

How America Can Still Come Together

By Nancy Gibbs, *TIME*, July 18, 2024

A country born by breaking with a king inherits dissent as a birthright.

Our current crisis of division feels shocking but not sudden; the dread has been deepening for years. As our information streams fill with acid, it eats at grace and trust. Americans have always disagreed, exercised muscles of reason and passion to press for progress and a vision for the common good that we don't necessarily hold in common. Do we care more about freedom or equality? Privacy or security? Being a leader in the world or tucked in safely at home with oceans to buffer us? Figuring that out was the heart of the democratic challenge, but the information technologies allegedly designed to connect the world conspire to dismantle the values that process depends on.

The tragedy, but maybe also the opportunity, of *this* moment is that relative to past brawls, Americans are largely united on key issues. "Red states" from Arkansas to Missouri to Florida pass minimum-wage referendums by fat majorities; Kansas votes to protect access to abortion. Two-thirds of Democrats agree that the situation at the border is a problem; more than 60% of people think it's too easy to get a gun, and about 80% worry about the solvency of Social Security and Medicare.

And in one last flicker of unity, 4 out of 5 people told Georgetown University pollsters that they fear that democracy is under threat. But people disagree profoundly about the source of the threat to democracy, with voters on the left and right viewing each other as uniquely, historically dangerous—immoral, dishonest, and closed-minded.

And now comes the assassination attempt on Donald Trump. Ignorance about the shooter or his motive did not deter reckless speculation; it inflamed it. "Well of course they tried to keep him off the ballot, they tried to put him in jail, and now you see this..." campaign manager Chris LaCivita tweeted and then deleted.

Some Democrats dove into the "Blue-Anon" fever swamps as well: "The last thing America needed was sympathy for the devil but here we are," Colorado state representative Steven Woodrow tweeted, then deleted. Even as calls came in from across the spectrum for calm, prayers, perspective, peace, the furies channeled by the platforms' amoral algorithms ensured that poisonous rumors would find a million minds to infect.

Our discourse amplifies the most radical voices and alienates the rest. Social media companies must be accountable for the harms they create. They should be responsible for the content they intentionally choose to amplify and monetize.

And we are each free agents of understanding. We can seek out reliable information sources, ones that try to get at the truth and hold themselves accountable if they fail—or we can choose to soak in the comfort of confirmation. So watch the networks you normally avoid, seek out the perspectives you instinctively reject. The goal is not to change your mind; it is to widen the lens. "Understanding is a two-way street," Eleanor Roosevelt observed, and when we don't see and hear the truth of our fellow citizens, we stand little chance of appreciating all that we actually hold in common, even now.