Social Media's Increasing Role In The 2016 Presidential Election

RENEE MONTAGNE, HOST:

Social media, by this point, is not new. But in this election season, it's played a bigger role in our politics than ever before. NPR's Sam Sanders has been following how our politics play out on Facebook and Twitter and other social media. And he has some thoughts. Good morning.

SAM SANDERS, BYLINE: Hey, Renee.

MONTAGNE: This is the big question, of course - has social media made our political discourse better or worse?

SANDERS: To answer that question, we have to start with the one candidate who dominated social media this year, and that is Donald Trump. And I bring him up not to discuss him exactly but to discuss his effect on all the other candidates for president.

MONTAGNE: All right. Give us an example.

SANDERS: So there's this exchange between Hillary Clinton and Jeb Bush from August of last year that kind of shows the effect that Trump has had. And the Clinton campaign tweeted out this graphic about student debt. It claimed that 40 million Americans owe $1.2 trillion in student debt. Bush campaign replies to her tweet, tweeks her own graphic and writes about 100 percent of student debt increases happen under Democrats. But then team Clinton replies again. They scratch out the words in the Bush response, they scribble on top of the graphic and then write a big F on top of that.

MONTAGNE: For failure.

SANDERS: Yes. And then the Jeb Bush campaign replies again. They turn Hillary Clinton's logo upside down with the words taxes repeated over and over again. And so this kind of back-and-forth argument between candidates for president, Trump helped normalize that.

MONTAGNE: And that is also going on with everyday voters, right?

SANDERS: Yeah. You know, the critique of Facebook is that it's now become an echo chamber. The algorithm that controls your newsfeed favors content that you've liked before and matches you're own politics. And with Twitter, you could argue that it's very DNA is just not set up for a thoughtful political dialogue. Kerric Harvey is the author of "The Encyclopedia Of Social Media And Politics" and she told me this.

KERRIC HARVEY: What ought to be a conversation is just a set of Post-it notes that are scattered not even on the refrigerator door but on the ground. And we've got to make sense of it.

MONTAGNE: OK so Post-it notes - true. But the site itself would probably argue that it is helping the dialogue by giving everyone a voice.
SANDERS: So, Renee, I actually called Twitter. I spoke with Bridget Coyne. She's a senior manager there. And she said Twitter is a lot more than 140 characters now.

BRIDGET COYNE: Now you can add a poll to ask your followers a question, and they can answer it. And we've also seen a tactic that we sometimes call a tweet storm where people will reply in succession so you have this robust stream of tweets.

SANDERS: And she's right about those things. But there is another wrinkle for Twitter in politics this year. It's the rise of the bots.

MONTAGNE: Ah, yes bots.

SANDERS: So yeah. Bots are these fake accounts on Twitter that are preprogrammed. There's a recent study that found between the first and second presidential debates, one-third of pro-Trump tweets and almost one-fifth of pro-Clinton tweets came from bots. And Douglas Guilbeault at the University of Pennsylvania, he was a part of that study. He says those bot messages are not nice.

DOUGLAS GUILBEAULT: The reinforce this sense of polarization in the atmosphere because bots don't tend to be mild mannered. They are programmed to align themselves with an agenda.

SANDERS: So that Post-it note conversation we were talking about earlier, a lot of those Post-its might actually be fake. Now, Twitter told me the methodology of that study is flawed, but they did not deny the existence of bots.

MONTAGNE: So, Sam, where does this all leave us? Social media is not going away. Of course, politics aren't going away.

SANDERS: So, you know, there is hope. Snapchat is a newish social media app with a very young audience. Talked to folks there and they said that their users want their social networks to help explain things for them to make sense of all this noise. And they want the networks to protect them from harassment. Now, how do you do these things well? The answer has yet to be found.

MONTAGNE: That's NPR's Sam Sanders who's been reporting all year on politics and pop culture in this election. Thanks very much.

SANDERS: Thank you, Renee.