



# WHEN EMOTION TRUMPS INFORMATION: THE IMPORTANCE OF STORYTELLING IN PROMOTING CIVIC PARTICIPATION

TECHNOLOGY / ARTICLE

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Martin Kaplan is the Norman Lear Professor of Entertainment, Media and Society at the University of Southern California Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism and founding director of the Norman Lear Center. Below he shares his thoughts on voting and civic participation, inspired by the Knight News Challenge on Elections, which asks the question: How might we better inform voters and increase civic participation before, during and after elections? The best nonpartisan ideas will share in more than \$3 million. Applications close at 5 p.m. ET, Thursday, March 19. Apply at newschallenge.org.

The Knight News Challenge inviting ideas to “make elections a meaningful gateway to long-lived civic engagement” makes a causal connection between better-informed voters and a robust democracy. The more people know what’s going on, the better off we are at self-government. Facts are the gold standard for democratic deliberation. It’s a common assumption. But might it actually be a leap of faith?

It’s certainly been my assumption. Since 1998 I’ve been studying local TV news coverage of politics and public affairs. Despite the Web and social media, despite network, cable and mobile news, the No. 1 source of local news for most Americans is local television. (That’s always surprised me, because no one I know actually watches local news. Do you?) If local news gets better, I’ve long believed, democracy gets better.

What’s on local news? Pretty much what you thought: If it bleeds, it leads. Seton Hall professor Matt Hale and I have conducted content analyses of nearly 60,000 half-hours of local news on more than

300 stations in 139 markets. You may be depressed, but will not be surprised, to learn that in 2009, for example, a typical half-hour of L.A. news contained 2 minutes 50 seconds of crime news, while the average time spent on L.A. government news—both city and county, including budgets, layoffs, education, law enforcement, prisons, lawsuits, ordinances, personnel, voting procedures, health care, transportation and immigration — was 22 seconds.

To promote reform, we spread findings like that widely, but shaming doesn't seem to be particularly effective. What does work is throwing a spotlight on best practices – on great journalism done against long odds in newsrooms of all sizes around the country. We celebrate it with the Walter Cronkite Award for Excellence in Television Political Journalism, presented by USC Annenberg's Lear Center since 2000. Many winners say it's boosted their careers. Some station groups actively vie for the prize, because the channels know the home office wants them to shoot for more than 22 seconds of civic excellence.

The causal question remains: Does news engage and impact audiences? Does quality news activate an informed public? At our Media Impact Project, funded by Knight and the Gates and Open Society foundations, we're working with The Guardian, Univision, The Seattle Times and other media partners to investigate those questions, looking for correlation if not causation. In the course of these and other case studies, my colleagues Dr. Johanna Blakley and journalism professor Dana Chinn have been developing and beta-testing replicable, open source methods and tools to measure changes in media users' knowledge, attitudes and behavior.

But what if providing people with more and better information doesn't make them better citizens?

That's arguably, and alarmingly, the implication of experiments by Yale Law School professor Dan Kahan, and by Dartmouth political scientist Brendan Nyhan. Apparently, when people are misinformed, giving them facts to correct those errors only makes them cling to their beliefs more tenaciously.

More and better information about concealed handguns, climate change, weapons of mass destruction, stem cell research or the economy doesn't transform low-information voters into knowledgeable citizens. It just makes them more committed to their misperceptions. When there's a conflict between your group's values and plain evidence, between who you are and what scientists, educators, journalists and experts say, it's the side of beliefs, affiliations and partisanship that wins. We are impervious to facts that contradict us. The hurdle is our hardwiring, which empowers emotion over reason, tribal identity over facts, once-upon-a-time over data sets.

That's not a bug in our operating systems; it's a feature. And though I'm not ready to give up on better information activating a Jeffersonian polity, I do know how much stories matter. Ever since our species roamed the savannah, storytelling, spectacle and play have shaped who we are, what we know, how we treat each other. \_\_\_\_\_

Entertainment can wield awesome power, for ill, and also for good. On one hand, as The New Yorker's Jane Mayer reported, the dean of West Point felt compelled to travel to Hollywood to plead with the creators of the TV drama "24" to stop telling stories depicting torture working. Our instructors and textbooks are telling students that torture doesn't work, he told the producers, that it's wrong, but it's you they believe. On the other hand, entertainment can serve public ends. Our Hollywood, Health & Society program, supported by the Centers for Disease Control and others, connects screenwriters with experts. When they're writing storylines about public health, health care and climate change, Kate Folb's Hollywood, Health & Society team wants to make it as frictionless as possible for storytellers to get it right, because our research finds that their scripts have a measurable impact on what viewers know, believe and do. A related example: Declare Yourself, a civics/entertainment mashup we helped launch, which featured live music, poetry slams, celebrities and a copy of the Dunlap broadside of the Declaration of Independence, registered more than a million new voters during its road show to all 50 states.

The fulcrum of this Knight News Challenge is voting, and voting, says Curtis Gans, "is essentially a religious act." Doing our civic duty at the polls is on some level irrational. "We all realize that our vote, and everybody else's individual vote, does not make a difference. But, historically, we have developed this religion of civic engagement and civic duty as a people wanting to contribute to what may be seen as a Rousseauian general will, with the freedom to give or withdraw our support to a leader or to a set of policies."

If civic engagement is a religion, its god is going through a rough patch. Declining electoral participation is a symptom of the dispiriting but not unreasonable erosion of moral confidence in democratic institutions. The legal corruption of politics by money has created what bids to be the permanent underclass of the politically powerless (as well as a multibillion-dollar windfall of ad revenue for TV stations). That feeling of impotence is the source of legitimate disgust, as are systemic dysfunctions like gerrymandering and anti-democratic subversions like voter disenfranchisement. The public's cynicism about the consent of governed that these engender is well earned – and not a misunderstanding that a cool civic app can dispel.

Knight Foundation is partnering with the Democracy Fund, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation and the Rita Allen Foundation on Knight News Challenge: Elections, which asks the question, How might we better inform voters and increase civic participation before, during and after elections? The best nonpartisan ideas will share in more than \$3 million. Apply at [newschallenge.org](http://newschallenge.org) by 5 p.m. ET Thursday, March 19. Winners will be announced this summer. 

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