

ELECTION 2020

Members of Sanders's Online Army Ready to Fight On

Senator's web-based fans aggressively use Facebook to support their candidate, and many aren't ready to embrace Joe Biden



Former Vice President Joe Biden and Vermont Sen. Bernie Sanders participating in the Democratic presidential debate in Washington on Sunday.

PHOTO: CNN/ZUMA PRESS

By Betsy Morris

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ITHACA, N.Y.—With the odds quickly growing against Sen. Bernie Sanders's bid for the Democratic presidential nomination, some in his army of online advocates are vowing to continue the fight even if he drops out, attacking Joe Biden and threatening to back a third-party candidate.

Victor Tiffany helps lead that loosely connected digital militia from an aging desktop computer in his upstairs home office here. The 64-year-old IT technician and protest-movement veteran runs a “Bernie or Bust” network that has been a potent force during the nominating process, with massive social-media campaigns against Mr. Sanders's rival candidates, including sometimes vicious memes spread across platforms such as Facebook.

The scale and intensity of Mr. Tiffany's network has drawn the attention of researchers. He has roughly 4,000 Facebook friends and belongs to 570 Facebook groups where he can easily get messages supporting Mr. Sanders in front of thousands of viewers, said Trevor Davis, a

research professor at George Washington University and head of CounterAction, an online intelligence company.

Using such networks, Mr. Davis said, Mr. Tiffany and others can amplify messages by spreading them widely and quickly. In a 90-day period, Mr. Tiffany's friends have posted a total of more than 165,282 times to groups, directly reaching some 19 million people, excluding reshares into additional groups. In the past year, friends of friends of Mr. Tiffany posted more than 1.7 million times into groups with Mr. Sanders's name in them. Mr. Davis said that volume surpassed the backing seen for other Democratic candidates.

For Mr. Tiffany, changes Facebook has made that were aimed at elevating online discourse have made life easier. Facebook Inc. Chief Executive Mark Zuckerberg has been encouraging users to join groups focused on common areas of interest. That, Mr. Tiffany says, allows him and others to post to the entire group, often reaching thousands of people simultaneously. Many groups are private, so their activity is also harder for outsiders to spot, Mr. Davis said.

Facebook declined to comment for this article.

Facebook's groups have shifted the online political battleground on the platform since the 2016 election, according to Jonathan Albright, director of the digital forensics initiative at Columbia Journalism's Tow Center for Digital Journalism. Instead of public postings, those groups are often private, making it harder to detect the source of misinformation, hyperpartisan news and conspiracy theories, he found in an analysis two years ago.

After Super Tuesday voting that put Mr. Biden ahead of Mr. Sanders in the delegate count, Mr. Tiffany took to Twitter more than two dozen times to tweet or retweet messages and memes attacking Mr. Biden and the Democratic National Committee.

Mr. Tiffany, who has a master's degree in social science from Binghamton University, cuts an odd profile for a revolutionary. He is an avid college basketball fan, who watches Fox News and frequently wears a white button-down shirt. His home office doubles as a makeshift video studio. He and his main compatriots use an encrypted messaging app to communicate and plan.

Since Mr. Sanders said he is remaining in the race, Mr. Tiffany has doubled-down on that campaign, questioning Mr. Biden's ability to defeat President Trump.

Mr. Tiffany is trying to get Mr. Sanders's supporters to pledge not to back Mr. Biden if he is the nominee and instead to vote for a third-party candidate. The morning after the Michigan primary, memes from Mr. Tiffany's network such as "I'm staying home unless the nominee is Bernie" and "Bernie or Else" flooded Twitter. His email list of 53,000 supporters, he says, includes those who have pledged—some as far back as the 2016 race—to shun the Democratic nominee if it isn't Mr. Sanders.

A spokesman for the Sanders campaign declined to comment for this article. Mr. Sanders has said he would work to get the Democrat nominee elected even if he loses.

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Mr. Tiffany and some of his collaborators, including Millersville University music professor Allen Howell, have two principal adversaries: supporters of rival campaigns and efforts by social-media companies to curb their kind of orchestrated campaign efforts.

Companies such as Facebook and Twitter Inc. have announced measures to battle manipulation and coordinated inauthentic behavior as they crack down on people artificially gaming their systems to win a broader audience. Facebook, for instance, has rules that prohibit posting and sharing at high volumes and frequency, without detailing where it draws the line.

Mr. Tiffany says those efforts are inconsistently applied. "Rules? I've never seen them," he said.

Mr. Howell recently posted a tutorial on YouTube titled "Facebook Guerrilla Tactics 101." In it, he provides a list of more than 600 pro-Bernie groups and advises joining as many as possible—but not more than 50 a day, he warns, saying that's a red flag to Facebook. Such steps are designed to avoid having Facebook suspend an account, something he and Mr. Tiffany call being put in "Facebook jail."

Mr. Howell's tutorial includes a method of mass posting that he says Facebook won't detect. Users that have joined and posted into groups can re-edit those posts, pasting in new pro-Sanders content and add a comment, he says, bumping the message to the top of the community's feed, drawing eyeballs. Messages can be spread across many groups—sometimes under aliases—and on platforms other than Facebook, Mr. Howell said in an interview.

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