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The latest word for candidates: a print debate

By JOHN CONNOLLY

During 1787 and 1788, 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 John Madison, John Jay and Alexander Hamilton triumphed in this deliberate dialogue that went back and forth over 60 times.

Today, as New Jersey braces itself for the crescendo of activity that will inevitably surround this fall's senatorial race, I propose that either Mr. Torricelli or Mr. Zimmer move away from politics as usual and challenge the other to a statewide "print debate."

The central instrument of this electoral process would be a short series of four- to eight-page, magazine-size documents. Each campaign would pay to have its candidate's "challenge documents" distributed statewide by just one or two selected newspapers and/or magazines.

Either the League of Women Voters, Common Cause or a major print medium could develop neutral terms and parameters that would shape a statewide print debate. One of several defined sections within a challenge document could be used to summarize issues. Another section could contain arguments, along with photographs, maps and/or graphs that support the candidate's positions. Still another section could allow for an opponent's ideas to be attacked in a defined format. Once this neutral structure was established and recognized as such by both journalists and the public, a candidate could initiate a print debate without the agreement of an opponent.

One motive for a candidate to initiate this challenge would be to influence the undecided middle of the body politic. One motive for an opponent to respond in kind would be to head off a shift of momentum at the polls.

Other media would naturally report and interpret this process. But 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 time frame just before elections. This clash of opinions would tend to level the playing field among adversarial views. The print debate also has the potential to increase the accountability of leaders because citizens would come to possess a more permanent historical record of that campaign.

Whereas TV and radio tend to emphasize personality, the print media tend to emphasize content. While televised debates encourage brief exchanges, the print debate is better suited to exploring complex issues.

Consider a three-stage print debate between New Jersey's two most prominent senatorial candidates. The first stage might call for the simultaneous publication of initial documents from both candidates. Then, week by week, one candidate's document would follow the other's until each had published three documents. This three-stage print debate would take five weeks and leave citizens with a total of six challenge documents. Among three candidates, a similar three-stage print debate would take seven weeks and produce nine documents.

With cyberspace expanding exponentially, why design a communication strategy based primarily on a printed document? More universal accessibility. The

print debate encompasses online elites and all other citizens. The disproportionate affluence of Internet users points out the need for a central campaign instrument that will better reach average Americans. And the Internet could augment the print debate in a multitude of ways.

One distribution plan among several could call for just one or two print media to distribute a senatorial print debate statewide. These newspapers and/or magazines would be required to gear up across the state to handle increased demand. These documents would be prominently numbered in sequence and could be made available in a second and perhaps third distribution wave to maximize readership. This will deliver a substantive debate to those who want it.

In general, campaign managers will abhor the print debate because they will not be able to exert sufficient control over it. But it allows a candidate to make a powerful and confident statement about his or her own positions.

In a campaign era dominated by the sound bite and the attack ad, the American public's diminishing participation at the polls has already indicated its displeasure with today's electoral process. Yet once Mr. Zimmer or Mr. Torricelli announces that he will proceed with a print debate, the other will surely follow. From that point, as citizens become engaged in a substantive and deliberate dialogue harkening back to the "Federalist Papers," a new campaign era might just begin.

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