"Rigged debate" conspiracies increase by over 500,000% on social media with 50 million views in under twelve hours

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Background

On September 10, 2024, Vice President Kamala Harris and former President Donald Trump engaged in a debate broadcast by ABC News. Consensus among observers and panels of voters suggests that Trump performed poorly in the contest with Harris appearing more prepared and more versed on issues of substance that the debate focused on (Goldberg et al., 2024; Griffiths, 2024). In a closely contested race with Americans deeply invested in their candidate of choice, reactions to such an outcome will, predictably, be emotionally charged. Contextualizing a performance widely viewed as awkward, unfocused, and conspiratorial reflects a need that Rahn et al. (1994) describe as political rationalization. Political rationalization occurs when voters seek to legitimize their preference for a candidate, even when the candidate has an instance of failure or inconsistency. This tendency is contextualized by a number of psychological theories, notably the

idea of cognitive dissonance pioneered by Festinger (1957). Essentially, when one is invested in a concept, emerging data that contradicts that concept will need to be rationalized away.

The space of social media has allowed these sorts of rationalizations greater space to be developed and shared in likeminded communities of individuals. Within such spaces, the ongoing construction of validating political narratives has taken on the character of conspiracy theories with narratives such as QAnon and misinformation related to the COVID-19 pandemic (Benton & Peterka-Benton, 2021; Peterka-Benton, D., Benton, B., & Penney, J., 2023). With that in mind, this report seeks to evaluate the emerging rationalizations that Trump supporters seek to construct to explain or mitigate the general shared perception that his debate performance was unsatisfactory.

Exploratory Questions and Process

The key questions considered include:

- What was the dominant rationalization message utilized after the debate to explain former President Trump's performance?

- What were the influential messages and voices driving this message?

- What was the reach of the dominant rationalization message?

- To what extent did the dominant rationalization message drive broader online discourse?

To answer these questions, researchers identified an initial rationalization message that was widely shared. They then looked at frequency of the message's presence on X (formerly Twitter). X was selected as the platform for evaluation as it offers a space with reduced moderation on political topics and a greater willingness to host conspiratorial information that could potentially be removed on other platforms (BBC News, 2022; Bond, 2022; Lorenz, 2022; Schreiber, 2022). The TweetBinder analytics tool was used to identify frequency, views, and impact of the message, along with spread. TweetBinder can provide ordinally measured influence scores for those using a term during a specific period of time. This is calculated based on influence algorithms that indicate how many people specific content influences based on view and engagement data. The tool's metrics also provide context for how much the "influence value" specific terms have in content that is posted (*Metrics*, 2020; *Social Media Management with Tweet Binder*, 2019).

Additionally, a Google Trends analysis was employed to see if activity and themes that are widely shared on X have affected broader internet search behavior.   A key feature of Google Trends analysis is that it allows for identification of items of interest for internet users (Nghiem et al., 2016). These analyses are "normalized to the highest volume of searches for that term over the time period being studied. This index ranges from 0 to 100, with 100 recorded on the date that saw the highest relative search volume activity for that term" (Arora et al., 2019, p. 338). Search interest in a specific topic has reliably forecast social media posts and actions related to that topic (McCarthy, 2010). Essentially, a topic trending on a significant social media platform should have a corresponding level of movement in search activity that a Trends Analysis will reveal.

Results

The rationalization post containing themes generating the most activity on X appear to have emerged on September 12 at 1:18 p.m. The post suggests that Vice President Harris had received the questions prior to the debate and scripted her responses accordingly. It also contends that the structure of the debate was intended to sabotage any chance of success for former President Trump. Consistent with conspiratorial discourse on social media, the post further suggests

that a broader conspiracy at ABC in conjunction with the Harris campaign is

responsible for the subterfuge.

Black Insurrectionist--I FOLLOW BACK TRUE PATRIOTS ✓ ···
@DocNetyoutube

I will be releasing an affidavit from an ABC whistleblower regarding the debate. I have just signed a non-disclosure agreement with the attorney of the whistleblower. The affidavit states how the Harris campaign was given sample question which were essentially the same questions that were given during the debate and separate assurances of fact checking Donald Trump and that she would **NOT** be fact checked. Accordingly, the affidavit states several other factors that were built into the debate to give Kamala a significant advantage. I have seen and read the affidavit and after the attorney blacks out the name of the whistleblower and other information that could dox the whistleblower, I will release the full affidavit. I will be releasing the affidavit before the weekend is out.

1:18 PM · Sep 12, 2024 · **2.2M** Views

💬 3.3K   ⟲ 12K   ♡ 24K   🔖 3.6K   ⬆

The post quickly garnered over 2 million views. Both the post itself and the themes

of the post (that a "whistleblower" at ABC News would reveal the conspiracy in an

"affidavit") were widely shared on X almost immediately after the post was made.

194,044
Total Posts ?

9/9/2024 - 9/13/2024
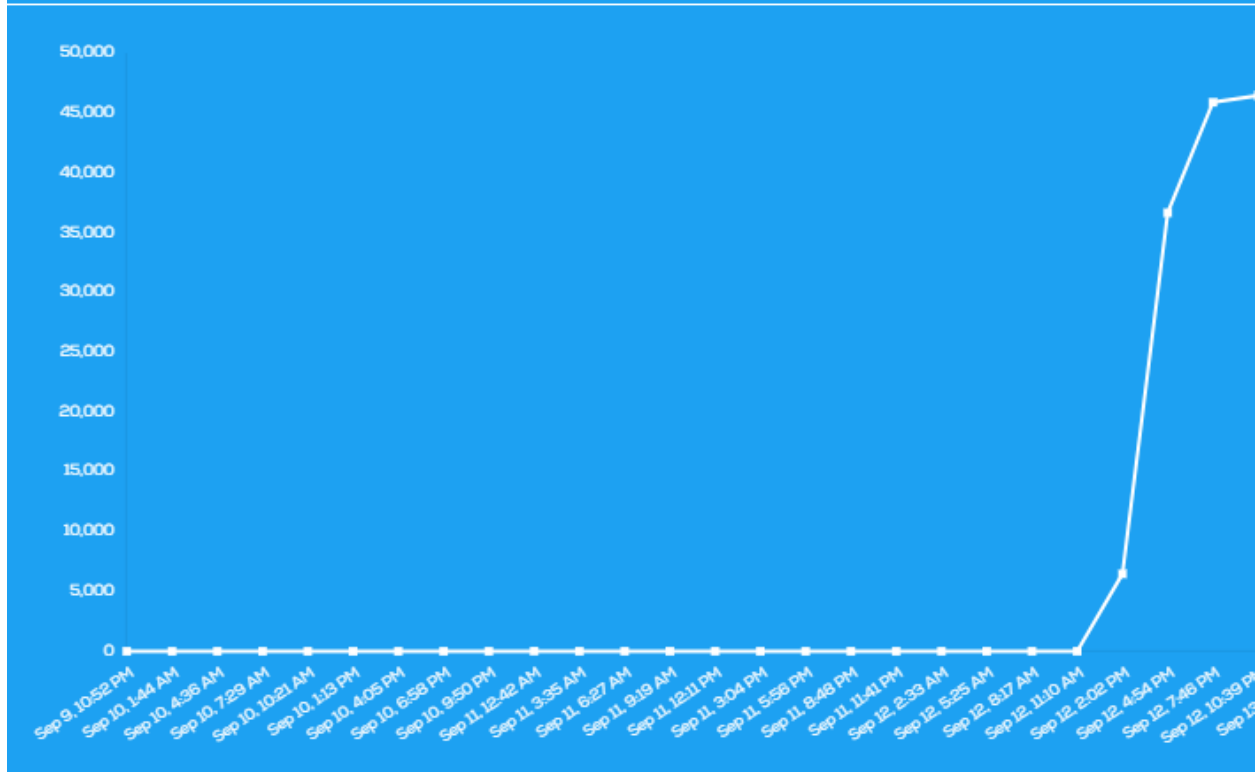
In less than twelve hours, 194,044 posts about the "ABC Whistleblower" appeared on X. The views and reach of "ABC Whistleblower" content similarly proliferated netting tens of millions of views and reaching a similarly large audience.

48,877,717
potential impressions

32,245,298
potential reach

Key influencers in rightwing conspiracy and Trump supporting spaces picked up the narrative as evidenced by the content receiving the most likes and most retweets.

Travis_4_Trump | 16 hours ago | 138262 Likes
Happening Now: Things are not looking good for Kamala Harris and ABC News. First, a whistleblower has offered to come forward with proof that Kamala was given the questions beforehand and promi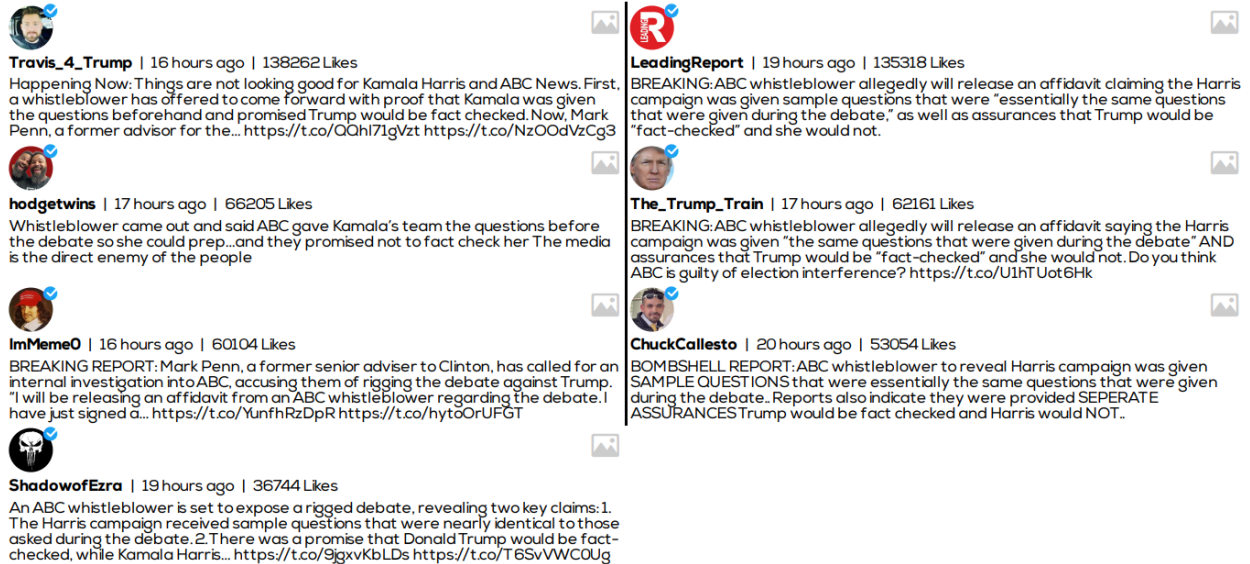sed Trump would be fact checked. Now, Mark Penn, a former advisor for the... https://t.co/QQhl71gVzt https://t.co/NzOOdVzCg3

hodgetwins | 17 hours ago | 66205 Likes
Whistleblower came out and said ABC gave Kamala's team the questions before the debate so she could prep...and they promised not to fact check her The media is the direct enemy of the people

ImMeme0 | 16 hours ago | 60104 Likes
BREAKING REPORT: Mark Penn, a former senior adviser to Clinton, has called for an internal investigation into ABC, accusing them of rigging the debate against Trump. "I will be releasing an affidavit from an ABC whistleblower regarding the debate. I have just signed a... https://t.co/YunfhRzDpR https://t.co/hytoOrUFGT

ShadowofEzra | 19 hours ago | 36744 Likes
An ABC whistleblower is set to expose a rigged debate, revealing two key claims: 1. The Harris campaign received sample questions that were nearly identical to those asked during the debate. 2. There was a promise that Donald Trump would be fact-checked, while Kamala Harris... https://t.co/9jgxvKbLDs https://t.co/T6SvVWC0Ug

LeadingReport | 19 hours ago | 135318 Likes
BREAKING: ABC whistleblower allegedly will release an affidavit claiming the Harris campaign was given sample questions that were "essentially the same questions that were given during the debate," as well as assurances that Trump would be "fact-checked" and she would not.

The_Trump_Train | 17 hours ago | 62161 Likes
BREAKING: ABC whistleblower allegedly will release an affidavit saying the Harris campaign was given "the same questions that were given during the debate" AND assurances that Trump would be "fact-checked" and she would not. Do you think ABC is guilty of election interference? https://t.co/U1hTUot6Hk

ChuckCallesto | 20 hours ago | 53054 Likes
BOMBSHELL REPORT: ABC whistleblower to reveal Harris campaign was given SAMPLE QUESTIONS that were essentially the same questions that were given during the debate.. Reports also indicate they were provided SEPERATE ASSURANCES Trump would be fact checked and Harris would NOT..

Most notably, former New York Mayor and longtime Trump advisor Rudy Giuliani amplified this conspiracy on September 12 by posting the following:

Rudy W. Giuliani ✓ @RudyGiuliani · 13h
🚨 ABC NEWS IN HOT WATER 🚨

REPORT: "A whistleblower has offered to come forward with proof that Kamala was given the questions beforehand."

ALSO: Mark Penn, a former advisor to Clintons, is calling on an independent investigation into ABC News for rigging the debate.

A Google Trends analysis was conducted to evaluate the extent to which this conspiracy has gained traction beyond the space of likeminded accounts on X. Results suggest that internet search activity correlates to the increase in X activity related to the "ABC Whistleblower."
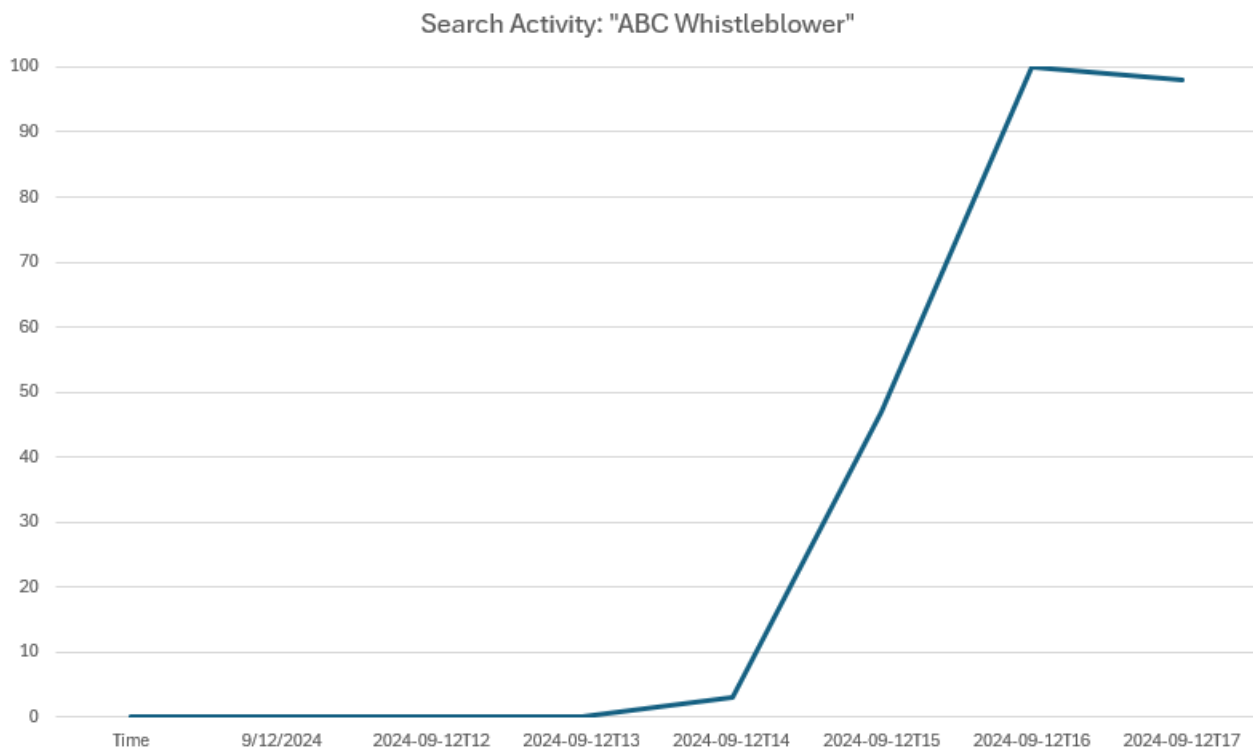
Cumulatively, these results suggest that the "rigged debate" narrative was rapidly developed and shared in Trump supporting spaces online.

Discussion

This report reinforces the notion of a psychological need for political rationalization. This need appears to supersede rational evaluation of context and data. For instance, the questions asked dealt with topics such as inflation, abortion, immigration, and climate change. All of these topics could have been predictably forecast by even a casual observer of politics without the need for an elaborate conspiracy that shared these topics with the Harris campaign beforehand. Additionally, the conspiracy fails to account for why the former president decided to energetically speak about false narratives of immigrants eating people's pets or attempting to assure the American people with his admission that he had only the "concept of a plan." For purposes of political rationalization, evaluation of empirical items is secondary to the need to explain the legitimacy of one's support (Rahn et al., 1994).

In terms of future implications, the spread of this conspiracy after a single debate would suggest that acceptance of an unfavorable election outcome should not be assumed. The combination of the need for political rationalization, social media spaces with reduced moderation, and a ready acceptance of conspiracy theory would seem to make rejection of a potential election loss a more salient point of risk that policymakers would need to consider

Future scholarship should continue to evaluate the speed and spread of mis/disinformation on social media. Indications from this report would suggest that the rapidity and effect of misinformation is growing. Evaluating that process and reflecting on possible means of mitigation (including education, media literacy, etc.) is incumbent on researchers in this area going forward.

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