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Public Discourse in the Lincoln Douglas Debates

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Public Discourse in the Lincoln Douglas Debates

by

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Introduction

The Lincoln-Douglas debates, to many, represent the pinnacle of American democracy – candidates exploring issues in depth and presenting opposing viewpoints, with an audience of citizens consumed with zeal for their own civic education eagerly soaking in the information. This image has long endured as the standard against which modern democracy should be measured.

In his book *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, Neil Postman laments the decline of this kind of quality public discourse that has accompanied the arrival of the television age. He claims that the rise of a fast-paced and superficial show business mentality has destroyed the attention spans and logical formats that accompanied the dominance of the print epistemology. In his view, the fusion of entertainment and politics has produced an uninformed, disengaged electorate.

Invoking Marshall McLuhan's classic mantra, "the medium is the message,"¹ Postman contends that the print medium molded the mindset of its consumers in such a way as to allow for more logical thought processes and, hence, more productive discussion and debate on public issues. In his argument, he esteems the debates of 1858 as premier examples of the quality of debate and level of citizen engagement that have been lost to modern television-inspired formats and audiences.

Postman contends that the speeches followed a rational progression that mirrored the print epistemology. Lincoln and Douglas, Postman says, reflect the logic of the written word in the content of their arguments by responding logically to each other's arguments, referencing relevant texts and events, and carefully scrutinizing the other's words. In short, the oratories actually contained content, unlike mindless television chatter. He

points out that at one point during the debates, Douglas even requested that the audience refrain from applause, as he would prefer to appeal to reason and intellect rather than emotion.

Postman not only esteems Lincoln and Douglas, but their audience as well, claiming that they attended the events with the primary purpose of educating themselves about political issues and were successful in doing so. “These audiences,” Postman says, “were made up of people whose intellectual lives and public business were fully integrated into their social world.”²

But are these images of noble statesmen and upstanding citizens an accurate depiction of the political scene in 1858? The debates must be viewed in the context of the highly partisan political atmosphere of the 1800s. In this context, is it possible that personal attacks and jests may have directed the orientation of the debate away from issue analysis toward an arena-like atmosphere?

This study questions this romantic portrayal of the debates and their civic-minded viewers and settings, taking Postman’s claims into consideration. It will do so by analyzing the two factors on which Postman bases his argument - the content of the debates and civic-minded audiences present. To test the validity of Postman’s larger thesis—that print media provided for a higher level of public discussion—this study will incorporate the additional factor of print news coverage. By analyzing newspapers, this thesis questions whether print indeed produced more logical content. That is, when presented in print form, was information about candidates logical and substantive as Postman claims, or did partisan promotion interfere with the ability of newspapers to provide informative coverage of the debates?

Literature Review

A wealth of literature exists addressing the Lincoln Douglas debates, with scholarly portrayals of the debates in many cases contradicting their glorified popular perception. Most scholars confront Lincoln and Douglas by analyzing the significance of the debated issues within the context of historical political developments. Within this sector of study, scholars are divided by their appraisal of the significance of the debates in affecting the discussed issues and by their preference for either Lincoln or Douglas. In addition, scholars have examined the debates from the point of view of artistic rhetoric or the qualities of the candidates' themselves. While much has been made of the issues confronted, however, no study has comprehensively assessed the logic and validity of the arguments that supposedly explicate those issues within the context of American political engagement in the mid 19th century.

Revisionist historian James G. Randall, considered by many the foremost expert on Lincoln, challenges the importance of the debates in history, noting the relative similarity in the candidates' policy preferences. He claims that, contrary to the popular belief in the gravity of the topics of slavery and popular sovereignty, the proposals of both Lincoln and Douglas would have evenly limited the expansion of slavery and calls the issue, "a talking point, rather than a matter for governmental action, a campaign appeal rather than a guide for legislation."³ He notes that two important developments proceeded from the debates: Lincoln's rise to prominence, which augmented his presidential campaign of 1860 as well as Douglas' statement at Freeport, in which he stated that he supported a territory's right to exclude slavery by popular will, prior to

statehood. This statement allowed Southern extremists to create a division in the Democratic Party with an issue on which, paradoxically, Lincoln and Douglas agreed.

Historian Henry Jaffa presents a direct challenge to Randall's view, venerating the debates as one of the critical turning points in American history. "The crisis of the war years," he writes, "was in a profound sense less critical than the moment in which the commitment which produced it was being debated."⁴ In *Crisis of the House Divided*, Jaffa claims that the ensuing division of the country was an indirect result of the continuing debate between Lincoln and Douglas. By effectively preventing Douglas from forming a leading coalition between the Republican Party and the South, Lincoln ensured that the majority of the nation would adopt his philosophy of national political responsibility which diverged sharply from Southern priorities.

David Zarefsky offers a rhetorical perspective on the debates, breaking the candidates' arguments into four categories – conspiratorial, legal, historical, and moral. He points out that both debaters offer conspiracy theories as vital threads in their arguments, with Lincoln claiming that Douglas endeavored to spread slavery nationwide and Douglas portraying Lincoln as a black republican hell-bent on abolition. Both debaters consistently implied historical as well as constitutional evidence, though perhaps attempting less to provide factual justification for their views than to gain the hypothetical endorsement of the highly venerated founding fathers. Zarefsky addresses the candidates' moral positions – to him, the most important dimension of the debates – noting that the moral arguments of each candidate largely evaded the other. While Lincoln expounded on the morality of slavery itself, Douglas addressed the correct means of policy formation in a democracy. In this manner, Lincoln and Douglas largely failed

to directly address the others' positions, but instead used the conspiratorial, legal and historical arguments as "surrogates" for the morality question. Zarefsky concludes that modern audiences should celebrate the debates for their "argumentative artistry."⁵

Kathleen Hall Jamieson, in *Presidential Debates*, takes a view similar to Postman's. She praises the debates as a high point in American political discourse, saying of the discussions, "They were orderly and closely attended. Both advocates were serious and articulate. They addressed themselves to a discreet set of political concerns. The debates advanced the issues, illuminating the areas of both agreement and disagreement."⁶

Michael Schudson mentions the quality of the debates in terms of their value in public discourse by examining their audiences, content and political environment. He holds that audiences must have had other reasons than political education for attending the debates. He suggests that entertainment most likely met the primary needs of the audiences, as the atmosphere of the events resembled more of a sporting match than a seminar and often provided a rare instance excitement for smaller towns.⁷

In addition, Schudson criticizes the content of the debates, noting that they are rife with ad hominem attacks, unfounded accusations and often focus on the candidates' personal lives rather than public policy. He points out, "Lincoln was as fleet-footed in running from the *a* word [abolitionist] in 1858 as Michael Dukakis from the *l* word in 1988."⁸ Even so, Schudson maintains that the modern political context is so far removed from that of the mid-19th century that comparisons or lessons to be learned from the time of Lincoln and Douglas are inapplicable.

Similarly, Schudson downplays the historical significance of the debates, noting,

Just as the brilliant Federalist papers failed to rally a pro-ratification constitutional assembly in New York, just as President Woodrow Wilson's national whistle-stop tour to sell the League of Nations to the American public failed even as he was struck down in the midst of his campaign, just as Martin Luther King, Jr.'s 1963 speech at the Lincoln Memorial failed to propel a sluggish Congress toward a civil rights bill..., so Lincoln lost the contest to Douglas.⁹

While Schudson challenges the logic of the candidates' arguments as well as the seriousness of the political atmosphere of the mid-nineteenth century, he stops short of providing a complete assessment of the texts of the debates or information about the conditions of the individual debate settings in support of his argument. Schudson makes this point without providing a system of support for his argument. Included as one chapter in a history of American political participation, Schudson's suggestions deserve further research that can assess with more detail the validity of Lincoln and Douglas' arguments as well as the practicality of the debate environments for political education.

Methodology

This thesis seeks to assess the quality of discourse provided by the Lincoln Douglas debates in terms of content, atmosphere, and print news coverage. To do this, it sets forth three hypotheses, which, essentially, are contradictions to Postman's claims about the debates and which will be tested in different ways. The hypotheses are as follows:

1. Lincoln and Douglas employed invalid claims, personal attacks, and entertaining and emotional appeals that largely overshadowed substantive portions of their arguments.
2. The environment of the debates created an atmosphere of diversion rather than education, attracting audiences that sought entertainment rather than civic edification.
3. Print newspaper coverage of the debates focused on promoting candidates at the expense of increasing understanding of the issues covered by Lincoln and Douglas.

To test the first hypothesis, the study will include a close analysis of the debate at Freeport. Freeport was chosen for this study as a representative sample of the debate series as whole. Though Freeport is representative of the rest of the debate in terms of the issues discussed, one would expect that the environment of Freeport would allow a more logical substantive debate than in some of the other locations. Freeport is a town located in the very north of Illinois -- an area whose residents maintained considerably more anti-slavery, less-racist views. Here, Lincoln could take liberty to be more

consistent in his anti-slavery views, and Douglas might be less likely to resort to racial fear tactics, providing for a higher level of discourse. The following analysis will test whether this debate, under optimum conditions, did or did not produce such results.

The debate will be analyzed, using a Harold Holzer's text of the debates published by Harper Collins. The evaluation is framed by Postman's claims about the debates, and the analysis is attempting to confirm or deny elements of Postman's argument about the debate content. Postman makes three central claims about the content on which the evaluation will be based:

1. Candidates' arguments were based on fact.
2. Candidates appealed to reason.
3. Candidates sought to educate rather than entertain.

To evaluate to what extent the speeches appealed to reason or emotion, the third hypothesis, the evaluation will examine the debate in terms of basis on fact, use of personal attack, and appeal to audience emotion. For purposes of this study, basis on fact will be defined as an argument supported by actual events and verifiable information as opposed to fabrication or conspiracy theory. Personal attacks will be defined as ridicule, name-calling, or any comment that casts a negative light on the candidate's personal life or character apart from his policy positions, while statements that appeal to emotion will be ones in which the speaker uses volatile language or exaggeration intended to evoke a passionate response.

The final test in the content analysis will address Postman's central argument in *Amusing Ourselves to Death* - that it was television that caused entertainment to seep into formerly education-oriented sectors of public life. Here, candidate's arguments will be

evaluated in terms of their intention for entertainment or substance. This section will also include a recap of audience reactions in attempting to determine the manner in which listeners received various portions of the discussion.

Also necessary to the evaluation of the audience's experiences at the debates is an assessment of the atmosphere in which they took place. Postman, referring to Douglas, noted, "he claimed his appeal was to understanding, not to passion, as if the audience were to be silent, reflective readers and his language the text they must ponder."¹⁰ This statement begs the question: Were the audience members indeed silent, reflective ponderers, or did other factors interfere with audiences' ability or desire to process rationally the candidates' words? To test the second hypothesis, this portion of the study will delve into newspaper coverage and other historical accounts to examine weather conditions, venue, crowdedness, ability to hear, and the nature of other activities taking place at the debates. This section will attempt to paint an accurate picture of the experiences of those audiences in 1858 and determine if those present sought and received political education or entertainment.

In its final section, this thesis will test Postman's glorification of print media through an analysis of newspaper coverage of the debates. Postman contends that the print medium molded the mindset of those in the pre-television age in such a way as to allow for logical, fact-based public discussion. Here, the study will evaluate whether, when this discussion appeared in print form, if it indeed boasted these qualities of substance and informative value. After measuring the level of logical discourse in Lincoln and Douglas' words, the study will examine whether the print medium succeeded

in conveying the material to the thousands of Illini who experienced the contest within the pages of local newspapers.

The central question in this section is: did the newspapers deliver the kind of logical discussion that Postman attaches to print? In the mid-nineteenth century, newspapers most often affiliated themselves with parties and candidates – a factor that colored their political reporting. It has been noted that papers often slanted their depictions of the debates in an effort to boost the appeal of their preferred candidate. To assess to what extent the papers provided useful and logical analysis or empty candidate promotion, the study will analyze newspaper coverage by a variety of Illinois print media. The sample in this section will be the newspapers' coverage of the Freeport debate (the same debate used to evaluate content in the first section of this thesis).

Newspapers provided analysis of the debates, highlighting key topics and assessing the outcome of the contest. Here, the study will examine this coverage of the Freeport debate, noting which portions of candidates speeches the newspapers highlighted and how much time the analyses devoted to substantive portions as opposed to entertaining passages and those regarding topics irrelevant to the discussion. The evaluation will assess whether the coverage was aimed primarily to educate readers or only to increase support for a particular candidate. In addition, it will examine the closeness of party and candidate ties to publications and how this may or may not have affected newspapers' coverage of the debates.

Data

I. Atmosphere and Audiences

Postman calls the language of the Lincoln Douglas debates “pure print.” Notable is that to Postman and the modern American public, the Lincoln Douglas debates are manifested in dusty library volumes and newspaper transcripts. To the 21st century, they *are* print. The thousands of Illinois residents who packed town squares in 1858, however, experienced something entirely different.

Evaluation of this experience is crucial in assessing the orientation of the discussion toward political education or entertainment. The conditions of the debates may have been conducive to productive discourse or to chaos. This section attempts to recreate the experience of Illini in 1858, taking into account the physical atmosphere of the events, including location, crowd size, and weather conditions. In addition, this section explores the general mood of the debate, exploring the events and celebrations before, after, and during the debates.

A. Location/Crowdedness/Weather Conditions

Several factors of the atmosphere of the debates were largely beyond audience control. Weather conditions, crowd size, and the ability of the location to accommodate the spectators played a large role in attendees’ ability to effectively learn about the candidates’ political views. In the absence of microphones or well-constructed venues for speaking, the effects of these factors are exaggerated.

Newspapers provide attendance estimates for each debate – estimates which undoubtedly vary for a number of reasons. Newspapers’ partisan alliances may have

caused them to artificially inflate or deflate crowd numbers in particularly strong Democratic or Republican areas. Still, most disputes concerned the proportion of Lincoln supporters to Douglas supporters rather than the size of the crowd itself. The newspapers, rather than altering crowd size, frequently accused their opposition of importing supporters from neighboring states. In addition to possible biases, reporters lacked a systematic method of measuring the crowds. Still, by examining a variety of sources, it is possible a rough estimate of the audience sizes for the events.

At the opening debate at Ottawa, the crowd numbered approximately 12,000 as the city was “beleaguered with a multiplying host from all points of the compass.”¹¹ At one o’clock, the crowd began to enter the town square, where the candidates were to face off, and “the rush was literally tremendous.”¹² The stand that had been erected for speakers and reporters was left unguarded, and the square was so packed with spectators that half an hour was taken up in an effort to make space for the candidates and reporters, before enforcement officers arrived. The *Chicago Daily Press and Tribune* commented, “even then the accommodations were of the most wretched character.”¹³ Several times, the crowd came close to knocking reporters off of the platform. Six attendees who had foolishly elected to sit on an overhanging roof broke through the boards, landing on the heads of spectators below.

In addition, the rapid influx of carriages in combination with the large processions marching across town created an enormous dust storm. The *Register* reported that from sunrise until noon on Saturday, the day of the debate, Ottawa was “deluged in dust,” continuing, “at eight o’clock the streets and avenues leading from the country were so enveloped with dust that the town resembled a vast smoke house.”¹⁴

The next debate at Freeport on August 27 attracted an even larger sum of people. The *Chicago Journal* reported “immense crowds” that “came down from above, and up from below in scores and hundreds.”¹⁵ Every regular railroad train on Thursday and Friday was filled to capacity with Lincoln and Douglas supporters.¹⁶ Towns ran special excursion trains to debate sites to accommodate the large exodus of spectators.¹⁷ Hundreds more came through other modes of transportation.¹⁸ Attendance estimates for the Freeport debate vary more than for any other event, with no clear divide between Democrat and Republican newspapers. Estimates range from five to more than twenty thousand, with the majority reporting 15 to 20 thousand attendees. The *Republican and Telegraph* called it, “One of the largest gatherings which was ever held in the State.”¹⁹

At two o’clock, the crowd surrounded the platform that had been set up in a lot near the Brewster House, a new grand hotel. The crowd formed a circle around the “pyramid of lumber” in the center, which had been fashioned for the speakers and reporters.²⁰

Of the weather, the *Illinois State Journal* reported, “The day broke chilly, cloudy and lowering. Alternations of wind, rain and sunshine filled up the forenoon. At 12 o'clock the weather settled dismally cold and damp, and the afternoon carried out the promise of the morning with the single exception of the rain.”²¹ The *Freeport Weekly Bulletin* said, “The weather was cloudy and cold, and in consequence of the high wind which prevailed a part of the time, many were prevented from hearing the speakers.”²²

The Jonesboro debate drew the smallest crowd of all the debates with 1400 to 1500 attendees.²³ Newspapers conjectured that many debate spectators had been lured

away by the presence of the state fair in that region or deterred by the “dog-day temperature.”²⁴ The discussion occurred in the town square, where a stand had been erected for the speakers.²⁵ Douglas supporters continued to fire a cannon as people filled the square, contributing to the huge volume of noise.²⁶

The Charleston Debate took place at the County Fair Grounds at eight on a Saturday evening. By ten that morning, “the streets and sidewalks around the public square were almost impassable, and those who essayed out-doors anywhere in the vicinity were well nigh stifled with dust for their pains.”²⁷ The Charleston audience numbered approximately 12 thousand.³¹ Having taken place the night the state fair closed, many had vacated the town or chose not to attend the evening activities.²⁸ The candidates each stood upon a “dry goods box” in the open square among the crowd.²⁹ The wind exacerbated the massive dust problem that resulted from the influx of carriages.³⁰

The crowd at Galesburg also reached huge numbers. The *Galesburg Semi-weekly Democrat* reported that, “At early dawn our gunners announced the opening day and at an early hour the people began to pour in from every direction in wagons, on horseback and on foot.” The *Daily Pantagraph* estimated the crowd at 16 to 18 thousand people.³¹ A special 22-car train from Peoria carrying 2,000 persons had broken down, as its engine gave out from overcapacity.³²

This crowd arrived despite inclement weather conditions, which the *Press and Tribune* described as an “arctic frost.”³³ The *Semi-Weekly Democrat* noted, “The crowd was immense notwithstanding the remarkably heavy rain of the day previous, and the sudden change during the night to a fiercely blowing, cutting wind which lasted during the whole day, ripping and tearing banners and sending signs pell mell all over town.”³³

The *Pantagraph* commented, “The day was cold and raw, but this did not seem to chill the enthusiasm of the people.”³⁴ The debate took place at two thirty on the college grounds, where a stand for the speakers had been fashioned on the east side of the college building.³⁵ The weather continued “cold and raw” as the speakers took the stand.

The *Press and Tribune* estimated the Quincy crowd at 12 thousand people.³⁶ The *Daily Pantagraph* at 12 to 20 thousand people.³⁷ The weather was “clear and admirable” in Washington Square, where the discussion was to take place at two o’clock.³⁸ As the crowd packed the Square to capacity, part of the railing surrounding the speakers’ platform buckled under the pressure, sending about 15 people sprawling backwards to the ground, accompanied by a heavy wooden bench.³⁹

The debate at Alton had approximately five thousand attendees.⁴⁰

All in all, the atmosphere of the debates seemed to provide an exciting social occasion for Illinois families. It is evident from the celebrations, processions, and crowds, that the debates offered more than just political discussion and attracted more than just political observers.

B. General Atmosphere/Celebrations

The activities involved with the Lincoln Douglas debates extended far beyond oratorical confrontations. The debates brought a source of entertainment to some small towns that might not have otherwise experienced such excitement. In the frontier West, residents of states like Illinois enjoyed fewer modern comforts than their counterparts in the more developed Eastern states. Entertainment was one of these comforts. Amid what

some might consider a dull atmosphere, stump speakers were common, providing an excitement and a chance to socialize.

With each match-up, Democratic and Republican enthusiasts packed trains and wagons and rode horseback to join the excitement. Supporters overtook the town with parades and celebrations in support of their candidates.⁴¹ This section explores these kinds of events that surrounded the Lincoln Douglas debates. As with attendance estimates, partisan newspapers may have had an interest in exaggerating their own candidate's celebration and underplaying their opponent's. Most newspapers, however, devoted nearly all of their coverage to their own candidate's procession.

At Ottawa, the town overflowed with excitement for the first debate. Processions descended upon Ottawa from every direction, "like an army with banners."⁴² "Military companies and bands of music monopolized the thoroughfares around the Court House and the public square. Two brass twelve pounders banged away in the centre of the city and drowned the hubbub of the multitude with their own higher capacities for hubbub."⁴³ Huge boats crowded with banner-waving supporters sat anchored to the bridge.⁴⁴ The *Press and Tribune* concluded, "Vanity Fair never boiled with madder enthusiasm."⁴⁵

An enormous crowd met Lincoln at the Rock Island Railroad, where the candidate was transferred with a carriage decorated with evergreens and banners by "the young ladies of Ottawa."⁴⁶ Douglas was greeted three miles west of the town with a procession of supporters in carriages, wagons, buggies, and on horse and foot, cheering him on with flags and banners.⁴⁷ He was said to have mounted a small cannon on a flat car for celebration upon his arrival to each city. [Opposition newspapers took great pleasure to ridicule Douglas' insecurity that his supporters might fail to produce an adequate

celebration].⁴⁸ The *Register* reported that the reception crowd measured a mile and a half long and expanded as it neared the city.⁴⁹

The Democratic and Republican processions met in the center of town, at which point each proceeded on its own path, wandering the main streets of Ottawa.⁵⁰ The *Register* commented, “the town was fairly alive with people, and with their shouts and hurrahs for their respective favorites, a constant roar was kept up.”²⁴ When time for the debate arrived, the crowd gathered in the town square, creating “a most imposing presence,” where a stand had been set up for the speakers.⁵¹

For the next debate at Freeport, Lincoln arrived in the city by the Illinois Central train at 9 a.m. the day of the debate. He was greeted with a speech by the Illinois Congressman T.J. Turner as well as a canon salute and a parade of Republican supporters. Spectators had arrived from across the state, “all with their banners and bands of music.”⁵² The *Alton Weekly Courier* reported that, “from the moment he came out of the cars till he entered his room in the hotel, the streets were made perfectly clamorous with shouts and hurrahs for Lincoln.”⁵³ When Lincoln attempted a few hours rest in his hotel room, the crowd outside chanted, demanding that he continue to greet them.⁵⁴ Lincoln appeased them by making a speech, “which set the crowd in a blaze of enthusiasm.”⁵⁵ After the first speech, “he was several times afterwards called out by the various delegations, who as they arrived, paraded in quest of his quarters to pay their respects to him.”⁵⁶ Douglas had arrived the night before and was also greeted by a vast procession, including a parade of torches.²

The *Illinois State Journal* reported that, at two o’clock, Lincoln was wheeled to the debate site by a Conestoga wagon pulled by 16 white horses, as “a tremendous hurrah

went up as the crowd joined in the procession and march, the music playing and the flags and banners waiving in all directions.” Signs read, “Winnebago County for Old Abe” and “The Galena Lincoln Club.”⁵⁷ The *Journal* reported that Douglas was to be pulled by a six-horse coach, but, upon seeing Lincoln’s grander transport, decided against it.⁵⁸

At five o’clock, after the debate had ended, much of the crowd transferred to Brewster House where, waiting for Lincoln to arrive, they chanted loudly for the Congressman Owen Lovejoy, who appeased the crowd by making a speech.⁵⁹ When Lincoln arrived, the “air was rent with their vociferous cheers.”⁶⁰

The third debate, at Jonesboro, produced the smallest turnout. Hence, it boasted a much smaller celebration, but a celebration nonetheless. Shortly before two o’clock, the crowd filled the town square. At the square, spectators waved signs and banners as they waited for the candidates. Douglas’ supporters manned his signature cannon, which produced deafening pops and a horrendous odor amid the multitude of people. As the candidates attempted to commence the discussion, the overzealous supporters continued to fire the cannon, delaying the start of the discussion.⁶¹

At Charleston, hotels were booked to capacity as supporters arrived the night before the campaign to decorate the town with banners, flags, and “artistic devices which could be pressed into political service.”⁶² Douglas supporters and their bands had gathered that night at the train depot in anticipation of their candidate’s arrival. When Douglas did not arrive that night, the crowd mistook another short man for Douglas and proceeded to accost him with music and cheers. When it was discovered that this man was indeed not Douglas, the crowd returned to their quarters in anticipation of the next day’s events.⁶³

Bands of music marched about town on the day of the debate, attempting to recruit supporters for the debate that evening.⁶⁴ Lincoln supporters hung an 80-foot banner depicting a 30-years-younger Lincoln. Separate processions escorted each of the candidates from the town of Mattoon, Illinois, 11 miles away, where the candidates had spent the previous night. On the way to Charleston, they were met by more processions of carriages, horsemen, bands of music, and most magnificently, a “mammoth car,” covered with white muslin and silk and adorned with wildflowers. Inside were 32 young women carrying signs for Lincoln. As they came into town, the parade measured more than a mile in length. Lincoln’s carriage was then driven to the Capitol House, where he was greeted by more supporters. The crowd then scattered for supper before reconvening for the main event.⁶⁵ The discussion took place that night at the County Fair Grounds.³¹ Douglas arrived and is said to have shaken hands with 11,384 persons present, a number validated by the Republican *Press and Tribune*.⁶⁶

At Galesburg, Douglas arrived by train to the depot, where a crowd met to escort him to the hotel Bancroft House, where university students presented him with an embroidered silk banner.⁶⁷ At ten in the morning, Lincoln arrived with the Knoxville delegation, of which the *Galesburg Semi-weekly Democrat* said: “‘mammoth’ would not describe it. It was like one of Cobb’s tales, of monstrous length and *to be continued*.”⁶⁸ It included 100 men and women on horseback.⁶⁹ The *Press and Tribune* stated, “It was about long enough...to reach around the town and tie in a bow-knot.”⁷⁰ Lincoln was also presented with embroidered banners from Lombard University students and from the “Republican Ladies of Galesburg.”⁷¹ Republican delegations from individual cities - some measuring more than half a mile long - carried banners displaying elaborate

artwork. One depicted Lincoln beating Douglas with his cane, while another showed Douglas in the midst of falling while attempting to ride two donkeys labeled “Dred Scott” and “Popular Sovereignty.” Yet another portrayed a beheaded Douglas ally.⁷²

At noon, the crowd began to gather for the debate, and by one o’clock, the site was filled with approximately 10 thousand people. During the hour wait, the crowd was entertained by a “spicy and humorous speech” by an editor from the *Aledo Record*.⁷³ At two o’clock, the candidates arrived at the debate site in two four-horse carriages.

The Quincy celebration began at nine on the morning of the debate, as an immense parade of supporters marched to the train station to meet Lincoln. The crowd included spectators from surrounding cities as well as Iowa and Missouri. The *Press and Tribune* reported, “The crowd was very large, and though less in number than that at the Galesburg debate, the excitement and enthusiasm on both sides were more marked and vociferous.”⁷⁴

At nine thirty, the noise of a cannon signaled the arrival of the train, transforming the procession into a mad rush for the station. Lincoln was cheered as he travelled with his procession, which included a large model ship on wheels with a live raccoon at the helm. The Douglas procession, also considerably long with countless banners and mottoes, hung a dead raccoon from their head wagon.⁷⁵

When the time arrived for the debate, the crowd assembled around a “large, pine-board platform,” which had been erected in Washington Square. Before the speeches, a rail on the stage broke under pressure, falling to the ground along with about 12 dignitaries and the bench it was supporting. Another bench crumbled under the weight of the women sitting on it, causing some to be removed from the scene due to injury.⁷⁶

For the final debate at Alton, Lincoln and Douglas supporters agreed to refrain from processions or other “demonstrations of enthusiasm.”⁷⁷ The *Press and Tribune* noted, “There was very little excitement manifest in the city during the forenoon.”⁷⁸ It continued, “the debate passed off with rather less than the ordinary amount of applause, but with unusually close attention on the part of the audience.”⁷⁹

II. Debate Content

Postman claims that by appealing to reason, referencing relevant texts and events, and supporting their arguments, Lincoln and Douglas provided a high-quality political experience for their listeners. This section closely examines the words of each candidate to test the validity of Postman’s claims about the speeches. In other words, did logical and reasonable arguments dominate the discussion, or did appeals to entertainment and emotion as well as personal attacks compromise the seriousness of their discourse?

In their speeches, Lincoln and Douglas addressed a number of issue-based questions as well as several that dealt with their consistency of ideology and/or character. Each employed a strategy of combined logical and emotional appeal by supporting his argument with facts and intermittent personal attacks intended for audience entertainment. The following recount illustrates the execution of these strategies by each candidate, using text from the Freeport debate as a sample.

A. Lincoln's opening speech

At Freeport, Lincoln opened the debate by recalling the seven questions his opponent had put forward in his closing rejoinder at the Ottawa debate. The questions inquired about Lincoln's pledged positions on admission of slave states to the Union, the abolition of slavery in the District of Colombia, prohibition of interstate slave trade, prohibition of slavery in the territories, the slavery question as relating to acquisition of new territory. Lincoln agreed to answer the questions on the condition that his opponent answer the same number of his own interrogatories. Lincoln, before offering his responses, mocked Douglas, saying: "I shall make no objection to the judge saying 'yes,' or 'no' right now, or, if it suits him, to remain silent. I pause for a moment to see how it will be. Well I suppose that I may assume that the judge chooses to remain silent."⁸⁰ The crowd responded wildly with laughter and applause.

Lincoln then proceeded to provide brief yes or no answers to each of Douglas' seven questions, arousing cheers of "Good! Good!" from the audience.⁸¹ He went on to explain more substantively his positions on each of the issues, using fact-based arguments for his positions. Several times he cited his constitutional interpretation of the powers of Congress explained his view of optimal conditions for abolition of slavery in certain areas. To interstate trade, Lincoln responded, "it is a subject to which I have not given that mature consideration that would make me feel authorized to state a position so as to hold myself entirely bound by it."⁸² He finished, however, with a biting comment aimed at Douglas: "In all this the judge has me, and has me on the record. I supposed the judge has flattered himself, that I was really entertaining one set of opinions in one place and another in another that I was afraid of saying in one place what I would not say at

another...”⁸³ Lincoln’s assertion of his own consistency framed much of the remainder of the Freeport debate as well as the entire series of contests.

Lincoln posed four of his own questions for Douglas concerning Kansas’ qualification for statehood based on population, exclusion of slavery through state constitutions, deference to the Supreme Court on the issue of popular sovereignty, and the importance of the slavery question in the acquisition of new territory. The questions evoked shouts of “That’s it!” and “He won’t answer!” from the crowd.⁸⁴

After asking his questions, Lincoln moved on to another subject that would dominate the debate - the question of whether Lincoln was party to a set of resolutions adopted by a Republican meeting in Kane County. Douglas had previously asserted that the resolutions had been adopted at the Republican convention at Springfield, and Lincoln spent a large portion of his remaining time absolving himself of responsibility for these resolutions. In reference to this disagreement, Lincoln attacked Douglas’ character and campaign style, commenting:

I allude to this extraordinary matter in this canvass for some further purpose than what I have yet advanced. Judge Douglas did not make his statements upon that occasion as matter that he believed to be true; but he stated them roundly as being true, in such a form as I understand to pledge his veracity for the truth of them. When this matter turns out as it does, and when we consider who Judge Douglas is – that he is a distinguished senator of the United States; that he has served nearly twelve years in such a capacity, and that his character is not at all limited as an ordinary senator of the United States, but that his name has become of world wide renown; it is most extraordinary, as I think, that he should so far forget all the suggestions of justice to an adversary, or of prudence to himself, as to venture upon the assertion of a thing which of the slightest investigation would have shown him to be altogether false; and I can only account for his having done so upon the supposition that the evil genius which as attended him through his life, giving to him an apparent astonishing prosperity, such as led very good men to doubt of there being any virtue over vice – I can only account for it upon the supposition that the evil genius has at last made up his mind to forsake the judge, and I may

add...another rather extraordinary feature of the judge's conducting of this canvass...the judge is in the habit, as I understand, in almost all the speeches he makes of charging falsehood upon his adversaries – myself and others. I do now ask the judge's attention whether he shall be able at all, in any thing that I have said, to find a justification at all comparing with what we have in this instance against him, for that sort of ugly talk. Lincoln's comment drew raucous cheers and laughter from the crowd.⁸⁵

Lincoln next introduced his conspiracy theory that the true aim of the Kansas Nebraska Bill was the nationalization of slavery. He noted that time constraints limited his ability dwell on the evidence for this claim and recalled that at his mention of the theory at Ottawa, Douglas “thought for a good while I was in fun” and “grew angry and somewhat excited when he found that I insisted upon it as a matter of earnestness.”⁸⁶ He continued, “Now the judge is very much in the habit when he argues me up into a position which I never thought of occupying for myself, of saying that...Lincoln is altogether conscientious in that matter.”⁸⁷

Lincoln interrupted his conspiracy theory to sarcastically note his confidence in Douglas to enact his view of what is right, attacking his opponent while exaggerating his position. He commented, “I do not find anything really in Judge Douglas' course or argument that is contrary or inconsistent with his belief, of the right to nationalize and perpetuate slavery as being a good or blessed thing, and so I hope he will understand that I do not question that in all this matter that he is conscientious in it.”⁸⁸ The crowd responded with laughter.⁸⁹

Lincoln proceeded to expound on his theory regarding the Kansas- Nebraska bill. He explained that Douglas and other Democrats' decision to vote against an amendment that would have expressly permitted settlers to exclude slavery from a territory as well as the Congressmen's failure to offer an alternative amendment that could have allowed for

popular exclusion and adoption, proved that they surreptitiously purposed to nationalize slavery. In addition, Lincoln claimed that Democrats' ultimate hope would be a decision by the Supreme Court, forbidding local authorities from banning slavery and that they voted in accord with that desired decision. Lincoln challenged Douglas' vote against the amendment, saying, "It will be vastly more satisfactory to the country to give some other intelligent, plausible reason for voting it down than it will to stand upon his dignity and call people liars."⁹⁰ The pro-Lincoln *Chicago Tribune* reported "loud cheers." "⁹¹

While he did present the amendment issue as a fact in arguing Democrats' proslavery leanings, Lincoln made an unsubstantiated leap to his opponents' goal of nationalization of slavery supported by the Supreme Court.

Lincoln concluded by addressing Douglas' charge against him that his theory that much of Congress colluded with the president was an *ipse dixit* -- an assertion lacking proof -- by asserting that Lincoln had indeed not presented a theory but only evidence to be interpreted by a reasoning audience. He then referenced a *Washington Union* article in which he says Douglas made the same charge against the president and other members of congress that Lincoln made against Douglas. He finished, "I must say that in this regard that my ipse dixit may not be so great as his, but somewhat reduces the force of his charge."⁹²

Douglas' Response

When it came time for Douglas to speak, he opened by praising the audience for their superb behavior, specifically pointing out the virtue of Lincoln's opponents in

affording him silence. In this, Douglas appears to demonstrate civility by commending the crowd, but by addressing Lincoln's opponents, he is praising only his own supporters.

Douglas employed a sarcastic tone throughout the beginning of his speech. He began by expressing his satisfaction that he had convinced Lincoln of the need to refine his political positions (communicating a triumph for himself in the implication of Lincoln's recognition of his former inconsistency). He then went on to reassert Lincoln's responsibility for the Republican resolutions adopted at Kane County. He led into his answers to the questions Lincoln had posed by commenting, "I will proceed in a few moments to review the answers which he has given to these interrogatories; but in order to relieve his anxiety, I will first respond to these which he has presented to me. Mark you, he has not presented interrogatories which are or ever have received the sanction of the party with which I am, and hence he has no other foundation for them than that they are merely his interrogatories."⁹³

Douglas proceeded into a substantive portion of his speech in which he answered Lincoln's questions, supporting his arguments with some of the same principles Lincoln had employed, such as the constitutional powers of Congress and its ability to regulate territories and states, but littered his explanations with jabs at his opponent. During his explanation of why admission of Kansas should be based on population, Douglas commented, "I would like Mr. Lincoln to answer to take his own medicine. I would like him to answer his own question, and then if he differs with Trumbull let him answer Trumbull's argument on the Oregon question, instead of poking his questions at me."⁹⁴ Cheers of "right!" and "good!" came from the audience.⁹⁵

He then proceeded with a personal attack to counter Lincoln's conspiracy theory regarding the Nebraska bill, commenting, "I thought that I had chased that amendment out of Mr. Lincoln's brain at Ottawa; but it seem that it still haunts his imagination, and he is not yet satisfied. I had supposed that he would be ashamed to press that question further. He is a lawyer, and has been a member of Congress, and has occupied his time and amused you by telling you about parliamentary proceedings. He ought to have known better than to try to palm off his miserable impositions upon this intelligent audience."⁹⁶

Douglas shifted to a logical argument by showing the Nebraska bill gave full authority over the slavery issues to local authorities, but quickly switched back to attacking Lincoln personally with a comment about the Cass amendment: "He offered his amendment for the identical purpose for which Mr. Lincoln is using it, - [sic] to enable demagogues in the country to try and deceive people."⁹⁷ Douglas bitinglly asserted Chase's success, noting "he offered it...simply to make capital out of it for the stump. He expected that it would be capital for small politicians in the country, and that they would make an effort to deceive the people with it; and he was not mistaken, for Lincoln is carrying out the plan admirably."⁹⁸ Douglas then claimed that Lincoln was aware of the purposes of the Nebraska bill, stating that he would not waste anymore time arguing an exhausted issue.

In addressing Lincoln's third question (whether or not, if the Supreme Court prohibited states from excluding slavery, Douglas would submit to it), Douglas mocked Lincoln, remarking, "I am amazed that Lincoln should ask such a question." A shout of "a school boy would know better" came from the audience. "As a school boy would know better," Douglas proceeded, "gentlemen, the object of that question is to cast an

imputation upon the Supreme Court. Mr. Lincoln knows there never was but one man in America, claiming any degree of intelligence or decency, who ever for a moment pretended to that doctrine.”

Douglas mocked Lincoln’s question as outrageous, saying ”he might as well ask you, ‘Suppose Mr. Lincoln should steal a horse, would I sanction it?’” drawing laughter from the crowd.⁹⁹ He closed that subject with the personal attack, “Why, Mr. Lincoln himself would never so forget himself in his partisan feelings as to be guilty of an act of that kind.”¹⁰⁰

Douglas moved on to the Lincoln’s fourth question, addressing the role of the slavery question in acquiring new territory. He pointed out that the philosophy of the “Black Republicans”¹⁰¹ - Douglas’ derogatory term for Republicans with abolitionist views - prohibited the acquisition of any new territory permitting slavery. Douglas would go on to use the phrase “Black Republican” more than a few times in the discussion at Freeport and all the remaining debates.

Here, Douglas launched into an entertaining appeal about the need to acquire new territory, stating, “You cannot limit this great country by mere boundary lines, saying ‘Thus far shalt thou must go and no further.’ Any one of you gentlemen might as well say to his son, twelve years of age: ‘You are now big enough; you mustn’t grow any larger,’ and in order to prevent growth, put a hoop around him to keep him to his present size. What would be the result? Either the hoop must burst and be rent asunder, or the child must die. So it would be with this great nation,’.”¹⁰² The audience roared with laughter.¹⁰³

Douglas concluded his responses to Lincoln’s questions by joking, “He racked his brain so much in devising these few questions that he exhausted himself, and had not

strength enough left to invent another, but as soon as he can hold a council of his advisers, by getting Lovejoy, and Farnsworth, and Giddings, and Fred. Douglass together, he will then frame and propound the other interrogatories.”¹⁰⁴ The audience responded with raucous laughter.¹⁰⁵ According to the *Chicago Times*, Lincoln “feebly” joined the laughter, expressing his hope to soon pose three more questions in addition to the four he had already asked, making a total of seven – the number Douglas had posed to him.¹⁰⁶

Douglas added, “I have no doubt you think they are all good men – good Black Republicans,” to which much of the audience shouted “White! White!” in protest to Douglas’ label.¹⁰⁷

At this point, Douglas’ comical tone takes a sharper turn as he appeals to racist sentiments by telling a story of no apparent consequence to any argument, in which he recalled seeing Frederick Douglass being chauffeured in a carriage with a beautiful white woman. A call from the audience of “What have you to say against it?” evoked Douglas’ response of “What of it! All I have to say is this, if you Black Republicans think that the negro ought to be on a social equality with young wives and daughters, and ride in the carriage with the wife while the master of the carriage drives the team, you have a perfect right to do so.” This inflammatory comment drew laughter and cheers from the audience mixed with shouts of “White! White!”¹⁰⁸

Douglas then redirected his attack back to his opponent, claiming that Frederick Douglass was at that time canvassing the state on behalf of Lincoln, “who is the champion of the black man’s party.”¹⁰⁹ To the mixed emotions of the audience, Douglas reiterated his point: “those of you who believe that the nigger is your equal, and ought to

be on an equality with you socially, politically, and legally, have a right to entertain those opinions, and of course will vote for Mr. Lincoln.”¹¹⁰

Next, Douglas shifted back to responding to Lincoln’s speech, specifically to Lincoln’s continued rejection of the Republican resolutions adopted at Kane County. Douglas ridiculed Lincoln here by poking fun at his defense of purporting Douglas’ error in recalling the location of the convention that passed the resolutions. Douglas combined humor with irrelevance by raising the Mexican-American War in his comment: “Mr. Lincoln makes a great parade of the fact that I quoted that Black Republican platform of 1854 as having been adopted at Springfield, whereas it turns out to have been adopted at other places than Springfield. Mr. Lincoln is great in the particular spots at which a thing is to be done. He thinks the platform was not adopted at the right spot, like the Mexican war, which in his opinion was unjust and infamous because the first blood was not shed at the right spot.”

From there, Douglas proceeded into a fact-based argument to prove that the resolutions at hand were indeed passed at the Republican convention in Springfield. He read to the audience a letter from the editor of the Daily Illinois State Register that cited information from the then Illinois Representative Major Thomas L. Harris that Lincoln had indeed endorsed the resolutions at Springfield.

Douglas then read the resolutions to the crowd, drawing cheers of both opposition and support, to which Douglas responded, “I am glad to find that you are more honest in your Abolitionism than your leaders.”¹¹¹ He asserted that Republicans pledged not to support any candidate who broke from those principles, to which a voice responded, “Exactly.” Douglas asked “What do you think of Mr. Lincoln who is your candidate, and

who is attempting to dodge the responsibility of this platform because it was not adopted in the right spot?”¹¹² Here, Douglas is tacitly raising the Mexican-American War again by referencing the mocking nickname of “Spotty Lincoln” that Lincoln had gained by demanding that President Polk justify the war by demonstrating the exact spot on which American blood had been shed.

At this point, Douglas increased in hostility, asserting, “I thought it was adopted in Springfield, but it turns out that it was adopted at Rockford, and when I get down into the next district, I will show you that it was the platform there, and so on until I shall nail it on the back of all the Black Republicans throughout the State.”¹¹³ To this, the audience went wild shouting “Three cheers for Douglas!” and “White! White!” One spectator shouted: “Couldn’t you modify and call it brown?” and was met with laughter.¹¹⁴

Here, Douglas shifted to the topic of the formation of the Republican Party using a combination of basis on fact and entertainment to present his argument. He began by asserting that Republicans in the Legislature aimed to dissolve the Whigs and Democrats in favor of a new abolitionist Republican Party, attempting to portray his opponent as an extremist. “We know,” Douglas said,

who the chief leaders in breaking up and destroying those two great parties were. Lincoln on the one hand and Trumbull on the other hand being disappointed politicians, and having retired and been driven by their constituents into obscurity, because of their political sins, formed a scheme to abolitionize the two parties, and lead the old line Whigs and Democrats, bound hand and foot into the abolition camp, having Fred. Douglass, and Chase, and Giddings ready to christen them whenever they brought them into the Abolition camp.¹¹⁵

At this point, Tom Turner, the Republican speaker of the Illinois legislature spoke up, affirming the resolutions as the basis for the Republican Party and in effect aiding the fact-based portion of Douglas’ argument. Turner stated, “They are our creed exactly.”¹¹⁶

Here, he is contradicting Lincoln by claiming that these resolutions represented the mainstream of the Republican Party. Lincoln based his denial of his responsibility for the resolutions on the argument that they represented the views of only a small faction of the party who later agreed to moderate their views in the interest of forming a unified platform. Still, Douglas continued with humor, commenting, “Well, now, all I have to say to Mr. Lincoln is that I don’t think there is much danger of his ever being put in a position where he will have to vote on the admission of a slave State. I propose, out of mere kindness, to relieve him of the necessity of that vote.”¹¹⁷ Laughter erupted in the audience.¹¹⁸

Douglas continued his portrayal of Lincoln as an abolitionist operative, “decoy duck”¹¹⁹ who set out to decoy the wild ducks (Democrats and Whigs) into the abolitionist net with purpose of electing a “Black Republican Legislature.”¹²⁰ Turner then again helped Douglas’ fact-based argument by stating that he, in supporting the resolutions, was representative of the Republican Party.

Douglas then incorporated a conspiracy theory of his own, claiming that Lincoln and Trumbull, after abolitionizing the parties, hoped to oust and replace both of Illinois’ senators, but were foiled by quarrels among themselves. Here, at his use of “Black Republican,” the crowd began to shout and stir loudly, causing Douglas to take a rather sharp turn against the audience. “I wish to remind you,” he reprimanded, “that there was not a Democrat here vulgar enough to interrupt Mr. Lincoln when he was talking. I know the shoe is pinching you when I am clenching Lincoln, and you are scared to death for the result. I have seen these men when they make appointments for joint discussion, and then the moment their man has been heard try to interrupt and prevent a fair hearing.”¹²¹

Above the shouting, he continued, “Don’t cheer; I need my whole time. Their object is to occupy it, so that I shall not go through with the evidence showing the double dealing of the Black Republican party.”¹²²

Following this brief outburst, Douglas resumed a rational appeal, reading the Republican resolutions, naming each of the state legislators who voted for or against them and noting the strict party-line split. He proceeded to point out that with few exceptions, each of those who favored the resolutions supported Lincoln for the U.S. Senate. He called attention to the inconsistency between that fact and Lincoln’s current renouncement of the platform, stating, “There is no escape for Lincoln on this pledge,” and asking, “Why can’t he speak out and say what he is for, and what he will do?”¹²³ Douglas concluded humorously, “He wouldn’t like to put himself in a position where he would have to vote either way. I pray you now, don’t put him in a position to embarrass him so much.”¹²⁴

From here, Douglas finished his speech with a logical argument emphasizing contradictions between Lincoln and the Republican Party as well as among Lincoln’s ideological positions at various points. Douglas cites Lincoln’s “House Divided” speech, asking how Lincoln could vote for the admission of a slave state if it meant the dissolution of the Union. The audience reacts with laughter throughout the argument.

Douglas next began to boast of his virtues in comparison with Lincoln, asserting he knew “that the God of Heaven would smile upon me if I was faithful in performance of my duty.”¹²⁵ He juxtaposed his virtue with Lincoln’s attempts to smear the president and Supreme Court with unfounded theories Lincoln knew were false. Douglas reasserted

his own theory of abolitionist elements unifying against him and finished with an avowal to uphold the Constitution and assurance of Lincoln's ill intentions toward him.

Lincoln's Rejoinder

Lincoln began his thirty-minute rejoinder in defense of his supporters by attacking Douglas' campaign style. "The first thing that I think of saying to you," Lincoln began, "is a word in regard to Judge Douglas' declaration about vulgarity and blackguardism in the crowd – that no such thing was shown by any democrat while I was speaking. Now, I only want...to say that while I was speaking I used no vulgarity of blackguardism toward any democrats,"¹²⁶ in effect, criticizing Douglas for his personal attacks. The crowd responded with cheers.¹²⁷

Lincoln then commenced a logic-based argument, defending himself for contradicting the resolutions in question that passed by a portion of the Republican Party, by affirming, "that many of the resolutions are at variance with the position which I have assumed here to-day."¹²⁸ The crowd responded with laughter and confusion as Lincoln continued, "Let us talk reasonably about it, that is all I ask upon the subject, that we talk reasonable and rationally about it."¹²⁹

Lincoln went on to explain that many opposed Kansas-Nebraska in varying degrees out of fear it would spur the spread of slavery. He noted that groups joined regionally to pass resolutions addressing the issue. At the state convention, Lincoln says, these factions came together to agree upon a set of principles for the state party, with some agreeing to moderate their positions in order to form consensus.

Lincoln then spoke of his “disgust” at Douglas’ attempt to misconstrue his House Divided speech, expressing his hope that the audience will read the speech, “to see whether there really be any of those bugaboos which Judge Douglas interestedly sees.”¹³⁰

Lincoln attempted to reconcile his positions on admission of slave states with his House Divided speech, noting that he would not view the admission of a slave state as permanently fixing the nation as divided. He noted, “The Judge is very great in working up this quibble argument,” sending the crowd into cheers.¹³¹

He then raised again the issue of Douglas’ opposition to the Lecompton constitution – a proposed constitution for Kansas that would have supported the existence of slavery, but was rejected by referendum of the people of Kansas. Lincoln provided evidence in the form of newspaper articles and speeches to portray Douglas as inconsistent in his position. He finished by stating, “The Judge’s eye is further south now – it was decidedly north then. His hope was very much then upon the idea of the evisceration of the black republican party, and the turning of it and making it the tail of his new kite...He soon found that these despised black republicans understood and appreciated him better than that, and he has found that his security depends upon his crawling back into the ranks of the democratic party.”¹³²

It is apparent that Lincoln and Douglas used a variety of strategies in appealing to their audiences. They shifted back and forth between substantive arguments and personal attacks. Lincoln and Douglas could cite credible constitutional evidence and in the next sentence use inflammatory language toward the opponent. Some comments were clearly intended for emotional appeal to the audience’s partisanship, while others were based on logic and reason.

III. Print News Coverage

Only a few decades before the Lincoln-Douglas debates, reporting of political speeches by mainstream media outlets was unheard of, with politicians preferring to circulate their positions through the more friendly medium of party communications. In some instances, politicians refused to commence speeches until intruding reporters were ousted. Often having tailored their words to appeal to those present, politicians deemed journalists impudent and objectionable. The Lincoln Douglas debates, however, marked a shift in reporting on candidate speeches, and though thousands viewed one or more debates live, the majority of Illinois residents experienced the political showdowns through the lens of the heavily partisan press of the mid-nineteenth century.¹³³

This section examines print news coverage in an attempt to determine how much of print was devoted to providing substantive analysis of the debates and how much to empty partisan promotion and entertainment. It analyzes the Illinois print media coverage of the Freeport debate, the same debate this study analyzed in terms of speech content. This section is a test of Postman's larger thesis -- that the dominance of print allowed for a higher level of public discourse. By analyzing the print news coverage in an era when that medium dominated, one can assess whether the medium lives up to Postman's expectations in providing valuable political information to readers.

The vast majority of print news coverage of Freeport focused on describing the celebrations and processions surrounding the debates. All of the information in the previous section was gathered from newspapers' detailed accounts of the festivities. The papers gave crowd estimates, showcased the witty slogans on banners supporting their

candidate, and told of gatherings before and after the debates. Most articles that provided information about the debates included a lengthy introduction describing the celebrations.

Next to the celebrations, most of the reporting on the speeches analyzed the debate in terms of victory and defeat, always assuring readers of the triumph of each paper's favored candidate. In doing this, the reporters most often used speaking style and consistency as evidence. Each paper assured readers of the consistency and eloquence of their own candidate, while portraying the opponent as inconsistent and impolite.

For example, the *Weekly North-Western Gazette* called Lincoln, "the same whole-souled man, the same honest, staunch, far-reaching statesman, the same perfect gentleman in heart and bearing that he has always been."¹³⁴ It noted, "No man heard Mr. LINCOLN who did not honor him for his frank integrity, his commanding talents, his high manly purposes, and patriotic heart. He made new friends, and many of them at Freeport, and no enemies. Whether Judge DOUGLAS did the same, we leave to be inferred from the results of the election on the first day of next November."¹³⁵

Likewise, the pro-Lincoln *Republican and Telegraph* noted, "We do not remember of hearing the sophistry and mis-statements of a speaker more fully and clearly spread out before an audience than did Lincoln show up those of Douglas in his rejoinder. – His sarcasm was, in the half hour that we heard him, exceedingly fine and polished, though severe," while, "Douglas was coarse, blustering and insulting in his language."¹³⁶

The *Chicago Daily Press and Tribune* said of Douglas, "He threw mud in great handfuls. So disgusting was his language that the people on the ground peremptorily hushed him up, three times." The paper went on to describe one section of his speech as "a copious volley of phrases from the cock-pit."¹³⁷

In contrast, the pro-Douglas *Daily Illinois State Register* said that Lincoln “was only involved deeper in the intricate mazes of his inconsistency.”¹³⁸ It noted that, “He seems to have learned a ‘Yankee trick’ during his northern tour – of asking questions in response to those put to him. In this he was foiled.”¹³⁹

The *Weekly North-Western Gazette* provided the following comparison of the candidates,

Lincoln is calm in debate; Douglas raves; Lincoln's logic is unassailable; Douglas abounds in sophistry, and in specious conclusions from false premises; and Lincoln is always a thorough gentleman, while Douglas, in debate, often descends to appear a bully. Douglas may, for a single moment, appear to gain an advantage, but it is never stable. Lincoln makes his points carefully and closely, and they are convincing. Douglas' flow of words may excite temporary admiration; Lincoln's arguments are remembered. Lincoln, always cool, addresses himself to the sober reason of the thoughtful freemen, Douglas, who is very often in a passion, addresses himself to the baser passions of unthinking minds.¹⁴⁰

Some newspapers were more outrageous in their assessments of victory than others. For instance, the pro-Douglas *Freeport Weekly Bulletin* commented,

Mr. Lincoln had the opening speech, and consumed his time in vain attempts to extricate himself from the unpleasant position in which Judge Douglas' arguments had placed him at Ottawa, and some evasive answers to the questions the Judge had there put to him. As in other days, when he was engaged in furnishing aid and comfort to the enemies of his country, he was persistent in his calls for the particular "spot" at which certain resolutions had been adopted, as though that would relieve him or his party of any responsibility in the premises. His answers to the questions which Mr. Douglas had propounded took him clear off the Republican platform, as understood in this locality. He reiterated the stale and ridiculous charge that Judge Douglas, in his introduction of the Kansas-Nebraska Bill, was party to a conspiracy to make slavery national. Taken as a whole, his speech was made up of lame and impotent conclusions, and came very far short of the expectations of his friends. Judged by the effect of his effort on Friday last, we think the Democratic party would be greatly benefitted to have Mr. Lincoln make a speech here each week between this and the election.¹⁴¹

The pro-Lincoln *Galesburg Semi-Weekly Democrat* noted, “Mr. Lincoln in his reply utterly demolished Mr. Douglas, and exposed his sophisms, his double dealing, and his cowardice so fully, that the friends of Douglas slunk away--glad the day was over, sorry it had ever come.”¹⁴²

Similarly, the *Rockford Republican* said of Douglas,

It is hard matter to ride two ponies at a time, especially when those ponies are going at the top of their speed in opposite directions -- and thus it is, that Mr. Douglas finds it exceedingly difficult to keep astride of his Northern hobby -- *Squatter-Sovereignty* -- and at the same time keep a tight reign upon the neck of the Southern nag presented him by Chief Justice Taney [who authored the Dred Scott decision].¹⁴³

In addition to assessments of victory and defeat, newspapers spent significant time recounting the behavior of the candidates. The *Freeport Journal* noted, derided Douglas’ manners, noting, “During the whole of Mr. Lincoln’s opening speech...Mr. Douglas sat near him smoking a cigar, and puffing out its fumes for the benefit of the Speaker and the Ladies who were so unfortunate as to be in the immediate vicinity of this ‘Shortboy Senator.’ Take this in connection with the ridiculous exhibition he made of himself when in his ‘mad’ fit, and what a specimen does he afford of an American Statesman!”¹⁴⁴ The *Chicago Times* reported, “during the delivery of Douglas’ speech, Lincoln was very uneasy; he could not sit still, nor would his limbs sustain him while standing. He was shivering, quaking, trembling, and his agony during the last fifteen minutes of Judge Douglas’ speech was positively painful to the crowd who witnessed his behavior.”¹⁴⁵

In addition to candidate behavior, newspapers dedicated significant space to condemning the behavior of the opposition audience members as well. After Freeport, the *Chicago Times* noted that in contrast to the quiet, attentive Democrats in the audience, the

Republicans offered no respect to Douglas. One supporter, they pointed out saw fit to hurl a melon, which hit Douglas in the shoulder. The paper concluded, “The Black Republicans evidently intend to be consistent in one thing – and for that one thing, unfortunately, they have fixed on ruffianism.” They explained the melon incident by saying, “the mortification of the Black Republicans was so overwhelming, that it only found relief in violence towards the man who occasioned it.”¹⁴⁶ The *Freeport Weekly Journal* reported, “Excepting the unmanly demonstrations made by some Republicans, (whose partisan feelings were stronger than their sense of good manners,) while Judge Douglas was speaking, the utmost decorum was manifested throughout the discussion.”¹⁴⁷

Newspapers employed similar tactics to the candidates in painting the opponent as extreme. For example, the *Freeport Weekly Bulletin* said that Lincoln had

gone off into the wildest stretches of Abolitionism,”¹⁴⁸ noting that, “there ought to be no ground for doubt in the minds of all those who love the Union; of all those who think its preservation an object of much greater moment than the election of a man whose distempered brain is full of strange fancies, and who is the willing Representative of a party which is full of hatred of fifteen at least of the States of the confederacy, and would destroy it rather than not succeed in their desire to obtain complete control of the General Government. Let Illinois be saved from the grasp of these desperate politicians, *and the Union is safe.*”¹⁴⁹

Papers also used descriptions of the debaters’ appearances to promote their candidates. After the Freeport debate, the pro-Lincoln *Weekly North-Western Gazette* noted, “One is tall and slim; the other short and somewhat inclined to chunkiness.”¹⁵⁰

The *Freeport Weekly Bulletin* provided a more detailed description, noting:

Lincoln's legs extending far beyond the length of any carriage to be found in Freeport, a large Pennsylvania wagon, old style, the dimensions of which we cannot give accurately at present, was procured to convey him to the stand erected to speak from. Mr. L. was placed in or near the rear of

the box on the wagon, and his legs extended forward several feet, and resembled the skeleton of some greyhound. He is as queer looking as he is queer spoken. If Barnum could procure him in the style he so beautifully represented on his way to the stand from the Brewster House, then would Mr. L.'s fortune soon be made, for a more ridiculous and laughable show has never been presented to the American people. Judge DOUGLAS, like a brave soldier, firmly footed his way to the stand, where he demolished Lincoln's platform, as endorsed by the Republicans present at the discussion, so effectually, that Lincoln refused to stand fairly and squarely upon it.¹⁵¹

The papers provided some substantive analysis of the candidates' speeches, most of which served to point out contradictions made by the opposing candidate. The *Alton Weekly Courier*, after Freeport, printed Douglas' Freeport speech alongside a speech he had previously made in Chicago and pointed out specifically where his policy positions differed.¹⁵² The *Republican and Telegraph* made similar points, though without printing the speeches verbatim.¹⁵³ Even so, the substantive coverage was enthusiastically partisan. For instance, the *Quincy Daily Whig and Republican* also printed a partial transcript of the debate, noting Douglas' contradictions with earlier statements. The paper stated, "As the canvass progresses, Mr. Douglas, at every step, becomes more and more entangled in inconsistencies and contradictions. The "Russian Bear" has been caught in the net of his own weaving, whose warp is personal ambition, and whose woof is falsehood and deceit."¹⁵⁴

The *Freeport Weekly Bulletin* quoted Lincoln's position on the admission of slave states, noting its incongruence with the platform of the Republican Party. The paper commented, "How are Republicans to reconcile this with their argument that only after admission as a free state could the people of the Territory north of that line make it slave? These are questions we wish you Republicans to answer among yourselves, and then let us all hear the result."¹⁵⁵

Most stories were a combination of information on candidates' positions and partisan promotion. The pro-Lincoln *Republican and Telegraph* stated,

Mr. Lincoln effectually answered the interrogatories put to him at Ottawa by Mr. Douglas. Those questions, on which the Little Giant boasted he would "trot" Abe down into Egypt, were answered in a manner which showed that Lincoln now stands on the same platform which Clay, Jefferson, Jay, Webster, and the founders of our government, stood. He did not wish to interfere with slavery in the states but protected against its farther extension.¹⁵⁶

The story continued,

Mr. Lincoln put a few questions to his opponent which caused the Little Giant to turn another complete political summerset. The question whether Douglas would acquiesce in a decision of the supreme court that by virtue of the Constitution slavery existed in the states as well as territories, and could not, therefore, be abolished by the people? That was a clincher for Mr. Douglas and he could not answer it with a plain *yes* or *no*; but evaded the interrogatory by saying that such a decision from the Supreme Court of the United States was impossible!¹⁵⁷

The headlines and subheads of articles about the debates reveal the attitudes of the newspapers and emphasis of the stories. Pro-Douglas newspapers' headlines proclaimed, "Dead Lion Ahead!!"¹⁵⁸ and "Beauties of Black Republicanism — Lincoln's Friends Indorse Fred Douglas [sic] and Negro Equality."¹⁵⁹ Pro-Lincoln newspapers used titles/subtitles of "Lincoln Trots Douglas Out,"¹⁶⁰ "Lincoln Tumbles Him All Over Stephenson County,"¹⁶¹ "Lincoln Defines his Position--The Dodger Dodges--The Little Giant Cornered,"¹⁶² "Stephen Arnold Douglas – The Truth Is Not in Him,"¹⁶³ and "Douglas' New Dodge."¹⁶⁴ Here, the emphasis clearly rests on assessing victory and defeat and calling the opponent's contradictions to readers' attention.

At times, however, the papers, in their partisanship, appeared to clearly contradict the statements made at the debate. The pro-Douglas *Jacksonville Sentinel*, for example claimed that, "the republicans stood up openly for Fred Douglas [sic] and negro

equality,” commenting, “If the dose is not sufficient to gag any man who is not a bred-in-the-bone abolitionist, we freely give him over to the kind care of Fred Douglas and Lincoln.”¹⁶⁵ The *Sentinel*, instead of providing evidence from Lincoln’s speech that he supported Frederick Douglass and abolitionism, quoted Stephen Douglas claiming that Lincoln held this position.

Several papers, including the *Quincy Daily Whig and Republican*, the *Alton Weekly Courier*, and the *Galesburg Semi-Weekly Democrat* provided synopses of the debates or partial transcripts. The *Weekly North-Western Gazette*, the *Jacksonville Sentinel*, and the *Galesburg Semi-Weekly Democrat* provided synopses. The *Quincy Daily Whig and Republican*, the *Alton Weekly Courier* and the *Weekly Belleville Advocate* simplified the debates for readers by listing interrogatories posed by the candidates next to the opponent’s answers. These kinds of stories, however, still managed to include partisan editorial comments. For instance, referring to Douglas, the *Alton Weekly Courier* said “He then repeated his trashy nonsense...”¹⁶⁶ to introduce Douglas’ argument. Still, the summaries did, for the most part, factually relay the candidates’ arguments.

The pro-Douglas *Freeport Weekly Bulletin* reported the pro-Lincoln *Chicago Journal* had claimed, “Douglas himself admitted on the stand in this city that he had made a mistake.” The Bulletin responded by saying, “So says the editor of the *Journal* in reference to the Springfield resolution, though he was on the stand, and *knows* that Judge Douglas did *not* make any such admission. What the editor expects to gain by such wilful [sic] perversions of the truth, is more than we can tell.”¹⁶⁷ The *Journal* here was referring to Douglas’ admission that he may have misnamed the place at which the set of debated

Republican resolutions were passed. The *Bulletin* went on to say that the place of passage was irrelevant, and concluded by asking, “Does the editor of the *Journal*, and the Republican party endorse that platform, and those resolutions?”¹⁶⁸

A number of newspapers, including the *Freeport Weekly Bulletin*, the *Chicago Daily Press and Tribune*, and the *Daily Illinois State Register* printed complete transcripts of the debate, allowing the readers to “judge for themselves as to the merits of the debates, which afford their own comment.”¹⁶⁹ The pro-Lincoln *Illinois State Journal*, printed only its own candidate’s speeches. The veracity of the transcripts, however, is disputed. Papers often questioned the integrity of opposition parties’ reporting on the debates. After the Freeport debate, the pro-Democrat *Missouri Republican* noted

Crowds which were heretofore great are now greater. If this displeases our friends of the Republican party, they can feel that it is to a great extent their own fault, whereas good Democrats may laugh, for the falsehoods and false reports which of late they have sent floating thick through the air, until there is a very murkiness of disorder around the districts infested by their evil cogitations, are commencing like curses and chickens come home to roost. These lying reports have been devised by the Republican committee, which meets every evening at the office of the Press and Tribune for the purpose of squaring up the reports sent in by Lincoln’s hired reporters, and to see that they tell the tale of his progress as Republican leaders can best afford to let the readers of their circulating mediums peruse them.¹⁷⁰

The *Freeport Weekly Bulletin* made a similar argument, stating,

To-day we publish the speeches made by Douglas and Lincoln, in Freeport, Aug. 27, 1858, having no fears of the result of an examination of them by our readers. That Douglas used up Lincoln, no sane man, after reading the speeches, will deny. If Republican papers, and among them the ‘Equalizing’ *Journal*, were of opinion that Douglas was used up in the date, why did they not publish this gentleman’s speech side by side with Lincoln’s? They dare not – they had no faith in what they said. In fact, they knew they falsified the record, and that Lincoln could not make even a passable showing with Douglas. Has the *Journal* sufficient courage to publish Judge Douglas’s speech? We will see.¹⁷¹

The *Daily Illinois State Register* noted, We invite the special attention of our readers to Lincoln's speech and Douglas' reply. We suggest to them to lay away the paper for future reference. The [Chicago] Journal will, probably, keep this debate from its readers, as it did the Ottawa debate. The editors prefer giving their lying versions of the contest between the two men to the verbatim report of their debates. Keep the debate by you, to refute the lies and misrepresentations in regard to it which the lying organs of Lincoln will put forth.¹⁷²

The *Jacksonville Sentinel* introduced their partial transcript of Lincoln's speech by stating:

In the recent discussion between Douglas and Lincoln at Freeport, certain questions were arranged by Lincoln's abolition body guard to be propounded by Lincoln to Douglas, as an offset to the questions presented to Lincoln by Douglas at Ottawa. These questions were got up with all the ingenuity and cunning that Lincoln's guardian committee could command, and were regarded by Lovejoy, Bross & Co., as stunners. As the republicans of this region have been busy in misrepresenting the manner in which Mr. Douglas answered these questions, we subjoin that part of the discussion that embodies Lincoln's interrogatories and Douglas' answers.¹⁷³

Some of the unrestricted favoritism displayed by newspapers can be attributed to the personal relationships between the candidates and newspaper editors, with 19th century stakeholders in politics and journalism more intertwined than those in modern times. Douglas maintained close alliances with the *Illinois State Register*'s Charles Lanphier as well as the staff of the *Chicago Times*, in which Douglas had made a significant financial investment. Douglas, looking for media endorsements, had helped to establish the Times, after the Senator's introduction of the Kansas-Nebraska Act caused Chicago's daily *The Democrat* to withdraw support.¹⁷⁴

Lincoln maintained similar friendships with Republican media figures, including Joseph Medill, editor of the Chicago Tribune and a staunch Lincoln supporter who is partially credited for Lincoln's rise to stardom. Medill had once attempted to cover

Lincoln's address to the 1855 Illinois Republican Convention, but instead joined the cheering and clapping, forgetting to take notes. In their zealous frenzy, several of Medill's Republican colleagues also forgot to make record of Lincoln's words, effectively deeming that oration, "Lincoln's lost speech." It is also widely believed that it was Medill who initially suggested the name "Republican" for the new party.¹⁷⁵

Overall, the newspapers' style seemed to match the atmosphere of the debates. The papers provided information on the candidates' position alongside entertaining rebukes of the opponent's arguments, speaking style, appearance, or behavior. Readers received a combination of information and amusement, just as they would by attending the debates.

And though the papers clearly displayed their partisan alliances, editorial assessments came only in the form of proclaiming victory for each paper's preferred candidate and by pointing out contradictions made by the opponents. Nowhere does a journalist provide an in-depth assessment of the merits of either candidate's arguments. The coverage promotes the papers' preferred candidates in a considerably superficial manner.

Discussion

This study assessed the level of discourse provided to the Illinois public by the Lincoln Douglas debates, using Neil Postman's argument in *Amusing Ourselves to Death* as a framework for the evaluation. It set forth three hypotheses that are contradictions to Postman's exultation of the debates. The hypotheses were as follows:

1. Lincoln and Douglas employed invalid claims, personal attacks, and entertaining and emotional appeals that largely overshadowed substantive portions of their arguments.
2. The environment of the debates created an atmosphere of diversion rather than education, attracting audiences that sought entertainment rather than civic edification.
3. Print newspaper coverage of the debates focused on promoting candidates at the expense of increasing understanding of the issues covered by Lincoln and Douglas.

The evaluation of the text of the Freeport debate, which tested the first hypothesis, demonstrated that Lincoln and Douglas used a combination of substantive arguments, personal attacks, and entertaining passages throughout the course of the debate. They presented both substantiated and unsubstantiated claims, arguments based on fact and based on emotion.

Both contenders frequently referenced relevant texts and events – opponents' speeches, resolutions, newspaper articles – in proving their points. On one hand, both

Lincoln and Douglas provided arguments that informed the audience thoroughly on their positions, citing the Constitution and previous legislative acts in support of their points. At times, the candidates even admitted their lack of knowledge on a subject – a practice unusual in today’s political atmosphere. In this, they displayed rationality and honesty.

These aspects of the debates may support Postman’s argument, but these displays of rationality are not all that transpired. Both candidates devoted a significant portion of their time to espousing arguments that did not benefit the audience in any way other than to inflame their partisan enthusiasm. Douglas’ cries of “Black Republican” and racial fear did not contribute to a higher level of discourse. He attempted to mislead the audience with his story about black men riding in carriages with white women, frightening listeners with exaggerations of the consequences of Lincoln’s positions. In addition, both candidates made unsubstantiated claims and advanced conspiracy theories. These arguments were not logical or supported by evidence as Postman claimed. They were false, outrageous statements that painted the opponent in an inaccurate light, misinforming listeners, but also entertaining them – the function for which Postman criticizes television.

In contradiction to Postman’s portrayal of the debates as far superior to discussions of the television age, the evaluation showed that portions of the debate actually displayed a striking resemblance to modern debate. For instance, Lincoln’s mocking of Douglas at the beginning of his opening statements, in which he states that he will answer Douglas’ questions on the condition that Douglas answer his own, stating, “I shall make no objection to the judge saying ‘yes,’ or ‘no’ right now, or, if it suits him, to remain silent. I pause for a moment to see how it will be. Well I suppose that I may

assume that the judge chooses to remain silent.” This recalls one 1984 vice presidential candidate Walter Mondale in his televised debate with opponent Gary Hart. Mondale referenced a popular commercial, asking “Where’s the beef?” in reference to Hart’s campaign for “new ideas,” which Mondale portrayed as lacking in substance. The audience roared with laughter.¹⁷⁶ Much like in 1858, this most catchy comment of the debate was frequently quoted in media.

In addition, each candidate repeatedly tried to portray his opponent as an extremist, as do modern candidates. Douglas used the term, “Black Republican,” painting Lincoln as an advocate of full racial equality, while Lincoln portrayed Douglas as an unrelenting advocate of slavery. Both attempted to associate their opponent with out-groups, representing their beliefs as incongruent with the mainstream. These strategies are reminiscent of the portrayal of Barry Goldwater as warmonger in 1964 and John Kerry as Massachusetts liberal in 2004.

Furthermore, the candidates spent a huge portion of their time on subjects that were trivial. The question of whether Lincoln should be held responsible for a certain set of Republican resolutions dominated the debate. Lincoln claimed that the resolutions represented only a more liberal faction of the Illinois Republican party, while Douglas claimed that the resolutions were representative of the views of the mainstream of the party.

This caused much of the debates to be consumed not with expression of the candidates’ stances on issues, but with this quarrel over what was and was not previously said. At the beginning of the debate, when answering Douglas interrogatories, Lincoln even points out that he is not necessarily stating his views, but only what he is “pledged

to.” That is, he gives statements regarding what he has said in the past, but avoids committing to specific positions on policy. So, even though candidates did use fact-based arguments, the subject of those arguments had been exhausted to the point of irrelevance.

At one point, the Republican speaker of the assembly stood up to express his own views, which were contradictory to those of his party’s candidate, Lincoln. Lincoln had spent much of the debate attempting to prove that his party affiliation did not make him party to the resolutions. Tom Turner, the Republican speaker then spoke out during Douglas’ speech, asserting that the resolutions did indeed represent the mainstream of the Republican Party. This revealed the possibility that Lincoln may have been attempting to manipulate the crowd in claiming the irrelevance of the resolutions. In addition, the episode of Turner speaking out during Douglas’ speech and Douglas responding displayed a breach of formality lacking in modern debate.

Significant is that the candidates appeared at the debate for the purpose of explaining their positions on the issues. Why, if the debates were oriented toward the political education of the audiences, did the candidates not simply explain their positions and proceed to the next set of issues? Instead, Douglas felt it necessary to stifle the discussion by repeatedly returning to his portrayal of Lincoln as the 1858 version of a “flip-flop.” This tactic contributed nothing to the explanation of pertinent issues. Both candidates and media exhausted the relevance of this apparent contradiction by Lincoln until its discussion served no other purpose than a quarreling point between Democrats and Republicans. Even national media at the time of the debates criticized this squabbling. The *New York Herald* commented, “From Lincoln to Douglas, from Douglas to Lincoln, their discussions have degenerated into the merest twaddle upon quibbles,

‘Forgeries,’ falsehoods, and mutual recriminations of the most vulgar sort,” and noted they had “exhausted their field of legitimate debate.”¹⁷⁷

The Cincinnati newspaper *The Commercial* was even harsher, stating:

While there is much, in the contest now going on, between Messrs. Lincoln and Douglas in the State of Illinois, that is calculated to excite feelings of curiosity, there is very little, either in its vicissitudes or its prospects, that merits much attention, or that can be esteemed as of interest to the public, or calculated to add to the reputation of the parties. Few debates less dignified in their external manifestations or containing so little that was worthy to be remembered, have fallen under our observation; and it is scarcely probable that this one will come to an end and not leave both parties in a worse condition, in the esteem of the judicious, than they were in the beginning. Falsehood and personal vituperation are among the most common of the offenses committed, upon one side at least, if not upon both; while, throughout the whole, we find fallacy usurping the place of principle, and the merest sophistry offered, and it would seem received, as worthy substitute for argument. In short, the reports represent the debate to be little more than a strife for victory between two political pettifoggers, neither of whom occupies a doctrinal position, that he can sustain against a serious attack; while each is only able to continue in the field, through the weaknesses of his adversary.¹⁷⁸

All in all, the debates provided listeners with some pertinent information, accompanied by irrelevant banter. That is, the audience received a simplified level of political education along with entertainment – very similar to that provided by modern television debate.

Postman uses the content of the debates to make assumptions about the spectators. For instance, the candidates often referred to arguments and claims made in the previous debate, Supreme Court decisions, or debates in Congress. Postman uses this in his case for the intellect of the audience, stating, “The Lincoln-Douglas audience apparently had a considerable grasp of the issues being debated, including knowledge of historical events and complex political matters.”¹⁷⁹ Postman claims that the debaters surely would not

have used such references unless they assumed the audience capable of understanding them.

This point, however, is not conclusive. The section of this study assessing the content of the Freeport debate showed that the audience provided frequent shouts and applause in response to the statements of Lincoln and Douglas. During the Freeport debate, one enthusiastic audience member even hurled a melon at Douglas. Naturally, biting attacks and inflammatory comments by both speakers evoked the most fervent response from the audience. Yet, the crowd shouted and laughed even during logical, substantive, arguably humorless portions of the discussion.

This study also assessed the atmospheres of the debates in order to put the audiences' experiences into context and to make inferences about the purposes of those audiences. Evaluation of the atmosphere attempted to determine what kind of audiences would be attracted to such events and to what extent they were able to gain political enlightenment from their experience.

The data on atmosphere established that the town squares in which these events took place were greatly crowded, at times even causing injury among attendees. Lincoln and Douglas most often stood upon stands or piles of lumber set up temporarily for the event, which did not provide an adequate view to the thousands of people present. This crowding in combination with shouts and cheering made for considerable noise volume. These distractions were sometimes compounded by harsh weather conditions like wind, rain, and dust storms, making seeing and hearing even more difficult. In addition, microphones were unavailable to compensate for these factors. Taking all of this into account, it would appear that audiences had a difficult time seeing or hearing the

candidates. The assessment begs the question: is it truly possible that thousands of people crowded into a square listening to the unamplified voices of two men did, in the midst of clamor, commotion, and shouting, recall their previous knowledge of policy in order to apply it to the current debate and rationally process the information?

More likely is that the content of the speeches mattered less to audiences than Postman claims. These audiences, as evidenced from their processions, parades, and demonstrations, were partisan enthusiasts. They attended the debates for the purpose of supporting their candidates, rather than to rationally ingest the policy positions of both candidates in the interest of making an informed decision.

In any case, the majority of attendees had been relieved of the burden of making a decision at all. In 1858, only white males possessed the right to vote. The women and African Americans among the crowd had no guise of practicality in their attendance. Even eligible voters could support Lincoln or Douglas only by proxy, in voting for their respective party's candidates for the state assembly. The 17th amendment, allowing for the selection of senators by popular vote, was not ratified until 55 years later.

Who then were these audience members? Or as Postman says, "What kind of audience was this? Who were these people who could so cheerfully accommodate themselves to seven hours of oratory?"¹⁸⁰ Postman says, "These were people who regarded such events as essential to their political education, who took them to be an integral part of their social lives, and who were quite accustomed to extended oratorical performances."

Postman is correct in that the debates were integral to the social lives of Illinois residents in the 1850s. They were their social lives. Where people today have a seven-

game World Series, those in 1858 had a seven matchup set of debates. The modern-day football flag is the descendant of the political banner. Politics was entertainment. It was Amusement.

Consequently, the evidence concerning the atmosphere of the debates provides support for the second hypothesis, that the environment of the debates created an atmosphere of diversion rather than education, attracting audiences that sought entertainment rather than civic edification. It is true that one seeking explication on the issues of the day would have their best chance to learn about the candidates at the debates. It is also true that one seeking a parade, procession or shouting match also found the debates suited to their desires.

It is possible that the same audiences who marched in parades, waved banners, and shouted and hurraed for their candidate during the debate did indeed wish to learn more about pertinent issues. Accounts of their activities before and after the debates, however, demonstrate that they did indeed seek entertainment in their attendance of these events. They did not, as Postman would suggest, spend the debates seriously pondering the words of the candidates. They shouted back. They threw fruit.

This study also evaluated print news coverage of Lincoln and Douglas at Freeport, showing it to have fallen short of Postman's lofty portrayal of that medium. Postman's book glorifies the print medium for the higher level of discourse it afforded the public in an era when it dominated. As noted in the previous section, however, print news coverage focused primarily on assuring readers of the oratorical victory of a certain paper's preferred candidate. They did provide information useful to readers in providing full or partial transcripts or synopses, though the veracity of these accounts has been

questioned. As seen from the back-and-forth quarrels between newspapers, these transcripts varied between papers and may have been influenced by partisan biases, preventing the impartial reader from any assurance of objective information.

The assessment of print media serves as this study's central test of Postman's argument, as the sample for analysis *is* print. By this test, the coverage seems to have failed in fulfilling the need for the elaboration that may have been lost among the cheering, banners, and time limits of the debates. Instead of affording those enthusiastic partisans a greater understanding of the issues, newspapers matched the unrestrained partisanship of supporters with even greater fervor. Those who experienced the debates through the pages of Illinois newspapers shared a similar experience with those who attended, save for the crowds and weather. Where reporters could have provided analysis of the topics spoken of by Lincoln and Douglas, they served as cheerleaders for their preferred candidate. Where they could have verified or refuted the claims of the debaters, they emptily extolled their own candidate while deriding the opponent. Newspapers failed to explore and provide additional information about the issues of the election. Assessments of candidate's appearances and audience behavior did not contribute to readers' political education but only reinforced the bias of partisan readers.

The newspapers served the primary purpose of entertaining their readers. By promoting their candidates and deriding the opponent with inflammatory language, papers allowed those not present to experience the excitement of the debates. Also serving this purpose were the detailed descriptions of the celebrations and processions surrounding the discussions. Naturally, descriptions of parades and processions were more easily understood and more entertaining for readers than were complex policy

positions and made coverage more amusing. Overall, newspaper coverage mirrored the events in providing a combination of entertainment and information.

Much like the introduction of television, the Lincoln Douglas debates served as a turning point in American politics, to be lamented by many in the same manner that Postman decries the rise of television. Scholars often complain that the rise of television has caused the electorate to value qualities in candidates that differ from those necessary for leadership. In this, they cite the famous Kennedy-Nixon debate of 1960, in which Kennedy was credited with victory on TV for his good looks and charm, while Nixon was credited with victory on radio for his policy positions. While these scholars often criticize television, glorifying the good old days of print, media in 1858 criticized the medium of live debate for the same reason. The *Cincinnati Gazette* wrote,

We do not quite agree with those who hold that the stump is the best way by which to judge candidates and their principles...We want good financiers in Congress. Does the capacity to make a thrilling speech afford any test of this class of men?...Washington was no speech-maker, neither was Jefferson. Had the elevation of either to a high position depended on this talent, their services as public men would have been lost to this country.¹⁸¹

Commentators in 1858 held the same animosity toward the stump that Postman directs at the television set.

So, while the Lincoln, Douglas, and their audiences were guilty of many of the same shortcomings as modern-day politicians and audiences, political observers of the two eras share common criticisms of emerging media. Refuting Postman's idealistic portrayal of the debates, however, does not necessarily diminish their merit. And the demonstration of the two eras as similar does not necessarily devalue the significance of political discourse in either one. Because, though the Lincoln Douglas debates do not

mirror Postman's glorified portrayal, they did offer value for political and public life for Illinois residents in 1858.

The candidates combined substantive arguments and empty entertainment in such a way that they were able to shift back and forth, including both in discussion of most topics. And perhaps the entertaining messages, while detracting from substantive portions, were necessary in maintaining the audiences' attention.

The evidence shows that the arena-like atmosphere of the debates did detract from the educational experience of many attendees. Speeches were delayed by shouting. Newspapers reported increased attention at Alton debate, the only one lacking parades. The processions, banners, shouting contributed nothing to citizens' knowledge of the issues pertinent to the election. They did not give audiences the opportunity to think seriously about the issues being discussed. They did, however, draw them out onto the streets and into town squares for the debate, where they listened to discussion that included at least some substantive political information.

Likewise, while rampant partisanship attracted supporters to the live discussions, newspapers catered to readers in a similar fashion. The newspaper data show that newspapers targeted specifically partisan audiences in their coverage, framing stories for the purpose of entertainment to reach readers – readers who, along with much empty candidate promotion, again gained at least some information about the contenders' positions on issues, even if it was often simplified. Papers poked fun at the unsightliness of their opponent while also providing information on their policy positions. So, much like the debates, the newspapers served the joint function of political education and

entertainment, simplifying information and making it amusing – the same function television serves for modern audiences, and for which Postman criticizes it.

This study pits Postman's glorification of the debates against a less romantic portrayal by questioning the level of discourse they provided to the Illinois public. The real value, however, offered by the Lincoln Douglas debates may not be the level of discourse, but rather its scope. Postman was right in stating that the 1858 debates represented a high point in American political participation, but he misses the mark in thinking that this was because they involved staid intellectuals pontificating on policy. Rather, they were valuable because they manifested the enthusiasm of the masses in a manner as to make people participants in political discussion. The debates benefited public discourse by making it even more public, as did the first debate to be broadcast on radio in 1948 as well as the first to be televised in 1960.¹⁸²

Postman's thesis rests on the argument that the fusion of entertainment and education – political and other -- brought about by the rise of television is detrimental to society. Noting the primary purpose of television for entertainment, he maintains that it is not mindlessness that has destroyed discourse in America, but the notion that discourse should be amusing. He blames television for making discussion shallow, stating, "Television...serves us most usefully when presenting junk-entertainment; it serves us most ill when it co-opts serious modes of discourse – news, politics, science, education, commerce, religion – and turns them into entertainment packages."¹⁸³ To Postman, the culprit is not MTV but Crossfire.

Central to this view, however, is an elitist perspective of political discourse. Postman calls for a total separation of information and diversion. He criticizes television

for simplifying discourse and making it entertaining. He would prefer debates to be completely reserved and news coverage sober and analytical. An important factor to consider, though, is the target kind of audience for this kind of medium. Intellectuals? Yes. The mass public? Most likely not. Postman, referring to the public of 1858, says that political events were “fully integrated into their social world,” and he is right. Audiences in 1858 attended the debates because they were social and because they were entertaining. Yes, they gained valuable knowledge about policy in the process, and this knowledge could have been increased in the absence of the multitude of shouting and festivities. But in the absence of processions, of cannons, of the partisan fervor that dominated the scenes, those town squares would have been considerably less crowded.

In the political context of mid-19th century politics was entertainment. People were inflamed by their partisan loyalties, cheering on their candidates as one would a favorite sporting event. The debates were not mindless. Nor were they dull. What drew thousands to pack themselves into town squares in wind and rain and sun was excited partisanship. And what the Lincoln Douglas debates offered the public was a chance to learn about public issues and to be involved in public life in a way to which they were receptive, a way that appealed to their more basic desire for entertainment.

On January 14, 2007, 149 years after the Lincoln Douglas debates, thousands of people again flocked to Illinois and gathered together in the same chilly, windy conditions as had existed at Freeport to witness a different kind of showdown about which they cared passionately. Earlier in the day, banners and flags blanketed the town. The entire nation followed the contest through the media, much as it had the contest between Lincoln and Douglas. This time, however, the crowd was divided not into

Democrats and Republicans, but into Bears and Saints. The showdown was not between senatorial candidates, but between the two football teams as they battled in the final playoff game before the Super Bowl. The modern audience, however, gained no sort of political or other education for their experience. Spectators in 1858 sought entertainment and got it, along with a dose of enlightenment about public issues. Spectators in 2007 sought entertainment and got just that.

The public can always be counted on to seek entertainment. Their quest for political knowledge, however, is less reliable. The Lincoln-Douglas debates, by combining these two elements, were successful in engaging the public. And while the stump can no longer serve the purpose of bringing popular appeal to public discourse, another medium can. Television serves a purpose similar to that of the Lincoln Douglas debates by creating mass appeal. People may watch television for entertainment, but in the process they learn a thing or two about issues of importance. In this, television benefits public discourse by packaging political information in a way that is simplified, convenient, and perhaps most important of all, amusing.

¹ McLuhan, Marshall. *Understanding Media: the extensions of man*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964, 7.

² Postman, Neil. *Amusing Ourselves to Death*. New York: Penguin, 1985, 47.

³ Randall, James, G. *Lincoln: The President*. New York: Dodd, 1945, Vol. I, 125.

⁴ Jaffa, Henry V. *Crisis of the House Divided*. Chicago: University of Chicago, 1982, 451.

⁵ Zarefsky, David. *Lincoln, Douglas, and Slavery: In the Crucible of Public Debate*. Chicago: University of Chicago, 1990.

⁶ Jamieson, Kathleen Hall. *Presidential Debates: The Challenge of Creating an Informed Electorate*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988, 45.

⁷ Schudson, Michael. *The Good Citizen*. New York: Martin Kessler, 1998, 136.

⁸ Schudson, Michael. *The Good Citizen*, 141.

⁹ Schudson, Michael. *The Good Citizen*, 142.

¹⁰ Postman, Neil. *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, 45.

¹¹ "Dred Scott Champion Pulverized." *Chicago Daily Press and Tribune*. August 23, 1858, 2.

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- ¹² “Dred Scott Champion Pulverized.” *Chicago Daily Press and Tribune*. August 23, 1858, 2.
- ¹³ “Dred Scott Champion Pulverized.” *Chicago Daily Press and Tribune*. August 23, 1858, 2.
- ¹⁴ “Dred Scott Champion Pulverized.” *Chicago Daily Press and Tribune*. August 23, 1858, 2.
- ¹⁵ “Douglas and Lincoln at Ottawa – The ‘Dead Lion’ Skins the ‘Living Dog’.” *Jacksonville Sentinel*. August 27, 1858, 2.
- ¹⁶ “Douglas and Lincoln at Ottawa – The ‘Dead Lion’ Skins the ‘Living Dog’.” *Jacksonville Sentinel*. August 27, 1858, 2.
- ¹⁷ “Speeches of Lincoln and Douglas at Freeport on the 27th.” *Rockford Republican*. August 19, 1858, 2.
- ¹⁸ “The Lincoln and Douglas Debate at Freeport.” *Alton Weekly Courier*. September 2, 1858, 1.
- ¹⁹ “The Freeport Discussion.” *Republican and Telegraph*. September 21, 1858, 2.
- ²⁰ “The Great Debate at Freeport between Lincoln and Douglas.” *Illinois State Journal*. September 1, 1858, 2.
- ²¹ “The Great Debate at Freeport between Lincoln and Douglas.” *Illinois State Journal*. September 1, 1858, 2.
- ²² “The Discussion on Friday Last.” *Freeport Weekly Bulletin*. September 2, 1858, 2.
- ²³ “Great Debate between Lincoln and Douglas at Jonesboro.” *Chicago Daily Press and Tribune*. September 16, 1858, 2.
- ²⁴ “Great Debate between Lincoln and Douglas at Jonesboro.” *Chicago Daily Press and Tribune*. September 16, 1858, 2.
- ²⁵ “Great Debate between Lincoln and Douglas at Jonesboro.” *Chicago Daily Press and Tribune*. September 16, 1858, 2.
- ²⁶ “Great Debate between Lincoln and Douglas at Jonesboro.” *Chicago Daily Press and Tribune*. September 16, 1858, 2.
- ²⁷ “Debate Between Lincoln and Douglas at Charleston.” *Chicago Daily Press and Tribune*. September 21, 1858, 2.
- ²⁸ “Not for Competition.” *Chicago Daily Press and Tribune*. September 20, 1858, 2.
- ²⁹ “The Fourth Joint Debate Between Lincoln and Douglas.” *Rockford Republican*. October 7, 1858, 1.
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