

UK Leaders to debate on TV: a victory for personal politics and digital democracy?

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I welcome the [decision by the three political parties](#) in the UK to enter the 21st century, even if it's nearly a decade late. Three TV debates will not transform democracy in Britain but they are a sensible way to inject some more substantial discussion into the soundbite culture. I hope they will begin them before the three week campaign itself.

But first here's the dangers. It makes politics more personal. It means that the media will obsess about the presentation and performance rather than the issues. It is a triumph for the idea of politics as both personality driven and a spectacle of political theatre. It means the leader becomes even more important rather than the party. And the requirement for that leader to be telegenic becomes even more important. I am not sure that those are all necessarily bad things and I suspect they are, anyway, inevitable.

I think that it is important that the public get a chance to see the political leaders talk at length about the big issues. It will be the clashes and the gaffes that make the headlines but it is still the best kind of proving ground that we have for politicians. Prime Ministers Questions is a sterile political sprint race for soundbites. These debates will at least offer a more marathon trial.

Character and communications skill matters in a modern leader. It doesn't mean that you have to be pretty and glib. Obama is a consummate media professional and a handsome, eloquent performer but he is also a master of his policy brief and a very intelligent man. I have suggested in the past that Gordon Brown's problem was not his 'ugliness'. It is perfectly possible to make a virtue of being a rough diamond as long as you are honest and open in the rest of your political life.

Conversely, David Cameron looks lovely in his pine kitchen and his Boden clothes but can he get over anything deeper and more inspiring through a broadcast encounter? As the current leaders in the opinion polls the Tories have been brave to risk this kind of encounter, but frankly it would have looked like cowardice if they had not gone for it.

As for Nick Clegg, well, he'll just be delighted to get some attention.

So we see that the different leaders will all have different challenges. Overall, their task is to use this series of platforms to engage a public that is generally bored and repelled by mainstream political discourse. This is a chance to connect.

And talking of connectivity, it will be fascinating to see how the broadcasters and Parties make the most of this opportunity to open up the debate to public participation. CNN's YouTube Presidential debates were a very limited step in this direction. I look forward to the full gamut of social media – from Twitter to [Mumsnet](#) – being deployed.

Will the debates make any difference? The American experience is that they are more useful at the Primary stage. By the time of the Presidentials all the candidates have become so practiced that it is difficult to get them to go off script and debate openly. They often confirm public opinion rather than move it.

Generally speaking the evidence in the UK is that our month-long election campaigns don't really shift the vote by more than a couple of percentage points. People make up their minds months earlier. But the point of this is not that somehow three hours of TV chat will decide who forms the Government. Instead we should see it as a chance for the politicians to show that we should care what they say. And ideally, a chance for us to talk back, too.

