

David Greenberg

*Torchlight parades for the television age:
the presidential debates as political ritual*

During the 2008 vice presidential debate, Alaska Governor Sarah Palin was pressed by her Democratic rival, Delaware Senator Joe Biden, and moderator Gwen Ifill to reply to a question she had previously ignored. The chipper Palin, who thrived on the perception of being persecuted, demurred. "I may not answer the questions that either the moderator or you want to hear," she parried, "but I'm going to talk straight to the American people."¹

For this statement, Palin suffered not only rebuke, but ridicule. Flaunting her intent to duck a question amounted to a failure of manners. Part of the performance of a presidential (or vice presidential) debate, after all, consists of following certain conventions. One is that candidates are supposed to act as if they are there to report to the public their ticket's positions on prominent policy issues, thereby helping voters figure out which party better matches their own preferences. According to this logic, Palin's sin lay not in her evasion of the question – a common enough occurrence in the debates – but in her unabashed admission of the evasion. If a gaffe, in the journalist Michael Kinsley's formulation, is when a politician

tells the truth, Palin told the truth without even the customary inadvertence.²

Kinsley's axiom, quoted often during the gaffe-ridden 2008 campaign, remains in currency because it highlights the power of the unspoken and sometimes unrecognized assumptions that underpin our politics. These assumptions aren't always true or even justifiable. But the public, particularly those in the news media who shape our discourse, has a stake in maintaining them. They serve a useful purpose.

An underlying premise of the discourse about the presidential debates is that they exist to inform viewers, who watch them with open minds to learn about the candidates and decide how to vote. In other words, grandiose as it may sound, our culture assigns the debates a vital democratic role: democratic theory holds that effective self-government depends on an informed citizenry, and the debates, more than any other vehicle, are supposed to teach voters what they still need to know about the candidates in the fall of a presidential election season. Accordingly, we eagerly anticipate these contests as potential turning points for the campaigns, the only scheduled events that might by design win or lose votes for one candidate or the other overnight.

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Journalists invariably speak of them as a rare chance for those all-important undecided voters to make up their endlessly wavering minds. In recent years networks have even convened focus groups of the vacillators on whose fleeting impressions the nation hinges, interviewing them on air after each clash to see if they were moved to reach any decisions that might collectively alter a campaign's outcome.

Of course, given the evasions, boilerplate, scripted jokes, and attention to stagecraft that routinely permeate the debates, it's hard to maintain that they fulfill this purpose of informing the independent-minded viewer. On the contrary, they seem to fail at this task often enough to earn them unremitting disparagement from the same pundits who hold them to such lofty standards. Ever since the first televised presidential contests, the 1960 "Great Debates" between John F. Kennedy and Richard M. Nixon, critics have complained that the spectacles are not debates at all, but well-choreographed joint press conferences – marred, as *The New York Times* editorialized in 1976, by "their show-business nature; their heavy reliance on rehearsal and grooming by professional image-makers; the concern for appearance over substance." The *Times* noted, "The 1976 presidential debates resemble the Lincoln-Douglas debates, to which they are inevitably compared, as much as a town meeting resembles – well, a television spectacular."³

Nothing encapsulates the view of the debates as superficial piffle better than the inevitable – and inevitably invidious – contrasts with those legendary Illinois Senate debates. Journalists have no corner on these glib comparisons. In *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, the late, unamused media critic Neil Postman railed against the Kennedy-Nixon contests as

a pale imitation of Lincoln-Douglas. The Kennedy-Nixon debates, he said, marked a passage from "the Age of Exposition" to "the Age of Show Business." The hours-long, touring contests between Abraham Lincoln and Stephen Douglas in the fall of 1858 exhibited "a kind of oratory that may be described as literary," with "a semantic, paraphrasable, propositional content," Postman continued, while the four Nixon-Kennedy clashes were empty charades made for television, which "speaks in only one persistent voice – the voice of entertainment."⁴

Please, Mr. Postman. Scholars should know better than to traffic in such nostalgia. The Lincoln-Douglas contests provided plenty of entertainment, too, along with double-talk, cheap shots, pandering, and no small concern with appearances. "There is much to learn from the Lincoln-Douglas debates about the politics of the 1850s," Michael Schudson has written, "but there are no lessons to 'apply' to our own time, certainly not in the form of a rebuke to a purportedly diminished political culture."⁵ Differences between the two sets of debates are real, but to judge the change as only decline is to make a moral judgment, not a historical one.

In short, both the celebrations of the debates as a fount of insight into the candidates' fitness to govern and the denigrations of their lifelessness and theatricality miss the point. Both rest on flawed assumptions about what the debates are there to do. Yet if we try instead to conceive of the debates' role and purpose differently, we may perhaps appreciate the democratic function that they *do* perform: not the provision of vital data to blank-slate voters seeking to form a considered judgment about the candidates, but rather the stimulation and engagement of broader public

interest in politics. This contribution, while more modest than the grand claims frequently made on the debates' behalf, nonetheless goes some way toward renewing voters' political commitments and enriching democracy.

The discourse about the democratic promise of the debates dates back to the Kennedy-Nixon contests. Since 1948, when Tom Dewey of New York and Harold Stassen of Minnesota squared off for an hour in pursuit of the Republican nomination, presidential primary contenders had occasionally taken to jousting over the radio. But for both political and legal reasons – mainly the fear that federal equal-time regulations would require the inclusion of all manner of fringe candidates in a prime-time free-for-all – televised general-election debates remained a dream. Only after the quiz show scandals of the late 1950s did the calculus change. With the networks' reputations suffering, a dose of high-minded public interest programming suddenly seemed like the perfect tonic. Congress suspended the nettlesome equal-time clause of the 1934 Communications Act, and the networks set about conceiving television programs much like the very quiz shows that they sought to displace. Like the Lincoln-Douglas contests, their entertainment value was part of the draw from the first.

Not wishing to be seen as reducing public affairs to the level of Milton Berle, network spokesmen took pains to portray the debates as something more than a commercial enterprise: as a civic boon, a cure for an ailing democracy. Coming at a time when Americans were grappling with a perceived sense of inauthenticity in politics, these arguments were not insincere. For much of the twentieth century, the public had grown

anxious that modernity was weakening democracy. A series of changes, including the astounding growth of the federal government, America's rise to global leadership, the decline of parties, and the Progressive Era's efforts to clean up politics, combined to make government a more important force in people's lives, but at the same time a more distant one as well. As Jürgen Habermas put it in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, citizens' "contact with the state [now came to] occur . . . in the rooms and anterooms of the bureaucracy," decidedly impersonal venues. Meanwhile, new media of mass communication – film, radio, later television – gave audiences an illusion of familiarity with national political figures that print could not, even as they encouraged the feeling that politics was playing out in a theatrical display on a faraway stage, remote from their own lives and concerns. The emerging political culture seemed to downgrade Habermas's celebrated "rational-critical discourse" that he posited was central to the Enlightenment conception of democracy.⁶

The rhetoric surrounding the televised debates – echoing the rhetoric surrounding television's coverage of the national party conventions and several other aspects of presidential politics – suggested that the new medium could restore a form of town-hall democracy in an impersonal age of mass media. Televised debates would bring an intimacy back to politics. The candidates would be in everyone's living rooms for sixty minutes, on four separate occasions, talking plainly and directly to the citizenry. Voters could use their autonomous intelligence in evaluating the two aspirants for the leadership of the free world.

And yet if a restoration was promised, television – that symbol of modern times – was not to be effaced. It was cast as the

hero, not the villain, of the civic revival story. CBS President Frank Stanton argued that the televised debates were tailor-made for the mass-media age. In the nineteenth century, he noted, large throngs turned out at campaign events such as torchlight parades and mass rallies; amid alcohol, music, and colorful costumes, they would feed off one another's partisan passions. Writing in 1960, just after the Kennedy-Nixon debates, Stanton dismissed those old-style gatherings as anachronistic, as calculated, in his words, "not to inform, or to create an atmosphere conducive to the appraisal of information, but to whip up attitudes capable of overcoming any temptation to judiciousness." By his own day, he said, America could no longer "afford the blind, uncritical automatic support of one man against another, whatever his insight, his judgment, or his qualities of leadership." The televised debates – an updated, twentieth-century substitute for the nineteenth-century outdoor spectacles – would treat voters as independent of mind, enlightening them about the candidates' stands and enabling them to weigh the issues with the care they deserved. Modern democracy demanded no less.⁷

Briefs like Stanton's set the standards by which the debates would be judged. More often than not, alas, they were judged as falling short. Rather than educating voters about the key differences between the candidates, went the critique, the TV extravaganzas stressed shallow qualities such as looks and speaking style, while allowing the presidential aspirants to avoid precisely the kind of substantive back-and-forth that the event was meant to foster. This critique of the debates as plotted and scripted, as valuing image over sub-

stance, implied that they weren't meeting their foremost obligation. Voters were instead being treated to a pageant of skilled performances, clever sound bites, prefabricated statements from stump speeches, and deft equivocations that aimed not to help voters assess the candidates' relative positions on the issues, but simply to win them over by strength of charm, wit, polish, misinformation, and spin. Even the jokes that occasionally brought down the house were known to have been devised in advance by a sharp wordsmith, with the candidate charged merely with finding the opportune moments to deploy them. This criticism of the debates was the flip side of the hope that they would restore a rational-critical discourse. It was the fear that they reinforced an irrational, uncritical discourse.

Exhibit A in the case for the debates' alleged substancelessness was the plain fact of Kennedy's victory. That mythology is so well-known that it scarcely bears repeating. With TV sets now in nine of ten American homes, an estimated seventy million people watched Kennedy and Nixon square off on September 26. Viewers saw a sharp contrast: Kennedy, standing calmly in a dark suit, projected unflappability. Handsome, relaxed, he answered questions crisply, snuffing out any doubts that he might be too callow for the job. Nixon, recovering from a knee infection and a cold, looked terrible. Sweat streaked the pancake make-up he had applied to his five-o'clock shadow, and his gray suit blended in with the walls. Afterward, the press, as if by unanimous consent, blamed Nixon's appearance for his loss. "Fire the make-up man," Nixon's aide Herb Klein was told. "Everybody in this part of the country thinks Nixon is sick. Three doctors agreed he looked as if he had just suffered a coronary."⁸

There is no doubt that Kennedy looked better. There is also little doubt that debates helped him. Kennedy's pollster Lou Harris wrote a memo after the debate noting that the senator had opened up a 48 to 43 percent lead in his latest survey, "the first time that either candidate has been able to show the other open water. This is almost wholly the result of the Monday night debate," Harris asserted.⁹ Other public polls showed a similar trend.

What is open to doubt is whether Kennedy's victory owed as much to a purely visual superiority to Nixon as is commonly thought. No empirical research directly supports the claim. The main piece of evidence supposedly buttressing it is the widespread notion that radio listeners believed Nixon had won. But that assertion is dubious. The historian-journalist Teddy White probably deserves the blame for etching it in the accounts of the debates. In his *Making of the President, 1960*, the urtext for chroniclers of the Great Debates, White wrote, "Those who heard the debates on radio, according to sample surveys" – surveys that White neither specified nor footnoted – "believed that the two candidates came off almost equal" (but not, it should be added, that Nixon won). "Yet every survey of those who watched the debates on television," White added – again, providing no details – suggested that Nixon had done poorly. "It was the picture image that had done it." Even more vaguely, the syndicated columnist Ralph McGill said that a sampling of "a number of people" he spoke to who listened on radio "unanimously thought Mr. Nixon had the better of it." Earl Mazo of the *New York Herald Tribune* recorded a similar anecdotal impression. But only one formal survey, by a Philadelphia market research firm, supports the claim of Nixon's

radio superiority, and its methods have been called into question.¹⁰

Equally dubious is the idea that the debates gave short shrift to "substance," at least if measured by discussion of the venerated "issues." For all the accusations that the candidates postured excessively, or that TV focused too much on smiles and stubble, a countervailing line of critique held something like the opposite: not that the debates were utterly vapid, but that the rapid-fire, information-rich answers prevented viewers from taking some kind of broader measure of the men. "Not even a trained political observer," noted the journalist Douglass Cater, who moderated one debate, "could keep up with the cross fire of fact and counterfact, of the rapid references to Rockefeller Reports, Lehman amendments, prestige analyses, GNP and a potpourri of other so-called facts. Or was the knack of merely seeming well-informed what counted with the viewer?" Public opinion expert Samuel Lubell agreed, citing voters he interviewed who "tried to make sense of the arguments of the candidates 'but the more we listened, the more confused we got.'"¹¹

What matters here isn't so much whether the debates really did exalt mere "image" as the more basic fact that such a belief took hold and endured. Perhaps the most lasting articulation of this belief came from the historian Daniel Boorstin in his now-classic 1961 work *The Image*. "[M]ore important than what we think of the presidential candidate," Boorstin argued, bemoaning the rise of television and media manipulation in politics, "is what we think of his 'public image.'" The Kennedy-Nixon debates, he said, offered "specious" drama that did nothing to convey "which participant was better qualified for the presidency."

They raised the peripheral matters of lighting, makeup, and Nixon's five-o'clock shadow to prominence while "reducing great national issues to trivial dimensions" and squandering "this greatest opportunity in American history to educate the voters."

Boorstin also elaborated what he saw as the dangers of the rise of this image culture: nothing less than the demise of representative government. Harkening back to Lincoln, he said that the maxim "you can't fool all of the people all of the time" was "the foundation-belief of American democracy." It implied, first, that the citizenry can distinguish "between sham and reality," and, second, "that if offered a choice between a simple truth and a contrived image, they will prefer the truth." But in the face of pseudo-events like the Great Debates, Boorstin argued, this assertion no longer held. The cornerstone of the American temple was shaky.¹²

It took sixteen years for the stars to align to permit another round of general-election debates. In 1976, Jimmy Carter, a relatively unknown former governor, needed the debates even more badly than Kennedy had in 1960, to prove that he had presidential stature. And whereas previous incumbents, Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon, had concluded that going mano a mano could only elevate their rivals, Gerald Ford, having been elected to neither the presidency nor the vice presidency, concluded that he, too, needed to submit himself to a vetting of sorts by the public.

The 1976 debates are remembered far less well than the 1960 contests. Two episodes above all endure in popular memory. One is the audio failure that occurred near the end of the first match-up, on September 23, resulting

in an awkward twenty-seven-minute silence in which the candidates stood still like mannequins. The other is Ford's statement in the second encounter that Eastern Europe was not under Soviet domination. Both moments exposed the fallacy of thinking about the debates as simply the candidates' unmediated statements and performances during the broadcasts proper. Rather, it came to be recognized, those performances belonged to a larger context that included how the candidates and the race were portrayed beforehand; how the participating journalists acted during the debate; and the whole post-debate battle for interpretation. "Starting with the Ford-Carter matches," Alan Schroeder, a scholar of presidential debates, has written, "a live debate has come to represent only the centerpiece of the larger media marathon that begins weeks before airtime and ends well after the program fades to black."¹³

In retrospect, the audio failure seems the more remarkable of the two incidents. At 10:51 p.m. Eastern time, as Carter was speaking, a technical failure crippled the sound system. In the interim, no one knew what to do. The moderator, Edwin Newman, suggested that the candidates sit down, but they didn't. Nor did they approach each other to chat informally. Instead they stood rigidly and silently at their respective podiums. This spontaneous mutual non-aggression pact became an emperor-has-no-clothes moment, underscoring the fear of spontaneity that had infused the debates. As much as anything, it revived the thread of criticism that had greeted the Kennedy-Nixon contests: that they were not real debates, requiring quick-wittedness and an active intelligence, but joint press conferences, packaged and rehearsed, short on the substance they were supposed to deliver. The si-

lence, wrote the editors of *The New Republic*, “was *prima facie* evidence, if any were needed, that the debates are not a news event merely available for coverage by the networks; rather they are productions staged for their benefit and even, despite their loud grumbling, to their specifications.” As a result, the magazine complained, no real give-and-take occurred; no “inspiring visions” were articulated, only talking points. “From Mr. Ford’s first response . . . to Carter’s last, the candidates delivered what they were programmed to deliver.”¹⁴

Comments like these about the debates, and those from *The New York Times* cited earlier, were widespread, and they recurred like clockwork in the following years. The laments about image superseding substance were fueled, moreover, by a new attention to the debates’ backstage maneuverings. Candidates began to hold practice debates, with aides and other supporters playing the roles of the opposing candidates, and the press started reporting on these preparations with clear delight. Journalists got excited, too, when in 1983 Laurence Barrett, a *Time* magazine reporter, disclosed in a book that Ronald Reagan’s campaign had gotten hold of Jimmy Carter’s briefing book before one of their 1980 debates.¹⁵ Though scandalous as a clear-cut violation of the norms of fair play, the subterfuge also caused discomfort for another reason: like the proliferating reports about debate preparation, “debate-gate” underscored the practiced nature of the performances and further dispelled any illusion of spontaneity surrounding them.

As viewers figured out that the debates didn’t really begin when the program itself came on TV, they also came to realize that the debates didn’t end with the candidates’ closing statements either.

The fallout from Ford’s remarks about Eastern Europe showed, more than anything else, the importance of the post-debate instant analysis and spin. As a substantive matter, the president’s comments hadn’t been terribly confusing or controversial. In context, his intent was clear enough – a desire not to write off Eastern Europeans’ aspirations for freedom from Soviet influence – and, according to polling, most viewers didn’t deem them an error. Some surveys taken that night even showed a plurality of respondents believing that Ford had outperformed Carter. The incident mattered, however, as an illustration of how the debates burst the time limits of the actual broadcast. Despite the public’s indifference to Ford’s comments, television and newspaper pundits seized on them as if he had made a horrendous blunder. At his press conference the next day, the first eleven questions dealt with the purported gaffe. Carter harped on it in his own appearances. Soon polls showed that the public had adopted the journalists’ view. “I thought that Ford had won. But the papers say it was Carter. So it must be Carter,” one voter was quoted as saying – ironically, maybe, but not without reinforcing the point about the importance of post-debate commentary.¹⁶

Post-debate spin was mostly new in 1976. In 1960, neither party had tried to shape anyone’s verdicts about the debates. Both camps simply said their men had done well, but their tone was restrained and not opportunistic. “Some Kennedy aides, asking not to be quoted, said they felt their candidate had scored more points and over-all had made the best impression,” *The New York Times* noted.¹⁷ Kennedy did use unflattering clips of Nixon sweating and scowling in a television advertisement, but that move was aimed at taking advantage

of an already-clear public verdict, not at influencing the verdict.

By 1976, the candidates' handlers had gotten cannier. After the first vice presidential debate that year, between Bob Dole and Walter Mondale, the Republican ticket conscripted three Dole supporters – his wife Elizabeth, Texas Governor John Connally, and Vice President Nelson Rockefeller – to praise Dole's performance; each appeared on each of the three TV networks. The practice grew apace. By 1988, journalists were referring to "Spin Alley," a corridor of the debate site where staffers argued shamelessly why their man had prevailed, whether they believed it or not.¹⁸ The candid acknowledgment of "Spin Alley" dispensed with the pretense that the debate analysts were offering objective or even sincere analysis. Reporters knew they were getting a deliberately partisan take, yet they quoted their sources anyway and happily passed it all on to their audiences with the stark disclaimer that it was all "spin" for the home viewer to sort out. Not only the journalists and the spinners, but the audiences, too, were presumed to agree that what mattered as much as the debate performances was the subsequent effort to shape perceptions of the outcome and of the candidates.

Given this incessant attention to the staging and spinning of the debates, complaints about their hyperscripted character multiplied. In 1988, for example, *New York Times* columnist A. M. Rosenthal raged about the vapidness of the vice presidential match between Democrat Lloyd Bentsen and Republican Dan Quayle. "It was not a debate," Rosenthal insisted. "It was not even a good news conference. It was a staged, manipulated, choreographed performance, stilted and artificial. At the end the most important question remained

unanswered." Like so many others, Rosenthal (who, it should be said, has been described as writing like Peter Finch's anchorman in *Network*, "as if he were shouting from the fire escape") saw the debate as emblematic of politics in the age of TV and mass media. The entire campaign, Rosenthal said, took place not "between two sets of candidates but opposing teams of political packagers, script writers, handlers, spinners, and sound-bite artists." Two years later, no less a personage than Walter Cronkite, in delivering (fittingly) the first annual Theodore White lecture at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government, made a similar pronouncement. "The debates are part of the unconscionable fraud that our political campaigns have become," he said. "Substance is to be avoided if possible. Image is to be maximized."¹⁹

Even as it became a cliché to decry the debates' failure to carry out their appointed democratic function, however, there remained a concurrent strain of commentary that regarded the debates as a useful exercise in public education. Though not dominant, this strain of commentary wasn't hard to find either.

In *The Making of the President, 1960*, White had spoken of television as having the properties of an X-ray, magically revealing a politician's inner self.²⁰ Though ridiculous as a scientific proposition, this was a felicitous metaphor, and one convenient for those who wished not to take too dim a view of the modern political TV dramas like the debates. Much like photographs are often assumed (wrongly) to capture "reality" as words cannot, the X-ray view of TV imagined the tube as a transparent medium: a medium that doesn't mediate. Implicit, too, in this notion was a trust in the judgment of ordinary citizens, a reluctance to part

with the Enlightenment faith in human reason. At the end of the day, went this argument, people could put aside the spin and stagecraft and arrive at sound judgments.

Remarkably, this determination to vindicate the TV debates often coexisted snugly alongside the sharp criticisms. In the same 1976 editorial in which it spent six paragraphs ruing the Ford-Carter debates as a poor progeny of Lincoln-Douglas, *The New York Times* concluded, without a shred of evidence, “Character, integrity, compassion, intelligence – or lack of them – do have a way of showing through.” In the same vein, Joe Duffey, an adviser that year to Jimmy Carter, told the *Times* in a separate news article: “Character is what I think is finally displayed. It’s either there or it isn’t, and television is a great revealer.”²¹

In 1980, Daniel Henninger, writing in the *Wall Street Journal*, deepened the argument on behalf of the debates’ intrinsic value. He praised the opportunity to see Carter and Reagan relatively unfiltered, speaking live and without a script (or at least not a literal script). “Television, in formats like Tuesday’s debate, is nicely suited to passing democratic judgment in this country,” Henninger noted. “It provides unimpeded and thorough access to the ideas and opinions of men and women in public life.” Compared to the evening news, in which “images rush by [and] the on-camera reporter intrudes, pressing his opinion, flattening mine,” the debates did indeed provide a rare opportunity to take the measure of two men; one could ignore the pre- and post-debate hullabaloo and fall back on one’s own impressions of the candidates going head to head.

From a slightly different angle, the political analyst Jeff Greenfield also sang the praises of debates when he wrote of the 1988 match-ups between George

Bush and Michael Dukakis. Greenfield also praised the contests as revealing, though he departed from Henninger in that he saluted the role of the questioning journalists as a beneficial ingredient in the mix. “The much-maligned format produced the most significant glimpses we have had into the thinking and character of the candidates since the general-election campaign began on Labor Day,” he wrote. Suggesting that the journalist-interrogators made the format more illuminating than a true Lincoln-Douglas encounter would have been, Greenfield said that the candidates’ responses to questions about criminal penalties for abortionists and Dukakis’s bloodless demeanor gave viewers useful data for forming judgments. In contrast, letting the candidates say whatever they pleased would have given us “programmatically formulated formulations of speechwriters such as Peggy Noonan and Robert Shrum.”²²

The pro-debate argument – that the contests elicit some important qualities in the candidates – is not wholly wishful. Some viewers certainly glean from them some information that they find useful. But they do so mainly because most of these viewers don’t follow political affairs as intensively as journalists or news buffs, and as a result they learn elementary information about a candidate – that he supports universal health care or a balanced budget, for example – for the first time. These viewers don’t mind that the candidates are regurgitating phrases they’ve used umpteen times before; the phrases are new to them. It shouldn’t be surprising that voters claim to find the debates helpful in deciding how to vote.

But that doesn’t vindicate the debates. That debates may serve as a convenient source of easily discoverable news hardly justifies their existence. Newspaper and magazine articles, TV news seg-

ments, and countless other journalistic outlets provide the same information, and much more; it's just that many debate viewers don't pay much heed to those sources. In 2008, after the second encounter between Barack Obama and John McCain, reporters for National Public Radio's *Morning Edition* interviewed undecided voters. "After watching these debates, I've become more undecided," said a woman named Martinique Chavez. "I think that I need to wait till another debate and see and learn more of the facts." But of course Ms. Chavez did not have to wait for anything to learn more facts. She could have easily turned to a huge trove of newspaper and magazine articles, or the candidates' comprehensive websites, for far more detail than she could ever get in ninety minutes of TV.²³

Nor does the fact that the debates sometimes sway dithering voters justify the conclusion that these voters are acting as democratic theory prescribes. On the contrary, if they're ignorant about the candidates going in, they're more likely to be seduced by clever or disingenuous statements in the debates – or by a winning smile, poised delivery, or snappy one-liners hatched weeks earlier. Anyone who paid attention to the focus groups convened by the networks to watch the 2000 debates between George W. Bush and Al Gore had to come away at least a bit uneasy about the public's capacity for critical thinking. On CBS, one Sandra Harsh said she was influenced by what she saw. "I was very impressed with Bush's specifics, his points of – of his program, what he planned to do," she said. "I like – I liked the line about trusting people, not the federal government. I liked his format for national health care. I – I think he showed himself as the superior candidate."²⁴ Not to be too harsh

on Sandra, but if viewers who turned on the debate that night had never before heard Bush recite his mantra about trusting the people, not the government, or came away thinking that he would implement a national health-care plan, it should give us pause about the debates' value in helping undecideds decide.

It's comforting to think that the debates disclose telling qualities about a candidate, whether it be Dukakis's sangfroid in 1988, Bush's indifference to people's struggles when the camera caught him looking at his watch in 1992, or Gore's superciliousness when he was roasted for high-decibel sighing in 2000. And surely it's proper for voters to consider the candidates' personal qualities, even superficial ones, alongside their records and their stands. All viewers have subjective criteria of what kind of politicians they like and dislike, and watching the candidates in a debate can help us gauge our own comfort level with them as television presences. But whether the specific personal traits on view in the debates should matter to the same degree that they're exhibited in a single performance or commented upon by the talking heads is totally speculative and highly dubious. Ultimately, the idea that debates give people the information they need to make a sound choice – whether about issues or about personal qualities – has to be seen largely as the expression of a wish. It may be true sometimes, but we don't have positive grounds for believing it to be true, and we have reason to doubt it as well.

Still, if the debates can't be said to serve the autonomous modern citizen, coolly assessing the candidates on the issues, they shouldn't be disdained entirely either. For while the debates have obvious flaws and could certainly be improved, the ultimate problem isn't the

debates themselves; it's the assumptions we take to them – specifically the idea that their value resides in the information they supply.

The late communications scholar James Carey once proposed a distinction between what he called a transmission view of communication and what he called a ritual view. The transmission view is the one with which most of us usually operate. It holds that the purpose of communication – of which presidential debates are of course one form – is to impart information. It hardly needs more elaboration than that. The ritual view, in contrast, is, according to Carey, “a minor thread in our national thought.” On this view, he wrote, communication is “directed not toward the extension of messages in space but toward the maintenance of society in time; not the act of imparting information but the representation of shared beliefs.”²⁵

It may make sense to conceive of the presidential debates as rituals rather than as transmitters of information. They are, after all, rites like holidays or parades, which gain meaning from the way they figure in our daily experiences. They may not educate, but they evoke feelings, bolster sentiments, and provoke action. Debates bring pleasure to following campaigns. They bind us together socially with our compatriots. They can even trigger political involvement. In this context, Frank Stanton – and indeed all of us – have had it backward: the debates matter not because they differ from the rallies and torchlight parades of bygone times, but because they *resemble* them.

Thinking of a debate as a ritual, more than as a source of information, also helps explain certain riddles. Why, for example, have presidential candidates since 1976 never declined to participate?

One possibility is the fear that the naysayer would be called a coward, and it is true that in fall 1992 the elder George Bush was drawn into televised arguments on the campaign trail with a man dressed as a large fowl who taunted “Chicken George” for shrinking from debates with Bill Clinton. But a candidate ahead in the polls could easily choose to weather such taunts if the advantages seemed great enough, or to demonstrate courage in another way. The harder obstacle to overcome seems to be that declining to spar would now be seen as neglecting a civic duty – like failing to put your hand on your heart at the playing of the national anthem or not showing up for the president's State of the Union address. Debates draw strength from their status as important rituals.

Or consider another riddle: if the debates exist to inform the undecided, why do so many viewers tune in who already have their minds made up? The transmission model makes these viewers superfluous. Yet for many such people, watching the debates is a beloved pastime. Admittedly, I'm something of a political junkie, but I often find myself over at a friend's apartment watching the encounters with a small group, all of us cheering on our candidate. The act of participating in such a shared experience renews our political commitment and excitement. And this is an old tradition. There were debate-watching parties in Democratic and Republican clubs back in September 1960; Jackie Kennedy hosted one in Hyanisport, where Archibald Cox, Arthur Schlesinger, and assorted politicians, family members, and journalists gathered over coffee and pastries to watch the tanned and polished JFK on a rented sixteen-inch portable TV set.

Even for those who are genuinely undecided, the debates may perform this kind of ritual function, too. Starting in 1992, the National Communication Association and the Commission on Presidential Debates set up a project called Debate Watch to bring together citizens in local communities to watch and discuss the contests. Although the results are too inconclusive to allow for confident generalizations, they seem to suggest that joining in these colloquies spurred people to vote on Election Day. At the least, they appeared, as one scholar of the project noted, to “engage voters in the ideas, perspectives, and concerns of others in their communities.” According to *The New York Times*, “participants lauded the sheer experience of post-debate discussion as much as the debates, bonding like jurors with other panel members and compounding their appetite for politics.” Diana Carlin, a scholar involved with the effort, declared, “This is creating a sort of civic discourse that I don’t think takes place in this country” – a claim that might be hyperbolic but nonetheless hints at some ground-level value derived from the contests.²⁶

Evidence that the debates achieved this less lofty but more realistic goal dates back to 1960. “The TV medium in the past has been legitimately criticized for injecting too much show business into areas where it is not appropri-

ate,” wrote *New York Times* television critic Jack Gould after the first Kennedy-Nixon debate. “But last night the networks demonstrated the civic usefulness of the broadcasting media.” A few days later he built on his observation. “Overnight, as it were,” he wrote, “there was born a new interest in the campaign that earlier had been productive only of coast-to-coast somnolence.” Even Teddy White agreed that the debates managed to “generalize this tribal sense of participation . . . for the salient fact of the great TV debates is not what the two candidates said, nor how they behaved, but how many of the candidates’ fellow Americans gave up their evening hours to ponder the choice between the two.”²⁷

The choreography and sound bites that constitute the presidential debates should be recognized as unreliable and inadequate methods for casual voters to get the facts about the nominees. But the experience of watching debates, perhaps in groups, or in discussing them “the next morning,” as Gould wrote, “in kitchen, office, supermarket and commuter train” has value.²⁸ In an age of desiccated politics, when too many citizens feel adrift and overburdened in trying to judge complex policy issues for themselves, this experience serves, in some quiet way, to thicken our commitments to political life.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Transcript of Palin-Biden debate, posted on October 3, 2008; available at <http://www.cnn.com/2008/Politics/10/02/Debate.transcript/> (accessed December 1, 2008).
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- 3 "Lights – Camera – Candidates!" *The New York Times*, September 24, 1976.
- 4 Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York: Viking, 1985), 44 – 49, 79.
- 5 Michael Schudson, *The Good Citizen: A History of American Civic Life* (New York: Free Press, 1998), 143.
- 6 Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1981), 211.
- 7 Frank Stanton, "A CBS View," in *The Great Debates: Kennedy vs. Nixon, 1960*, ed. Sidney Kraus (1962; repr., Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977), 65 – 72.
- 8 Fawn M. Brodie, *Richard M. Nixon: The Shaping of His Character* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1981), 427.
- 9 Memorandum from Louis Harris, in the Robert F. Kennedy Papers, Political Files, Box 45, John F. Kennedy Library, Boston, Massachusetts.
- 10 Theodore H. White, *The Making of the President, 1960* (New York: Atheneum, 1961), 348; Ralph McGill, "TV vs. Radio in the Great Debate," *Washington Evening Star*, October 1, 1960, quoted in Alan Schroeder, *Presidential Debates* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 176; Michael Schudson, "Trout or Hamburger: The Politics of Telemythology," in *The Power of News* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995); David L. Vancil and Sue D. Pendell, "The Myth of Viewer-Listener Disagreement in the First Kennedy-Nixon Debate," *Central States Speech Journal* 38 (1987): 16 – 27; *Broadcasting* 59 (1960): 27 – 29.
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- 12 Daniel Boorstin, *The Image; or, What Happened to the American Dream* (New York: Atheneum, 1961), 204, 41 – 43, 36.
- 13 Schroeder, *Presidential Debates*, 173 – 174.
- 14 "Packaged Politics," *The New Republic*, October 9, 1976.
- 15 Laurence I. Barrett, *Gambling with History: Ronald Reagan in the White House* (New York: Doubleday, 1983); Phil Gailey, "Baker and Stockman Report Receiving '80 Carter Material," *The New York Times*, June 24, 1983.
- 16 Larry J. Sabato, *Feeding Frenzy: How Attack Journalism Has Transformed American Politics* (New York: Free Press, 1991), 127 – 129; voter quoted in Doris Graber, *Processing the News: How People Tame the Information Tide* (New York: Longman, 1984), 264, and in Thomas E. Patterson, *Out of Order* (New York: Knopf, 1993), 57.
- 17 Schroeder, *Presidential Debates*, 181.
- 18 The first printed references I've found to this term were in Steven Komarow, "Protocol Takes a Powder as Senators Beat Up on Colleagues," Associated Press, October 6, 1988; and Christine Chinlund, "Spin Doctors Swing into Operation," *The Boston Globe*, October 14, 1988.
- 19 A. M. Rosenthal, "The Bentsen-Quayle Whatever," *The New York Times*, October 7, 1988; James Wolcott, "Hear Me Purr," *The New Yorker*, May 20, 1996; Cronkite quoted in Tom Wicker, "Improving the Debates," *The New York Times*, June 22, 1991.
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- 21 "Lights – Camera – Candidates!"; James M. Naughton, "The Debates: A Marketplace in the Global Village," *The New York Times*, September 26, 1976.

- ²² Daniel Henninger, "The Great Debate and Electronic Democracy," *Wall Street Journal*, October 30, 1980; Jeff Greenfield, "There's No Debate: The Format Works," *The New York Times*, October 13, 1988.
- ²³ "Undecided Voters Watch Debate In Albuquerque," *Morning Edition*, National Public Radio, October 8, 2008 (accessed via Lexis/Nexis, October 14, 2008).
- ²⁴ Phil Jones, Transcript, "Focus Group Gives Their [*sic*] Views of the Presidential Debate," CBS News Transcripts, October 17, 2000 (accessed via Lexis/Nexis, February 29, 2008).
- ²⁵ James W. Carey, "A Cultural Approach to Communication," in *Communication as Culture: Essays on Media and Society* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 14 – 15, 18.
- ²⁶ Francis X. Clines, "'Ask Not . . . ' . . . Military-Industrial Complex . . . ' . . . but Fear Itself . . .,'" *The New York Times*, September 23, 1996; Barbara A. Pickering, "The American Democracy Project at Work: Engaging Citizens in Argumentation," *Argumentation and Advocacy* 42 (Spring 2006): 220, 222; Christina Nifong, "Efforts to Engage Voters via Political 'Tupperware Parties,'" *Christian Science Monitor*, October 16, 1996.
- ²⁷ Jack Gould, "TV: The Great Debate," *The New York Times*, September 27, 1960; Jack Gould, "The 'Debate' in Retrospect," *The New York Times*, October 2, 1960; White, *The Making of the President*, 352.
- ²⁸ Gould, "The 'Debate' in Retrospect."

The presidential debates as political ritual

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