Snapchat Bets Big on Quick-Fire Approach to Campaign Coverage

Peter Hamby, the head of news at Snapchat, at an event for Gov. John Kasich in Manchester, N.H., last week. Ian Thomas Jansen-Lonnquist for The New York Times

BEDFORD, N.H. — Standing toward the back of the room at a Jeb Bush campaign rally here last week, Peter Hamby, the head of news at Snapchat, carried no notebook, pen or laptop.

"See that girl right there? She's uploading a Snap," Mr. Hamby said, referring to one of the short video snippets for which the popular mobile messaging app is known.

He scanned the crowd, pointing to others holding smartphones aloft and vertically. Within moments, a video of Mr. Bush getting choked up after being asked about his daughter's battles with drug addiction had made its way to a Snapchat "live story," the daily compilation of videos from thousands of users that are selected by a team of editors led by Mr. Hamby.

Best known for photo and video messages that disappear soon after they are delivered, Snapchat is making a big bet in 2016 by trying to break into the news business at a time when the industry is in turmoil.

Developing a strategy for news coverage at a time when established newsrooms are struggling with the digital transition could be seen as a risky move, even for a booming technology company. But Snapchat has something that every other news organization is after: a loyal and active audience of more than 100 million users, mostly teenagers and millennials.

The Snapchat logo on Mr. Hamby's phone case. Ian Thomas Jansen-Lonnquist for The New York Times

"I think if you look at millennial usage of TV, that's clearly in decline," said Nick Bell, the head of content at Snapchat. "And that's where a lot of our audience were previously consuming this sort of content."

Internally, Snapchat coverage is called "content," not "news," but the company has made a substantial investment in the hiring of journalists. Mr. Hamby, a former CNN reporter, was the first splashy hire. He brought on Katy Byron, a former CNBC producer and two-

time Peabody Award winner, as his managing editor. They hired from CBS, ABC, cable networks and colleges for a team of roughly six journalists.

Their mission is to reinvent mobile storytelling through the most compelling and important story of the year — the presidential election — and they are already finding an audience, with more than one million viewers on every political story that they have produced.

The central component of Snapchat's political coverage is the "live story," which is a carefully edited piece that uses a few of the tens of thousands of videos uploaded daily by Snapchat users. Snapchat calls these live stories "experiential," because the viewer can see what the snapper sees. But the live story experience is sometimes lacking a crucial element: hard news. Little of what, in this election cycle, is considered central to political coverage — fact-checking candidate speeches, explaining complex issues and analyzing polls — fits neatly into the 10-second snippets that make up a live story.

And while the rough, amateur footage shot by all those users provides viewers a sense of being there, it is sometimes lacking in production values, like framing or audio quality, with a candidate's remarks often inaudible or hard to discern.

The stories can also be lacking at times in the use of footage from the central political event being covered. In the live story of Saturday's Republican debate, which was composed of 48 segments, only six contained footage from the actual event. In the Snapchat story of the first Republican debate in August, the signature moment — Donald J. Trump squaring off against the moderator Megyn Kelly — was barely present, and when it was, the audio was soaked in an echo and difficult to discern.

Mr. Hamby is quick to highlight how the difference in approach sets Snapchat apart, focusing on the experiential nature of live stories, which lives in tandem with the more explanatory journalism found via the "Discover" tab of the app and in Snapchat's new original political show, "Good Luck America."

"If you're watching TV, it's a lot of analysis and punditry," Mr. Hamby said. "And Snapchat is out there allowing people to experience what it's like. In Iowa, we were in every corner of the state, we were inside caucus precincts, we were in get-out-the-caucus events. We were there when Sanders canvassers ran into Clinton canvassers."

Mr. Hamby will often insert himself into a political story to offer context, using the selfie camera to talk about what is happening, like explaining that the event in Bedford was Mr.

Bush's debate day warm-up, and that the campaign told him it was a capacity crowd.

Live stories have also captured the chance encounters and moments when the television cameras are off. During Saturday's debate, a video showing Gov. Chris Christie of New Jersey hunched over, chatting with Senator Ted Cruz of Texas in the front row of the debate hall during a commercial break, made its way into the live story. Previous live stories have included video snippets of candidates speaking at closed door fund-raisers or up close at rope lines, giving Snapchat what it considers to be exclusives, based on the ubiquity of its citizen journalists.

Snapchat has also added an extra layer of storytelling with "geofilters," graphics that a user can overlay on a video. These filters have gotten more advanced as Snapchat's news efforts have intensified, allowing users to annotate a clip with analysis or outline a candidate's position on an issue. During the Iowa caucuses, filters were used to pipe in live results, which were seen by more than six million users.

Yet it still is a lot to pack into 10 seconds.

"Do I think that we're able to provide all of the information that a user needs? No, absolutely not," Mr. Bell said. "Hopefully this does spark interest and they go away and have a level of understanding and a level of knowledge" which allows them to learn more elsewhere.

"Good Luck America," Snapchat's first foray into original news programming, stars Mr. Hamby and is produced by Sean Mills, the former president of NowThis, a news start-up that creates short stories for distribution on social media. The program debuted in Iowa by explaining how the caucuses work and bringing viewers to the candidates, with a particular bent toward millennials. The most recent episode took viewers to New Hampshire, where Mr. Hamby had an interview with Mr. Bush.

"I think they both complement each other very well," Mr. Bell said about the relationship between a political live story and "Good Luck America." "I think over time you maybe see a world where they start to combine a little bit. So we may have more produced elements in a live story which helps provide some of that context as you go along, whilst giving you that kind of raw, unabridged version of what's happening on the ground."

For those in politics, Snapchat's investment and presence in this election have caught their eye.

"I'm not an avid Snapchat user, I probably use it once a week," said Henry Barbour, a Republican strategist from Mississippi who was at a campaign event for Gov. John R. Kasich of Ohio in Manchester, N.H., on Saturday. But he said he saw the potential.

"I remember missing one of the Democratic debates, and I just went on Snapchat and checked out their three-minute version of what happened at the debate, and it was darn informative," he said.

Senator Bernie Sanders of Vermont, who is counting on the support of young people to propel him to victory, was a late Snapchat adopter but has now attracted the largest following, posting videos daily.

Senator Lindsey Graham of South Carolina, who ended his campaign in December, also embraced the platform. But the 60-year-old, like many his age, was not reliant on the app for his news.

"I just talk on it," he said at an event in Salem, N.H., this week. "I use smoke signals to follow the campaign."