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## How to Ignore the Campaign



By Marty Kaplan

Congratulations. You're about to prevent hundreds of hours of your life from going down the rat hole between now and Election Day.

It's no mystery why we pay attention to campaign news. We're wired to love stories. Suspense, surprise, risk, noise, combat: the thrill of a pumping narrative literally turns us on. It causes our brains to squirt dopamine, the same feel-good neurotransmitter implicated in addictions to sex, drugs, gambling, food and checking our e-mail twice a minute.

No wonder media outlets maximize political drama. It holds audiences, and that's great for the bottom line. But there is zero civic virtue in paying attention to campaign coverage. The likelihood that a news story, blog, rant or shouting match will change someone's mind about health care reform, bank regulation, marginal tax rates, the deficit or any other campaign issue is nil. There may be sober speeches and position papers out there, but airtime goes to mayhem. Keeping up with the punching and counter-punching may feel like being informed, but it's more like being entertained. So unless you're hopelessly hooked on inane speculation and manufactured melodrama, you are now free to move about the cabin.

Here's all you need to know about polls: With margins of error of plus-or-minus three-to-four points, the breathlessly reported gaps between candidates will be illusory. They're ratings bait. One day one poll will say Obama or Romney has opened a shocking lead in Ohio or Florida; another day, another poll will say the reverse. In most cases, add three to one candidate's numbers and subtract three from the other, and it's a dead heat. You already know that polls are just snapshots, and that trends are what matter. Now you also know what the trends will say: It's going to be a nail-biter. So it's OK to unplug, take a walk and get some fresh air.

The conventional wisdom is that whatever story is dominating today's news cycle — a gaffe, a lie, a trip, a Trump — will be forgotten by tomorrow. It is universally acknowledged that only three things matter between now and Election Day: Romney's choice of a vice president, the acceptance speeches and the debates. But there are no cliffhangers about how any of those stories will play out.

When Romney names his running mate, it will be called a good move *no matter whom he picks*. If it's someone bland like Rob Portman, John Thune or Tim Pawlenty, its safety will be praised: Romney was smart not to take a risk. If it's someone spicy like Marco Rubio, Bobby Jindal or Condoleezza Rice, its boldness will be acclaimed: Romney was shrewd to show leadership. But in either case, *it won't matter*, because very few people vote based on who's No. 2 on the ticket. Sarah Palin may have sucked all the media oxygen out of the campaign when John McCain picked her, but he didn't lose (or might have won) because of her; it was his real-time dithering during the financial meltdown that did him in.

Going into the Republican convention, the talking heads will call Romney's speech the most important of his life. It's his best chance to introduce himself to the American people, to tell his personal story, to lay out his plans for the future, to make it safe to make a change in the White House. And you know what? After the speech, everyone will say he rose to the moment. He knocked it out of the park. He was presidential. He put all the noise of the campaign behind him. With adjustments for incumbency, the same will be said before and after Obama's speech. The stakes couldn't be higher. He really has to deliver. Wow. He really delivered.

That media scenario *always* happens, even for candidates with reputations as stiffs, like Walter Mondale, Michael Dukakis, Al Gore and John Kerry. (Disclosure: I wrote Mondale's speech, so blame me for losing 49 states. But for a few days there, it was called a

triumph.) If you're an anxiety junkie, go ahead and agonize about how your nominee will do at the podium, but — spoiler alert - both speeches will turn out to be home runs.

Between the conventions and the debates, “strategists” will say that the electorate is frozen, that the few hundred thousand remaining swing voters in swing states are waiting to watch the candidates square off. Each successive debate will be said to be more crucial. Each debate will get the same kabuki coverage: dueling spinners, dueling instant polls, dueling sound bites, dueling body language quacks. Obama won. Romney won. It was a draw. Both candidates had their moments. Only time will tell. And on Election Day, exit polls in battleground states will reveal that the number of late-deciding voters whose choice was clinched by the debates made no difference in who won.

Imagine what democracy would be like if elections were more than cash cows for local TV stations selling ads, if they were more than profit centers for conglomerates whose business model is monetizing the attention of — that is, entertaining — audiences. Imagine if campaigns really were what we deserve: great national conversations about issues and choices. What a tribute to our founders and fallen patriots it would be if a free press and an educated public had more to do with this election than the voter suppression laws passed in 16 states and the couple of dozen billionaires determined to buy its outcome.

If, if, if.... I know: If my grandmother had wheels, she would have been a bus. But even without wheels, if she'd caught me bingeing on campaign coverage the way I'll probably keep doing, I bet she'd tell me to get off my *tuches* and go out and play.

*This is my column from The Jewish Journal of Greater Los Angeles. You can read more of my columns here, and email me there if you'd like.*

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