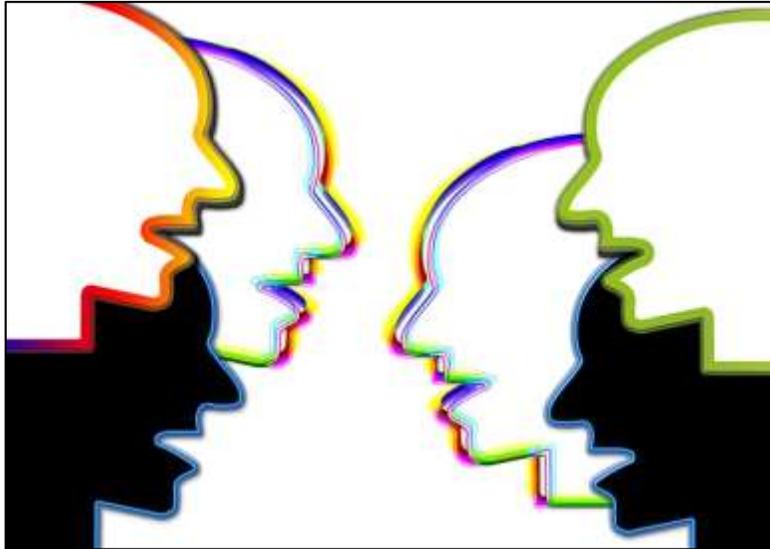


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What issues are the 'talking heads' missing? via Pixabay.com

Getting misled by short-term thinking in U.S. presidential debates

Peter Raven

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Last week the New York Times published [an analysis of most-discussed topics in Republican and Democratic debates](#). Not surprisingly, vast gulfs exist, with Republicans talking about military power, religious liberty and the Constitution, while Democrats debated education, race and Wall Street, among others.

But what alarms me is what's not on the list.

We live in a world that is home to three times as many people — 7.4 billion— as when I was born in 1936, adding a net of about 250,000 each day and heading for more than 2 billion additional people by mid-century, just 34 years from now.

Half of us live in extreme poverty, at less than \$2 per day; some 800 million of us are malnourished to the point where our brains and bodies can't develop properly; 100 million of us are on the verge of starvation at any one time. Oxfam has estimated that 62 people own half of the world's wealth.

We are using an estimated 50 percent more of our sustainable capacity than exists (www.footprintnetwork.org). As we do so, the world is continuously becoming less resilient, less beautiful, less rich, and less sustainable. What this means is that if the sustainable capacity of the world were to be increased immediately by 50 per cent, we would be no better off than we are now, but we would not be depleting our future capital.

A third or more of the women and the children in the world are disadvantaged to the point where they have no prospects for contributing to our common welfare in the future.

Our activities are warming the world's atmosphere at such a rate that most of our agriculture will be seriously dislocated over the next few decades—even if we were to get down to business now and start controlling our emissions of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases. If we delay, we run the risk of making most of the Earth uninhabitable planet by the end of the century.

We are driving plants, animals, and other kinds of organisms to extinction at such a rate that about half of them are likely to be gone forever by the time our grandchildren and great-grandchildren have a chance to explore the world. Most species will disappear unknown. We depend on them directly for our livelihood, and haven't even begun to know the vast majority of them yet.

The United States is one of the richest nations on earth, much richer per capita than any other large one. We spend as much on defense as the next eight nations put together. We have about 7,000 nuclear warheads, Russia about 7,700. Yet all we hear are calls "to make us strong again."

Since the whole world was divided into countries and colonies over the past 200 years, roughly 200 million people have been killed in wars. The potential is always there for more, and the poor have little hope. In a world like ours beating or bombing them won't make them into affluent democrats. How do we move away from a "we" and "they" mentality?

Aren't there some problems we ought to be talking about beyond those emphasized in the political debates? Where, for example, is the discussion about population stability, empowering women and children, feeding the poor, finding alternative sources of energy, learning to love one another?

Can we find some way to get away from arguing about ways to improve our immediate prosperity, and instead start to think a bit about the medium to longer run that will determine the fate of our civilization and everything we have built in it? A robust public debate still may have the chance of mitigating the disasters looming on the horizon and giving us a soft landing. Let's demand that our leaders, by leading, get us where we need to be in preserving the conditions of the life that we are enjoying now.

Sources:

NYT chart: <http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/03/11/us/elections/what-parties-debate-or-ignore.html>

Peter Raven is president emeritus of the Missouri Botanical Garden and the George Engelmann Professor of Botany emeritus at Washington University.

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