Town Hall Meetings and the Death of Deliberation

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The Future of the Town Hall Meeting

If the town hall meeting campaign stop is the first significant step away from the original town meeting, a corporate town hall meeting with a political agenda might be the biggest departure yet. However, at their 2018 Donor Summit, the Koch brothers outlined a midterm election strategy that included town halls. This is a staple of the Koch playbook—during the 2017 debate on tax reform, the Koch brothers held more than one hundred town halls and announced plans for more during the 2018 election cycle.1 One of the most notable recent town halls suggests what the future of the town hall might be. On February 21, 2018, CNN hosted a televised town hall on the recent horrific mass shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida.2


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The live event, held at BB&T Center, included classmates of the victims, parents, and members of the community. CNN also invited prominent Florida lawmakers and politicians, as well as President Trump, to take part in the town hall.

This particular school shooting has motivated the survivors to advocate for change, and I hope that this impetus can sustain a different and better approach for the safety of students. At the same time, the town hall meeting’s evolution continues to reshape the paradigm of what it is and does. Most notably, one of the most prominent aspects of the Florida town hall meeting was the absence of elected officials. In particular, Florida Governor Rick Scott faced criticism from survivors of the shooting for not accepting CNN’s invitation to participate.3

The anger of student-activists like Sarah Chadwick is easy to understand. It also emerges in a context that is worth considering. To start, there was a horrific event, all the more horrific because of how routine school shootings have become in the United States. In the context of this discussion of town hall meetings, the particular evolution of this Florida town hall meeting warrants some thought. We have a TV network that convened a public gathering to discuss a topic of national interest. As the host, CNN invited politicians, survivors, and other interested parties, including NRA spokesperson, Dana Loesch. CNN’s role here was complex—the network’s act of convening this town hall meeting was itself a news story that CNN then disseminated. Politicians who chose to attend or not attend generated another news story. If this event changed the relationship between politicians and

3. Sarah Chadwick (@Sarahchadwickk), “Upset to hear our governor Rick Scott wont be attending the town hall meeting on Wednesday. To be fair, he does have an A+ rating from the NRA, and i think he’s scared of my peers and I,” Twitter, February 22, 2018, 12:56 a.m., https://twitter.com/Sarahchadwickk/status/965827435567730688.
pro-gun lobbyists, we can hope that this change will make the United States a safer place. At the same time, it is striking how the roles of various parties have evolved from the town meeting paradigm. Rather than a municipality, a TV network was the host of this event. It was an event that people were or were not invited to. It took place in the BB&T Arena, which is usually the home of the NHL’s Florida Panthers. This town hall was an event for media, not a structure of governance.

If there is a rough taxonomy of political, academic, and corporate town hall meetings that descend from the original town meeting, this CNN meeting blended the three. It was political in that it served as a form of constituent service; it had the trauma management function of some academic town halls; and it was hosted, organized, and sponsored by a corporate entity. As such, this gathering straddled usual conceptions of public and private. Because elected officials were present, they were, to some extent, accountable to their constituents. At the same time, this was a private and not public event since CNN was in charge of the guest list. An invitation-only gathering cannot, by definition, be fully inclusive, but there is a difference between people not invited who did not come and officials who were invited but chose not to attend, such as Florida Governor Rick Scott. For the officials brave enough to show up, it may have felt like attending a demonstration to get their fair share of abuse. But whatever benefits the event offered survivors, parents, and other citizens, this process also functioned as a spectacle that benefited CNN by attracting viewers. As Todd Starnes of Fox News commented, “It’s a public flogging, not a town hall meeting. Hope the ratings are worth it, @jaketapper and @CNN.”

4. Todd Starnes, (@toddstarnes), “It’s a public flogging, not a town hall meeting. Hope the ratings are worth it, @jaketapper and @CNN), Twitter, February, 21, 2018, 10:03 p.m., https://twitter.com/toddstarnes/status/966508702340734978.
Starnes might have overstated the case, but the Parkland town hall meeting on CNN felt more like a pep rally for gun control than a democratic, deliberative process a town meeting should be. This concept of town hall meeting as pep rally is also one that Starnes’s own network has employed. In January of 2019, Fox News presented the “Battle at the Border Town Hall,” which focused on immigration and border security and was hosted by Brian Kilmeade and Tomi Lahren. This spectacle—with a name worthy of a heavyweight boxing match—took the town hall as pep rally one step further, as chants of “Build that Wall” periodically erupted from the audience.