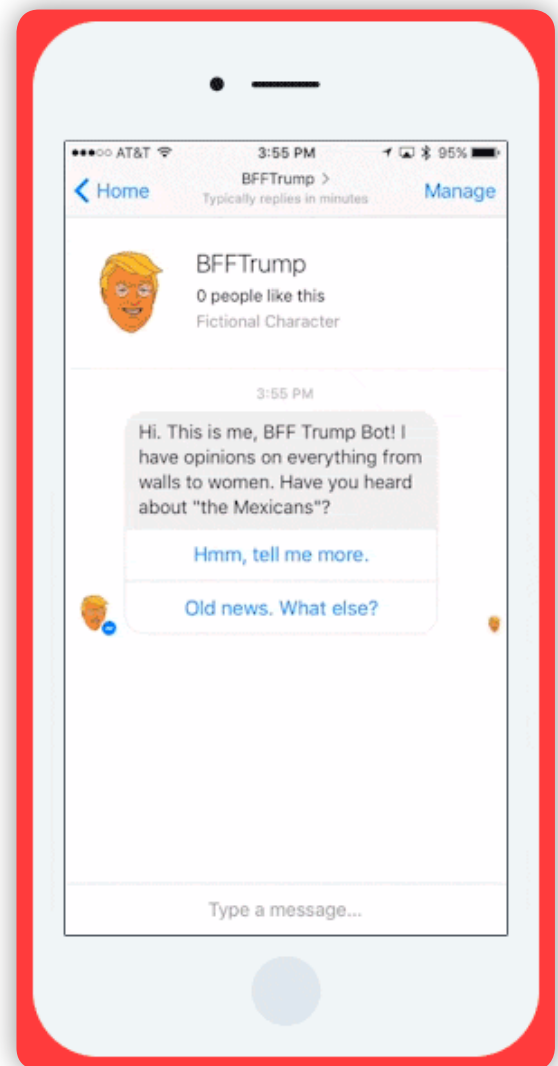
Clinton Campaign Experiments With Multiple Chatbots, Sees Mixed Results

The Hillary Clinton campaign launched several chatbot experiments starting with "Trump Text," a satirical SMS-based bot that shared real Trump quotes based on the user's choice of topic. The bot also allowed users to type the word "Source" anytime to learn where the quote originated.
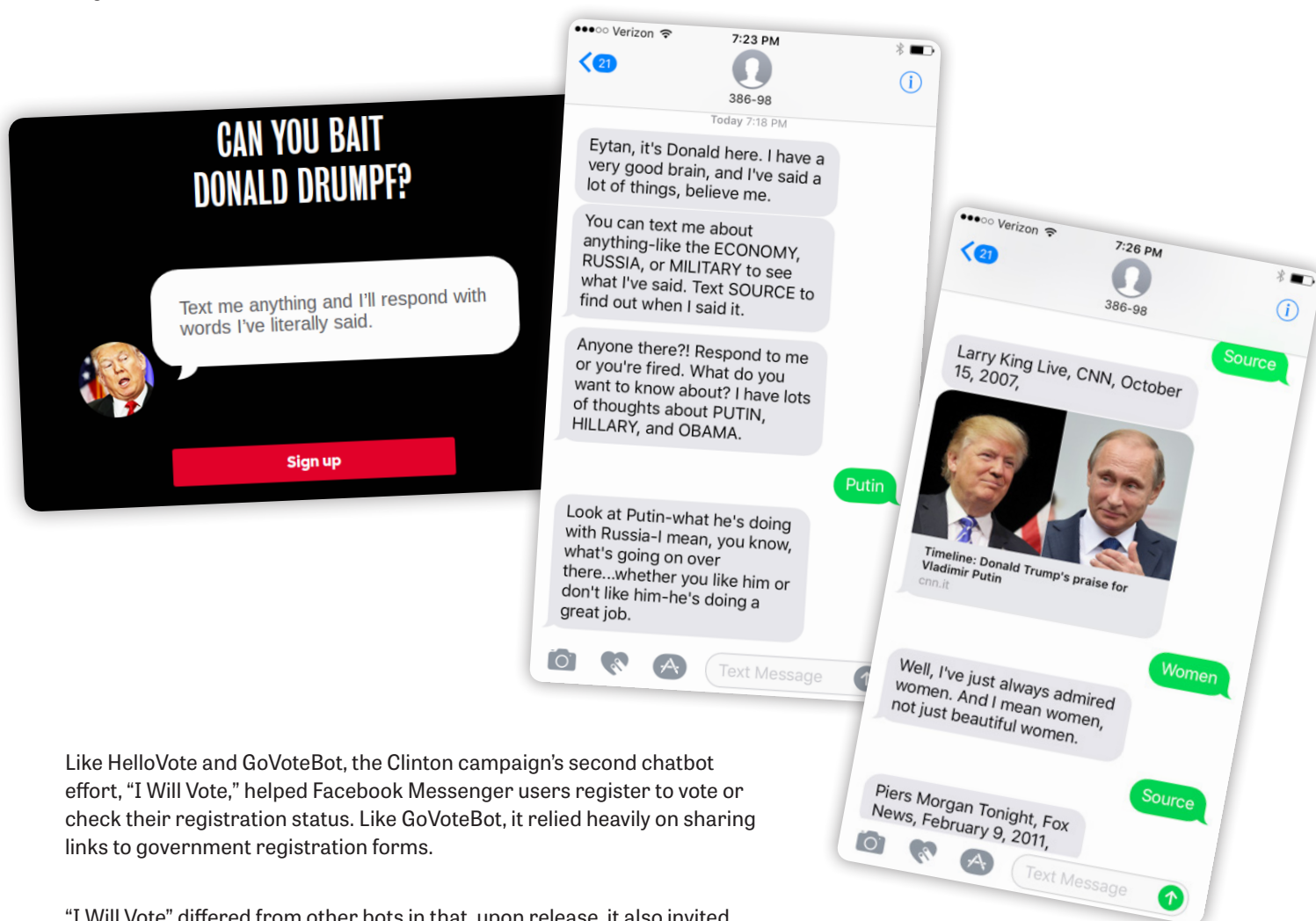
Like HelloVote and GoVoteBot, the Clinton campaign's second chatbot effort, "I Will Vote," helped Facebook Messenger users register to vote or check their registration status. Like GoVoteBot, it relied heavily on sharing links to government registration forms.

"I Will Vote" differed from other bots in that, upon release, it also invited users to ask "any questions you have about voting." While the bot fielded certain queries impressively, tech blogs such as VentureBeat were quick to point out that the bot was ill-equipped to do so consistently. The screenshots below show a few moments of conversation in which the bot struggles to respond to seemingly basic on-topic questions:

These types of "fails" are somewhat common within the relatively nascent chatbot industry, especially when a simple bot with limited artificial intelligence attempts tasks better suited to more sophisticated technology. It appears that the Clinton campaign may have taken criticism of the bot to heart, as the experience was eventually simplified to avoid free-form conversation.

'HillYeah!' Leverages Chatbots for Viral Content Distribution

HillYeah! was an unofficial, pro-Clinton chatbot developed by a small team—including a former Clinton campaign data analytics intern. While the bot provided voter registration and polling information, its unique contribution to the world of political chatbots was delivering a steady stream of shareable visual content for supporters to send to friends.


Leveraging chatbots for distribution of viral content was a no-brainer since users were already using the platforms to chat with friends and family. And while many chatbots are geared toward one-to-one conversation between a bot and a human, there is a growing movement toward bots that simply enhance conversations between humans.

This model is especially popular on Slack, where bots complete simple work related tasks for professional teams within conversation threads. It is also increasingly pervasive on teen-friendly chat app Kik where, for example, the Weather Channel bot shares weather forecasts within conversations between friends. Apple's new iMessage apps take a similar approach, where companies like Fandango let friends peruse movie showtimes and purchase tickets without ever leaving the conversation.
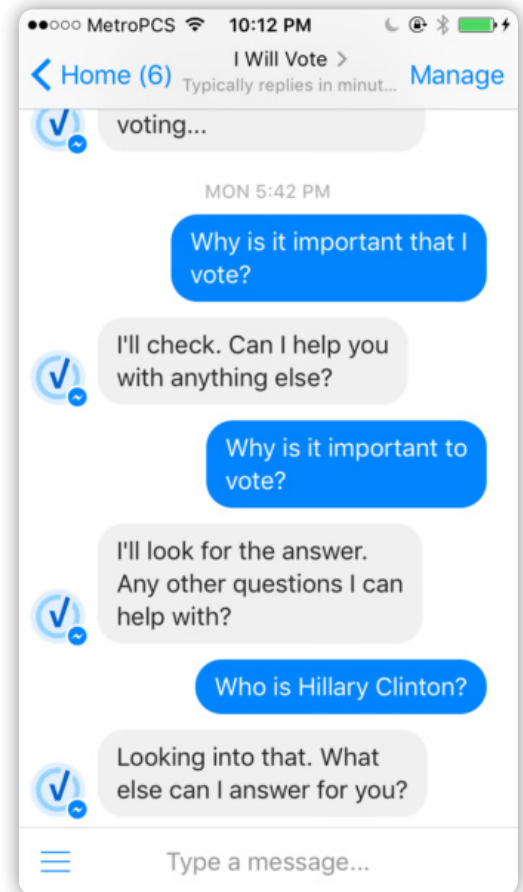
The New York Times Introduces Election Bot With a Human Touch

New York Times Politics invited readers to subscribe to what it called a Facebook Messenger "experiment" during the final three weeks of the U.S. election campaign. Users received a daily push notification from political reporter Nick Confessore featuring one tidbit of election analysis users could explore in further detail by clicking suggested response buttons. They could also use the bot to access a daily forecast of the projected election winner.
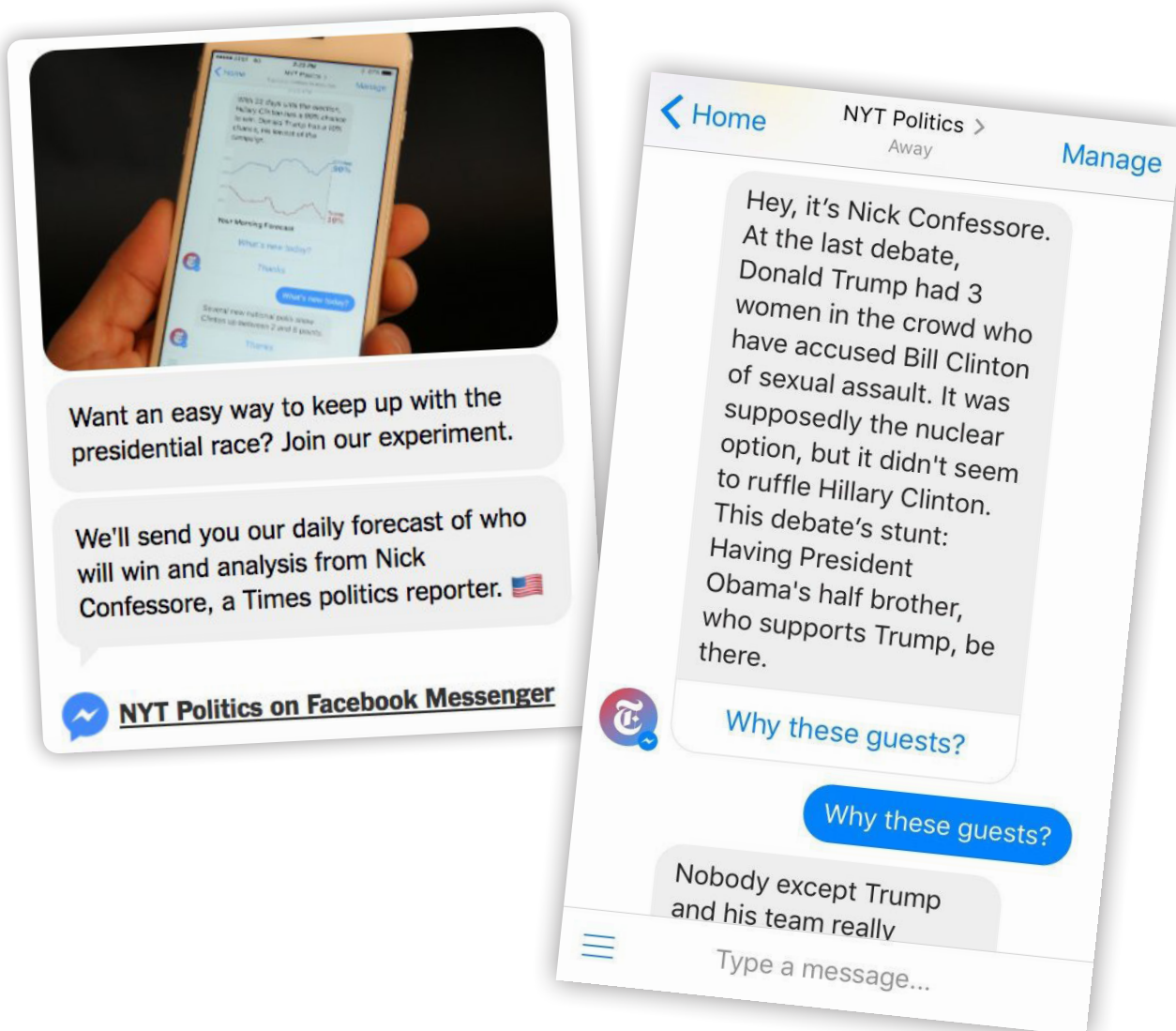
Despite the small-scale test, the effort was notable for three reasons: It used a bot to create a connection with a specific reporter. This approach differs significantly from most news company bots, which generally share various article links without much of a human touch. The Times actually piloted this approach over the summer through an SMS campaign where readers signed up for daily text messages from sports reporter Sam Manchester describing his experiences at the Rio Olympics.

By sending one daily thought from a real reporter, the bot delivered thoughtful, intelligent observations within the chat, rather than leading the user to those observations within articles.

While most news bots are built to be evergreen, this one was positioned as a short-term project. An argument can be made that ephemeral, single-purpose bots have the capacity to deliver more powerful results in that they're not trying to do too much.

KIK DELIVERS ELECTION NEWS TO U.S. TEENS

Kik, which claims more than 300 million registered users, including 40 percent of U.S. teens, launched its election efforts early in the primaries via an Election 2016 chatbot and microsite. The chatbot asked users for opinions on a political issue and then responded by sharing how the broader Kik community polled on the same question. The chatbot also invited users to join one of a series of chat rooms broken out by topic (such as immigration or the environment) or politician (Donald Trump, Chris Christie, Bernie Sanders, Hillary Clinton). [17]

Having over 20 thematic chat rooms, however, spread the audience thin, and most rooms were fairly sparsely populated. Kik pulled the entire program long before the general election due to lack of interest. The company instead opted for a simpler activation around "Team Trump" and "Team Clinton" sticker packs, which were prominently featured in its official Sticker Shop.

Soon after, CNN stepped in to lead election coverage on Kik. The company launched its official chatbot in July and provided basic interactive educational information on the upcoming Republican and Democratic national conventions. Users could learn about how the conventions worked, where they were held and who would be attending.

17   Marcus Baram, "Now You Can Sell Your Very Own Chatbot in Kik's New Store," Fast Company, April 5, 2016.

The company then ramped up efforts on election night, building an ambitious bot experience that delivered real-time election results. Kik users could also share CNN's election-themed stickers in conversation, as well as GIFs that were created throughout the night as the drama unfolded.

According to CNN, hundreds of thousands of users subscribed to the bot, 5 million messages were sent and received with the bot on election night, and millions of its stickers, emojis and GIFs were shared in conversation.
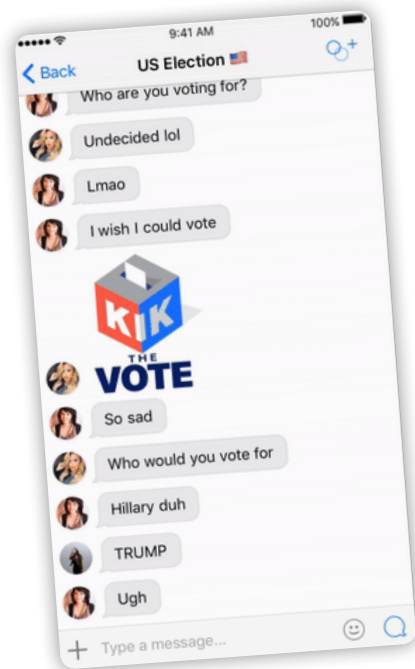
Reflecting on the campaign, Alex Wellen, CNN's senior vice president and chief product officer, told The Drum that Kik "enabled us to reach an entirely new audience of 13-17 year olds . . . on LINE and Kik, visual communication elements are the norm, so on Election Night, our social and product teams created custom graphics, real-time GIFs, election stickers, emojis, and election-themed keyboards to enable those audiences to share the news in the ways they've become accustomed to communicating. This resulted in massive engagement." [18]

In a separate interview with Ad Age, CNN's head of social media, Samantha Barry, stated that the goal was to reach users unlikely to tune in to CNN's television coverage. "For us, it is about creating a news habit for every generation on every platform," she said. "We are enabling them to become CNN news users." [19]
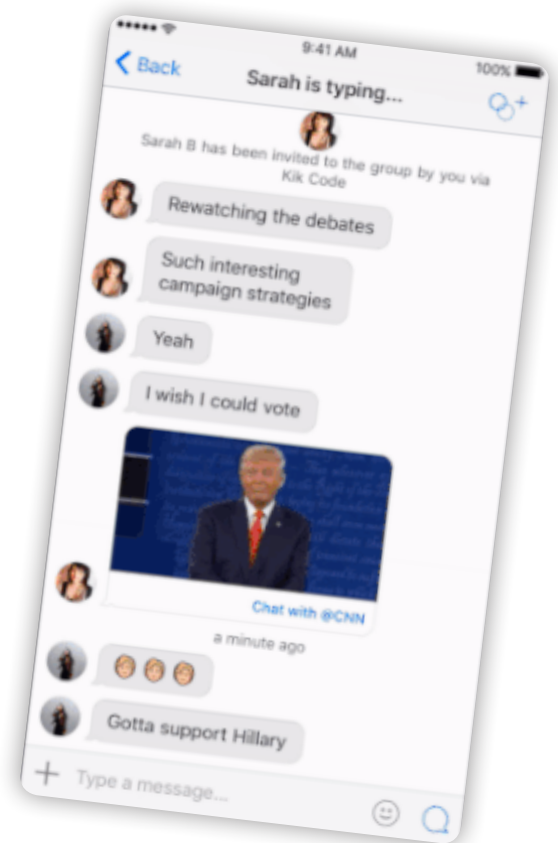
18   Charlotte McEleny, "What CNN Has Learnt After Six Months of Chatbot Experimentation," The Drum, November 16, 2016.

19   Jeanine Poggi, "Why CNN Will Be All In on Kik on Election Night," Advertising Age, October 31, 2016.

The media company Mic took a notably comedic approach to news storytelling on Kik via its TrumpChat bot, which provided daily campaign news stories through fictionalized texts from Donald Trump. In its early days, the bot regularly linked to stories on Mic.com, but over time TrumpChat became a self-contained experience akin to a friend sending a news story synopsis via chat.

Sequel, a chatbot technology company that has worked with a variety of brands, launched its own Sequel Election 2016 chatbot to deliver news updates to Kik users.
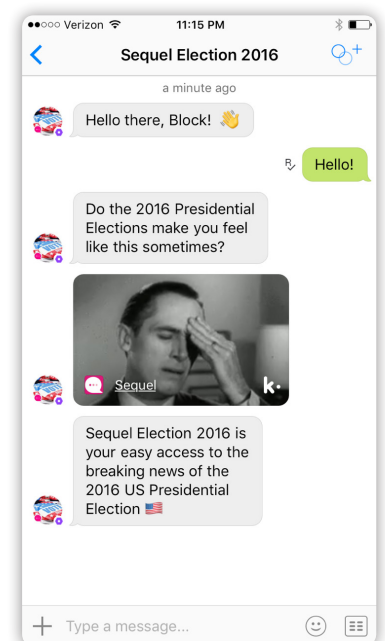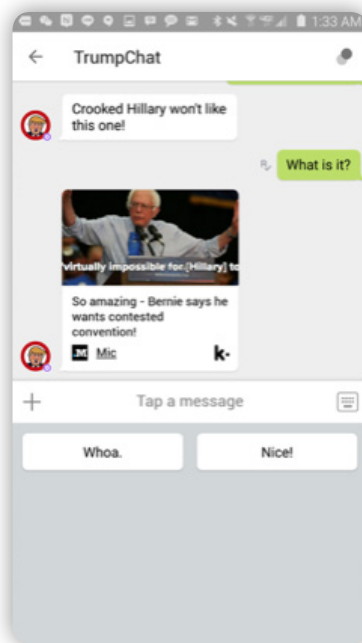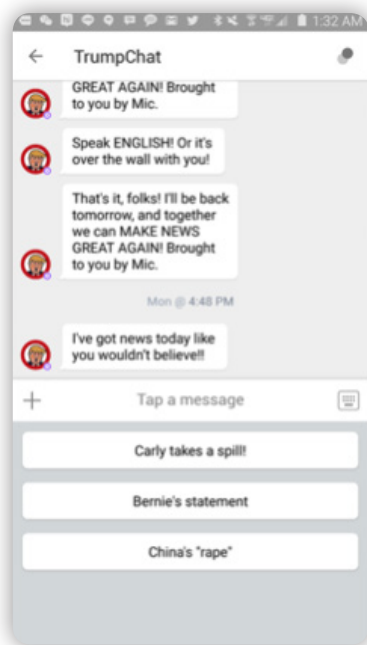
VIBER ENGAGES INTERNATIONAL AUDIENCE IN U.S. ELECTION DISCUSSION

Despite its 800 million registered users, Viber has struggled to significantly penetrate the U.S. market [20] — but that didn't stop it from engaging the global community on discussion of the 2016 U.S. election. [21]

Huffington Post launched a custom Elections sticker pack on the platform, which users downloaded free in exchange for following the official HuffPo News Viber account. The page accumulated 182,000 subscribers over the course of the campaign and featured Huffington reporters analyzing the campaign, sharing articles and encouraging readers to vote.
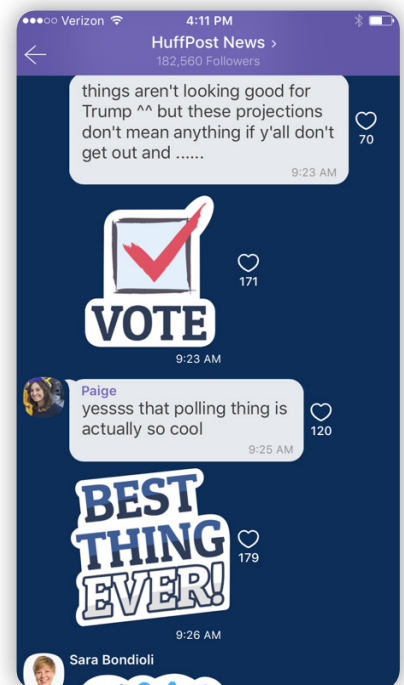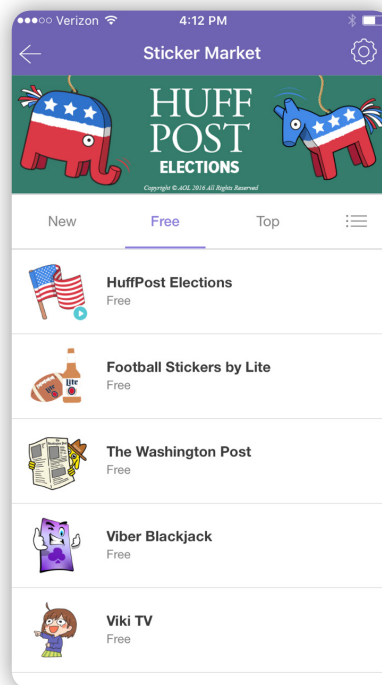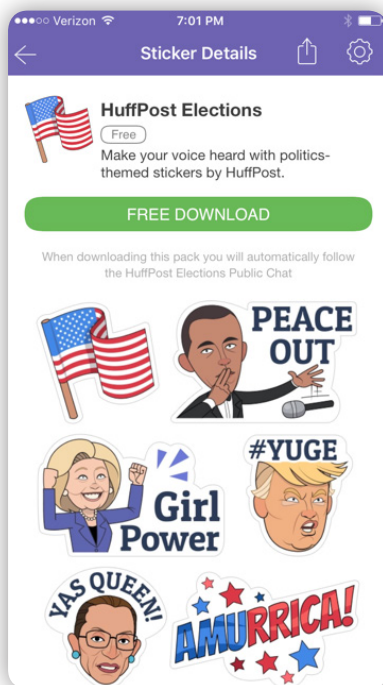

In early November, Viber rolled out a new chatbot product, which it debuted via a Global Election Poll bot asking users their favorite candidate. Participants were asked to share their age, gender and mobile operating system (iOS vs. Android) and were also able to "reset" their ballot if they changed their minds as the campaign unfolded.

20   Viber is based in Tel Aviv, with offices in Belarus and Cyprus. The app is most dominant in Russia and Ukraine.

21   Matthew Hughes, "Viber Wants to Ask Its 800 Million Users the Big Question: Trump or Clinton?" The Next Web, October 31, 2016.

In an interview with The Next Web, Viber's chief operating officer, Michael Shmilov, said he hoped the effort will "reveal new worldwide trends and will encourage new involvement of social platforms in political dialogue." [22] Although users could view poll results in real time, Viber transparently admitted to users that the poll was not scientific.
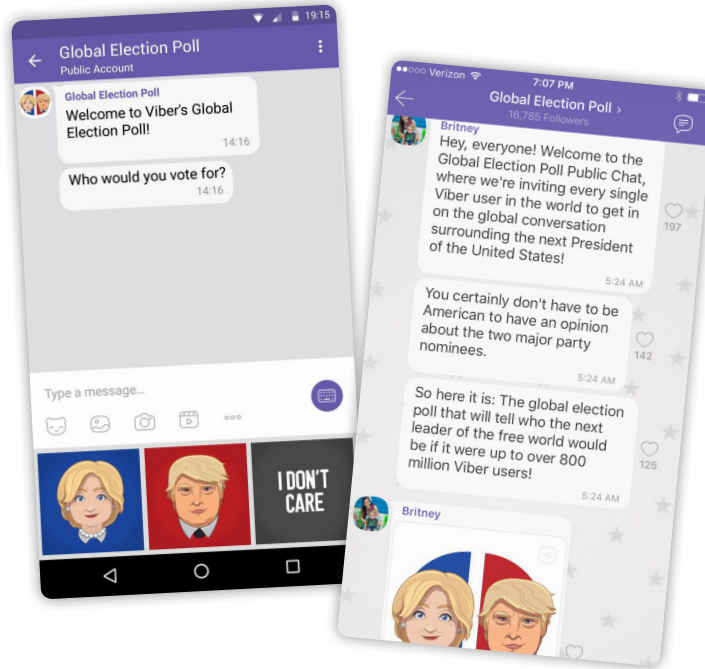
LINE SUPPORTS VOTER REGISTRATION AND ELECTION Q&A LIVE CHAT

LINE's 220 million monthly active users reside primarily in Japan, Thailand, Indonesia and Hong Kong, but millions of Americans have registered for the service. A significant portion of its U.S. audience is of voting age, with an ethnically diverse demographic that over-indexes with Asian-Americans and Hispanics. [23]

LINE has consistently delivered disproportionately large returns for U.S. and UK news companies that launch "official accounts" on the platform. CNN, which joined the platform in April and leads the pack with 4.5 million subscribers, was joined by The Wall Street Journal, BBC News, Time, Business Insider, NBC News, the Financial Times, NBC News, The Economist, Huffington Post, CNET and TechCrunch. Each has millions or hundreds of thousands of subscribers.

22   Matthew Hughes, "Viber Wants to Ask its 800 Million Users the Big Question: Drumpf or Clinton?," October 2016, The Next Web.

23   Thomas Wilson, "Japan's Line Corp Swings to First-Half Profit as Ad Revenue Soars," Reuters, July 27, 2016.

CNN, which made a concerted effort to experiment with election coverage on multiple chat apps, arranged for Zach Wolf, the managing editor of CNN politics, to host a "live chat" on LINE. A product unique to LINE, live chats allow official account holders to privately review and select fan questions submitted via chat and then respond to them in real time for all subscribers to see.

Sample questions included, "What happens if the person who loses does not accept the results?" and "How have this election and campaign been different from previous cycles?"

LINE also partnered with HelloVote in early October to launch a voter registration bot and official account, which gained over 9,500 subscribers in the homestretch of the campaign. To support the effort, LINE U.S. sent a push notification to its entire American user base with clickable artwork encouraging people to sign up. Several LINE users on Twitter expressed a mixture of surprise and enthusiasm about the ability to register to vote on the platform.
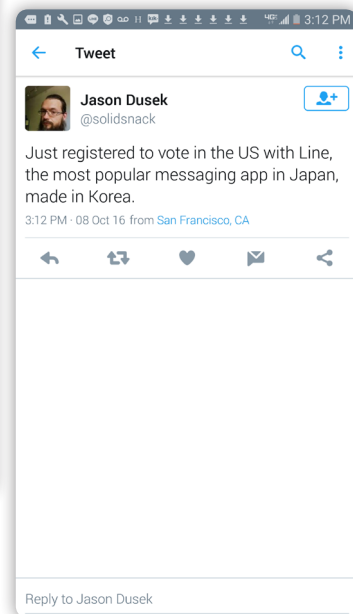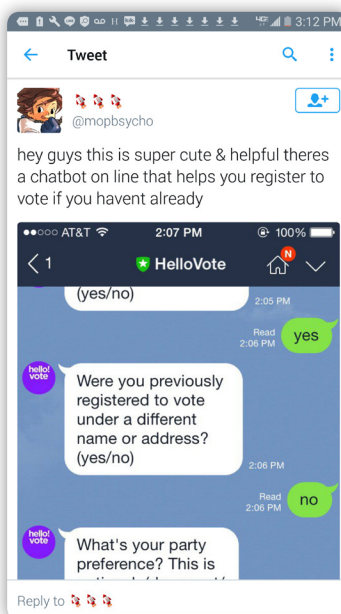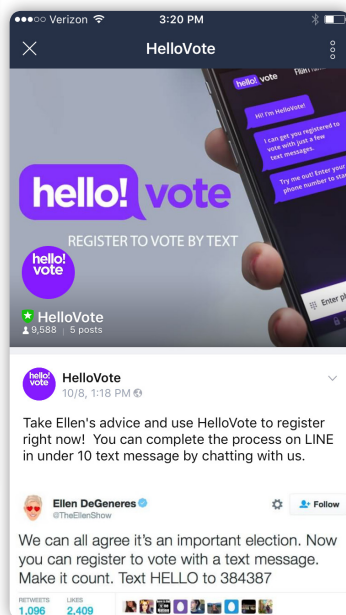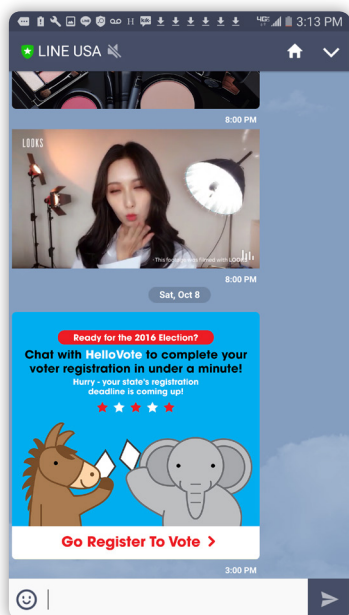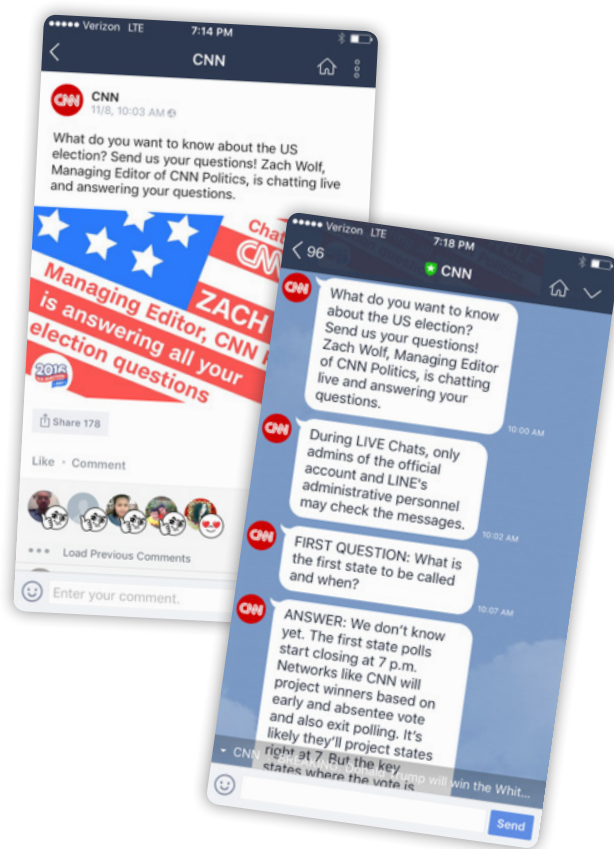
AMAZON ADDS A NEW VOICE TO ELECTION COVERAGE

Voice-based chat technology has been touted as the next big thing by numerous tech pundits and anecdotally appears to have more signs of early enthusiasm from consumers than text-based chatbots. While Apple's Siri was a harbinger of things to come, Amazon's Echo (with the virtual personal assistant "Alexa") turns the technology into a fixture of a user's home—giving new life and context to artificial intelligence agents.

Echo has a comparatively small audience when pitted against chat apps; it's only expected to be in 14 million homes by the end of 2017. But its ecosystem already includes over 3,000 "skills" (Amazon's term for Alexa-based apps), with a variety of news companies building experiences for the platform—and with good reason:

Consumer Intelligence Research Partners reports that while music listening is the biggest driver for early adoption of the Echo, seeking "information" is the second most popular activity—with more than 30 percent of users doing so. [24]

Chart 2: How consumers use Amazon Echo (multiple responses allowed, percentages sum to over 100%)
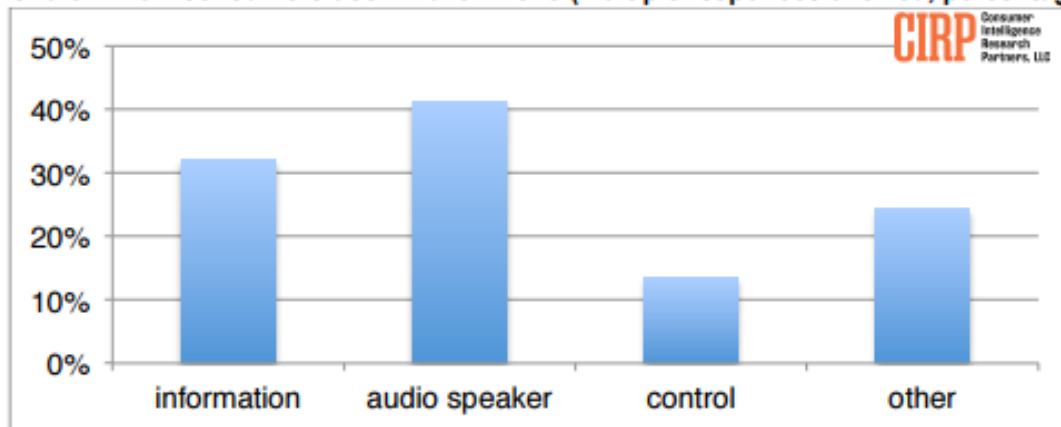
NBC News launched an Amazon Echo "Decision 2016" skill in March that could share headlines, candidate bios, an election calendar, delegate counts, polling data, primary results and trivia. In a playful demo video, NBC News depicted a user asking Alexa "Who should I vote for?" – to which she cheekily responded: "Ah, the age-old question. Go with your gut, but inform your instincts first with up-to-the-minute information on NBCNews.com."

24   "Amazon Echo – What We Know Now (Updated)," November 2016, Consumer Intelligence Research Partners

Duke Reporters' Lab introduced a "Share the Facts" Alexa skill, which referenced resources such as Washington Post's Fact Checker, FactCheck.org, and PolitiFact to answer user queries. Leveraging a database of roughly 2,000 curated and fact-checked topics, the skill responded to the prompt "Alexa, ask the fact-checkers... ." It could then answer questions like, "Did Donald Trump oppose the Iraq War?" and, "Is it true that 300,000 Floridians have lost their health insurance because of Obamacare?" [25]

CNN also developed an Echo skill letting users "access the latest news, election coverage and top stories from CNN's on-air coverage minutes after broadcast." After enabling the skill, users can say things like, "Alexa, ask CNN for the latest on elections," or even ask about specific election topics to access audio content.

In an interview with Digiday, CNN's Wellen was candid about his hopes for Alexa and the limitations of text-based chatbots. "We put a lot of work into ensuring our audience hears our talents' voices," he said, adding that the Amazon skill is "more chat than bot." [26]

Amazon also gave Alexa a few new core political skills on Election Day, allowing her to answer questions like, "Alexa, which states has Trump won?" and, "Alexa, what percent of the popular votes does Hillary have?"

Several other major tech companies including Microsoft, Apple and Facebook are expected to ramp up efforts in voice-based artificial intelligence in the coming years. And Gartner projects that 3.3 percent of global households will have virtual personal assistant-enabled (VPA-enabled) speakers by the next U.S. presidential election in 2020 – with 25 percent of those owning multiple devices. [27]

25   Erica Ryan, "Fact-checking Comes to the Amazon Echo," October 2016, ReportersLab.org

26   Max Willens, "CNN Will Bring Anderson Cooper to the Amazon Echo," Digiday, October 25, 2016.

27   "Gartner Says Worldwide Spending on VPA-Enabled Wireless Speakers Will Top $2 Billion by 2020," October 2016, Gartner Newroom

CONCLUSION

The 2016 campaign marked the first U.S. election cycle where chat platforms collectively attempted to register voters and spark political conversation. Much of the activity on Facebook Messenger, Kik, LINE, Viber and other apps was small scale and experimental, making use of nascent chatbot technology that wasn't widely available on most platforms until mid-2016.

It is likely that similar future efforts will reach a significantly wider subset of the U.S. chat app audience—especially if chatbots catch on. If naysayers of bot technology (there are quite a few) are proven right, this may not diminish the dominance of chat apps, which have now overtaken traditional social networks in size. But the format of voter registration efforts may evolve as the apps reshape their product features.

Among the top messengers, Snapchat is the only app that went all in on voter registration and politics this cycle—courting politicians and users alike, and putting its efforts front and center. The company's election activity seemed less driven by user demand than its own aspirations to play a role in public discourse, become a media powerhouse and attract political advertising dollars. With the help of partners such as TurboVote, it seems to be achieving success on all fronts.

Voice-based chat appears to be the next frontier, with Amazon and Google making major promotional efforts for their Echo and Home products, respectively, for the 2016 holidays. While only a small group of organizations tested the technology in the 2016 election content distribution, it could be that by the 2018 off-year elections, users sitting at home will be able to talk to a device that fully registers them to vote.

Eytan Oren

Eytan Oren is the CEO of Block Party, a consultancy that helps media owners, nonprofits, brands and celebrities build their presence on major chat apps. He launched his first mobile messaging campaign for One Direction in 2013 and shortly after co-wrote the first widely shared white paper on modern chat marketing, IPG Media Lab's "Messaging Apps: The New Face of Social Media and What It Means for Brands." As a Tow Fellow at Columbia Journalism School, he also co-authored a short book for news organizations, "Guide to Chat Apps."

Oren holds a bachelor's degree in music from Columbia University, and began his tech career at Google.

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