

Stop Having Opinions

1 Introduction

Discussions of the negative cultural consequences of social media have become contrived. I won't waste your time with another think piece rehashing the ubiquitous arguments about extremism, ego-economies, and the impact of Instagram on body image. There's very little left to say, but there is one angle that I feel has been under-explored — the growth of the space of potential disagreements.

At any point in time, there are some number of topics in the “national discourse.” These are the political topics that:

1. are deemed pressing,
2. you are expected to have an opinion on,
3. and are likely to come up in conversation.

In August 2025, a few topics in the national discourse are tariff policy, the definition of “for cause” when firing a member of the Federal Reserve Board of Governors, the relationship between transgender identity and acts of mass violence, and about ten-thousand inflammatory questions about Israel and Gaza. Point two deserves focus; you likely have a strong opinion on all these topics! This is expected. You are expected to have an opinion on everything. If you don't have an opinion on each topic in the national discourse at any point in time, at best you'll get strange looks. At worst, not having an opinion on a topic is taken as evidence of moral deficiency. Maybe you're a coward — you're afraid to stake out a position in the face of disagreement. Maybe you're lazy — you don't want to read the news (or more realistically, check Twitter/TikTok). Maybe you're cold — you just want to bury your head in the sand and remain blissfully unaware to the problems plaguing your country and the world. You are desperately clinging to the ignorance that allows you to stay emotionally uninvested in people far away from you. “Your silence is telling. Silence is violence.” If you're a good person, you're engaged in the discourse.

2 The Space of Possible Disagreements

Each topic in the national discourse represents a potential disagreement. I feel that the space of potential disagreements has been greatly inflated over the last fifteen years. Unsurprisingly, mass media and social media have changed the topics in the national discourse. Seemingly small, localized incidents and issues are elevated to national conversations. At any point in time, more topics are under discussion and the topics are recycled more quickly. For example, at the peak of the COVID pandemic, every change in policy — state by state, city by city, and school district by school district — was subject to national scrutiny. Further, international topics enter the discourse. Again during COVID, trucker protests in Canada were a part of America's national discourse!

These observations hint at a dual concept to the Overton Window. The “Overton Window” refers ¹ to the range of *socially acceptable* opinions on a topic at a given point in time. Extremist positions are outside the Overton Window, and are commonly shunned. A standard physical window has two dimensions: a height and a breadth. To force an analogy, the Overton Window corresponds to the height of a physical window; it's the part that you can change by sliding. The breadth of this window also has an interpretation: the breadth of topics in the national discourse. These are

¹I always think that “Overton Window” has entered the public vernacular, but I continue to have conversations monthly where I have to define the term.

the numerous topics that you are expected to have an opinion, and your opinion is expected to be inside the height of the window. For ease, let's call this second dimension the "Overton Breadth". Many essays by people far smarter than me have convincingly argued that the mass media and social media have greatly expanded the classical Overton Window through the creation of echo chambers. I am arguing that they have also increased the Overton Breadth.

3 The Problem of Large Overton Breadth

While far from exhaustive, here are three negative consequences of having a large Overton Breadth. First, there are immediate social consequences. As mentioned before, each topic in the national discourse represents a potential point of conflict with the people around you. Moreover, each topic represents a potential disagreement with members of both your political in-group and political out-group. For your out-group, each topic is used as evidence that you and your tribe-mates are evil, morally deficient sub-humans needing to be excised from society like the malignant tumor you are. For your in-group, each topic is a chance for ideological purity testing — an opportunity to make sure you're really *in the tribe* and not being corrupted by the propaganda of the out-group. This purity testing often feels like it is subject to random and arbitrary rules. In what order should I put the Palestine Flag, the Ukrainian flag, and the Trans flag in my Twitter bio? Is the order going to be interpreted as a statement on the relative importance of stopping a trans-genocide, a Gazan-genocide, Russian imperialism? Is my personal insistence on continuing to call that hellscape "Twitter" instead of "X" to be taken as a condemnation ² of Elon Musk? If I remark that "Government should stay far, far away from private business," is that an attack on Zohran Mamdani's idea to create city-run grocery stores, or an attack on Trump's partial-nationalization of Intel? Increasing the Overton Breadth loses you friends and emboldens your enemies. We become more fractured and alienated from our communities.

Second, there are psychological consequences. Having informed opinions takes a lot of time (if you care about the "informed" qualifier) and a lot of cognitive space. Even without trying to be actually informed, just remembering ³ your in-group's positions on every topic is hard! It is a mandate for mental labor at a mass scale. You always need to be ready to share and defend your positions. You may even feel acute stress about it! The more time, energy, and cognitive resources we spend on politics, the less we have left to spend on the things that are actually important to us. Increasing the Overton Breadth makes us angrier people, less focused on providing good lives for ourselves and the people around us.

Third, there are political consequences. There's a certain lens through which political liberalism (small l) can be seen as the solution to an engineering problem concerning local and global information. Governments write and enforce policies to improve the conditions of citizens on the ground. The citizens understand their own conditions and the policies that would improve them better than a spatially and experientially distant autocrat. It is more efficient to give the citizens the ability to have input on the policies that affect them than for the autocrat to try and gain the knowledge necessary to make as good of choices as the people would make for themselves. Hence, democratic structures allow highly local knowledge to be efficiently incorporated into the decision-making process, leading to better policy outcomes than seen in autocratic structures. This argument is further strengthened by the fact that policies usually don't concern individual entities so much as the relationships between entities. As the number of nodes in a network grows, the number of edges tends to grow quadratically. Secretly this is also an argument for federalism, but that's a conversation for another time. In essence, this is Hayek's local knowledge problem applied to political systems instead of economic systems. Of course, this argument is only valid when voters are actually providing input on the topics they have local knowledge of. When local topics are entering the national discourse, those voices with actual local knowledge are drowned out by the sea of screaming fools who only have positions out of necessity. Increasing Overton Breadth leads to worse policy outcomes.

²The answer is "no," by the way. Twitter was just such a great brand identity that I continue to hope Elon will come to his senses and revert back from the boring, generic, X identity.

³Pop quiz for people on the American left: in the year of our lord 2025, what is the "correct" term for each of the following groups: people who have slave ancestry in the USA; people living in tent-encampments; someone from the region of the world including Egypt, Libya, Israel/Palestine, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar.

4 Epistemic Humility

Mass media and social media have increased the Overton Breadth to detrimental effect. What is to be done? We could fight back by changing the media, but it would likely be easier and more effective to change the cultural norms that make Overton Breadth relevant in the first place. We should be comfortable not having strong opinions on every topic, and we shouldn't expect others to always have an opinion. At the very least, we certainly shouldn't expect people to have strong positions on what policies should be used to address each topic in the national discourse.

In the philosophy of science, there's a useful concept called "epistemic humility". In short, to be epistemically humble is to recognize that you are a person subject to your own limitations and biases, and that you cannot holistically grasp the entirety of reality. To not have an opinion isn't an act of cowardice, sloth, or a cold indifference; it's simply epistemic humility. A near axiomatic belief I hold is that most people are wrong about most things, *and that includes me*. There are not enough hours in the day for me to be informed about all topics. The information I do get is highly filtered by the media sources I choose to engage with. All the information in the world is being filtered by the current boundaries of the Overton Window. Brilliant people of yesterday and today have been horribly wrong about so many issues. The same is overwhelmingly likely to be true of each of us. To have a strong opinion on every topic — to believe you could be right about every topic in the national discourse at any point in time (let alone across your whole life) — is nothing less than extreme epistemic hubris.

I'll start by conceding my own ignorance. Should the United States start a sovereign wealth fund? I don't know. Should AI tools be used to identify potential mass shooters, and if so, what data should these tools be allowed to utilize? I don't have the expertise to say. What is America's best path to energy independence and a clean, livable environment? No clue! Privately I have inclinations on all three of these questions, but they aren't strong opinions, they could easily be changed, and I absolutely will not share them with you. I am not well informed on public finance, the ethics of pre-crime, or environmental policy. I shouldn't be expected to be, and I certainly shouldn't be judged negatively for admitting that.