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The Presidential Debates: 10 Ways the Media Could Do Better

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1. Don't ask about the polls. Too often the candidates are asked to explain why they are up or down in the polls. But this is a distraction from what debates should be. Treat the candidates as candidates not commentators. Their job is to persuade the public why they should be President, not to predict the outcome or to analyze the polls.

2. Do ask about issues that matter. With millions of Americans watching, the debates provide a rare opportunity to address big issues—the economy, national security, foreign policy, immigration, equality and inequality, and the role of money in politics. Asking the candidates to react to the insults and gaffes that have littered this campaign is catnip for television coverage but a disservice to democracy.



question, the easier it is for a candidate to evade.

4. Do ask short, pointed questions. The most revealing questions do not have an elaborate wind up. They are clear, sharp, and pointed. For example, “What would you do, if you were elected, about Aleppo?” This was the question that tripped up Libertarian candidate Gary Johnson. Journalists should ask short, factual questions to test candidates’ knowledge of foreign and domestic policy.

5. Don’t get ahead of yourself. Too often, reporters are so preoccupied preparing their next question that they forget to listen to the candidates’ answers. Good follow up questions depend on listening.

6. Do follow up. The best way to cut through evasions is to take seriously what candidates actually say. For example, after Trump declared that President Obama was born in the United States, journalists pressed Trump surrogates on why he had perpetuated the birther movement for five years. A more pointed follow up would be: “What *new information* suddenly persuaded you that President Obama was born in the United States? (The answer can’t be Obama’s birth certificate, because he produced it in April 2011). Hillary Clinton has been asked innumerable questions about her use of a private email server while Secretary of State. She and her supporters often reply by pointing out that she has acknowledged it was a mistake. A more pointed follow-up would be: “By “mistake,” do you mean it was imprudent (because it caused political difficulties) or wrong?”

7. Don’t try to fact check off the cuff. Candy Crowley came under criticism, especially by [Republicans](#), when she seemed to side with President Obama’s version of the facts when he debated Mitt



believe it is my job to be a truth squad. But on the cult of audio fact checking is not the only way to bring the facts to bear in the debate.

8. Do go to the video. The best kind of fact checking for a televised debate consists of video clips that enable viewers to see for themselves if the candidates are telling the truth about their own past statements. Debate moderators and their producers should have at their disposal a full array of video and audio clips that can be deployed to fact check candidates past statements and positions. For example, when [Donald Trump](#) told Matt Lauer that he opposed the Iraq War from the start, Mr. Lauer was criticized for failing to correct him. The best way would have been to go to the video archive.

9. Don't Go to the Spin Room. Immediately following the debates, it is commonplace for networks to interview the candidate's supporters and consultants in so-called "spin rooms." There is no good reason to devote coverage to the pat and predictable pleadings and impression management of the hired consultants of the candidates.

10. Do Check the Facts and Claims after the Debate. While adept moderators backed by nimble producers can do some instant fact checking during the debate, the post debate coverage should be devoted to a systematic fact checking of the candidates' claims. Such coverage may not be as easy as soliciting the predictable opinions of the candidates' supporters, but it is more fundamental to making presidential debates what they should be but rarely are—great national moments of civic education.



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