

The story that swallows the news

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This election season has seen calls for journalism to rise to the rather bizarre occasion. Candidates' claims should be fact-checked, not just reported. Lies should be called lies. The news media, the argument goes, needs to step up and do more.

Perhaps—but it also needs to do less. The problem with election reporting isn't that it fails to inform voters about the issues. It's that this critical work gets obscured by the dominant media focus on the narrative, the constant emphasis on seeing candidates and campaigns through the lens of story.

Exhibit A: the presidential debates.

"The consensus that Donald Trump badly lost the first debate gelled overnight," began James Hohmann in the *Washington Post*. This is not a sentence about Trump's arguments or Clinton's, or even about the political ramifications. It's about the narrative itself, a story about story. Right after the debate, a flurry of commentary dominated TV news and social media. Soon, people started to get the story straight. The consensus gelled.

People love stories. Preachers know this well; Jesus certainly did. Anyone interested not just in saying something but in people hearing it can appreciate narrative. Journalists are no different.

But story isn't the best tool for every job. U.S. voters may be lightly informed, but most understand the basic narrative of an election: the candidates compete for votes until early November, when the winner takes all. Yet most media energy goes toward continuously updating and nuancing the details of this story.

This does little to serve voters. The debate contained crucial information about both candidates, information that could help people decide how to vote. But the postdebate chatter was mostly about who "won" and how that affects the narrative. This doesn't help people make sense of what they've seen; it just speculates on how they will make sense of it. It's the people's story, yet cable news is eager to tell it in advance.

Vox's Ezra Klein observes that journalists are uncomfortable with the knowledge that they don't just reflect reality but shape it. "So we . . . recast ourselves as observers of voter reactions we can't observe. We judge the debate based . . . on what we think the public will think to be true about it." This leads to, among other things, the double standard of evaluating the candidates based on their respective public narratives, rather than on shared criteria. But Klein stresses that the media bias here isn't toward one candidate. It's toward story itself—ongoing narratives about Clinton's wonkiness, Trump's boorishness, and so on.

Campaign journalism is getting better at fact-checking and resisting false equivalency. Now it needs to lay off the storifying that obscures these efforts to inform. It's not the media's story to write—that work belongs to the voters.

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