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Well-Informed, or Well-Amused; Presidential Debates in a Post-Truth Era

From the dusty roads of the Lincoln-Douglas debates, to the 2024 stand-off between Kamala Harris and Donald Trump, our nation has fixed its gaze on the political ritual of presidential debates in an idyllic and perhaps unattainable quest of producing a well-informed nation. We have traveled time and medium in pursuit of engaging and educating our citizenry. Despite our historical and present efforts, well-informed citizenry has dwindled synonymously with the strength of our democracy as the mediums through which we receive information have altered the meaning of “being informed.”[[1]](#footnote-2) Such mediums are a product of immense technological advances, and while these advances provide opportunity, they present challenges in maintaining a well-informed citizenry and consequently place the legitimacy of our institutions in danger. As news corporations cater to consumerism merging opinions into fact, and social media bypasses once traditional sources in disseminating information through carefully curated feeds, presidential debates now have little influence over the well-informed citizens who have become the well-amused audience.[[2]](#footnote-3)

At the root of our failed presidential debate system is a citizenry narcotized by technology that has diminished our individual and collective capacity to think. As individuals are disillusioned by their technologically curated realities, a well-informed citizenry declines, and presidential debates become increasingly less effective. It is both our citizen base and the speed and magnitude by which information is produced and reinscribed on social media that have made presidential debates impractical to legislate as a means of ensuring a well-informed citizenry. Congress should not legislate or mandate presidential debates because the debates are merely a symptom of what plagues our democracy. Social media and the First Amendment are predicated on dualism that prevents legislation regarding presidential debates from being effective. Congress cannot regulate, monitor, or correct the disinformation and manipulation of truth from social media or the candidates themselves without breaching the free speech of all parties involved.[[3]](#footnote-4) Disinformation is an ailment that cannot be legislated.

Citizen participation is vital to a healthy democracy; however, for participation to be productive and strengthen democracy, citizens must be well informed. Without being informed, citizens lack the necessary knowledge to understand how political decisions will affect their interests.[[4]](#footnote-5) The process and criteria for what constitutes being well-informed extend beyond simply possessing political knowledge. Authors Svenja Schäfer and Christian Schemer emphasize that to be well-informed, one must have factual and structural knowledge.[[5]](#footnote-6) Factual knowledge refers to concrete facts regarding political structures and current affairs. Structural knowledge, however, “describes a more complex form of knowledge that involves understanding and sense-making of politics by combining the meaning of various facts.”[[6]](#footnote-7) Simply put, citizens must be able to disseminate disinformation from fact, while understanding political facts within the context of what it means for both our democracy and their interests as citizens.

Social media has become a primary source for political information, where citizens feel they are growing their political knowledge.[[7]](#footnote-8) Pew Research Center notes that 59 percent of X users obtain news digitally, as do a similar share of users on Truth Social (57 percent), the site owned by President Donald Trump. About half of TikTok users (52 percent) say they regularly get news on the site, up from 43 percent in 2023 and just 22 percent in 2020.[[8]](#footnote-9) In another analysis of surveys conducted between October 2019 and June 2020, Pew Research Center documented that those who rely most on social media for political news tend to be less likely than other news consumers to closely follow major news stories, and tend to be less knowledgeable about these stories.[[9]](#footnote-10) The utilization of social media for news has thus infringed on well-informed citizenry and the presidential debate process. Schäfer and Schemer note that, unlike newspapers and TV news broadcasts, social media presents news and information in a small, “bite-sized, snackable format”.[[10]](#footnote-11) The information being presented to citizens is in a more truncated, simplified format to facilitate quick consumption while retaining its users' attention. Such consumption is problematic, even when the information is from high-quality sources, due to the short length of posts, the ability to present information without context, and the capacity to perpetuate disinformation. Neil Postman notes that, “Disinformation does not mean false information. It means misleading information - misplaced, irrelevant, fragmented or superficial information - information that creates the illusion of knowing something, but which, in fact, leads one away from knowing.”[[11]](#footnote-12) As social media has enabled disinformation and a lack of structural knowledge, citizens have become less informed, and presidential debates have become less effective.

Our current system of presidential debates, where the terms of the debate are privately negotiated and agreed upon, has been ineffective in ensuring a well-informed citizenry. The fragmented and biased nature of the information regarding candidates on social media, before, during, and after the debate, has impacted voters' retention of knowledge and their impressions of candidates. Technology has, in turn, undermined the purpose of debates by impacting on the candidates' ability to directly address voters without external influence. In a study regarding the influence of social media on televised debates, CBS displayed tweets alongside presidential candidates on screen, illustrating that the incorporation of Twitter comments may have hindered normative outcomes of debate viewing.[[12]](#footnote-13) The findings specifically show that including information from social media on-screen during the debate increased polarization, limited what viewers learned about candidate policies, and led to less overall persuasion by the candidates. The authors note that “the inclusion of on-screen social media visuals during televised debates may overwhelm the viewer’s ability to process and retain democratic information.”[[13]](#footnote-14)

CNN notes a similar effect during the first general election debate of 2012 in which Barack Obama delivered a subpar performance. The study indicated a distinct difference between people who were watching the debate in focus groups without their mobile phones and access to the public and those who were actively using social media. The focus group participants thought Obama was not great, but those who had listened to the criticism of both experts and his most ardent supporters thought the President was terrible.[[14]](#footnote-15) Indeed, what is said on social media during the debate is almost as important as what is said in the debate. These studies illustrate how the communal process of social media has interfered with the effectiveness of debates by making them less impressionable and less informative.

Another critical issue with referring to social media during the debates is that individuals are generally only exposed to sources that align with their ideological preferences. Such ideological preferences often construct narratives of candidates and the political parties that are conducive to their agenda, possessing the capacity to influence how individuals may perceive candidates. Social media functions through algorithms that are designed to provide users with content based on their personal preferences and patterns.[[15]](#footnote-16) The algorithm of this technology consequently produces echo chambers that do not expose users to new content, such as varying perspectives, sources, or accounts. The lack of exposure to varying perspectives is particularly harmful given the speed at which these sources can reach their audiences. The sources individuals are consuming are already providing simplified, and potentially factually incorrect overviews of the debate, but the technology permits disinformation to rapidly reach audiences during and after the debate. The curated nature of the pages makes it more difficult for individuals to pursue varying perspectives at the speed in which they are receiving the ones produced by their echo chambers. Without seeking more versatile content independently, users are generally confined to the fragmented and biased knowledge that their curated pages provide them.[[16]](#footnote-17)

David Shenk notes the consequence of our ever-evolving technology in his book, *Data Smog;* “After a steady series of breakthroughs in information technology, we are left with a citizenry that is certainly no more interested or capable of supporting a healthy representative democracy than it was 50 years ago, and may well be less capable.”[[17]](#footnote-18) To Shenk’s point, social media is one of the most prominent reasons why our current debate system is ineffective, and it is also why legislating the debates would not make them any more effective in ensuring a well-informed citizenry. Even with mandating that debates, and fact-checking occur, social media and its impact will still exist, and we are still left with a citizen base that is content with the limited political knowledge they are consuming.

Congress cannot constitutionally[[18]](#footnote-19) or practically legislate social media companies to change their technology and fact-check to break the bounds of existing echo chambers. Just as Congress cannot legislate the technology or circulation of content on social media, it cannot restrict what candidates say during the debates, per the First Amendment. Thus, mandating debates may not be beneficial because the debates themselves can promote disinformation. While debates provide candidates with the opportunity to present their platform to the American public directly, such presentation does not guarantee that the information provided by the candidates is truthful. For the same reason, debates can be beneficial; they can be equally harmful. Misinformed or false statements made by candidates during debates can reach both the audience of those just listening and the participating audience[[19]](#footnote-20) of those on social media, before fact-checkers can intervene[[20]](#footnote-21), permitting the ability to perpetuate disinformation, rather than well-informed citizenry.

The impact of such false claims can be seen after the first and only presidential debate of the 2024 election when President Donald Trump baselessly claimed, in response to a question about immigration, “In Springfield, they are eating the dogs. The people that came in, they are eating the cats. They’re eating – they are eating the pets of the people that live there.”[[21]](#footnote-22) Trump’s false claim had rapid and profound impacts on the residents of Springfield and on Haitian immigrants within our nation as the claim spread across social media with now Vice President JD Vance promoting the claim on X, gaining more than 11 million views.[[22]](#footnote-23) Despite efforts from Springfield’s city manager, law enforcement, and officials to assure the nation that there was no evidence or reports to support this claim,[[23]](#footnote-24) Trump’s baseless statement sparked retaliation and violence against Haitian immigrants within Springfield. Notably, Springfield City Hall and two elementary schools had to be evacuated after receiving bomb threats because of Trump’s claim.[[24]](#footnote-25) In addition, Wittenberg University was forced to increase security following an email threatening a potential shooting on campus targeting Haitian members of the school’s community.[[25]](#footnote-26) Trump’s claim demonstrates the negative influence that presidential debates can have when providing candidates an unfiltered platform, as his claim sparked violence, racism, and furthered the deepening partisan divide within our country.

Trump’s claim and its vast impact illustrate both our nation's attraction to disinformation and how destructive and dangerous that disinformation can be. The failures of our current presidential debate system cannot be remedied by legislating the debates themselves.

As our society is rooted in the right and principle of free speech, we function at its privilege and its peril. Though its peril has permitted the creation of a post-truth era, where disinformation has become assimilated with information, its privilege permits us to resist disinformation and initiate efforts that can lead to a more well-informed citizenry and more effective presidential debates. Congress can advocate for and legislate an enhanced civic education curriculum at the federal level for public school districts K-12. A comprehensive civic education should emphasize both factual and structural understanding of political knowledge, while honing skills such as media literacy and critical thinking. When effective, this education would develop students' capacity to apply and use their acquired knowledge to participate competently in our democracy, increasing well-informed citizenry and the strength of our nation.

Providing citizens with the knowledge and skills necessary to recognize, disseminate, and combat disinformation is the first step toward healing our democracy and establishing a more well-informed citizen base. Education, however, cannot function alone. For civic education to be effective, the well-amused audience must want to become well-informed citizens. America and its institutions can only protect us from tyranny insofar as we permit them to do so. The enemy is not disinformation nor the mediums that perpetuate it, rather, “the enemy is the tyranny of the dull mind.”[[26]](#footnote-27) To protect our democracy and enhance the effectiveness of presidential debates, we, the citizenry, must develop an awareness of our own consumption and a desire to break the bounds of our own entertainment. We must look inward and not fix our gaze solely upon our presidential candidates or the systems that are failing because of our own willful ignorance. We must remain committed to a vision of ‘a more perfect, well-informed union, composed of, for, and by the people;[[27]](#footnote-28) as the ignorance of one voter in a democracy impairs the security of all.[[28]](#footnote-29)

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