

# Challenging the candidates to put the debate on paper

BY JOHN CONNOLLY  
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THE 2004 campaign season promises to be the most frenetic and expensive ever. And if history is any guide, campaigns throughout the state of Washington next year will cost unprecedented sums of money while producing more fireworks than informed citizens.

As we brace ourselves for this seemingly inevitable crescendo of activity, perhaps Washington's gubernatorial, senatorial and congressional candidates should consider a move away from politics as usual and commit to challenging their respective opponents to a print debate in the general-election campaign.

The central communications instrument of this new campaign process would be a short series of "challenge documents" widely distributed in selected newspapers and/or magazines. Simultaneous publication of these documents would take place on an authorized Web site. The combination of these two media would create a universal process for a relatively low cost to the candidates. Let's examine how this could work and where it may lead.

To begin with, some entity would need to create neutral terms, parameters and specialized sections for a print debate. This could be the League of Women Voters, a university organization, one or more of the print media or possibly a bipartisan committee representing participating candidates. More on this later.

One section of a challenge document would summarize issues. Another would contain arguments, along with photographs, maps and/or graphics that support the candidate's positions. Another defined section could allow for an opponent's ideas to be answered and/or attacked in a proscribed format.

A motive for a candidate to initiate this challenge of his or her opponent would be to influence the undecided middle of the body politic. As those challenge documents were distributed, that candidate would stress the superficial approach of an opponent who refused to meet that challenge. One of the opponent's motives to respond in the same format would be to head off a shift of momentum in the polls.

Envision a print debate in which two candidates would publish, say, a total of four documents each. Both candidates could publish their initial challenge documents simultaneously. Then, week by week, one challenge document would follow another, allowing candidates to expand upon their previous statements and to respond to each other. A third-party candidate could easily be included on this level communications playing field in a number of ways.

The print debate would formally create a central, definitive and, indeed, historical record of a presidential campaign that would be reported upon extensively by the TV networks, cable, newspapers, radio and other media. Once used, a print debate may cause increasing numbers of citizens to tune out and other-

wise ignore the shrill cacophony of conventional ads and campaign messages. And this phenomenon could tend to neutralize the power of money in a given campaign.

Since the Internet could be used for a content-driven debate with even less cost, why use print? Only by combining print with the electronic would this inexpensive debate be readily available to all levels of society, whether one had a computer or not. Anything less would undermine democracy.

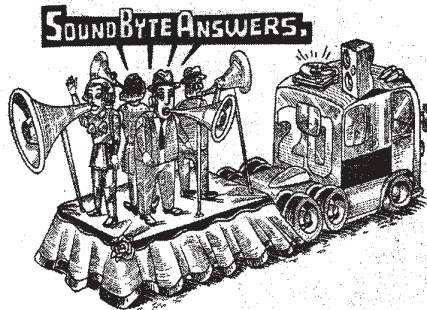
While televised debates encourage brief exchanges and catchy "sound bites," the print debate is better suited to exploring complex issues and presenting comprehensive arguments. A print debate might also elevate the quality of a TV debate, because citizens would already have a common foundation of information in their hands.

The print debate would increase the accountability of leaders because citizens would receive a short series of documents that many will keep permanently. Yet, if a candidate prefers to avoid committing to an issue, he or she could spell out the reasons within one of the challenge documents. Unlike these other media that produce a continual stream of information, the scope and timing of a print debate would be limited to a short duration just before an election.

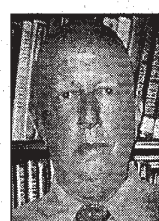
Virtually all campaign media strategists in both parties will dislike the idea of this print debate intensely. Shifting the public's focus away from the status quo of the costly TV attack ad and toward this deliberative, step-by-step and relatively economical process would ultimately diminish their power and income.

In 1787 and 1788, the authors of the "Federalist Papers" and the "Anti-Federalist Papers" engaged in a 10-month print debate that ultimately led to the ratification of the U.S. Constitution. The views of James Madison, John Jay and Alexander Hamilton triumphed over the anti-federalists in this deliberative and public dialogue that went back and forth more than 80 times in newspapers of the day.

In a campaign era dominated by the sound bite, the TV attack ad and money, what will happen when the public comes to see the print debate as a fundamental alternative to campaign business as usual? The first step to bring this option onto the state and, indeed, national agenda may be for a candidate to publicly call for the creation of the rules that would define a contemporary print debate.



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