

Chipotle Week: How Bad Can Campaign Coverage Get?



Eric Boehlert: 04/17/15

Less than one week into Hillary Clinton's presidential campaign and it's a blurry image from a fast-food restaurant security video that's emerged as the defining media image. After "news" broke that Clinton, en route to Iowa to meet with voters, stopped in at an Ohio Chipotle for lunch and that the order was captured on film, the press corps basically went bonkers, treating it like a Tupac sighting and going all-in with fevered reporting.

The New York Times first got hold of the security cam video and reported that Clinton's order "included a Blackberry Izze drink, a soda and a chicken salad, and was filled just after 1 p.m." (1:20 p.m., to be exact, according to the New York Daily News.) Who carried the tray after payment? Clinton herself, the Times explained to readers.

Stories like the original Times report are not entirely out of the ordinary for campaign coverage. But the way the rest of the press went completely overboard in its wake suggests we could be in for a long and painful 19 months before the 2016 election.

More tick-tock details followed. "The newly-minted presidential candidate ordered a chicken bowl with guacamole, a chicken salad and fruit juice," according to ABC News, which interviewed the restaurant's manager. (The guacamole and fruit juice information was considered a mini-scoop; Business Insider noted guacamole "costs extra.")

Meanwhile, the Times asked in a follow-up, "Is Mrs. Clinton's order like the normal Chipotle meals of everyday Americans, or is it polarizing?"

For days, Clinton's Chipotle stop served as a treasure trove of information: Who made Clinton's burrito bowl? Politico sent a reporter to Maumee and determined, "The 25-year-old who cooked the chicken that

went into the burrito bowl Hillary Clinton ordered at the Chipotle here on Monday makes \$8.20 an hour and splits rent with two roommates." And assistant general manager Jef Chiet got Clinton her drink, Politico confirmed, "first a blackberry Izze, which she decided she didn't want after she read the ingredients, so he replaced it with an iced tea."

But campaign sleuths weren't finished. Bloomberg confirmed that, "The change from the meal totaled less than a dollar, but it was pocketed rather than deposited in the tip jar as many customers at the restaurant do."

Could any political analysis be gleaned from the mundane lunchtime stop? Of course:

- "Hillary Clinton Goes Unnoticed at Chipotle In Botched Retail Politicking Bid" (Washington Times)
- "Clinton Bypassed Centrist Taco Bell for Liberal Favorite Chipotle" (Wall Street Journal)
- "What Hillary Clinton's Chipotle Stop Says About Her Campaign" (Christian Science Monitor)

Is it possible that maybe she was just hungry?

The Chipotle nonsense reached such heights (or depths), that even starstruck E! called out the political press for its ridiculous overreaction to the story, and the fact that "ChipotleGate 2015" triggered "all sorts of in-depth analysis, from what her choice in burrito bowl means for America, to whether her decision to don sunglasses means she's unfit to be president."

During her first week on the campaign trail, Clinton has avoided any defining, self-inflicted gaffes. The same cannot be said of the press.

News organizations have gone on a "staffing binge" in preparation for the 2016 campaign, according to the Washington Post. That means political units have to produce content, no matter how trivial and innocuous. The machine must be fed (clicks must be harvested). And right now, that machine is spitting out some dreadful, breathless, and gossipy campaign dispatches that are divorced from anything remotely connected to a public discourse.

Just think about the Chipotle story. Was Clinton in hiding at the time? Had she dared the press to find her out? Was there any reason to think her highway pit stop for food was newsworthy? No, no and no. Maybe -maybe -- if it were the final weeks of an historically close White House campaign, that kind of myopic attention paid to a lunch order would be warranted. But 70-plus weeks before voters go to the polls? It's unfathomable.

The irony was that while the campaign press freaked out over the trivia surrounding Clinton's lunch order, some pundits were simultaneously castigating the candidate for not rolling out a sweeping campaign agenda.

Politico assigned no fewer than eight reporters for an article about how, just 72 hours into her likely 18-month campaign, Clinton "has been slow" to articulate detailed positions on issues such as fast-track trade agreements and the need for reform at the National Security Agency.

The team at NBC's First Read agreed: "That lack of a message was on display at her Iowa event yesterday." Well, actually that wasn't true. NBC conceded that Clinton had already detailed four fights she wants to

wage: "1) building an economy for tomorrow, 2) strengthening families and communities, 3) fixing America's political system by getting rid of "unaccountable" money, and 4) protecting the country."

Additionally, NBC reported Clinton had struck a "populist tone" and condemned income equality in America. But NBC didn't think any of that counted as much of a "message" from Clinton because she was just saying "what you hear from 90% of Democratic candidates running for downballot office."

Clinton didn't say anything entertaining and newsy! "She didn't say anything unique, which was always going to be the shortcoming of a rollout emphasizing theater over substance/message," according to NBC.

And there's the media's inadvertent punch line: It's Clinton who's guilty of emphasizing "theater over substance."
