

mots croisés
 INTERROGEZ LES CANDIDATS À LA PRÉSIDENTIELLE,
 RÉAGISSEZ EN DIRECT !

Posez vos questions aux candidats du 10 au 16 avril 18h

Sélectionnez un candidat, posez votre question.
 Nous retiendrons une question par candidat qui lui sera posée en direct ou à son rep

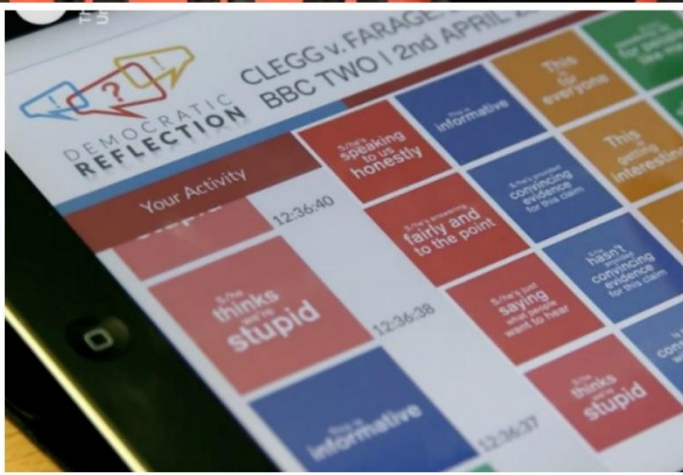
François Hollande et Nicolas Sarkozy seront représentés respectivement par Pierre Moskovic et Jean-François

Eva Joly
Candidate Europe

Marine Le Pen
Candidate Du Front

Nicolas Sarkozy
Candidat De L'UMP

Jean-Luc Mélenchon
Candidat Du Front De



RETHINKING DEBATES







RETHINKING DEBATES
SEPT. 19, 2016

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Civic Hall's mission is to advance the use of technology for the public good, which is how we define civic tech. Civic Hall emerged from the connections that evolved over the first ten years of the Personal Democracy Forum conference. Seeing the power that real world interactions had on our network of civic tech and social innovators, we decided to build a collaborative work and event space for the community to gather year-round and turn ideas into action.

Founded in February 2016 and located in the heart of New York City's Silicon Alley, our curated and inclusive community of more than 1,000 members and over 100 member organizations works, networks, builds, learns and organizes to solve big problems. We are mission-driven professionals, technologists, social entrepreneurs, corporate leaders, academics, city officials, statewide government offices, federal government agencies, philanthropy professionals, journalists, activists and change-makers.

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Executive Summary

The Rethinking Debates project launched in November 2015 to research and report on how election debates around the world are using innovative formats and social media to increase engagement and become more responsive to voters' needs and concerns.

Citing examples from both international and U.S. debates, we see several existing and emerging technologies that have great potential to transform political discourse. New tools and platforms can be used to return debates to their democratic origins by making them more responsive to the public, and advance debates into a new era in which viewers are not just observers but participants shaping the conversation.

Specifically, we make the following recommendations:

- **Live Interactive Audience Feedback:** These tools can generate data and conversation with on-point survey questions that are set up in advance or added during a debate. They are recommended for debates that want to 1) incorporate public opinion; 2) allow the audience a say in the direction of the conversation; and 3) gather viewer data by party affiliation, age, sex, etc. Though these tools can be made accessible to online as well as studio audiences, from a true engagement perspective, the best use is within the debate space itself.
- **Voter-Generated Questions:** Sourcing questions for candidates in advance is recommended for debates at all levels. Selected questions should represent a more diverse mix of issues and focus less on reinforcing the same debate narrative. For more effective interaction, live questions and comments from the public should be encouraged more often during debates.

We also recommend crowdsourcing questions online—not only to achieve a mix of questions from voters, but to learn which questions matter the most. Online platforms can be set up relatively easily, but it's important to prioritize transparency, which is essential for securing voters' trust in the process, and moderate submissions.

- **Emerging Tools and Platforms:** We recommend that debate organizers team up with local media and civic tech groups to incorporate/develop post-debate analysis tools, such as annotated debate transcripts and video, to better explain and contextualize debate topics. On a grander scale, we also support the use of dedicated debate spaces, exemplified by the McLaren Thought Leadership Centre, that embrace the use of digital tools and encourage audience interaction.

Companies such as Facebook, Google, and Twitter are taking active roles in debates, not just in the United States, but around the world (where the innovations they offer are sometimes used to greater effect). Their often experimental technologies show promise, but we need assure that these tools are used in ways that lead to thoughtful participation instead of more superficial engagement.

This first half of this report includes excerpts and summaries from seven case studies looking at recent debates in Australia, Taiwan, France, Japan, New Zealand, and the U.K. (two studies). It examines in-depth the innovations used in these debates and their potential.

The report also references debate examples from countries such as Malawi, which held its first presidential debates in 2014 and where more people listened by radio than watched on television, and the Philippines, where this year's presidential debates, the first in nearly a quarter-century, sparked more than 35-million election-related tweets and 268-million election-related Facebook posts.

Impact, however, is about more than numbers. As we found from our research, technology has produced, in some cases, massive participation, but the integration of new digital tools has not guaranteed a consistently higher quality of conversation or a deeper level of civic engagement.

This is particularly true in the United States, where recent presidential primary debates attracted unprecedented ratings along with widespread criticism for becoming a media circus. Though tech companies frequently teamed up with television networks to host the debates and source questions for candidates from the public, most attempts to involve the public on a deeper level were not as thoughtful or as creative as some of the international examples featured.

The second half of this report takes a close-up look at some of the more successful U.S. engagement efforts, including how Twitter and CBS teamed up to source, vet and incorporate a live tweet into a Democratic debate, as well as efforts that fell flat.

Over the course of this research project, we noticed more interest in organizing debates at the state and local level and, with it, examples of technology being used not just to supplement the conversation but to change it. Therefore, the final third section examines some promising examples of engagement that can be adapted at all levels of debates.

The launch of this report coincides with an announcement by the Commission on Presidential Debates that Facebook will be working with the moderators of the presidential debates to provide data on what people are searching for and discussing about the election. For the second presidential debate, the town-hall style forum, Facebook will help source questions for the candidates. Other technology companies such as Google may also play a role.

While we applaud the door being cracked open, if just a tiny bit, it remains to be seen if this integration will be utilized by moderators (who have the ultimate say in which questions are asked), and if the questions selected will bring more nuance to the debate or reinforce an existing narrative.

We welcome the opportunity to further discuss and encourage the adoption of some of the innovative methods we've discovered worldwide.

Rethinking Debates

Minority parties and their supporters scorn the debates as a sham—except when their nominees are included in them. Before and after the debates, the candidates' campaign staff and party spokespersons spin them for political advantage. Political pundits and journalists scour the candidates' performances looking for the "winner." Media watchdog organizations and political advocacy groups question the debates' legitimacy, even their legality. The candidates themselves pose and posture before acceding to the debates, like prizefighters trying to intimidate each other. But citizens watch the debates in total numbers that rival or even exceed the Super Bowl for viewership. The debates are their one opportunity in the campaign to see and hear the candidates speak directly to each other in a face-to-face encounter.

-Newton N. Minow and Craig L. LaMay

"Inside the Presidential Debates: Their Improbable Past and Promising Future"
(University of Chicago Press, 2008)

When the first general election presidential debate of 2016 takes place on Sept. 26, it will be 56 years to the day since the first televised presidential debate, between John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon, was broadcast from the studios of CBS's WBBM-TV in Chicago. That debate drew around 70 million people—nearly 60 percent of U.S. households—with many watching on black-and-white television sets.

This year, tens of millions of people around the world will view the debates between Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton on their phones, tablets, and laptops. Many will use a second screen to criticize, cheer on, and annotate the conversation. Data streams will be gathered under hashtags, a term that wasn't in use during a presidential election until 2008.

Yet few changes have been made to the debate format that might reflect this massive technological shift and the new ways in which we engage with media, politicians, and each other. As it was in 1960, the viewers will be on one side of the mediated wall, and the candidates on the other.

Quincy Howe, the ABC journalist who moderated the fourth and final Kennedy-Nixon debate on Oct. 21, 1960, said at its conclusion: "Vice President Nixon and Senator Kennedy have used a new means of communication to pioneer a new type of political debate... Surely they have set a new precedent. Perhaps they have established a new tradition."

The paradox in the idea of a "new tradition," as Howe put it, captures the promise and disappointment that have accompanied modern presidential debates since that moment.

Televised presidential debates in the United States have solidified a firm place in the campaign season, and considering the popularity of those debates in the present election cycle, they produce political and cultural moments that were inconceivable in previous eras. Despite that transformative power, however, the format of that first televised debate—two candidates on stage with a moderator—remains the default, with very few exceptions that offer only the slightest variations.

For the last nine months, Civic Hall’s Rethinking Debates project has focused on this one question: Can new approaches to debates embrace the increased civic desire to participate in the conversation and raise the level of political discourse? Or, in short, can tech help improve debates?

From our exploration of debate formats and tools around the world, we can suggest several avenues, most of them afforded by new and emerging digital tools, through which the traditional structure of debates can be transformed to enhance political discourse and boost civic engagement.

The question, at least for this study, is not which one magical format or tool will make for better debates, but what structural and technological possibilities are available to begin the process. The increasing number of debates on the state and local level may offer a powerful experimental ground.

The idea of making significant changes to U.S. presidential debates seems virtually impossible, especially when media traditions and the entrenched interests of the candidates inhibit innovation. Others have tried; in particular, the Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania, which [published a report](#)¹ in 2015 on debate reform that looked at alternative formats and broadening accessibility, offering a set of sensible and actionable recommendations. But to date, the Commission on Presidential Debates, the nonprofit body set up by the two major parties to manage America’s national debates, has yet to make any meaningful changes in its format.

Despite this inertia—and the carnival atmosphere that recent primary debates have assumed, often with boisterous in-room audience reaction—the importance of presidential debates remains. And while the political discourse reflects entrenched polarization on many issues, debates, at all levels, are essential elements of the democratic process.

Debates in the Interactive Age

As of September 2016, a total of [78 countries and regions](#)² have held political debates for elected office—most at the level of president or prime minister. In the past year, some election debates, as well as debates on issues such as Brexit, have made front-page news worldwide, causing a seismic impact on the future of nations. And, in a historic first, four candidates running to be the next UN secretary general [debated publicly](#)³ at an event in April at Civic Hall, fielding questions [solicited from the public](#).⁴

On a more fundamental level, no matter the history or size of a country, the very act of holding televised debates has become a marker of the health of a country’s democracy, or at least its democratic potential.

“TV debates between the candidates are the highest expression of democratic political culture,” Zoran Milanović, former prime minister of Croatia and president of the Social Democratic Party, wrote on Facebook earlier this year, when calling for televised debates with his challenger.

What we have also seen across the globe is a growing acknowledgement of the importance of engaging the public in those debates, using whatever tools are available. In countries where debates might be new or internet access is limited, debate organizers are still making efforts to solicit public input.

In Guyana, for instance, where internet penetration is under 40 percent, the nonprofit organization Merundoi hosted a series of debates in advance of elections in March—the first local government elections since 1994—and [solicited questions](#)⁵ from voters via Facebook, a dedicated Gmail address, *and* a phone number. The debates were broadcast by the National Communications Network and streamed live on its website.

In Malawi, getting eight of the 12 presidential candidates to appear on stage together in 2014 for the country's [first televised presidential debate](#)⁶—the first presidential debate ever in Malawi's 50 years of independence—was considered revolutionary. Eleven candidates attended the next two debates.



Presidential candidates join hands at the first presidential debate held in Malawi / [Debates International](#)

“It’s rare to get so many candidates to attend the first-time effort,” said Matt Dippell, National Democratic Institute (NDI) global debate program advisor and deputy director for Latin America and the Caribbean. “That was a huge achievement.”

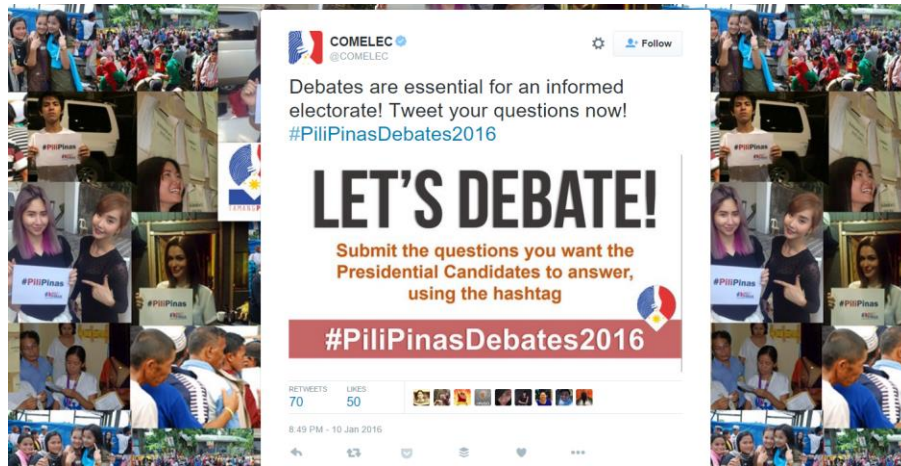
With internet penetration only around 7 percent, social media did not factor into the organizers’ plans. Yet it still played an indirect role. Many Malawians living in the United States and in other countries turned to Facebook and Twitter to discuss the debates, and those conversations had an impact on the questions that were asked.

“One cannot ignore the social platform at the moment,” said Anthony Kasunda, chair of Malawi’s debate taskforce. “So the team organizing questions took serious notice of the issues raised on the social front.”

In countries that have a higher level of internet and smartphone penetration, their first presidential debates— or, as in the case of the Philippines, the first debates in nearly 25 years—have been more likely to embrace social media, both as a form of messaging between the campaigns and the voters and as a social space to discuss and debate the election. They have skipped directly to a style of debate that mirrors current media/technology partnerships in the United States, sometimes even surpassing it.

For instance, in 2015, Facebook, which says it has 47 million users in the Philippines—only 7 million fewer than the total number of people registered to vote there—[partnered with the Philippines Commission on Elections \(Comelec\)](#),⁷ as well as with different broadcasters hosting the election debates, to provide data to help inform the questions moderators might ask the presidential candidates.

This included conversational trends, such as the top political issues people were discussing in different parts of the country. Facebook and Twitter, another Comelec partner, also assisted with crowdsourcing questions ahead of the debates.



On April 24, the last of the three presidential debates generated more than 1.9 million tweets using the hashtag #PiliPinasDebates2016. It was “the highest engagement on Twitter for a presidential debate this year.”⁸ By the end, more than 35 million election-related tweets, and more than 268 million election-related interactions on Facebook, had been registered.

Broadcasters also tried new technologies. The GMA Network, co-host of the first debate, broadcast 360-degree livestream coverage, the first for a live event in the Philippines—both building on and feeding the public’s desire to do more than watch passively.

Impact, however, is about more than numbers, and while technology, from television to social media, can produce seemingly massive participation, our study has found that integration of new digital tools has not guaranteed a consistently higher quality of conversation or a deeper level of civic engagement.

In this project we looked at several examples of technologies that have aimed to give the public a say in debates, either by providing real-time feedback or engaging people in generating questions for candidates in advance. These approaches include: viewer-response tools, live interactive audience feedback, voter-generated questions, and emerging tools and platforms.

The first half of this report explores in-depth the potential of each of these innovations, based on their use in recent election debates around the world.

Following the survey of global debate innovations, the latter half of this report examines efforts within the United States to use tech to elevate public involvement. While these have not, generally speaking, been as extensive as some of the international examples featured here, there clearly is interest on the part of both tech platforms and media sponsors to partner around debates. And, as we will show, at the state and local level, some debate organizers are already making real use of tech platforms, including using social media to source debate questions and live interactive audience feedback tools.

PART ONE

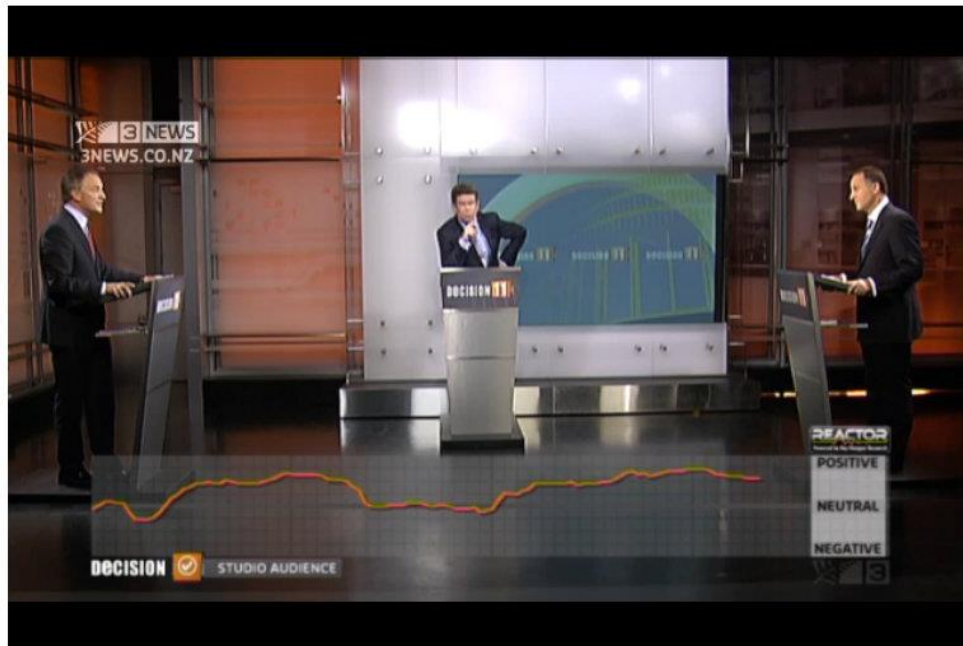
A Survey of Global Debates and Innovative Technologies

1. Viewer-Response Tools

The viewer-response tool [The Reactor](#)⁹—more commonly known as “the worm”—was created by Roy Morgan Research, an Australian market research firm. By turning a dial on a hand-held device or dragging a slide on an app, viewers can indicate positive and negative reactions in real time. First used in Australia in 1993, the technology has become a familiar fixture in debates around the world, including [U.S. presidential debates](#)¹⁰ starting in 2008.

The dial or app is usually used with a small studio audience of undecided voters who watch the debate in the same room. Their responses are aggregated and graphed, creating a squiggly line that resembles a worm. Occasionally, and more controversially, viewer responses are broadcast at the bottom of television screens during the debate so watchers can see the line in real-time.

In 2011, during a party leaders' debate in New Zealand, participation was open to anyone with a smartphone or tablet. Two worms would wiggle on TV screens: one showing the reaction of the studio audience, and one showing the reaction of viewers using the mobile app at home. Critics were quick to cite concerns, including increased vulnerability to manipulation by political partisans who would give one candidate decidedly higher marks.



The studio audience response to the debate featuring Labour Leader Phil Goff and Prime Minister John Key is reflected in the “worm” shown onscreen. / Screenshot TV3

Another concern focused on access and representation: Only around 5 percent of New Zealanders owned smartphones at the time, and wealthier citizens tended to favor the center-right National Party over the center-left Labour Party. Broader critiques focused on the technology itself, which critics feared would turn politicians into “worm whisperers” who could smartly manipulate reactions by using positive phrasing and uplifting stories to win over voters.



“If you say ‘this is the greatest city or country in the world’, the worm goes through the roof. If you say ‘well, the problem we’ve got is our hospitals don’t work’, it goes down,” Ray Martin, a journalist who moderated debates in Australia for Channel Nine News, [told the BBC](#).¹¹

While some researchers have argued that real-time measurement is a source of raw data, others have shown that the worm may impede viewers’ ability to form their own judgments. Three British researchers reported on an [experiment with 150 university students](#)¹² in which they manipulated the worm and superimposed it on a live broadcast of the final of three U.K. election debates in 2010. They found that the manipulation influenced viewers’ judgments not only of who had “won” the debate, but their choice of preferred prime minister.

“Apart from the concerns about unintentional bias, there is real possibility that the worm could be used to systematically bias the outcome of the election,” [said Jeffrey Bowers](#),¹³ a psychology professor at the University of Bristol who was involved with the study. “Given the small sample of undecided voters that generate the worm, just one or two persons could influence the worm by voting for one candidate no matter what. The system is cute, but open to abuse.”

In 2013, the British Parliament’s Select Committee on Communications [held hearings](#)¹⁴ on televised political debates and invited another of the study’s authors, Colin Davis, also a psychology professor at University of Bristol, to testify. “Even without any deliberate bias, it’s very unlikely that the worm provides an accurate indication of the views of undecided voters, given that it is based on such a small sample,” said Davis, referring to the less than two dozen people selected to use the worm during debates hosted by ITV News and the BBC in 2010. (Responses were shown during post-debate analysis, not during the live debate.)

Also testifying was Alan Schroeder, a journalism professor at Northeastern University and author of “Presidential Debates: 50 Years of High-Risk TV.” “I think [the worm] is ridiculous,” he told the

committee. “First of all, I think social media, particularly Twitter, has supplanted the worm. The real-time, real reaction of the audience is now measurable in ways that make the worm obsolete.”

The 2011 leaders’ debate in New Zealand produced several interesting outcomes that came as a surprise to political watchers. First, the at-home audience showed more restraint than the studio audience of undecided voters, creating fewer spikes and nosedives on the graph.

The at-home audience was also less partisan; after the debate, a right-wing blogger found evidence that four of the audience members were Labour and Green Party supporters, causing a [mini-scandal](#)¹⁵ of sorts. But success in the debate didn’t transfer to success at the polls. Labour lost, by a wide margin.

Today, as Alan Schroeder of Northeastern University said, social media has largely supplanted the worm in terms of instant audience engagement—and, as we have witnessed, it has upped the instant-engagement factor exponentially. But we still see examples of the worm’s influence, and some adaptations are better than others.

Read more: [Viewer-Response App Worms its Way into New Zealand Debates](#)¹⁶

2. Live Interactive Audience Feedback

One of the better examples of interactive technology usage in a debate setting was showcased in a U.K. debate held in 2015, two weeks before the general election. CNN correspondent Christiane Amanpour welcomed viewers to a debate held inside the futuristic Thought Leadership Centre on the [McLaren Technology Group](#)¹⁷ campus outside London.

One hundred and thirty people, selected according to official U.K. guidelines on politically balanced debate audiences, were seated in the round. All were equipped with individual iPads to cast votes during the debate, with the results displayed in real time on the wall surrounding them. But what made this debate stand out is the degree to which instant audience feedback—requested on topics like immigration, the economy, and EU membership—shaped the conversation between Amanpour and the five politicians representing the leading parties.

CNN’s editorial team prepared questions in advance on key debate topics. Audience members had eight seconds each time a question came up to select “yes,” “no,” or “no opinion”; a sea of smiling, frowning, and neutral faces would start to appear on the circular wall, reflecting the responses. Drawing on the results, Amanpour would guide the conversation with the panelists and occasionally ask for audience reaction to a point that was made. For these on-the-fly questions, audience members voted thumbs-up or thumbs-down using their iPads.

In addition, CNN correspondent Max Foster drew out more nuance by occasionally asking someone *why* they had voted the way they did. Here’s how that [played out](#)¹⁸ during a question on whether there should be a referendum on membership in the European Union. At the start of the discussion, Foster gave the audience these instructions: “If you think we should have a referendum, it’s a smiley face. If you don’t, then it’s a sad face. If you don’t actually care, you can also vote for an indifferent face, so please vote.”



The results of a vote on holding an EU referendum appear on the wall at the Thought Leadership Centre.

The wall lit up with mostly smiley faces.

Final tally: 57 percent in favor of referendum; 36 percent against; and 7 percent didn't care. Foster approached an audience member and asked which way she voted.

"I went 'yes,' do have a referendum," she said. "I think it's right the electorate gets to choose, rather than having it promised and never delivered. It would be interesting to see if the next party leading actually does follow through."

Another audience member said he also thought there should be a choice.

"There you go," said Foster, turning to Amanpour and the panelists. "Two clear answers."

"Well, that is pretty clear," said Amanpour, "57 percent want a choice."

The conversation among the panelists—Conservative Pauline Neville-Jones, Liberal Democrat David Steel, Labour's Chris Bryant, Humza Yousaf of the Scottish National Party (SNP), and Louise Bours of the UK Independence Party (UKIP)—took off from there.

By combining technology with added comments, the audience was treated more like invited guests than members of a jury. And Amanpour still had room within the format to ask follow-up questions and push the guests.

Two factors that made this debate possible may be difficult to replicate for U.S. audiences. The first is the building itself. The Thought Leadership Centre is, quite simply, a unique space. It was originally conceived as a modern arena for global leaders to use advanced technology to communicate ideas, and its sophisticated set-up (and [CNN's modifications](#)¹⁹) put it on a different level than most debate arenas.

Cinimod Studio, which oversaw the integrated lighting and audio components, has a [short video on its website](#)²⁰ that demos some of the design elements.

The second, and perhaps less formidable, obstacle is that the debate did not involve party leaders, and some politicians might balk at leaving so much of the debate conversation up to the public—and interactive technology.

But Gill Penlington, CNN’s director of news and event programming across Europe, the Middle East and Africa, argued that CNN can now use this debate to convince prominent politicians to embrace a more interactive debate model.

“It was a bit of TV theater as well as a serious political debate,” she commented.

Read more: [Audience Members Have Say at U.K. Election Debate](#)²¹

3. Inviting Voters to Generate Questions

Instead of asking debate viewers to weigh in on a candidate’s performance while or after the questions are posed, more countries (and U.S. debates at the local and state level) are inviting voters to have a say in the questions that are asked. Almost across the board, their questions have proved substantive.

In France

An early example comes from Europe. In 2012, a French presidential election debate took place on the public television program “Mots Croisés” (“Crosswords”) that marked the first time a high-level political debate in Europe featured questions submitted via social media.

For the first-round debate, France 2, a state-owned television network, conducted a poll on its website and Facebook page to determine the debate topics. The [top responses](#)²² included the national debt, employment, immigration, and nuclear energy.



“Mots Croisés” posted images and video on Facebook inviting questions for candidates.

France 2 also asked Facebook users to [submit questions](#)²³ for the candidates. More than 3,000 questions were posted to a dedicated platform [developed by the French company Brainsonic](#).²⁴ Network staff picked 10 of the questions, one for each candidate, and those questions were asked during the debate.

The program reviewed new comments posted on Facebook while the debate was underway, and in several instances the candidates were asked to respond in real time. In one such sequence, a Facebook user asked Eva Joly of the Green Party which part of the military budget her party intended to cut to address the national debt. Joly replied that \$20 billion euros would be cut from the nuclear arsenal. Another commenter suggested this was impossible, a point the moderator brought up on air, forcing Joly to break down how she proposed to squeeze \$20 billion euros out of the nuclear arsenal without crippling it.

To further engage the public, France 2 worked with Facebook to create an app that would allow users to stream the debate, comment during the show, and discuss the debate with other viewers on Facebook. Viewership of the April 16 debate reached a first-round record of 1.4 million people, and a record 15 percent share of the audience for that time period, according to France 2.

Read more: [Facebook and the French Election of 2012](#)²⁵

In Taiwan

In 2015, Taiwanese voters were invited to submit questions directly to their presidential candidates. The format, however, involved a collaboration between Google and a homegrown organization called Watchout.

Google set up an [election hub](#)²⁶ with information on the candidates, similar to what it had done in previous elections. But this time, working with Watchout, which is known for civic tech projects and open-government advocacy, and Apple Daily, Taiwan's second-largest newspaper, Google added a [platform to crowdsource questions](#)²⁷ for the candidates. The name of the site translated to "President, May I Ask a Question."



The platform at elections.withgoogle.com/taiwan2016/your-voice

Users could access the platform via Google or at taiwan.wethepeople.tw,²⁸ run by Watchout, which had initiated a similar platform around the Tapei mayoral election in 2014. There also was a dedicated [Facebook page](#)²⁹ for the project.

“President, May I Ask a Question” was deceptively simple. After clicking the “I want to ask” button, users could enter their query under more than a dozen categories, including education, economy, labor, and health and welfare. Other users could “like” the question and share it. Only questions that received at least 1,000 likes would be considered for the debates, with the final questions chosen by lottery.

Representatives for the three presidential candidates readily agreed to the format. “It allows people to directly participate in public affairs through the internet, which is why it can best represent a diversity of public opinions,” said Alex Huang, director of the Democratic Progressive Party’s Department of News and Information.

Chieh-Ting Yeh, co-founder of Ketagalan Media, which covers news and culture in Taiwan, said the platform was “a product of increased youth engagement in the election as much as a contributor.” The student-led Sunflower Movement in 2014—which included a 23-day occupation of Taiwan’s legislature—had protested the lack of transparency in trade negotiations with China. While it was initially squashed, violently, by the police, its power reverberated throughout the 2015 elections [and beyond](#).³⁰

By the end, 6,500 questions were submitted, attracting 220,000 votes. [Six questions](#)³¹ were included in the only scheduled [vice-presidential debate](#),³² and [five questions](#)³³ were posed to presidential candidates during [the second](#)³⁴ of two scheduled debates, which achieved a record-high rating for a televised debate in Taiwan.



Site visitors can filter by category and see which candidates responded to which questions.

The three presidential candidates also answered questions on the site itself. (Some of the responses can be viewed at the bottom of the site’s [homepage](#).³⁵) Still, voter turnout was only 66.27 percent—the lowest turnout since the 1996, the first year the office of president was directly elected by voters.

Going into the election, polls showed the winner, Tsai Ing-wen, with a wide lead over both her opponents, which some observers said could have depressed engagement with both “President, May I Ask a Question” and with voting.

It is also worth noting that while Google and the big media outlets gave the platform legitimacy, its origins can be found in Taiwan’s civic tech boom. An early version of the platform—“Mayor, May I Ask a Question”—[was shown](#)³⁶ during a [g0v](#)³⁷ hackathon in February 2014.

There were signs of the platform’s lasting influence: Following the devastating defeat suffered by the Chinese Nationalist Party, civic groups affiliated with the party [organized a post-election forum](#)³⁸ for party chair hopefuls to discuss future plans and to answer questions from the public. The forum was titled “Chairperson, May I Ask a Question.”

Read more: [Civic Tech Fuels Presidential Debate in Taiwan](#)³⁹
(and) [vTaiwan: Public Participation Methods on the Cyberpunk Frontier of Democracy](#)⁴⁰

In Australia

Perhaps the most surprising example of a debate featuring questions from voters in the past year was the leaders’ debate in Australia, which took place June 17, 2016. After two earlier debates drew poor to middling ratings and criticisms that the party leaders were overly attached to their talking points, Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull, head of the Coalition Party, challenged Labor Party Leader Bill Shorten to a third and final debate, this time on Facebook Live.

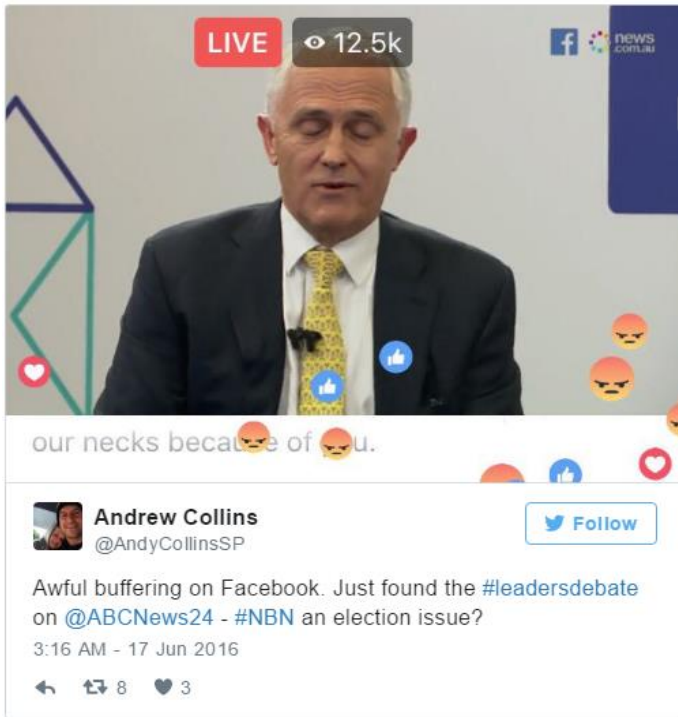
“These are the platforms that many people, many would say most Australians, see most of their media on, most of their news, and I think it’s important that we have an innovative election and that we use the platforms that Australians use,” said Turnbull.



Andrew Bucklow, an entertainment reporter with news.com.au, reminded Facebook users to share their reactions by clicking, as often as they wanted, on one of Facebook’s emojis.

Hosted by news.com.au, owned by News Corp Australia, the [livestream could be viewed](#)⁴¹ at Facebook.com/news.com.au and on the news.com.au website. Television broadcasters had the option of airing it.

Though a moderator officiated, the questions posed to the candidates came from Facebook and from a small, pre-selected studio audience that gathered at Facebook’s headquarters in Sydney to watch the event. The final tally at the end of the 45-minute debate: Three of the questions had been submitted to Facebook in advance, four were pulled from Facebook during the debate, and four were asked by members of the studio audience. Overall, the questions were more varied and spontaneous than those posed in other forums, and the candidates sparred more directly.



Viewership numbers, though modest during the debate, continued to grow in the days afterward. According to Facebook, the debate had 160,000 views by 8:15 p.m.—a little more than two hours after the start—with a total [newsfeed reach that night of 1.6 million](#).⁴²

“If those figures are correct, even if they’re only half correct, it shows that the debate has reached a lot more people than it normally would,” Andrea Carson, a University of Melbourne lecturer in media and politics, [told the university’s Election Watch](#).⁴³ The video ultimately reached 800,000 views before the election, along with 40,000 comments, 2,400 shares and 16,000 reactions.

But the point the debate ended up making about technology and access wasn’t entirely the one Turnbull intended. Referencing the National

Broadband Network, a major infrastructure project to deliver fast broadband that has seen cost overruns and delays through several different administrations, Shorten managed to curry favor with online viewers by speaking to them directly.

“If I could use the Facebook system we have here, I would just like to see people press ‘like’ if they would prefer to have fiber than copper,” said Shorten. “I’m interested to see what Facebook users who have bad connections and delays and buffering—Malcolm Turnbull says everything’s fine. Let’s press ‘like’ if you prefer fiber to copper.”

Indeed, many online viewers had been reporting choppy video with periods of buffering, sending angry emojis flying across the screen and posting images on Twitter of what the debate looked like.

A Facebook spokesperson later told [Mashable](#)⁴⁴: “We thoroughly tested all aspects of our product on different devices with people located around the country both before and during the debate and were not able to identify any issues with the livestream at our end.”

Shorten's direct appeal to viewers led to a non-stop parade of thumbs-up emojis, and Turnbull and Shorten sparred over whose party bore more responsibility for the project's slow pace and cost.

"The facts are pretty unpleasant, whatever side of politics you're on," said the moderator, Joe Hildebrand, finally moving the candidates on to another question from Facebook about mental health funding.

A reporter liveblogging the debate for The Guardian reminded viewers they could always watch the leaders go at it on television: Sky News and ABC24 both carried the livestream feed.

Read more: [Australia's Party Leaders Take Debate to Facebook Live](#)⁴⁵

In Japan

The broadband situation in Australia shares some similarity with a livestreamed debate in Japan¹ in 2012. After then-Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda dissolved Parliament and set up a new election, he challenged Liberal Democratic Party leader Shinzo Abe, his main opponent, to a one-on-one debate.

Abe would only agree to debate if it was streamed live on Nico Nico Douga, a hugely popular video sharing site (now known as Niconico), where it would be "interactive and open to the world."

On Nov. 29, 2012, a total of 10 party leaders ended up taking part in the first livestreamed debate. Nico Nico Douga users could type in comments about the candidates, and the comments appeared in an overlay on screen, allowing for a quick-paced side conversation that attracted 1.4 million viewers (the comments were on a delay, however, which was not typical for Nico Nico Douga broadcasts). Non-paying subscribers, who had to watch on a lower bandwidth, experienced viewing glitches.

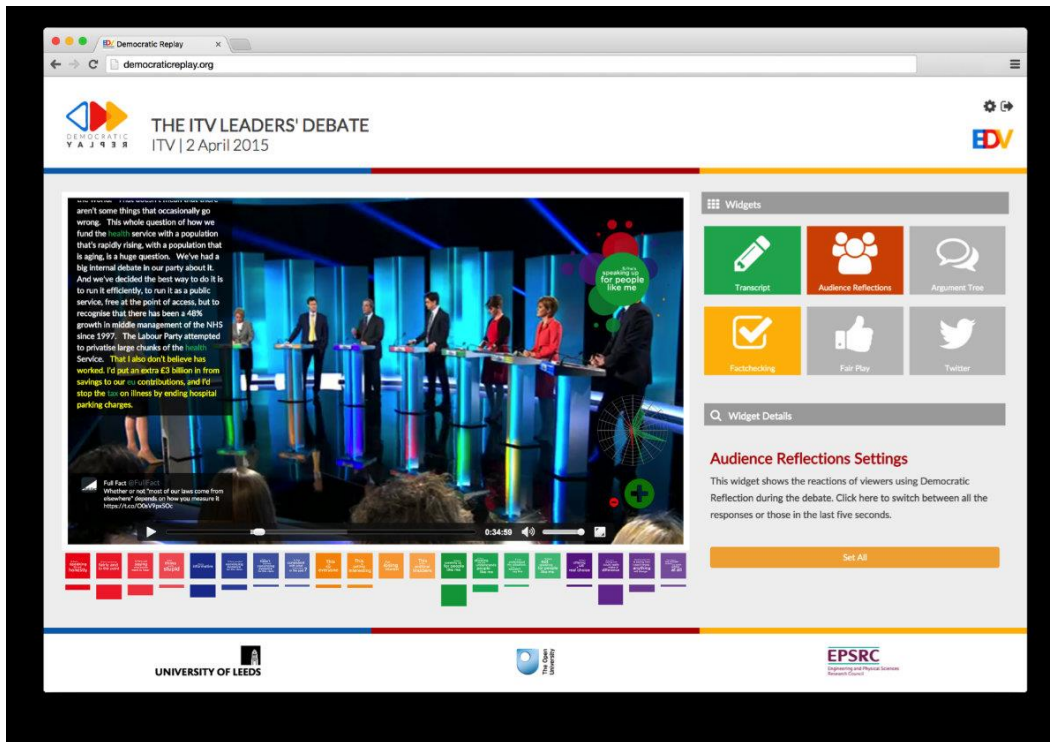


Image captured from the debate on Nico Nico Douga / Global Voices

Nobuyuki Okumura, a sociology professor who watched both the free and paid-subscriber versions online, told the Asahi Shimbun, "It quickly became difficult to view on the free site," adding that the site "did not live up to its free-access credentials, despite this being a debate ahead of a Lower House election. There may be a need for another viewing environment, along the lines of television."

Read more: [Smile, You're On Nico Nico Douga! Japan's First Livestreamed Debate](#)⁴⁶

4. Emerging Tools and Platforms



Beyond viewer-response tools, live interactive feedback and voter-generated questions, researchers, debate producers, and the media are also beginning to develop approaches that aim to use technology to enhance viewers' understanding of the debate after it ends.

What if you could replay an election debate—with built-in fact-checking and data maps that track the arguments and show who violated the debate rules? And what if the viewing platform was interactive, so you could call up previous articles about an issue that is mentioned, pull in other viewers' responses to the debate, and share your own?

What if, in other words, debates became more informative *after* the debate? Could the enhancements increase viewer comprehension, engagement, and political confidence? That's the question researchers working in Britain on the [Election Debate Visualization \(EDV\) project](#)⁴⁷ are attempting to answer.

The first televised election debates in the U.K. didn't take place until 2010. They attracted strong public interest, but through a series of national surveys completed before and after the debates, Stephen Coleman, a professor of political communication at the University of Leeds, found that many viewers were left with questions on the issues and uncertainty about the candidates' competing responses.

In 2013, researchers from University of Leeds, including Coleman, teamed up with data science experts at the Open University's Knowledge Media Institute (KMI), a research and development lab, on the EDV project. The three-year effort aims to identify the information needs of various audiences and create interactive visualization tools that respond to those needs.

“The analogy that I often use is that the debate is rather like trying to buy a car from someone who is a very fast-talking salesperson,” said Coleman. “What we want to do is to give you a chance to go home, sit at your computer, slow the whole thing down, take it apart, and really ask the questions that you want to ask.”

With a grant from the Engineering & Physical Sciences Research Council, the EDV team set out to develop an open-source web platform that would allow viewers to re-watch a debate with a full array of interactive visuals and analytics on discourse, audience feedback, debate topics such as healthcare or the economy, and, in the future, data-mining tools that could answer such questions as, “Did the candidate actually promise this last year?”

They named it Democratic Replay and are working on a prototype:



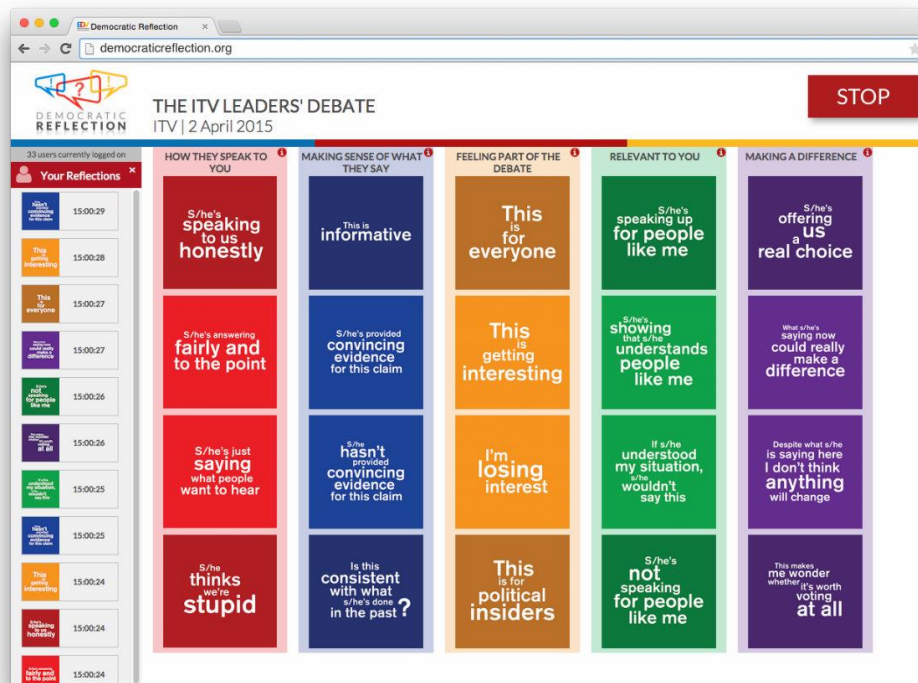
A schematic overview of the approach behind Democratic Replay: data is collected and analyzed to produce interactive visualizations synchronized to the debate video, and this becomes a “hypermedia” repository that is made available to users / (c) EDV Project.

Early on in the collaboration process, the project team decided to see if it also could create an audience-response web app that would provide genuine insight into voters’ attitudes and needs. It was outside the project scope (and unfunded), but they were motivated by voters wanting a say in the debates and the limitations of existing ways to capture feedback.

“We agree with the view of the House of Lords [Select Committee on Communications](#)⁴⁸ that ‘the use of the worm might distort the viewer’s perception of the debate,’” EDV team members wrote in a [2014 project report](#),⁴⁹ referring both to the small sample of participants and the fact that the worm only asks the audience to “like” or “don’t like” what the candidates are saying. There’s no context.

More insight into voter reactions can be gained by analyzing Twitter activity during the debates, but this, too, is limited. “If instant audience feedback is to be a new fact of political life,” they concluded, “we need better tools for capturing and interpreting what viewers and voters are thinking.”

Democratic Reflection, the audience-response app the group created, began as a paper prototype—18 flashcards designed to gather “soft feedback” in three categories: emotion (how debate viewers related emotionally with what they were viewing), trust (whether viewers trusted the person speaking or what was being said), and information need (if viewers had questions about the debate topics). It was modified over the course of a more than a year before it was tested live during the [ITV Leaders Debate](#)⁵⁰ in April 2015.



Around the same time the flashcards were being developed and tested, Coleman, along with two other University of Leeds researchers, asked groups of voters and non-voters about their experience with the 2010 televised debates and what they hoped to gain from future debates. The Leeds team identified five demands, or “entitlements,” that people said the debates needed to fulfill in order for them to feel comfortable taking part in the democratic process (the interviews are also discussed in this [University of Leeds report](#)⁵¹):

- They wanted to be addressed as if they were rational and independent decision-makers.
- They wanted to be able to evaluate the claims made by debaters in order to make an informed voting decision.
- They wanted to feel that they were in some way involved in the debate and spoken to by the debaters.
- They wanted to be recognized by the leaders who claimed to speak for (represent) them.
- They wanted to be able to make a difference to what happens in the political world.

Besides being surprised about how forthcoming people were about what they needed to make democracy work for them, and how much people wanted the debates to involve them as well as inform them, the researchers were a little startled by the lack of interest in digital technology as a solution.

“There’s an assumption that people are looking to digital technologies. They weren’t looking,” said Coleman. “They’re looking for particular opportunities to do things rather than particular technologies that they think have got a magic solution.”

Focus group participants came up with interesting ideas for improving the debates, said Brian Plüss, a research associate at KMI who codes linguistic behavior, including penalties for candidates who dodge questions. While such a suggestion would never pass the negotiation stage between political parties and broadcasters, the EDV team began to envision how technology could be used to deliver more of what the public wants.

“If one of the politicians says something that has no evidential basis or that is plainly wrong, we can show it, and then make people aware of that,” said Plüss. “Even though we can’t make changes to the debates themselves, with technology we can empower citizens. That’s one of the overall grand goals of the project.”

The EDV team is open to discussions with media partners in and outside Britain interested in using the Democratic Reflection app in future debates. The goal of providing debate viewers with the means to express their emotions as well as their needs could be applied in any country, said Coleman.

“What we’re looking at is who we can work with for the greatest public good,” he added.

Read more: [Making the UK’s Political Debates More Responsive to Public Needs](#)⁵²

PART TWO

U.S. Debates: Transforming a Tradition

“We are seeing a tremendously high level of engagement with this election across all platforms. Four years in today’s media and tech world is a lifetime, and naturally the products, access and use has skyrocketed. It’s an incredibly rewarding challenge to capitalize on the tools available and to see them executed.”

-[Ed O’Keefe](#),⁵³ vice president of CNN Politics and CNNMoney, comparing the 2016 election cycle to 2012

If you didn’t watch the presidential primary debates and only paid attention to the debate promos, you would likely think that technology companies and social media were changing the very nature of debates, making them more responsive to voters and more inclusive of different voices. You would be impressed by the wealth of data promised and the number of questions submitted by the public on issues of national concern.

If you had watched the debates themselves, however, you might have wondered what all the fuss was about.

“More than half of the sanctioned primary debates this cycle have been co-sponsored by tech companies,” [The Hill’s David McCabe wrote](#)⁵⁴ earlier this year. “That’s more than in 2012 and in 2008, when the only tech-network partnership, between CNN and YouTube, was treated as a novelty.”

While no longer a novelty, the integration of social media and technology in the debates has, for the most part, failed to elevate the discourse. The partnerships have succeeded in boosting ratings and have given a new sheen to media organizations that have been hosting debates for decades and are trying to reach younger viewers. But so far, with just one genuinely notable exception, debate partnerships between tech platforms and TV networks in the United States seem mainly an exercise in mutual admiration. By being included as co-sponsors of debates, tech platforms get plenty of free promotion. And by partnering with the tech companies, old media gets a sprinkle of tech fairy dust to help with its efforts to reach younger audiences.

In an [interview with The Drum](#)⁵⁵ last October, Ed O’Keefe, vice president of CNN Politics and CNNMoney, explained the multiple ways the Democratic debate CNN hosted that month had boosted digital and social engagement:

“The records broken with this debate weren’t exclusive to TV ratings. Nearly one million people viewed the debate on CNN.com’s homepage live stream, CNN.com saw more than 11 million unique visitors on debate day, 4.3 million total live streams (web, app, and Apple TV) and more than 13 million total video starts. On social, more than 183,000 people in all 50 states voted through CNN’s Facebook page, and the debate live stream in virtual reality was viewed in 73 countries.”

As this data suggests, we are witnessing an explosion of digital engagement with debates and the entire electoral process. We have more ways to view and discuss debates, and more data to digest, than ever before. (Not all methods work for everyone; using a second screen for social media while viewing a debate, for example, may distract some viewers from learning information. An [Annenberg Public Policy Center study](#)⁵⁶ on debate viewing and social media use during 2012 election found that it particularly, and ironically, depresses learning *positive* information about one's preferred candidate. Other studies find a more positive relationship between debate viewing and second screens.)

On a more important level, however, we have seen limited efforts to increase civic engagement for the public good. The problem is not with the lack of technological innovation; it's with the lack of innovation to first determine—and then provide—what voters need to feel a genuine part of the political process.

When Anderson Cooper opened the Oct. 13, 2015 Democratic debate co-hosted by Facebook and CNN, he noted that “thousands of people stepped inside” CNN's cross-country campaign camper “to record their questions for the candidates on video,” and “millions more have weighed in on Facebook.”

What did all that involvement lead to? Three questions—and only one of them came directly from a Facebook user, asking Bernie Sanders how he would work with the Republicans.

The other two—on gun control and college tuition—were based on what CNN found people on Facebook and college campuses were talking about. These were mainly the same topics raised in almost every poll, and therefore in almost every debate. Other debates hosted in conjunction with Facebook yielded similar results.

While it was good to include different (and younger) voices, the use of “regular people” mainly reinforced the existing political narrative. Truly productive civic engagement would elicit questions—and answers—we haven't heard before, and involve a combination of technological innovation and editorial savvy.

1. Beyond Fairy Dust: PBS NewsHour Brings Engagement to Life

To give one example of how this might work: “PBS NewsHour” went back to Facebook basics in its impressive use of social media to engage debate viewers.

In late-January, it created a closed [Facebook group](#)⁵⁷ comprised of around 77 undecided voters selected from states with upcoming primaries. Leading up to the [Feb. 11 Democratic primary debate](#),⁵⁸ members of the “NewsHour” political team facilitated conversations within that group and learned about the issues that mattered to them.

Their concerns [fueled some of the questions](#)⁵⁹ “NewsHour” co-anchors Gwen Ifill and Judy Woodruff asked the candidates and gave the moderators an already curated group of people to check in with during the debate for follow-up suggestions.



PBS NewsHour

January 19 · 🌐



Want to join the group? Click the link below to apply.

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/1734496516784092/>

Be a part of PBS NewsHour's 2016 election coverage. We're seeking engaged voters who are still evaluating the candidates to join our team in a private Facebook group. PBS NewsHour weekend anchor Hari Sreenivasan will host the group, where you'll be able to share your opinions and concerns about the election and chat with members of the PBS NewsHour's politics team. You may even get a chance to submit a question to the candidates during the PBS NewsHour Democratic Debate moderated by Gwen Ifill and Judy Woodruff, on February 11, 2016 at 9PM ET.

Applicants will need to provide some personal details to verify identity. Participants should not be employed by or volunteer for a presidential campaign or politically affiliated group of any kind, and should be eligible to vote on Nov. 8. We look forward to hearing from you!



199K Views

Four questions, including a follow-up asking Bernie Sanders if there were any areas of government he would like to reduce, were attributed specifically to group members during the debate. The Facebook group opened to the public just before the debate started so all Facebook users could follow along with the members' discussion.

“By having this group of people that they knew were undecided, that had been vetted, and that they knew weren't working for any of the campaigns or advocacy groups, it gave them that ability in which to move fast and to have trust in the people that were asking some of the follow-up questions,” said Katie Harbath, Facebook's global politics and government outreach director (and an advisor to this project).

Today it remains an active group for discussion about the 2016 election.

2. Twitter and CBS Find “The Voice of the Crowd”

In 2015, after four Republican and two Democrat debates—and tens of thousands of questions submitted via Facebook and Instagram, real-time opinion meters and polls, streams of Twitter reactions, live coverage on Snapchat, and livestreaming in virtual reality—the wall dividing candidates and viewers almost came down.

It happened Nov. 14 during the [Democratic debate in Iowa](#),⁶⁰ when a real-time comment on Twitter was posed to Hillary Clinton. While it took all of eight minutes for debate organizers to select, vet, and read on air a #DemDebate tweet from a university law professor rebuking Clinton for her comments about 9/11 and taking donations from Wall Street, it could be argued that the lead-up took decades.

“For 55 years, we’ve all been yelling at the screens in presidential debates,” said Adam Sharp, head of News, Government and Elections at Twitter. “This is really the first time the screen talked back.”

In actual terms, the prep took months. CBS, host of the first-ever televised presidential debate in 1960, teamed up with Twitter for the event at Drake University, marking the first time the social media platform was an official partner in a U.S. debate (Twitter has advised other networks hosting debates).

The two media companies started working in tandem over the summer, said Sharp, testing curation methods during the other networks’ debates and building on ways Twitter has been used in previous election cycles and in other countries.

Past debates, for example, may have included a counter showing number of tweets per minute. This time around, online viewers saw a graphic cycling through the volume of conversation as well as each candidates’ share of the conversation. Visuals also captured the topics people were tweeting about and debate moments that drove conversation (view the [top moments](#)⁶¹). Twitter collaborated with Postano, a social visualization and measurement platform, to [display data](#)⁶² on a huge digital video wall in the spin room.

Using [Curator](#)⁶³—a tool Twitter rolled out [earlier this year](#)⁶⁴ to help media publishers search, filter and curate tweets for display on web, mobile or TV—CBS producers could select and display a scrolling timeline of tweets that ran alongside the candidates on CBSNews.com:

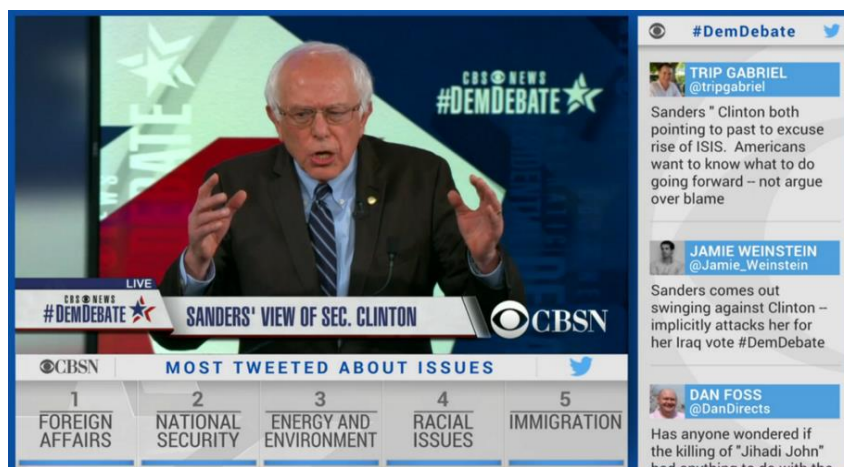


Photo: @gov

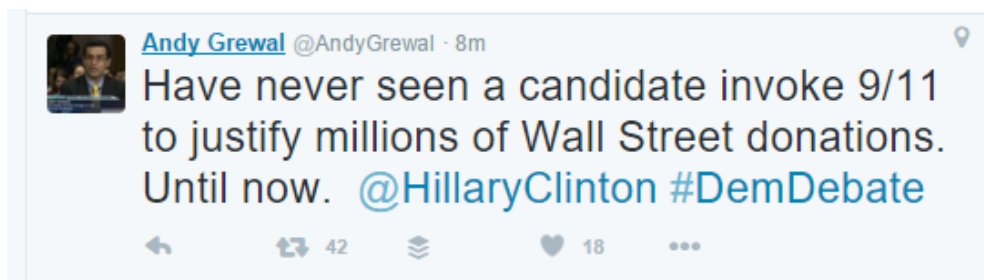
“That’s where it started, with the data telling a story,” said Sharp.

As the debate was happening, producers saw a spike around Clinton’s comment linking Wall Street campaign contributions to her work as a senator helping to rebuild downtown Manhattan after 9/11.

CBS used Curator as well as TweetDeck and Twitter itself to gather perspective on how Twitter users were reacting. Upon noticing that the majority of tweets were highly critical, the search was on for a tweet that would represent the consensus that was forming.

“It was immediately apparent that this was the moment that was driving conversation,” said Sharp. “This was the moment people were going to be referring to at the water cooler the next day. Finding a tweet that referenced that wouldn’t be just picking a face in the crowd, it was actually picking a voice of the crowd.”

Then a comment by University of Iowa law professor Andy Grewal surfaced:



“I couldn’t believe the tone-deafness,” Grewal later [told](#)⁶⁵ the Des Moines Register. “I felt compelled to make an actual critical remark.”

Grewal had fewer than 200 followers when producers found the tweet, so it wasn’t the most re-tweeted comment when it drew CBS’s attention, though by early December it had been retweeted more than 2,800 times and liked by more than 3,000 Twitter users. Being an Iowa voter helped in the selection process.

Before submitting the comment for air, CBS producers had to quickly vet Grewal, verifying his bio and reviewing past tweets for any sign he might be working for another campaign.

“That’s where it gets important to have both that algorithmic layer and that human editorial judgment paired together, but neither can exist without the other,” said Sharp.

“The reality is, with many millions of tweets about one of these primary debates, a human without help from the algorithm would drown under the volume. The key is, how do you get them at least to the right part of the haystack so they could start poking around a little bit more.”

The tweet was [shown on a screen](#)⁶⁶ above the candidates as it was read by one of the moderators, making it visible to all.

The groundbreaking moment wasn't lost on political and media observers; tweets congratulating CBS's use of the tweet quickly began appearing.



Grewal's tweet led to a short exchange involving Clinton, Bernie Sanders, and Martin O'Malley about Wall Street's economic and political power. Yet the comment also had a longer-lasting effect, giving the controversy over Clinton's Wall Street ties more volume and validity in the election narrative.



It was the level of impact Twitter officials had hoped to achieve going in.

“For every prior debate since August, [CBS] producers have been using these tools to surface tweets around those debates. They have a very good handle of what type of content and what quality they’d be able to raise during their own broadcast,” said Sharp.

“And now, undoubtedly, producers of future debates know, Oh, I can get a great question from Twitter, and I can get it in real-time. I don’t have to either take something stale that’s weeks old, or something that’s more stunky or kitschy, because that code’s now been broken, if you will.”

Read more: [How Twitter and CBS Found the “Voice of the Crowd”](#)⁶⁷

3. YouTube Creators Bring New Questions & Viewers

In 2007, televised presidential debates reached a new milestone: CNN included [questions from the public](#)⁶⁸ submitted via YouTube.

“We’re out there to actually see how people who want to be president think and handle issues and questions and people that are slightly outside of their comfort zones,” David Bohrman, then-CNN’s senior vice president, [said at the time](#).⁶⁹ (The fact that CNN didn’t invite the YouTube community, or the general public, to help prioritize those questions led Personal Democracy Media—the parent organization of Civic Hall—to launch 10Questions.com. Working with a broad coalition of media and political blogs, the site collected more than 300 questions for the candidates and more than 120,000 votes ranking them. Several of the presidential candidates, including Barack Obama, John Edwards, Ron Paul and Mike Huckabee, recorded video responses to some or all of the top 10 questions posed.)

In 2016, the media is still figuring out how to push candidates beyond their comfort zone while also remaining an editorial gatekeeper and profitable debate partner.

One of the differences, as we saw during the [NBC News-YouTube Democratic debate](#)⁷⁰ in South Carolina on Jan. 17, is that questions are now being asked by members of the public with social media followings and audiences that rival those of major media companies.

That debate included [questions](#)⁷¹ from four YouTube creators: writer/actor [Franchesca Ramsey](#)⁷² (220,000+ subscribers), author and lifestyle entrepreneur [Connor Franta](#)⁷³ (5.2 million+ subscribers), tech reviewer [Marques Brownlee](#)⁷⁴ (3.1 million+ subscribers) and [MinuteEarth](#)⁷⁵ (1.2 million+ subscribers), a group channel that creates animated videos about science and environmental issues.

Steve Grove, director of Google News Lab, said that the first debate involving YouTube in 2007 was “not necessarily as democratic as it could have been,” because CNN ended up choosing the questions, “but we thought it was a great step forward for getting voices from outside of the Beltway reporter class into these discussions.”

Now, the goal is not only to include new voices but to bring in new audiences as well who might not be watching the debates. Google worked with NBC to compile a list of potential YouTube creators to choose from, with NBC making the final call.



Ramsey, who often blends social commentary with comedy, particularly around race and LGBT issues, asked [one of the most pointed](#)⁷⁶ questions of the night about local prosecutors investigating cases of police violence in their communities.

Debate moderator Lester Holt directed the question to Bernie Sanders, who responded with specifics. (Adding more insight to an important policy discussion, two Washington Post reporters [annotated](#)⁷⁷ the debate transcript with relevant background information, a useful feature.)

During a post-debate interview with MSNBC, Ramsey praised Sanders' response, yet added she was disappointed the question was not addressed to other candidates. She made the same point in the comments on her video—using her widely popular platform to critique the process.

Of course, good questions do not guarantee thoughtful responses—follow-through is dependent on the moderator. The candidates didn't seem to understand Brownlee's question about encryption technology and privacy vs. security, and Holt turned Franta's question about youth engagement into a horse-race question directed only toward Clinton, who led off by congratulating Franta on his 5 million viewers.

A smart play by Clinton, as it yielded this much-retweeted response:



Read more: [Taking Debate Questions From YouTube Creators](#)⁷⁸

4. Drawbacks of Live Polling

As with several of the overseas examples cited above, U.S. debate producers are also experimenting with real-time feedback platforms.

With a click or a tap, debate viewers can share instantly and continuously how they feel about the debate, the candidates, and anything that is said or done on stage. Using an audience-engagement tool can provide a semblance of community, even knowledge, as we're able to instantly "see" what other viewers think about divisive issues at the same time we're sharing our opinions and the candidates are giving theirs.

CNN added a plug-in to its Facebook page last year to connect debate viewers to a polling platform provided by [iPowow](#),⁷⁹ a media company that allows television viewers to interact in real time.

Its CEO, Gavin Douglas, [noted](#)⁸⁰ that more than 183,000 people took part in the polls during a Democratic debate CNN hosted in October 2015—"a first for television and a political milestone."

In [an interview](#)⁸¹ with Cynopsis Media, Douglas said that the audience's take on debate winners and losers can differ from the media's narrative:

"[T]he system creates its own stories and content, which I think is great for democracy. I think it's incredibly good for democracy to have live polling, voting, and audiences participating in the political process. [But] some of our colleagues at various television networks – not CNN, but certain other ones – wouldn't agree. Because they like to give the news to the audience, not have the audience have anything to do with the process of making it."

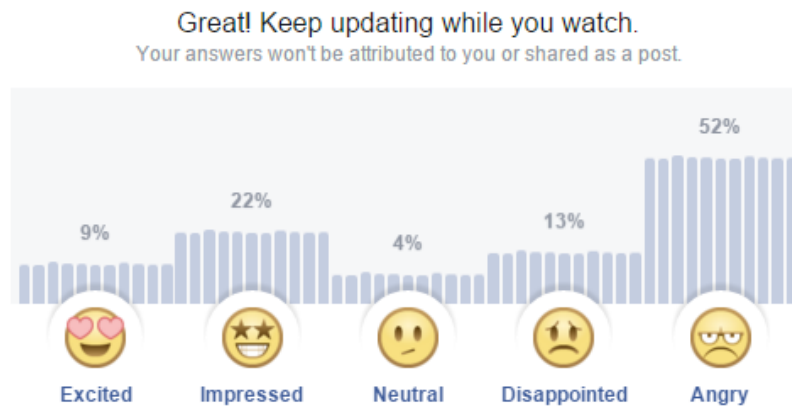
If we accept this perspective, viewer reaction tools are a great boon to the democratic process, disrupting the media's hold on the political conversation. And Douglas adds that iPowow was developed to "let the audience affect the outcome of conversations in TV studios in real-time."

But this empower-the-viewer attitude only goes so far, as audience engagement is also used to support the media's relationship with advertisers.

On the difference between iPowow and social media platforms, Douglas said:

"Tweets and Facebook posts drag your attention away from the main television screen, which is where the million-dollar content is – the content that advertisers want to make sure you're watching. If you look down and start interacting with your followers on Twitter, or your friends on Facebook, or you're going to Instagram, then you're no longer watching or interacting with the TV show. [...]"

As we all know, TV has shifted more and more towards video on demand, and time-shifting viewing, and skipping ads. Anything that can be done to help advertisers and sponsors have people watching their ads is incredibly valuable to them. And it's also incredibly valuable to have intelligent audience data saying, "This many people actually did watch your ad."



iPowow Facebook plug-in showing live viewer reaction. This message appears after answering the question "How are you feeling about the debate right now?" Facebook.com/CNN / GOP presidential primary debate, Dec. 15, 2015

CNBC used the iPowow platform during a Republican debate, directing voters to its homepage to take part in the polling. Basic demographic information, commonly requested at the start, is not verified but is used nonetheless to provide more angles for post-debate analysis and media coverage.

CNBC VOTE

Welcome! Please answer a couple of questions anonymously to vote. Skip ▶

What is your political affiliation?

What is your gender?

What is your age?

▶

iPowow registration screen / CNBC.com/vote/ Republican presidential primary debate, Oct. 28, 2015

PART THREE

Innovation at the State and Local Level

Over the course of this research project, we began to see more interest in organizing debates at the state and local level and, with it, examples of technology being used not just to supplement the conversation but to change it.

“Who will move into the White House in 2017 matters, but the same can be said for the candidates for mayor, city council and school board,” wrote Bob Davis, associate publisher and editor of the Anniston Star, which is co-hosting a number of debates in Alabama. This sentiment has been repeated in news articles, editorials and letters-to-the-editor across the country.

We've also identified examples of civic groups giving up on televised debates, or broadcasters refusing to air them, either because some candidates refuse to participate (especially incumbents, who don't want to elevate the standing of their rivals), or the race is not considered competitive due to redistricting. In other words, the seat is “safe.”

In some communities, it's a matter of infrastructure. The city council in Casper, Wyoming rejected a request to allow political candidates to use the council chambers for debates, even though that location offers something no other place in Casper can match: live public television access and an internet connection.

Where debates are scheduled, we've seen more of a willingness to involve the public both before and during the debates, and we have catalogued examples of debate organizers using everything from Facebook and Twitter to Google forms and email addresses to gather questions for the candidates in advance.

The Seattle CityClub this year spearheaded the creation of the [Washington State Debate Coalition](#),⁸² and, with numerous partners, pulled together U.S. Senate and gubernatorial debates. It also created a [2016 Debate Watch Toolkit](#)⁸³ with tips for hosting debate watch parties and engaging with other viewers online—including tweeting questions and comments during the debates and using Microsoft Pulse to weigh in on topics of discussion. (More on Microsoft Pulse in the next section.)

"Public debates are one of the few opportunities for voters to hear directly from candidates about why they should be elected," said Diane Douglas, CityClub's executive director. "We believe this important exchange of ideas should be a regular and reliable part of Washington's electoral cycle."

1. Florida Open Debate Asks Voters to Ask the Questions

While few questions for U.S. presidential candidates have come from voters this election cycle, two U.S. Senate hopefuls from Florida agreed to a debate this year focused entirely on issues determined by the public.

On April 25, Rep. Alan Grayson, a Democrat, and Rep. David Jolly, a Republican, went head-to-head in an “open debate.” (This was prior to Florida’s primary election; Jolly would later drop out of the race, and Grayson lost in the primary to Rep. Patrick Murphy.)

The event was hosted by the [Open Debate Coalition](#),⁸⁴ which is backed by groups and individuals across the political spectrum who aim to make debates more “of the people” by building them around questions proposed and voted on by the public.



Rep. Alan Grayson and Rep. David Jolly answer questions during the Florida Open Debate.

More than 900 questions were submitted to [FloridaOpenDebate.com](#)⁸⁵ in the week leading up to the debate, attracting more than 410,000 votes from across the country, including more than 84,000 in Florida.

Debate moderators Cenk Uygur, co-host of the popular YouTube news channel The Young Turks, and Benny Johnson, creative director of Independent Journal Review, drew from the [top 30 questions](#)⁸⁶ that received the most votes from Florida residents. The bottom-up format led to a serious mix of issues, albeit one that skewed left. Social Security, campaign finance reform, climate change, and voting rights factored among the most popular questions.

Questions were submitted in one of 10 issue areas, including civil rights, education, economy and jobs, taxes and budget, and society and community. According to the site guidelines, moderators had the right to move questions to a different category and to remove, modify, or combine similarly worded questions.

The moderation process was transparent, involving both site users and experts from Coalition organizations. Authors were notified if a change was made to their submission, and they were given the opportunity to clarify their question or request a reversal.

In addition, all changes were logged at [floridaopendebate.com/changelog](#),⁸⁷ a public page, along with the reason for the revision.

The most popular questions—both nationally and among Florida voters—were about money in politics. But the even bigger issue, said Lilia Tamm, the Coalition’s program director, is the ability to shift the conversation.

“It’s not so much that any one question is going to be particularly insightful or going to really dig deeper than the news media,” she said. “I think that the news media does quite a good job of digging deep on a lot of things, and it is their job to know the issues well enough to be able to do so.

“What we have as a collective—the power of the crowdsourcing—is the agenda setting. It’s saying, we’re going to give the people the power to decide what areas we want these candidates to be discussing in front of us. And by and large, there are no political questions. That’s the thing that’s really different.”

The debate took place at the WUCF studio on the University of Central Florida campus and was streamed live across multiple internet platforms, including FloridaOpenDebate.com.⁸⁸ There were no corporate sponsors, no commercials, and no questions about campaign politics.

Organizers [counted](#)⁸⁹ 81,000 live viewers. The [video](#)⁹⁰ on The Young Turks’ YouTube channel had more than 99,000 views within a couple of weeks of the debate (as of September 2016, it has surpassed 123,000). An open video feed allowed any website or TV station to broadcast high-quality debate footage live or after the debate, and it aired at least twice on C-SPAN 2.

“I’m really happy that finally the American people get to see what it’s like to have two serious members of Congress struggling with the great issues of the day,” Grayson said during closing statements. “This is the way politics ought to be.”

People posting to Twitter during the debate mostly seemed to agree.



There was a definite contrast between this debate and the two town halls MSNBC held that same evening with Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders. In separate interviews, both were asked all-too-familiar campaign questions: For Sanders, it was about endorsing Clinton and encouraging his supporters to back her if she's the nominee; for Clinton, it was about a role for Sanders if she's in the White House.

The open-debate technology is ready for a national platform; in fact, the Coalition sent a proposal to the Commission on Presidential Debates in advance of the 2016 presidential debates.

The goal, said Tamm, is for open-debate technology to “trickle down” to other races, including those at the local level. That will be easier once a high-profile, national open debate takes place and sets the standard for how these types of events can be run.

“This has never been a technology problem,” she said, “it’s just the political will and the understanding of the technological space and all the stakeholders lining up and seeing this would be a benefit to them.”

Read more: [Florida Candidates Field Questions Chosen by the Public](#)⁹¹
(and) [Florida Open Debate Raises Question of Public Involvement](#)⁹²

2. Silicon Harlem Engages Audience on Second Screen

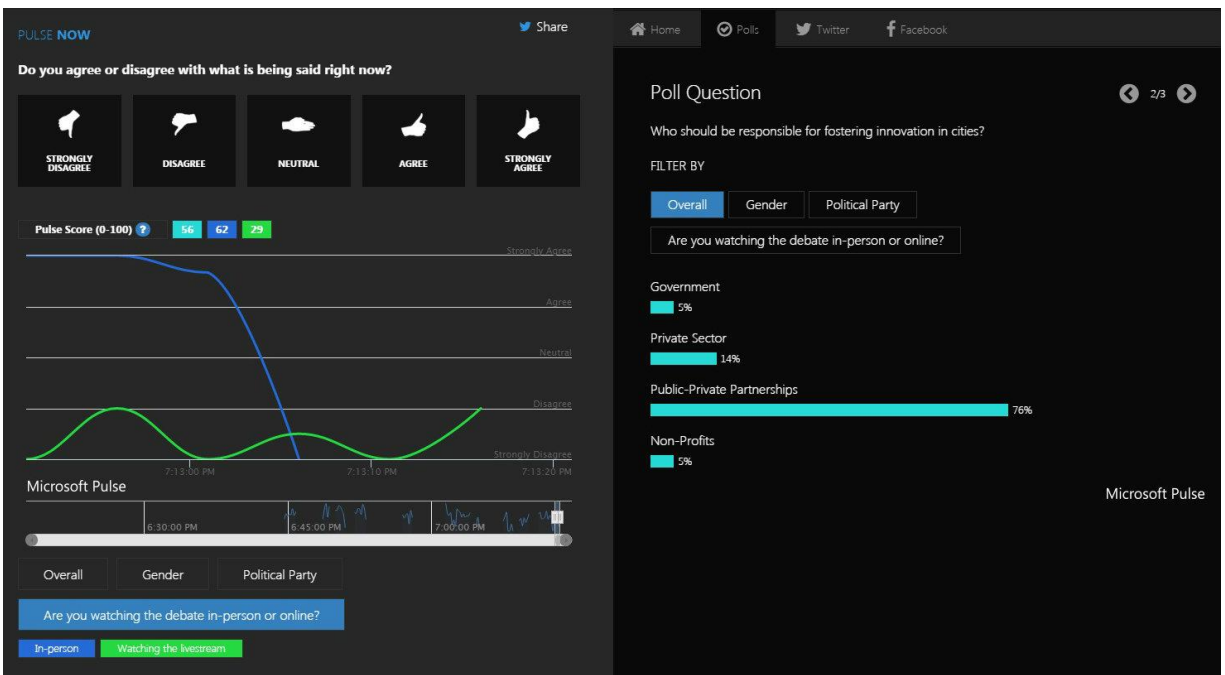
Using viewer-response tools to engage thousands of people at once—or even more when these tools are used for real-time voting during television competition shows such as “The Voice”—has become the norm. What’s more unusual is incorporating audience-response technology into a local debate.

A U.S. House primary debate in New York did that this year, when seven Democratic candidates looking to replace retiring Rep. Charles Rangel gathered for [a debate](#)⁹³ at the MIST Harlem event space. The event was sponsored by [Silicon Harlem](#),⁹⁴ which opened in 2013 with the mission of transforming Harlem into a technology and innovation hub.

Silicon Harlem had previously worked with Microsoft’s [technology and civic engagement team](#)⁹⁵ in New York and sought their involvement in the debate. They agreed upon using Microsoft Pulse, an audience-engagement platform that has been used for conferences and in schools, along with much bigger political events, including a recent presidential primary debate hosted by [Telemundo](#)⁹⁶ and a [Labour Party leaders’ debate](#)⁹⁷ in the U.K.

At the start of the event, Lee Brenner, who heads business development and partnerships for Microsoft’s Technology and Civic Engagement team in Washington, D.C., spoke briefly about the company’s efforts to empower citizens and communities. He then encouraged the audience members to take out their phones and go to [siliconharlem.net/pulse](#).

Once there, participants could select their gender, party affiliation, and whether they were viewing the debate in person or watching the livestream. Information could be filtered using those parameters at any time during the debate.



Real-time voter reaction on the left; a survey question on the right asks, “Who should be responsible for fostering innovation in cities?”

Microsoft Pulse runs continuously, offering real-time voting to gauge whether audience members disagree, are neutral, or agree about what the candidates are saying at that moment. Responses can be registered every five seconds. The results create a worm-like effect on the screen, as a line curves up and down depending on audience members’ reactions. This sentient analysis shows how people are feeling throughout the event while optional survey questions invite more reflection on issues.

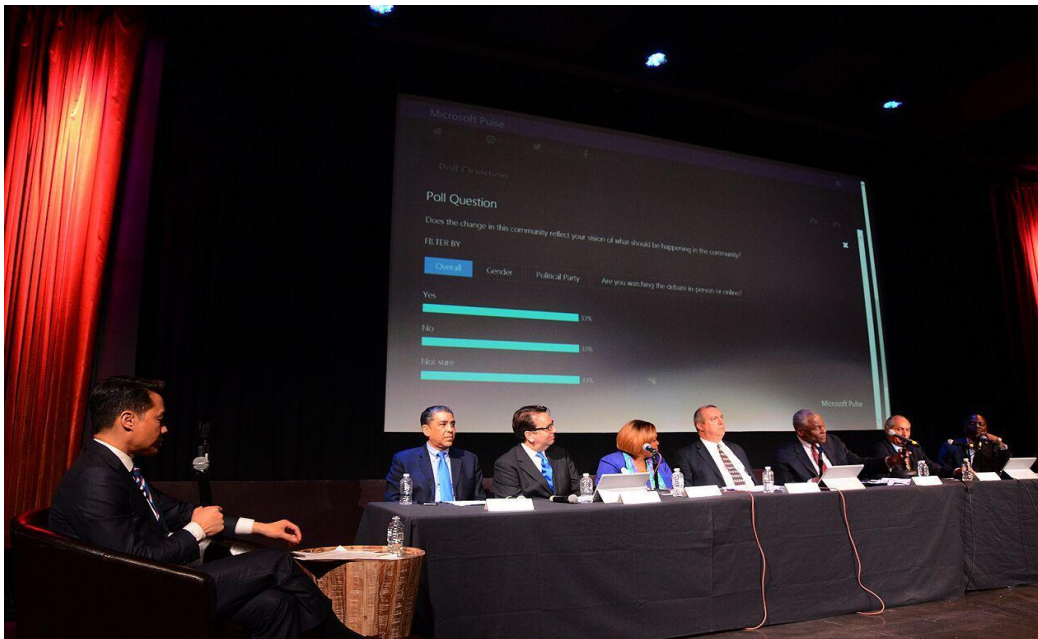
“There are advantages to the two-sided approach,” said Brenner. “One is a little bit more nuanced; the other gives you more depth.”

The Silicon Harlem debate marked the first time Pulse was employed during a local, non-televised debate. Set-up is free, making it a practical option for election debates at state and local levels.

Brenner said he’s surprised more debates haven’t given voters engagement opportunities, given the available technology. But he sees that changing.

“I think the more pressure that we have, the more demand that there is,” he said. “And citizens are more engaged anyway in their everyday lives. Any debate, local or national, will have to integrate technology in some way.”

Silicon Harlem inputted 10 survey questions ahead of time related to the technology and economy issues the candidates would be discussing. The questions appeared periodically on Pulse, with polling staying open for several minutes each time. In another first for a political debate, the audience’s responses were shown on a screen behind the candidates as they spoke about the topic.



Microsoft Pulse poll results appear behind candidates for New York's 13th Congressional District / Silicon Harlem

It was difficult to determine how well the responses represented the audience, however, because of connectivity problems in the room. As candidates were answering the first question from moderator Richard Lui of MSNBC and NBC News asking what could be done to bridge the digital divide, Lui reminded audience members to go to siliconharlem.net/pulse to weigh in.

Some people shouted in response that the Wi-Fi was down, preventing them from getting online.

“Digital divide in Harlem,” sighed Assemblyman Keith Wright, one of the candidates, prompting laughter amid groans.

The biggest issue with successful audience engagement is adequate bandwidth, and on that night, it wasn't close to par.

“Even though we sort of had a laugh about it, the point is, this is how important this issue is,” said Clayton Banks, co-founder of Silicon Harlem, noting that if the broadband was working appropriately, hundreds of people could have participated simultaneously instead of 40 or 50 people at a time.

“It shows how important it is that your infrastructure is strong, how important it is to have ubiquitous broadband, and how important it is to bridge the digital divide.”

Read more: [Congressional Debate in Harlem Engages Audience with Microsoft Pulse](#)⁹⁸

RECOMMENDATIONS

Going forward, we recommend that all parties interested in hosting debates consider the method of engagement most valuable to their audience, as well as the logistics and cost.

It's worth noting that all of these examples assume the presence of debate moderators. Indeed, knowledgeable moderators are often necessary to ensure that questions from voters, no matter how they're sourced or submitted, are answered thoroughly. Involving the public may mean less focus on the moderator, but it doesn't mean less responsibility.

Viewer-Response Tools

Out of the categories we studied (viewer-response tools, live interactive audience feedback, voter-generated questions, and emerging tools and platforms), we're most skeptical of methods such as the worm that offer only a superficial and potentially biased peek into the thoughts and reactions of debate viewers.

Interactive Audience Feedback

Some advanced audience-feedback tools are equipped with worm-like functionality, but they're designed to generate more data and conversation with on-point survey questions that can be set up in advance or sometimes added during a debate.

They are recommended for debates that want to 1) incorporate public opinion; 2) allow the audience a say in the direction of the conversation; and 3) gather viewer data by party affiliation, age, sex, etc.

Though these tools easily can be made accessible to online as well as studio audiences, from a true engagement perspective, the best use is within the debate space itself or combined in-person/online. A moderator can do a quick check-in with an audience and adjust the direction of the conversation based on input and informational needs, and ask some audience members why they voted the way they did.

Voter-Generated Questions

Social Media – Pre-Selected Questions

Sourcing questions for candidates in advance is recommended for debates at all levels. Simple online submission forms, or even email, can be used to gather questions from voters and to invite those whose questions are selected to attend the debate to ask their question in person.

With a modest level of resources, questions can be sourced from social media, ideally from a curated audience, such as the Facebook group created by "PBS NewsHour." This allows for more direct and nuanced discussion about election issues, and more buy-in for the debate.

Community organizations might consider putting together a diverse group of voters that meets for a series of in-person meetings (or some combination of online and IRL) and develops questions that address the needs of the community.

Regardless of how they are sourced, debate organizers should do more to ensure that the selected questions represent a more diverse mix of concerns and issues and focus less on reinforcing the same debate narrative.

Social Media – Live Questions

Questions and comments from the public that add value to the conversation should be welcomed more often during debates.

The complex technical and editorial preparation that CBS and Twitter pioneered in selecting a live tweet is unlikely to be replicated by smaller media or community organizations. But there are more accessible online curation tools (the simplest being a debate hashtag, the more elaborate being a data-filled dashboard) that can be used to help find comments and questions.

Having an already vetted group (see above) to turn to for follow-up questions is also recommended.

We recommend that candidates consider opportunities and invitations to debate on social media platforms, taking advantage of accessible tools that can be used to broadcast live events and make them more easily shareable and interactive.

Crowdsourcing Questions

We recommend crowdsourcing questions online not only to achieve a mix of questions from voters but to learn which questions matter the most. Online platforms can be set up relatively easily, but it's important to prioritize transparency, which is essential for securing voters' trust in the process. With appropriate moderation, this is a promising choice for national debate organizers, as well as organizers of local and state races.

We recommend considering additional features to increase interaction with candidates and facilitate more responses. For example, the Taiwanese platform "President, May I Ask a Question" enabled candidates to post responses to questions that didn't make it into the debate, a feature that debate organizers might consider as an add-on or stand-alone feature.

If the candidates are not interested in taking the time to respond, a partnership with local media might include reporters or an editorial board selecting questions to ask on the public's behalf and reporting on or publishing the responses.

Other Tools and Platforms

We recommend that debate organizers team up with local media and civic tech groups to incorporate/develop post-debate analysis tools, such as annotated debate transcripts and video, to better explain and contextualize debate topics. It would be helpful to voters, for example, to learn why a candidate's debate proposal to improve city parks is likely or unlikely to cost taxpayers more and to learn what experts and stakeholders think about the proposal. Certain media outlets might also be able to augment the transcripts or videos with fact-checking.

On a grander scale, we support the use of dedicated debate spaces, exemplified by the McLaren Thought Leadership Centre, that bring many digital tools together in an environment designed to encourage interaction.

We also recommend that debate sites welcome the use of social media companies and individuals using social media tools that can broadcast events to larger audiences and invite comments and questions.

Challenges

There are, of course, challenges to the application and spread of these approaches. First, we are reminded of issues related to internet access and infrastructure that can limit participation. And there are the difficult negotiations with parties and candidates and sponsors that can make getting everyone in the same room on the same day seem like a victory.

In that respect, the laudable efforts of the [Annenberg Debate Working Group](#),⁹⁹ which built a cross-partisan panel of experts, deliberated carefully, and offered the Commission on Presidential Debates a sensible and actionable set of modest format reforms, so far to no avail, suggest that innovation is more likely to come from state and local debate producers than from national debate sponsors.

CONCLUSION

In the 56 years that presidential debates have been held and televised in the United States, we have witnessed a technological revolution that has influenced the creation of tools and platforms that have altered our communication and interaction. We also have witnessed a downward spiraling of civil discourse and public trust in politics and politicians.

As these tools have been applied to our political conversation—and debates in particular—the results have been mixed. While some have added to the cacophony, others have had a positive effect on the political discourse or at least show great potential.

Looking at the most promising case studies in this report, their appeal isn't chiefly their technological "wow" factor; it is their willingness to respect and engage the audience, and perhaps even cede some control.

As Stephen Coleman, a member of the U.K. research team working on Democratic Replay, noted, people view debates as cultural events. They want to be involved as well as informed; they want to feel like they were part of something. They also want to be able to evaluate what the candidates say so they can make an informed decision when they go to vote.

People view debates, in other words, as essential elements of the democratic process.

It's safe to assume that debates will continue to be central events in political campaigns at many levels. And as more people the world over grow accustomed to being able to participate more directly in decisions that affect their lives, public expectations for greater debate participation will continue to rise. Hopefully, debate producers at all levels, along with candidates and the public, will find the lessons of this report useful.

For all the Rethinking Debates case studies and news round-ups containing both global and U.S. debate news, go to <http://civichall.org/topic/debates/>

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