

Debating the YouTube debate

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Three weeks ago, YouTube and CNN announced that they will be co-sponsoring [presidential debates](#) for the Democratic and Republican White House hopefuls, with the Democratic event taking place on July 23 and the GOP gathering in September (details haven't been released yet). For the first time, citizens will be able to submit questions for the debate on YouTube; CNN's editors will select which questions to ask in the debate. In a conference call with reporters, CNN bureau chief David Bohrman said the debate would be the "most democratic" ever.

While we agree that they've taken an important first step, do they really want to change the debates or just align themselves with popular culture? If the goal is to change the way the debates are won, there's a lot more work to do.

Voter-submitted questions from YouTube have the potential to be much more interesting than the ones submitted by the same panel of journalists we're used to seeing. But is this process really and fully "democratic" -- and does the project fully tap into the energy of the Web -- if the final questions are selected by CNN and not by the people themselves, for whom the debates are held in the first place?

The Internet is now proving that it can give our democracy a shot in the arm by increasing the ways in which citizens can have their voices heard through blogs, video-sharing sites or social networking sites like Facebook and MySpace. But the Internet has also enabled us to know how these different pieces of "voter-generated content" are being received once they are created and posted online; the Web isn't just a one-way "suggestion box" but an entirely new ecology that enables two-way -- as well as many-way -- conversations. Sites like Digg or Reddit let readers give a "thumbs up" or "thumbs down" to any content posted on the Web, and as videos get a large number of views on YouTube, they rise in popularity.

For many, YouTube is not just about uploading videos, it's also about participating in a community of producer-viewers by posting, rating, commenting on and sharing those videos. This collective action decides what videos are popular and which fade into the ether. By ignoring this natural democracy of the Web, YouTube and CNN are missing a terrific opportunity to improve upon and open up the debate process and possibly end the era of "sound bite" politics.

Why not let the voters themselves choose the final questions to ask the candidates? YouTube and CNN's argument against this is that the top video questions would be known to the candidates beforehand, giving them an unfair advantage. But do we really judge our presidents based on their ability to spontaneously answer a question they didn't know was coming? In fact, by giving them more time to prepare, we might actually get a better understanding of the differences in their positions. Isn't that the way they're going to make decisions as president anyway -- by relying on aides, building on consensus and contemplating a decision?

Let's accept for a moment that candidates should not be given a chance to know what's coming. Why not simply hide, until just before the event, the number of views of the top-rated submitted video questions? This way, the video questions with the most views will not only be the ones that are asked but will also reveal something about the interests of the electorate, for example, if a large majority of them are about health care or the environment, or only about Iraq. Plus, the ratings would be more accurate since viewers wouldn't simply vote for the most popular video but for those questions they want asked of the candidates.

More importantly, the debate format will be immeasurably improved because the mainstream media and the political parties will not be able to universally control the process, even if they still

control much of the format.

Since it doesn't seem likely that YouTube and CNN will adopt this strategy, a group of YouTube users, led by high school physics teacher David Colarusso, have stepped in and done it themselves. The website they created, [Community Counts](#), displays all of the videos submitted for the debate and gives users the chance to vote for their favorites and against those they don't like. They will then request that CNN include in the debate the most popular questions from the Community Counts site.

In an [op-ed](#) published on [TechPresident.com](#), the creators of Community Counts wrote that to achieve a true "flattening of democracy, ... citizens must use the Internet to harness the 'wisdom of crowds' and then convince politicians to heed that wisdom." This project sets a clear example for YouTube and CNN and any other future sponsors of the debates to follow.

The 2008 election is clearly establishing the power of voter-generated content to change the dynamics of the election. Whether it's videos, blog posts or simple e-mails sent to your network of friends and contacts, the fact is that the conversations about the candidates that used to happen over the backyard fence, by a water cooler in the office or over dinner are now getting a boost of steroids. The ability of citizens to produce and distribute their opinions has been enhanced by the ease and reach of the technology. Imagine if our debates got a boost of steroids too.

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