

Democratic debate: Still not democratic enough

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At Monday night's CNN/YouTube Democratic presidential debate at The Citadel in Charleston, S.C., the political establishment and the mainstream media finally acknowledged that the Internet and the world of voter-generated content deserve to be recognized as a new player on the election landscape.

But as these two disparate worlds collided head-on, it became clear that the older one stayed on top.

The professional journalists at CNN took the nearly 3,000 voter-generated questions submitted by YouTube users and, picking nearly 40 of them to broadcast, crafted two hours of lively, at times even riveting, television.

The "CBS Evening News" called it "A Debate for the Internet Age," but when the dust settled on all the hoopla about this "historic" and "unprecedented" occasion, it became clear that we have a long way to go before that label will really apply.

That's not to say that the new format didn't shake things up in some useful ways. For example, we doubt many people missed the professional talking heads who have traditionally been at the center of these events. The amateurs proved they were just as good at asking questions of the candidates.

However, not to be outdone, as soon as the live debate ended, there were Wolf Blitzer, David Gergen and Donna Brazile opining away, telling viewers who they thought did well. But their familiar faces and clichéd commentary paled in comparison to the stark and authentic voices of the YouTube citizen-questioners.

To be sure, some YouTubers proved themselves to be as adept at tossing a bland, softball question at the candidates ("Who was your favorite teacher?") as any traditional debate questioner.

But the woman with breast cancer who pulled off her wig to reveal her bald head, the father who showed the folded American flags from three generations of his family's military service and the aid workers and children in Darfur brought an emotional immediacy and seriousness to their questions that elevated the intensity of the evening.

Unfortunately, the candidates often avoided answering the question directly and simply used its theme to pivot to their talking points.

In a way, the fact that the citizen-questioners were separated by time and space from the actual debate made the whole presentation less compelling than if they were actually there in real time.

Leave aside the fact that not everyone in the country has access to a broadband connection and a video camera. The structure of this first CNN/YouTube debate could have been more democratic, in several ways.

First, as we wrote in our last column, the public could have been involved in a much more substantial way in deciding which video questions were worth airing.

Volunteers, in fact, set up a very useful site at www.communitycounts.us, and by the day of the debate, more than 30,000 people had picked a number of serious submissions out of the thousands submitted.

This could also have been designed in a way to prevent stuffing of the ballot box, which was CNN's fear.

Second, why assume that the public's ability to participate in the debate stops after the questions are asked? Imagine being able to grade the candidates' answers and then see how your peers and the general public viewed them.

Imagine Anderson Cooper being able to say to one of the candidates in real time, "Well, 65 percent of the people who have been watching the debate on the Web have told us that they'd like you to go back to that question on X, because they feel you didn't answer it at all."

Lastly, why assume that the debate has to end when the TV cameras are shut off? YouTube could invite each of the candidates to post longer responses online to each of the questions that were asked and then feature them on its home page.

Such exposure would generate hundreds of thousands of views, an audience that would quickly surpass whatever ratings CNN garnered this week. People could be invited to vote on what they think were the best answers or to add new questions to the mix.

What all this suggests is a new kind of democratic dialogue is possible, one that would engage many more voters and cover a much wider array of topics than is possible in the constrained format of old-fashioned TV debates.

The Internet offers not only a way to allow people to ask provocative questions of candidates for president but may in fact help us get away from "sound bite" politics and provide voters what they really want: substantive and detailed answers to their own self-generated questions. That would be a debate worth having.

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