

THE ABC DEBATE: AN OPPORTUNITY?

As it happens, the two Pennsylvania voters I had visiting and I missed the debate last night. Thankfully. Though I've watched most of it at NYT. And I agree with the general consensus that the debate marks a low point in American journalism.

Still, I wonder whether it can't be turned into a public good.

I've argued for a long time that journalists need to clean up their own house, first, before they start demanding new privileges or criticizing bloggers (and see Athenae kicking ass on this today in typically glorious fashion). Yet it is rare that journalists take critical stances of their own. They'd rather turn Judy into a martyr—presumably in hopes it will benefit them, too—than acknowledge Judy's profound failures and how those failures discredit their profession.

But this time, it seems different. Already a number of mainstream journalists have criticized last night's performance, most notably Tom Shales.

When Barack Obama met Hillary Clinton for another televised Democratic candidates' debate last night, it was more than a step forward in the 2008 presidential election. It was another step downward for network news – in particular ABC News, which hosted the debate from Philadelphia and whose usually dependable anchors, Charlie Gibson and George Stephanopoulos, turned in shoddy, despicable performances.

For the first 52 minutes of the two-hour, commercial-crammed show, Gibson and Stephanopoulos dwelled entirely on specious and gossipy trivia that already

has been hashed and rehashed, in the hope of getting the candidates to claw at one another over disputes that are no longer news. Some were barely news to begin with.

[snip]

At the end, Gibson pompously thanked the candidates – or was he really patting himself on the back? – for "what I think has been a fascinating debate." He's entitled to his opinion, but the most fascinating aspect was waiting to see how low he and Stephanopoulos would go, and then being appalled at the answer.

More generally, this debate seems to be a rorschach test for journalistic responsibility. Howie Kurtz and David Brooks were delighted with the debate. Greg Mitchell and Will Bunch were appalled. Walter Shapiro judges the debate failed both on democratic terms and on bad spin terms. While most of these journalists qualify as media critics (thus, it's not surprising they're commenting on the debate), it does present an opportunity to ask other journalists what they thought of the debate, to force them to take a stand on the role of journalists in the presidential campaign.

Done well, this would be an opportunity to shame journalists into avoiding the kind of spectacle we saw last night. Done well, we could use this opportunity to get journalists to forswear the kind of crappy coverage ABC offered last night. After all, if we have the opportunity to compete with John McCain on the issues, we'll kick his butt. But if we're forced to continue sniffing Hillary's or Obama's underwear drawer rather than talking about how they differ from Bush and his buddy McCain, it'll be a long six months until the election.

Update: Changed then to than per Frank Probst.