ABC EDITORIAL REVIEW 23

U.S. PRESIDENTIAL DEBATES

November 2020

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Contents

Review

This is an external editorial review to examine ABC news reports, analysis and interviews associated with the three US presidential debates scheduled for 29 September, 15 October and 22 October 2020.

Amendment to Scope

The second presidential debate was cancelled, and as a result the scope of this review was amended to include coverage of the Vice-Presidential debate between Mike Pence and Kamala Harris on 9 October 2020.

Content

The content reviewed will include coverage of the debates on the ABC News Channel, 7pm News, 7.30, Radio Current Affairs (AM, The World Today and PM), Radio National Drive, ABC News Digital, Planet America, The Drum and Insiders.

Other content may be included if the reviewers deem it appropriate.

In relation to daily coverage, the focus will be on content from the 24 hour period immediately after each debate takes place. In relation to weekly programs, the focus will be on the first program that airs after each debate takes place.

Methodology

Each of the two reviewers will independently review the content, and then their thoughts will be brought together in a joint write up. While the aim is to have an agreed final draft, the review can encompass differing perspectives and comments from each reviewer.

Reviewers

Laurie Oakes is one of Australia's most experienced political journalists, a member of the Federal Parliamentary Press Gallery from 1969 to 2017 and the long-serving Political Editor of Channel Nine.

He was won three Walkley Awards (including the Gold Walkley in 2010. He was also Journalist of the Year in 2011 and was inducted into the Logies Hall of Fame. He is the author of eight books on Australian Politics.

Alan Sunderland is a journalist with forty years' experience at SBS and the ABC. A former Political Editor at SBS, he was most recently the Editorial Director of the ABC from 2013-2019. He has won two Walkley Awards.

Questions to consider

- Did the coverage explore the right angles and themes?

- Was the coverage thorough?

- Was the coverage accurate, fair and objective?

- Is there evidence of any systemic lapse of editorial standards?

INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

The first thing to make clear is that this is *not* a review of the ABC's overall coverage of the US Election. It deals only with the specific coverage related to the debates.

This is important because our review inevitably raises areas where we believe the coverage could be improved, including some elements that we think were missing and some issues which we think were underplayed or neglected.

Because of the scope of the review, it is quite possible that some of these concerns were answered in other coverage we did not see, hear or read.

For example, where we have pointed to issues that we think might have been covered in more depth or detail, it is possible this happened *outside* of the specific debate coverage we reviewed.

Nevertheless, we are confident the points made here are valid and useful in planning future coverage.

Finally, we should explain some important elements of the process and timing of our review. The assessments of each debate were made and written up soon after each debate ended, and the overall conclusions and recommendations were formed before the result of the election itself was known. In other words, the outcome of the election itself played no part in our views on how well the debates were covered.

THE FIRST DEBATE

The ABC's coverage of the first 2020 US presidential debate was, overall, fair, balanced and comprehensive. The panel discussion that preceded and followed the debate accurately conveyed the atmosphere, homed in on key issues and provided sensible and useful analysis. The prime time news bulletins were notable for excellent analysis by Washington bureau chief David Lipson. John Barron and Chas Licciardello on Planet America provided insights and background in a way that was fresh and entertaining. If there was a weak link it was *7.30.*

LIVE COVERAGE

For its live coverage on the news channel, the ABC assembled a panel consisting of Ellen Fanning and Stan Grant as hosts with fellow ABC journalists David Speers from the Melbourne studio and David Lipson in the US. Effective use was also made of Planet America's John Barron.

Dr. Gorana Grgic from the United States Studies Centre was included to supplement the ABC team. And using Casey Briggs to remind viewers of the latest Covid statistics for the US made sense, given the prominence in the debate of Trump's handling of the pandemic.

A decision had clearly been made NOT to bring in any partisan reaction to the debate from either the Trump camp or the Biden camp at this stage. It was a sensible way to ensure that the immediate analysis was as impartial and fact-based as possible.

But the same approach largely continued across all ABC outlets in the 24 hours following the debate (with the minor exception of a brief segment on The Drum) and it came at a cost. There would have been interest in hearing at some point from the two camps and/or their supporters how they justified the more odious aspects of the debate and how they spun the question of who won and who lost.

In a businesslike 15 minute lead-up discussion the panel set the scene for a debate that was keenly anticipated because of the way the pandemic had restricted normal campaigning. They pointed to Donald Trump's credentials as a strong campaigner and Joe Biden's lead in the polls. Lipson went through the mechanics of the debate process. Speers reminded viewers that, historically, debates have rarely shifted the momentum of election campaigns.

The debate itself, marked by constant interruptions and personal abuse, was broadcast live and also covered by a live blog on the news website. The moderator—Chris Wallace from Fox News—battled vainly to pull Trump into line. Biden clearly felt the need to show that he could muscle up to his opponent.

Discussion of matters of substance was frequently derailed by Trump as he changed the subject, introduced irrelevancies or shifted to personal attacks to put Biden off his game. But Trump's concentration on disrupting Biden backfired to an extent because-- as Chas Licciardello put it later on Planet America-- "he never actually built any moments of his own".

Biden was at his strongest when he used the tactic of ignoring Trump and speaking directly to the audience down the lens of the camera.

Trump was at his strongest when he relied on his energy and his personality to try to dominate the discussion and assert his achievements as President.

If Trump was weak and vulnerable on COVID, health and climate change, Biden was shakier on law and order and the economy.

The panel discussion that followed covered these issues and other key elements of the debate in a strong and lively way.

The panellists were consistent in condemning the unpleasant tone of the debate. (Fanning: "It was hard to watch that shouting match." Speers: "This was nasty. This was petty. This was juvenile.") Both Trump and Biden were criticized, but identifying the president as the main offender was unavoidable. Any other approach would have conveyed a grossly inaccurate impression.

The selection of debate highlights used during the discussion focussed heavily on the personal attacks, insults and interruptions. This, too, was the right approach. Apart from anything else, it accurately reflected the dearth of policy substance in the debate.

The panel touched on most of the news angles to emerge, including Trump's failure to condemn white supremacists. "Proud Boys, stand back and stand by", the President had said. (Very quickly, the right-wing extremist group adopted these words as a mission statement, incorporated them into its logo and began selling "stand back and stand by" T-shirts.)

"I think that's going to generate some headlines," Lipson predicted, accurately. Speers said it was "dangerous language", particularly in light of Trump's refusal—repeated during the debate—to guarantee that he would accept the election result if he lost.

Perhaps more of the panel's time could have been devoted to discussing this issue, but at least it was spotted and its importance underlined. Some other media outlets either ignored the story or misquoted the president (wrongly claiming he had called on the Proud Boys to "stand down").

On the ABC news website, a more significant level of attention was afforded to the "white supremacy" moment. Within an hour of the debate ending, the debate blog had identified this, together with Trump's attack on the legitimacy of the poll, as the "two points we are going to hear a lot about". Within two hours, "Stand Back and Stand By" had become the headline on the blog, and the quick reaction from the Proud Boys online had been included in the report.

Later in the day, the website ran an analysis piece from Stan Grant, who picked up and reiterated most of the points he had made in the panel discussion.

RADIO CURRENT AFFAIRS

The World Today went to air while the debate was still underway, and so confined itself to a live cross to ABC reporter Phil Williams who called it "adults at their worst" and pointed out that Biden was being constantly harangued but was holding his nerve.

PM that evening devoted ten minutes to the debate, calling it "chaotic, cantankerous and ill-mannered". Nick Grimm's package covered all the key points well and highlighted the white supremacy angle. This

was followed by a Q&A with Kathryn Tempas from the Brookings Institution. This think tank is sometimes seen as liberal or left-leaning, but her comments seemed to be fact-based and insightful.

AM the next morning featured a package from Phil Williams that focussed more on the fallout after the debate, particularly the growing angst over the white supremacy comments and fears of election-day intimidation.

RADIO NATIONAL DRIVE

David Speers was the fill-in host on the day, and the bulk of its coverage featured Lahnee Chen and Larry Diamond, two experts from the Hoover Institute which is often perceived as having a right wing bias, particularly on economics.

However, as was the case with the Brookings expert, their comments seemed fair, insightful and fact-based. Chen, as a former Republican adviser to Romney and Rubio, was both conservative in many of his views but also no particular fan of Trump (although not a public and vehement critic either),

Their comments echoed the general   points that others had made.

Diamond, though, was obviously confused over the "stand back and stand by" comment. He thought Trump had pinched a slogan from the Proud Boys rather than the other way around.

TV PRIME TIME NEWS AND CURRENT AFFAIRS

The **7pm News** had a comprehensive, well-produced package from David Lipson, followed by a punchy but even-handed piece of analysis. The debate, Lipson said, showed "a president who is behind in this race trying to steamroll and bully his way to a second term and a challenger who is easy to provoke and can be sent off course". Biden had been wrong-footed at times and struggled to get his message out, but "he is not the one who needs a campaign reset". It did not appear that Trump had done enough in the debate to turn the race around, Lipson concluded.

The disappointment of the day was **7.30**. Its surprisingly brief coverage consisted of a few highlighted grabs from the debate followed by an interview with Oliver Laughland, a Guardian journalist based in the US. The whole section ran less than five minutes, about half the time that PM spent on the story. It appeared to be not much more than a token effort.

When asked about the treatment, the program's Executive Producer explained that they were reluctant to cover a story unless they could add something new. They did not want to replicate what was in the 7pm news. That is fair enough, but what went to air seemed half-hearted rather than different. It did little to take the story forward. A little more imagination would have been no bad thing.

The Executive Producer said Laughland's background in covering issues of race equipped him to expand on the white supremacy angle. In fact, though, that matter received only a brief mention—and Laughland got Trump's quote wrong.   It would have made more sense—and better television—to build the issue into coverage of more substance through a reporter package and/or talking to a wider pool of talent.

The 7.30 Executive Producer has explained that the program devoted substantial resources at other times to covering the broader US election campaign. This is true. In particular the program aired a three-part major special towards the end of the campaign which was comprehensive and insightful.

But, as we made clear in our introductory remarks, this review does *not* examine or assess the overall ABC coverage of the election campaign, simply the way the debates were handled.

To that point, the program has indicated that the Biden/Trump debate was covered in the second part of their three part special. This consisted of a thirty second sequence showing a retired steelworker reacting to elements of the debate. Although this worked well in the context of that package, in our view it was not a substitute for better quality coverage at the time the debate occurred.

THE DRUM

As is often the case with the Drum (hosted on this night by Stan Grant), the talent did not appear to have been chosen specifically for their experience and skill in covering US issues, and this was reflected in the discussion. Cole Brown (in particular) and Kathryn Greiner had some worthwhile points to make, but the broader discussion over the half hour devoted to it meandered a little. Brown not only highlighted the white supremacy angle, but he made the compelling and relatively fresh point that the debate may have favoured Trump simply because it was so negative that it might further discourage voter turnout.

Chas Licciardello was also interviewed and criticised both Trump and Biden, saying Biden was unimpressive but Trump's aggression ruined the moment for the president.

The program's producers have pointed out that the Drum's guest list was chosen, as it always is, to take account of the stories and issues of the day and so a number of the guests were selected specifically because of their experience and knowledge of US affairs. While this is clearly the case, the need for the program to canvas a wide range of different issues means there is inevitably a compromise between this and their ability to focus in an informed and expert way on the specifics of any single issue.

PLANET AMERICA (Wednesday edition)

The program began with an entertaining but insightful dissection of the debate which made plenty of criticisms of both candidates in a fair and accurate way. Despite acknowledging that Biden "won" the debate by virtue of surviving it without any major strikes against him, neither Licciardello nor Barron held back in identifying the flaws of both men.

An extended interview with Lahnee Chen was a good choice. As a Republican but not necessarily a Trump supporter, his analysis was calm, logical and insightful.

Planet America showed there was plenty left to say after the news, and interesting ways to say it.

PLANET AMERICA (Friday edition)

This more detailed and considered examination of the debate, two days later, was the clear highlight of the ABC's coverage.

The show aired after Donald Trump's COVID-19 diagnosis, so unsurprisingly the first 20 minutes of the one hour show was dominated by this, including an interview with a medical expert to explore the nature and prognosis of the diagnosis, as well as covering the political implications.

The last 30 – 40 minutes of the show was then devoted to a detailed and forensic examination of the debate by the two hosts (John Barron and Chas Licciardello).

The key elements of the analysis were:

- An in-depth discussion of the white supremacy comments, exploring in particular why Trump found it so hard to clearly and unambiguously condemn white supremacy , his clarifying comments afterwards, the reaction from Proud Boys themselves, etc… It had context, nuance and insight.

- A very good round up of the polls after the debate and what they meant, including distinguishing between junk polls and scientific polls. At all times, the discussion was notable for carefully attributing key perspectives and delving below the surface to explore them in more detail.

- Licciardello, in discussing the behaviour of both parties in the campaign, made a point of drawing out the issue of democratic complacency (off the back of a discussion about door-knocking). This was a useful addition to the context around the debate and its aftermath.

- There was then a substantial fact-checking of four Biden remarks during the debate (two were true, one was false and one was disputed) and four Trump remarks (two were false, one was true and one was contested).

- The Hunter Biden allegations were explored in depth and with nuance, debunking the main conspiracy theories around him including Trump's remarks in the debate, but also pointing out the nub of truth behind the controversy (Hunter did 'cash in' on his father's name) and further explaining that this was also true of Trump's family and was a broader problem across the board.

- Licciardello engaged in a passionate and detailed explanation of mail-in voting, debunking and/or contextualising Trump's specific examples in Philadelphia and Pennsylvania.

This was everything a great ABC program on the debate (and US politics generally) should be. It was entertaining, fast-paced, well-produced and full of insight, context and analysis delivered in a fair, impartial and accurate manner.

It is worth noting, however, that this edition of Planet America had a significantly smaller television audience than other parts of the ABC's coverage. It was watched by just 173,000 viewers, compared with 429,000 for the Wednesday edition of the program and 653,000 for 7.30, where coverage of the debate was—to be kind about it-- limited.

The program team has pointed out that Planet America is repeated several times, available in full on You Tube and segmented on a range of other platforms, giving it a cumulative audience of at least half a

million. While this is to be welcomed, the opinion of the reviewers remains that some of the best analysis available on the ABC deserves greater prime time prominence.

There are good grounds to consider ways of incorporating some of this coverage into prime time or higher rating programming.

COMPARED WITH OTHER MEDIA

While we did not undertake a thorough review of all media, a quick scan suggested that the ABC hit all the key points and their analysis was consistent with that of other major news outlets.

The Australian newspaper's news coverage and the immediate "verdicts" from its key writers echoed the ABC and others in suggesting Trump had not made up any ground, with only Greg Sheridan taking a different view.

Nine newspapers and TV, the BBC and the mainstream US network and cable news all took a similar line, while more partisan right wing outlets (Sky evening programming here and Fox in the US) were strongly supportive of Trump's performance.

OVERALL SUMMARY

We have very few criticisms to make about what was, in the main, substantial, comprehensive, accurate and impartial coverage.

Around the margins, we would raise the following suggestions for minor improvement:

- Although the focus on clear and incisive reporting and non-partisan expert analysis was correct, we believe there is still room to hear at some point from the two camps and their supporters. *The Drum* crossed to a range of voters (undecided, Democrat and Republican) in swing states to get their immediate reactions, but there was little of depth from these interviewees. At some point across the coverage, we would have liked to hear more from the Trump and Biden camps and/or their camp followers on what they had to say and how they were spinning the key take outs.

- Although the white supremacy "Proud Boys" moment was identified several times as a key take out, it might usefully have been explored a little more deeply. This is particularly so given the controversy it aroused overnight and the way Trump shifted ground next day. By the time the ABC's evening programs aired, there had been several hours to gather wider reaction to this and to show the online memes and other content emerging in response to the comments.

THE VICE-PRESIDENTIAL DEBATE

Until President Trump's Covid diagnosis, there was doubt about whether the ABC would broadcast the vice-presidential debate. In our view, not to do so would have been a mistake, even without the drama of Trump versus the virus or the likelihood of the second scheduled presidential debate being cancelled. With one presidential candidate aged 77 and the other 74, the succession issue was always going to be of considerable interest in this race.

Once the president tested positive for the virus, of course, the question of whether to go live with the battle of the VEEPs became a no-brainer. Trump's illness brought the succession issue much more starkly to public attention. In addition, the possibility that there might be no more Trump v. Biden confrontations made the debate between Mike Pence and Kamala Harris even more relevant. This was particularly so given the *debatus interruptus* nature of the first Trump-Biden contest which precluded any serious discussion of policy. It was apparent that the deputies' debate might turn out to be the only remaining opportunity for this to occur.

LEAD-UP

The 15-minute pre-debate panel discussion featured a similar line up to the first presidential debate, with Ellen Fanning and Stan Grant in the studio, David Speers in Melbourne and Kathryn Diss (instead of David Lipson) in Washington.

Before the panel discussion began, however, there was a long and detailed profile piece on Vice President Pence from Phil Williams. It was a good and useful piece, but there was no similar piece on Senator Harris, which was an odd omission. The channel producers said the package was included at the last minute to make time for a change of hosts in the studio and they also pointed out that Harris received a lot of coverage when she was first selected as Joe Biden's running mate back in August. Nonetheless, we consider this choice to have been a mistake: fairness required that both or neither candidate receive such an in-depth profile.

The panel itself was solid. Grant explained why this VP debate was more significant in the circumstances than a normal VP debate, at least partly because of the age, health and longevity issues around Trump and Biden.

It was interesting that Fanning was able to focus on the challenges Harris faced as a woman and Grant was able to focus on the challenges she had as a black American.

In raising the gender issue, Fanning set the scene for the controversy that would arise over the way Pence treated both the female moderator and his opponent once the debate was under way.

The key political and stylistic differences between the candidates were teased out, and there was emphasis placed on the fact that we were looking and hoping for substance in some of the key policy areas of jobs, the economy, health, etc… beyond the expected discussion of Covid and other matters.

Alan noticed one minor but potentially significant factual error in the discussion when Grant referred to Trump's 'miracle cure' for Covid as Remdesivir. Although the President had taken Remdesivir, he had also taken Regeneron and this is what he was claiming as a cure for Covid.

DEBATE

The debate, not surprisingly, was quite different in tone from the Trump/Biden debate.

This had little to do with the moderator, Susan Page from USA Today, who seemed to have few clues about how to exercise control. She abandoned any attempt to get the candidates to engage with and answer the substance of the questions she asked (no follow ups, no attempts to bring them back to the topic). Her attempts to enforce the rules were largely ignored, especially by Pence.

That might have backfired on the vice-president, however. Planet America's John Barron commented in post-debate analysis that it was unlikely any female voter would have been won over by the way Pence repeatedly talked over the two women who shared the stage with him. And that mattered, Barron said, because recent polling suggested 66% of female voters intended to cast their ballots for Biden-Harris. Barron's point provided important context.

In most other respects, though, Pence, like Harris, was polite and respectful. And they did talk about policy in a way not seen in the Trump-Biden event a week earlier. Issues discussed included Covid, the economy (including tax policy), China, foreign policy more generally, the Supreme Court, the environment and race.

POST-DEBATE ANALYSIS

The analysis that followed —with Barron joining the panel, along with Maya King from Politico and Kim Hoggard from the US Studies Centre—covered the key points. It was comprehensive but also lively.

Fanning noted that civility and substance had been the hallmarks. Grant usefully summarised the Pence rhetoric as "We believe in America, the Democrats don't" and the Harris rhetoric as "Trump has let down America, and Americans deserve better".

When it came to the section of the debate on the economy and tax, Grant acknowledged that he and Fanning "were seeing it very differently".

Grant dissected the rival policies and focussed on how vulnerable the Democrats were on economic management, pointing out that Biden's lead in the polls was narrower on this issue than on others. Fanning drew attention to what the exchange over tax said about male/female interactions as Harris sought to deal with Pence's interruptions. ("Mr Vice-President, I'm speaking.")

Both viewpoints were important in any assessment of the debate.

Speers noted that Harris had landed telling blows over the Trump Administration's handling of the Covid pandemic. "Her best issue, by far" said Speers. "She nailed that".

Pence, according to Speers, had been most successful on the economy, tax policy and climate. "He kept circling back to what he called 'the Democrats' radical climate agenda'… He knows that's going to play well in the rust belt states."

Diss argued that Harris had done well on the race issue, where she was able to "touch people on an emotional level".

Several panelists pointed out that critical questions remained unanswered at the end of the debate.

One was Harris's failure to say whether the Democrats would stack the Supreme Court by increasing its size. (Biden had also dodged this issue in the presidential debate.) Instead, Harris used an Abraham Lincoln anecdote to attack Republican plans to ram through a new conservative Supreme Court appointment before the election.

Another example was Pence's evasiveness on the issue of how people with pre-existing conditions would be protected under Trump's health policy.

Barron provided a pithy judgement on how the debate participants performed. Pence, he said, had been a much better advocate for Trump in the debate than Trump had ever been for himself, while Harris "passes the threshold test—she appears to be ready to be president if she needs to be".

Diss also reported on Trump's response to the debate. He had been effectively interrupting from the White House via Twitter throughout.

As with Dr Gorana Grgic in the earlier debate, King and Hoggard made worthwhile contributions and were certainly worth having on the panel. It was again obvious, however, that the ABC team lacked neither expertise nor authority and was in no sense dependent on the outside experts.

Most significant issues or angles were touched on in the discussion. The analysis was fair overall with useful background and insights. The highlights replayed from the debate were well-chosen.

No one mentioned the fly.

A minor point, though…Fanning could have chosen a better Harris line to quote on the Trump Administration's mishandling of Covid than the Democrat senator's toilet paper reference.

Harris had said: "I want to ask the American people, how calm were you when you were panicked about where you're going to get your next roll of toilet paper". Former presidential speechwriter and Wall Street Journal columnist Peggy Noonan called it "the worst sentence ever uttered at a vice-presidential debate". It is hard to disagree.

THE ABC WEBSITE

The website once again ran a live blog during the debate.

It's coverage of the key elements of the debate was solid, and it was also useful that they incorporated a sort of running commentary from social media, where people were noticing in particular that a lot of questions were being asked but not answered.

On the tax issue, while the substance of the debate was covered, it seemed that more attention was afforded to Harris's "Let me speak" moment. When one of the live bloggers asked readers who they thought had won "the first half of the debate" it seemed a little trivial and irrelevant at that point.

The climate change and China exchanges were covered well, and the blog then included some comments on the formulaic nature of many of the responses.

The issue of fracking was nicely contextualised when it came up. It prompted Alan to wonder whether there might be a bigger role for ABC fact-checkers in the live blogging of debates.

The healthcare issue was well summarised, as were law & order and race.

At this point the fly landed on Biden's head and yes, it was covered at length in the blog, chiefly by reference to all the people commenting about it on social media.

As soon as the debate ended, the blog began to gather and post reactions from far and wide, including a recap of Trump's tweets throughout the debate and an "interruption count" from CBS (10 to Pence, 5 to Harris).

The bloggers engaged with a few questions from the readers and also pointed out how quickly the Biden campaign was capitalising on the "fly" moment.

The overall sense was that it was a solid performance by both candidates with no major gaffes, and therefore one that is likely to be soon forgotten and overtaken by other events.

One of the most fascinating things included in the blog was a summary of what was being Googled during the debate. It showed that fracking, tax and the economy were indeed significant issues.

Later, the site published a series of reports featuring the highlights of the debate as well as a story describing the "key takeaways".

They listed those takeaways as:

- Nobody won but nobody lost

- There were few interruptions

- The moderator performed poorly and was criticised for not forcing answers to questions

- Both candidates dodged important questions (supreme court stacking, accepting election result).

- There probably WILL be another presidential debate

We would suggest that in a story that purports to describe the key takeaways, it was an error not to include any details of the key policy issues where the candidates clashed. Most observers felt Harris made strong points on Covid and Pence made strong points on the economy, and this should have been part of this piece.

RADIO CURRENT AFFAIRS

PM ran a four-and-a-half minute package from Sam Donovan followed by five minutes of analysis from David Lipson – a similar amount of time to that devoted to the first Presidential debate.

The summary and description of the debate was clear, comprehensive and fair, summarising the key issues of Covid, foreign affairs, the economy and climate change.

David Lipson's analysis inevitably mentioned the "fly" moment, but also pointed out that the debate was largely policy-driven – a "return to politics as normal".

On Covid, he delineated very well Pence's support for freedom over Harris's condemnation of the death toll and the neglect involved.

He pointed out that the handover issue was dodged, as was the issue of "stacking the high court".

Trump's reaction was included.

Overall it was balanced and comprehensive coverage. If anything was under-reported, it was probably the discussion on the economy.

AM ran a package from Phil Williams on US politics, but the story had moved on, to Trump's refusal to participate in the second Presidential debate because it was to be a virtual event. The Vice Presidential debate did not receive a mention, which was understandable.

RADIO NATIONAL DRIVE

RN Drive, with usual host Pat Karvelas back in the chair, provided 9 minutes of coverage of the debate. After kicking off with edited highlights, Karvelas interviewed LA Times journalist Seema Mehta, an experienced political reporter covering her fourth US Presidential campaign.

She was asked who won it and declined to give an answer. She did say, though, that Pence and Harris laid out and dug into policy issues much more than Trump and Biden had done. She discussed their presentation styles and their personalities, before moving onto the issues.

Covid, race issues, law and order, transfer of power were all touched on but it was surprising that there was no serious discussion of the economy and taxes. This was a clear and significant issue that should have been included.

TV PRIME TIME NEWS AND CURRENT AFFAIRS

7pm News The VP Debate was inevitably overshadowed by President Trump's release from hospital and his statements about coronavirus treatments, so both were covered in the same package from Kathryn Diss. After leading with Trump's comments, the key elements of the VP debate were shown, with an early focus on Covid as well as mentioning climate change, the Supreme Court and other issues. Tax and the economy were perhaps underplayed here, too, but in such a crowded story it would have been very difficult for Diss to do justice to everything.

7.30 had no coverage of the VP debate. Given that the program went to air immediately after Anthony Albanese's budget reply speech and events had moved on quickly after the debate, we did not have a problem with that.

THE DRUM

Hosted by Ellen Fanning and featuring guests James Arvanitakis, Peter Hartcher, Nicki Hutley and Neela Janakiramanan, the program got to discussion of the debate at about the halfway point—probably the prominence it warranted.

Once again there were crosses to voters in some of the key swing states. They found the debate more constructive and easier to watch than the Trump-Biden clash, criticised both candidates for dodging questions but otherwise didn't have strong views on who emerged victorious.

On the panel, Peter Hartcher said it was hard to disagree with Harris' suggestion that the US coronavirus response was a disaster. He went on to say it was generally a very sane and sensible debate but it was overshadowed by what Trump had been saying and doing.

Janakiramanan (who grew up in the US) spoke mostly about Kamala and her "code switching" between black and white ways of talking. She was quite pro-Kamala.

Arvanitakis said Pence had tried to send a very calming and clear message about preserving conservative values, something he achieved very well.

 Hutley was then asked about the tax exchange, and Ellen continued to focus more on it as a gender moment than a substantive exchange on tax and the economy.

It was a pity the panel did not dig into the economic choices a little more, given the importance of the US economy to Australia's future. None of that is to suggest that the gender issue is not an important one, and it deserved to be teased out. It would have been good, however, to see both issues given some time. Hartcher ended the discussion by talking about the China-US relationship, and Harris' comment that the trade war had failed. He said it was now a contest to see who can beat up on China the most, where it used to be to try to work with and accommodate China where possible.

He discussed the implications for Australia as "cover" for us to reset our relationship in a more modest way.

Overall, some good points discussed on most of the issues.

PLANET AMERICA

The debate occurred too late in the week for the Wednesday edition of the program, but on the Friday night "fireside chat" edition on the news channel, John Barron and Chas Licciardello spent ten minutes analysing the performance.

For the most part, the analysis echoed the key points made already by others – that both candidates passed the test of looking potentially presidential and that Harris had impact when it came to making it all about Covid.

They also provided some more detailed analysis on the subsequent polls, breaking them down to not only show that Harris was felt to be the winner, but also pointing to the significant gender difference where women were far more favourable to Harris than were men.

Once again, however, the Planet America team had the edge on many other ABC programs when it came to significant policy analysis. Although they spent little time on it, Licciardello drew attention to Pence's attacks on Harris and Biden over the issue of tax increases, and the point was made that this was a bread and butter issue likely to become a significant talking point in the remainder of the campaign.

COMPARED WITH OTHER MEDIA

The Australian newspaper's coverage described the debate as 'courteous but evasive' and provided a solid, blog-style coverage of the main exchanges. In their instant verdict of who won, Greg Sheridan declared Pence the clear winner, Cameron Stewart said there was no clear winner and it would have zero impact, Troy Bramston said much the same, and Tom Switzer said it failed to change the momentum.

The SMH provided a straightforward and factual news story that focussed on the key points raised.

OVERALL SUMMARY

Overall the coverage was fine and touched on all the key issues in a fair and balanced way, though in our view tax and economic issues were passed over a little too lightly.

It was an error to run a Pence package but not a Harris package in the lead up to the debate, but otherwise both candidates were given equal coverage and were subjected to equal scrutiny.

CANCELLATION OF THE SECOND PRESIDENTIAL DEBATE

In the days following the Vice-Presidential debate, the second Presidential debate was cancelled.

The sequence of events was that, in response to the President's Covid diagnosis and after seeking advice from relevant health experts, the independent Debate Commission decided that the second debate, which was to be a 'town hall' style debate, would be done virtually, with the two candidates in separate locations answering the public questions online.

Following news of that change, President Trump unilaterally decided not to participate, saying he wasn't interested in wasting his time on a "virtual" debate instead of a real one.

The President's campaign team then suggested the second debate be delayed by a week, which the Biden camp refused to accept.

The Commission then cancelled the debate.

ABC News online reported the developments accurately and comprehensively, including the key developments and statements from each side, and also providing context about a previous Presidential debate that had been held with the candidates in different locations (Kennedy and Nixon in 1960).

In subsequent coverage of the two "town hall" style events organised by both candidates when the debate had been cancelled, ABC News reporting continued to report that the debate was cancelled "when Mr Trump refused to take part in a virtual event". This was accurate and contextual reporting which correctly reflected what had happened.

There was no other significant additional coverage of this aspect of the campaign as events moved on quite quickly to other matters.

THE FINAL DEBATE

The second and final debate between Donald Trump and Joe Biden was keenly anticipated. With the President still trailing in most polls there was a sense that he might be running out of time; that this could be his last chance to turn things around. During the pre-debate analysis there was speculation among the panelists—Ellen Fanning, Stan Grant, David Lipson and David Speers-- about how Trump would approach the debate. Would he repeat his tactics of the first debate, ignoring the moderator and the rules and constantly interrupting to try to put Biden off his game? Or would he take note of a widespread view—backed by some polling evidence—that his aggression the first time around had alienated many voters?

Recognising that the first debate had been an embarrassment, organisers from the Commission on Presidential Debates made changes. They introduced a "mute" button to ensure that each candidate would get two minutes without interruption to answer questions from the moderator at the start of each of six segments. That did not guarantee, however, that a shouting and hectoring Trump would not be on display for the rest of the time.

The panelists agreed that the President needed to be less abusive, more "presidential", than he had been in the previous debate, but Speers predicted that this would not happen. "I don't think he has another gear," Speers said. "I just doubt he's got it in him to do something different today".

But Speers—as he was quick to admit—was wrong. Trump dialled back his aggression and delivered a relatively disciplined performance. The result was a debate in which the leaders actually discussed issues and pushed their central messages to voters. Moderator Kristen Welker of NBC could take some credit, along with the mute button, but Trump's abandonment of his bull-in-a-china-shop approach was the major factor.

The change in tone helped Biden to explain where he stood on various issues and to articulate his criticisms of Trump. But it also helped Trump to get some of his own policy positions across. And it helped the president in another way—by allowing Biden to commit himself to policies the Republicans believed would hurt the Democrats on fracking, the oil industry and climate change.

The opening panel discussion usefully prepared the way for some of what was to come in the debate. Fanning, for example, prompted Lipson to background new allegations about the business activities of Biden's son Hunter. Without this explanation of what was a complex and murky affair, Trump's claims during the debate that Biden is a corrupt politician—not to mention his reference to "the laptop from hell"-- would have been difficult for many viewers to follow.

There was also discussion on the apparent third wave of corona virus infections in the US and its likely impact on parts of Trump's base in rural communities. Grant provided some context for what the leaders might say about the economy. Lipson talked about the extraordinary number of Americans who had already voted and what this might mean. And the discussion accurately anticipated Trump's argument—effective in 2016—that, unlike Biden, he is not a politician. Speers pointed out, though, that things were different this time because Trump "is no longer the outsider—he is the incumbent".

THE DEBATE

In his bid to appear more presidential than he had the first time around, Trump even praised the moderator he'd been attacking only a day earlier. ("I respect very much the way you're handling this.") For the most part he referred to his opponent, politely, as "Joe".

There was still plenty of biffo, including Trump's accusations of corruption against Biden and his family and Biden's allegation that Trump is a racist who "pours fuel on every single racial fire".

But, this time, policies were advocated and criticized. Argument over issues outweighed the personal mud-slinging. The two leaders acquitted themselves pretty well. Lipson might have gone over the top a little, though, when he later referred to it as "a fabulous debate".

Key issues covered included Covid-19, the business and tax affairs of the two candidates, foreign policy including relations with China and North Korea, the Supreme Court, health care, immigration, racial violence and climate change.

Trump, in his final pitch, recognized the importance of the economic management issue to his re-election chances. "Success is going to bring us together," he said. "We are on the road to success but I'm cutting taxes and he wants to raise everybody's taxes and he wants to put new regulations on everything. He will kill it."

Biden said in his closing message: "What is on the ballot here is the character of this country". And he added: "Decency, honour, respect. Treating people with dignity. Making sure that everyone has an even chance. And I'm going to make sure you get that."

POST-DEBATE ANALYSIS

For this, the panel was expanded to include Maya King from Politico.

There was intelligent discussion on the contrast in tone between the two presidential debates, the reasons for it and the likely impact.

Speers made the strong point that, because both candidates had spoken in more detail than previously about policy, we were now getting some indication of what was at stake for Australia. On climate change policy and Asian Pacific regional politics, in particular, clear differences were emerging.

Biden, Speers said, had echoed Kevin Rudd on climate change by describing it in moral terms. Biden's talk of transitioning away from oil and reaching net zero emissions by 2050 was "very much in line with the Labor approach in Australia". And it would have implications for Australia's policy response "if America was back in the Paris club".

Fanning raised Biden's use of the word "thug" to describe North Korean president Kim Jong-un and China's president Xi Jinping. "I think Australia would very much welcome a tougher line against Kim Jong-un", Speers said.

But Speers clearly did not believe abuse of the Chinese leader would be welcomed in the same way. And Fanning said Grant had "recoiled" when Biden made the comment.

The panel overall spoke approvingly of Biden's performance, but they were nevertheless prepared to criticize him. Grant, for example, fact-checked him on America's trade deficit with China, pointing out where he was in error.

But Trump received more criticism, not as a result of bias but because of the extraordinary nature of some of his comments.

Fanning homed in unerringly on apparent inconsistencies in Trump's defence of his handling of the Covid pandemic. In the space of a few minutes, she said, the president went from "we'll have a vaccine within weeks" to "we have to learn to live with the virus". Speers noted that Trump had, in fact, claimed at the start of the discussion that a vaccine was actually "ready". It was, Speers said, "the best example of one of his exaggerations, or indeed lies, being exposed" by the moderator.

It was an interesting moment. ABC journalists involved in the debates coverage had generally shied away from directing accusations of lying at the President. However, Trump's often-demonstrated lack of respect for the truth had become such an issue in the campaign and in US politics generally that, when Speers did use the word, it seemed unexceptionable.

Trump's more extraordinary comments on race, not surprisingly, provoked an emotional response in some commentary on the ABC and elsewhere, but Grant reined in the emotion and was probably more effective as a result. When Trump claimed nobody had done more for the Black community than he had, with the "possible exception of Abraham Lincoln", Grant asserted quietly: "Abraham Lincoln freed the slaves". It was all that needed to be said.

It was on Trump's record on race, in particular, that Maya King added value to the panel.

If there was an area of weakness in the post-debate analysis it was again on economic management. We would have liked more on why economic management was viewed as such an area of strength for the President.

More could have been made of Biden's fracking and oil industry comments. Trump was cock-a-hoop. In his view he had set a trap for his opponent and Biden had been caught.

Also, we would have liked brief partisan contributions from representatives of each side. What their candidate's strategy had been. Who they thought had won and lost and why. The spin would have been interesting. However, we understand that time pressure may well have been a problem.

Finally, when the wrong extract from the debate came up—on race, when Fanning was talking about Trump's accusations of financial impropriety against Biden—Grant handled it so calmly and professionally that there was no disruption to the discussion, hardly any sense that there had been a glitch.

RADIO CURRENT AFFAIRS

The World Today provided a live Q&A with Washington-based ABC reporter Kathryn Diss, as the debate was still in progress when the program went to air.

Their coverage was partly a preview and partly an on-the-fly summary of the debate up to that point.

It did include one decision which was a problem.

It chose to include just one short grab of Biden from the debate and one of Trump. While this is a fair and sensible approach, it was the choice of grabs that caused concern.

The program ran Biden criticising Trump's performance in relation to the coronavirus, which was largely accurate in its depiction of what had happened in the US – the number of deaths, the number of infections, etc… It then ran a grab of Trump making a series of allegations about Hunter Biden and his business activities. Some of those allegations have been investigated and found to be unsubstantiated, some have been dismissed by independent third parties and all have been strongly denied in no uncertain terms by Biden himself. To run that grab without context or comment is quite problematic.

It can be difficult making decisions like this while an event is still underway, but the choice of content needed more thought.

PM ran a comprehensive summary from US correspondent Kathryn Diss. She covered all of the key issues well for those who didn't watch the debate themselves. Where there were personal allegations thrown, they were fairly included and rebuttals and denials were also included. Her conclusion was that the debate was unlikely to "move the needle" on the campaign, and she included a range of anonymous, vox-pop style reactions. The program then turned to a phoner with Professor of Communications at Colorado State University, Karrin Vasby Anderson, who analysed the debate from the perspective of the way the two candidates engaged and spoke. Her overall take was that Trump continued to undermine democratic norms by failing to tell the truth.

AM on the Saturday morning did not discuss the debate any further, but chose instead to speak to a Democratic data analyst on the polls, early voting and the likely outcome on election day.

RADIO NATIONAL DRIVE included extended coverage of the debate in their weekly wrap, where host Patricia Karvelas was joined by Stan Grant and Jennifer Hunt from the US Studies Centre. They began by discussing style and then moved on to substance. Everyone acknowledged that this had been much more of a real debate than the first one.

On matters of substance, the discussion began with Covid, and Stan Grant pointed out that Covid had not been one of the three most important issues on the minds of US voters, which drew into question why so much time had been spent on it. Hunt responded by pointing out that both the economy and healthcare (the top two issues for voters) were inextricably linked with Covid.

They discussed climate change, and Hunt pointed out that this would be the first election where millennials were the largest voting bloc. Climate change was a key issue for them.

The discussion turned to race. Grant pointed out that, as with Covid, Biden is on much firmer ground on this issue. And he had produced some strong lines on it during the debate. "(You have a dog whistle as big as a foghorn".)

Hunt said Biden was more prepared to admit past mistakes and more prepared to try to include both "red and blue" states in his pitch.

On the Hunter Biden laptop vs the Trump tax returns exchange, Hunt said that "emails are very 2016" and Trump had a problem on the issue of children given how closely his own family were involved in his administration. She said Trumps attacks were dated and would backfire. Grant said the attacks would feed into Trump's base, but were not front of mind for most people.

They ended with notes of caution about the polls, but an overall sense that the election remained Biden's to lose.

The overall discussion was very much focussed on tactics and campaigning, rather than the substance of policy positions.

TV PRIME TIME NEWS AND CURRENT AFFAIRS

On the 7pm News, David Lipson delivered a package on what was described as a "surprisingly civilised" debate. It was a tight, fair and comprehensive story with well-chosen grabs and solid analysis. Lipson included the final pitches of the candidates to illustrate his point that they had presented quite different visions for America. However, there was no further input from other experts or sources.

Given that there was no 7.30 Report that night but there was an edition of Planet America later that evening on the news channel, a pointer to that program at the end of the Lipson story might have been useful for the audience.

THE DRUM

Kathryn Robinson hosted the program, and was joined by guests Greg Pickhaver, Salvatore Babones, Tanya Hosch and Jane Stephens.

They turned to discussion of the US Presidential debate about halfway through the program, and spent several minutes on it. They began with some grabs to provide a flavour of the debate and then turned to three US voters to get their takes.

One aspect of this was notable and quite strange. Included in the three "voters" (one undecided, one Democrat and one Republican) was Lahnee Chen from the Hoover Institution, who until this point had been used by various ABC programs as an expert commentator.

As a senior policy analyst, it seemed quite inappropriate to present him in this context as a simple voter trying to make up their minds on who to vote for.

It devalued someone the ABC had hitherto presented to the audience as an expert, and left us wondering if Chen was aware that this was how he was to be portrayed. The decision seemed the wrong one.

In response to our concerns, the program's producers have assured us that Lahnee Chen was aware and comfortable with how he was to be used in this particular program, and the decision to include him in this way was made because the republican voter pre-arranged to appear did not make themselves available. While this is reassuring, the reviewers remain of the opinion that this was not the best use of Chen and was potentially confusing to an audience that was used to seeing him in a different role as an expert policy commentator.

Apart from that, the practice on The Drum of gathering input from ordinary voters was, as on previous occasions, a less than useful device. The undecided voter never indicated whether anything had influenced her likely decision, and the more partisan ones largely echoed predictable talking points. We would not recommend this approach is repeated in future without a lot more thought, structure and process.

In relation to the subsequent studio discussion, Robinson first turned to a cross with John Barron from Planet America, who provided some solid analysis of the debate contents, including pointing out that there was some genuine policy substance in what both men said on immigration, the economy, etc.

In the general discussion, Salvatore Babones shifted the discussion closer to the issues and suggested that Trump was winning on the issues – the economy, China, etc… He differentiated between the style of the man and the substance of what he had achieved. He also said Trump won the debate, and the debate could have an impact on the election, which he said would be close. It was actually refreshing to hear someone who had such a different view to many others.

Barron said that part of the Trump strategy was to give Biden enough rope. This was an interesting point because it seemed that Trump succeeded to some extent in getting Biden to talk himself into trouble, particularly on the fracking / energy policy / oil industry issues.

For that reason, it was good to hear Babones' view that Trump did pretty well. There is a perfectly valid case to be made for his opinion that Trump won the debate, so it was useful in the interests of both balance and context to have that view put forward.

Given that this view was at odds with most others, it would have been good if Babones' qualifications and background had been given greater emphasis. He is, for example, author of *The New Authoritarianism: Trump, Populism and the Tyranny of Experts,* named best book on politics 2018 by The Wall Street Journal. His opinion carries weight.

Jane Stephens said the more measured tone was welcome as more and more people are fed up with nasty politics, while Greg Pickhaver was critical of the general standard of the whole thing.

Pickhaver was clearly on the program primarily because of his ability to comment on the football Grand Finals on the weekend, and as a result he added little to the US debate discussion, His reference to "two carnival barkers or clowns" seemed a little off key, given that the quality of the debate was a significant improvement over the first Trump Biden encounter.

Tanya Hosch was brought in to comment on Trump's arguments on race, and she was highly critical of his view that he had done more for African Americans that almost anyone else.

They threw back to Salvatore Babones but only to discuss the polls, which in my view was probably not the best use of him.

The final summary came from John Barron, which was a much more detailed analysis of the polls.

There was a throw to the later Planet America program, which made sense.

PLANET AMERICA (Friday edition)

Another solid performance from this program.

It began with a good, extended examination of the Hunter Biden / Trump tax return exchanges. They demonstrated they were as prepared to draw attention to Biden's obfuscations on the issue as Trump's, whilst also making it clear there is currently no smoking gun pointing to any misbehaviour on Biden's part. Licciardello pointed out that Trump had made vague allegations but not levelled a single clear charge.

On COVID, they also managed to raise some strong points that had not been aired elsewhere. Firstly, that Trump has a good story to tell on Operation Warp Speed and the race to a vaccine (but failed to tell that story) and that there is a degree of unfairness about some of Biden's COVID attacks on Trump, where he simultaneously attacks Trump for not doing more to tackle the virus while at the same time slamming Trump for the impact of the existing slowdowns and shutdowns on the economy.

On the immigration issue, specifically a dispute about the facts on what was referred to as "catch and release", Licciardello clearly called out Trump's lies on the statistics, and pointed to the authenticity of Biden's unscripted comments.

What is clear in analysis like this is that the two hosts are, at times, less interested in whether an issue or a controversy will "last" until election day or have an impact on the polls, and more interested in what the facts are and where the truth lies.

The program looked at the initial post-debate polling which gave the debate to Biden, except for the traditional and unscientific outlier at Fox News.

In later discussion, Licciardello took up the "enough rope" theme, saying Trump's strategy had been to "hang back and let Joe Biden hang himself." Recognition of this helped provide balance to the ABC's overall coverage, as did the program's detailing of some Biden untruths and inaccuracies as well as Trump's.

An example was Licciardello's comments on Biden's claim that 50 security experts had dismissed the allegations about Hunter Biden and his business dealings.

Licciardello also recognised the significance of the energy policy exchange, acknowledging that it could come back to bite Bidden.

The Barron-Licciardello analysis was followed by an interview with Matt Schlapp, the Chair of the American Conservative Union, who provided a very clear pro-Trump assessment of the debate. This was a useful addition to the diversity of perspectives across the ABC. Schlapp accused the media generally of being anti-Trump, criticised Biden extensively and explained how victory in one or two key states would give Trump four more years in power. He also made a series of assertions about the Hunter Biden affair, immigration and about Biden's policies on fracking and fossil fuels.

This was a useful and relevant perspective. However, we found it surprising that Schlapp was not really challenged, even when what he said appeared to be either factually incorrect or highly questionable.

More rigorous questioning might have been expected, especially as the interview was not followed by a similar one with a Democrat operative.

The program's producers have advised us that the interview that aired with Mr. Schlapp was edited from its original length, and the recorded interview did indeed include attempts to interrogate his claims in more detail, but he conceded little or nothing in these exchanges. They argued that to leave this material in the final version would have been little more than "performative". We disagree. For the audience's benefit, it is important that interviews are seen to be appropriately challenging, impartial and questioning, even if those challenges produce little result. To edit them out potentially leaves the audience with the same concerns we had as reviewers.

COMPARED WITH OTHER MEDIA

In The Australian, the initial reaction and "who won the debate" analysis by their key writers was broadly very similar to the ABC's analysis.

Overall, most commentators felt Biden had won by virtue of the fact that Trump blew his chance to make a decisive impact.

The Sydney Morning Herald included straightforward coverage that largely followed the same lines.

Importantly, other coverage we saw and read did not identify any significant issues or moments that the ABC hadn't covered.

OVERALL SUMMARY

Apart from the specific lapses noted in the summary above, the coverage remained fair and comprehensive.

Coverage of this debate did suffer from its timeslot (a Friday in Australia) which meant that 7.30 was not on air and AM on Saturday was a softer, weekend-style program. As a result, the overall level of attention on prime time was less, which was a pity given that this debate was richer with policy and content to talk about than the first Presidential debate.

The best content remained on programs with smaller audiences (noticeably Planet America and to a lesser extent RN Drive), so the challenge remains for the ABC to explore ways to inject more of that into its key programming.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Overall, the ABC should be proud of its coverage of the US Presidential debates.

There was a high degree of professionalism, depth and colour, and the coverage overall clearly met appropriate editorial standards. It was fair, even-handed and accurate.

In terms of the key players involved in the live coverage, Ellen Fanning was a good choice in the "ringmaster" role. She performed competently without being too formal, was well-briefed, kept the discussion moving and ensured key points were covered.

Stan Grant's assured performance showed that the decision in September to make him the ABC's International Affairs Analyst was well justified. Throughout the debate coverage he showed a wide knowledge of the issues involved and an ability to explain them concisely and simply.

David Speer's analysis was astute, and contributions from correspondents on the ground (led by David Lipson and Kathryn Diss) was solid, fair, informative and comprehensive.

The contribution from Planet America's John Barron and Chas Licciardello was a genuine highlight. They are clearly specialists on US affairs who are superb at turning complex material into accessible and entertaining television.

Despite our overall satisfaction with the coverage, there are always elements that can be improved and lessons that can be learnt.

Most of those have been covered in our summaries of each debate, but it is useful to draw them together and summarise them here, based on the specific questions posed in the scope of this review.

We were asked to consider the following key questions:

- Did the coverage explore the right angles and themes?

- Was the coverage thorough?

- Was the coverage accurate, fair and objective?

- Is there evidence of any systemic lapse of editorial standards?

These were front of mind as the review progressed, and all of them were explored in some detail during the discussions of each debate.

Our findings can be summarised as follows:

Did the coverage explore the right angles and themes? Was the coverage thorough?

In brief, the answer is yes. All of the key angles and themes were covered. Nothing was omitted.

The choice of experts was generally good, with no obvious biases. One area where we thought there was a gap was the lack of any comments or perspectives from the respective Republican and Democrat camps themselves. While the choice to rely for the most part on expert and non-partisan analysis was

sensible, there is always a place for hearing how the two camps feel the debates went, how they are choosing to spin the outcome, etc…

In relation to the substantive issues, while they were all appropriately touched on, we felt there were areas where there could have been greater coverage and/or further analysis:

- After the first Presidential debate, the "Stand Back and Stand By" comment could have received more exploration, particularly given its galvanising impact on the wide race debate and the immediate reaction to it by the Proud Boys. This was well handled in the immediate post-debate analysis, but we believe there was room for further coverage. This was particularly a lost opportunity given 7.30's decision that evening to run relatively sparse (Oakes would say "token") coverage.
- Similarly after both the Vice Presidential and the second Presidential debates, the issue of the economy generally and the fracking/oil industry/Green New Deal controversies facing Biden could have received more coverage. The economy was always likely to loom large in voters' minds, particularly in the swing states, and warranted a little more attention. One example of this was in the "key takeouts" published by ABC News online after the debate, which did not mention the economy at all.

One aspect of the coverage that we felt didn't work particularly well was the decision by The Drum to cross regularly to a trio of "real voters' in the US to get their views. The format of the The Drum, which brings together disparate panellists to discuss a wide range of domestic and international issues, was always going to make coverage of the debates tricky, and so the desire to add a new more focussed element was understandable. But we viewers we never found out enough about each voter to identify properly with them, and their views for the most part were anodyne and added little to the coverage.

Was the coverage accurate, fair and objective? Is there evidence of any systemic lapse of editorial standards?

The overall coverage was clearly accurate, impartial and met the ABC's editorial standards. There are no grounds we could see for complaints of systematic lapses or biased reporting and analysis.

Inevitably, there were some occasional missteps or questionable judgements, Again, these have been covered in our detailed comments but are worth summarising here:

- In the lead-up to the Vice Presidential debate, ABC News channel ran an extensive package on Mike Pence but nothing on Kamala Harris. Both or neither should have been run.
- In the panel discussion before the Vice Presidential debate, the so-called "miracle" drug that helped Trump overcome coronavirus was named as Remdesivir instead of Regeneron.
- The Drum's use of Lahnee Chen as a "republican voter" instead of the expert way he had been used elsewhere was a problem in terms of proper labelling and context.
- The Trump grab chosen by The World Today after the second Presidential debate) was not the best choice.