

Utne Q&A with John Donovan of Intelligence Squared

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by Soli Salgado

Intelligence Squared U.S. is an Oxford-style debate series covering a range of relevant controversial topics, from [science refuting God](#) to [“too big to fail” big banks](#). The series recently celebrated its [100th debate](#), and Utne Reader editorial intern Soli Salgado had an opportunity to talk with moderator John Donovan beforehand about how the topics develop, the challenges of moderating, and preserving the integrity of the ancient art of debate.



Utne Reader: How has previous reporting for ABC News helped you as a moderator?

John Donovan: I had 30 years of ABC and did virtually every beat there was: I was a foreign correspondent for 13 years, came back and worked as a general assignment reporter, then as the White House correspondent. In the course of all that, at some point or other I covered every printed story there ever was, sometimes three times over, and that really gave me a broad range: from economy to religion to poverty to race science to medicine to health to politics and international conflicts. We haven't really had a debate where I haven't covered the issue in some fashion or other. We just had [a debate on genetically modified food](#), and I did a broadcast on that in 1999. The debate before that was on [assisted suicide](#), and I had done a one-hour documentary on that in 1994. It's like a perfect repurposing of my entire body of knowledge gained from my career as an ABC reporter.

What non-reportorial experience has come into play for you in this job?

I'm very interested in acting and performance. I went to the Acting Conservatory at the Studio Theater in Washington. I've done a lot of improv, classical, live storytelling, Shakespeare, and comedy—all gave me instincts that allow me to be live in front of people and in the moment. It really became important when I started moderating because there's no script in the debate. It's much closer to improv in that I have to be reacting all the time and paying attention to keep it on course. That matter of performing

and being really aware of a live audience has been a perfect complement to the more intellectual side of journalism.

Describe what you expect from the 100th debate.

It's on the notion of [whether America is in decline or not](#). The idea of the 100th is that it's big and sweeping and looking at both the past and present and this administration at this time. There's an electric feeling in the room. To me it's amazing that we get 500 people to come watch a debate in New York City when there's so much else going on. You revive this ancient yet timeless format of an artistic style of debate and bring it to New York at a time when everything is so polarized. So at the 100th debate we'll talk about that achievement and have a big party afterwards and [a rapper come on stage](#) rapping about our previous accomplishments.

How are the guests chosen and invited? Are you a part of that process?

I'm in Washington, so I come up for meetings from time to time. But the process within the organization is very democratic—it's a small organization with a few people—and everybody on the staff throws in ideas that usually begin with topics that are just interesting and relevant within themselves, but without knowing there's actually a debate there, that there's a dichotomy of views with legitimate arguments on both sides. So we start with a broad discussion about topics. "We should do something about 'healthcare,' and then it becomes, 'What's relevant about it? What's being debated?' Some are framed as verdicts on situations, others are framed as a policy choice that needs to be seen.

We'll put out a lot of lines to people in their fields, or sometimes we go to interdisciplinaries and might call a philosopher to ask his opinion on science or religion. We try to get a sense of whether there's a strong debate with credible arguments on both sides, and then whether there are people willing to argue both sides. We have a producer or two full-time reaching out to potential debaters, seeing what they would say and if there's a coherence: if they can get on stage, but also being able to talk and being in a competition. Not everybody can.

We ask for ideas and get emails all the time, and we take that very seriously. But they really come from all over, from conversations. I've asked people at dinner parties for ideas for debates that are now in the hopper.

Is there a rehearsal, or are you surprised by what the debaters say in the moment?

I don't know what they're going to say in the body of the debate. They'll come with prepared remarks, but we strongly discourage debaters to come in with a script for opening remarks. We have some sense from conversations beforehand through the booking process about their arguments, so we can know if there's a head-to-head or not. But all of the debaters write. They've almost always published on these topics, and I read a lot, if not most, of those. Usually to figure out their rhythm as speakers, I'll watch them on YouTube. But on the night of the debate, I literally don't know what they're going to say. And sometimes they don't say what we expected them to argue, or their arguments come from a different angle, which is fine, so long as they're not just talking past each other.

That's where the improv comes into play; it's so unscripted, we don't know where it's going to go. Every time I go up I'm worried there's going to be a trainwreck, and so far we haven't had one.

What's the hardest part of moderating?

I figured out that the hardest part is the easiest part: the art of interruption. It is the key to moderating, and getting over the inhibition, I think any of us have, to interrupt somebody when they're trying to say something meaningful. It seems impertinent and it seems rude. But I learned that if I didn't interrupt people, they would just move way, way off topic quickly. They'd also spend an enormous amount of time elaborating on the same point, giving an example of why they were right and then another example, and another... It's a combination of the art of listening closely and the art of interruption. I tell them before going on stage that I'll do that, and most are pretty good about it.

You seem to moderate so fairly and straightforward, yet after most presidential debates, there's [controversy](#) and [criticism](#) from the public regarding the moderator. Why do you think that is? Is it just the different style of debates?

The presidential debates are set up to be for moderator failure. The candidates come in with no true intention to debate one another, and there are so many rules set out to avoid them falling on their faces, that the moderator really has a difficult time.

The trick is getting involved without making it about yourself. It's not about you: it's about the debaters and the debate. But you also have to get in to keep them on course. And the presidential debates are not set up to be debates. They're alternating press conferences. The guys come in with their talking points, and very rarely do they respond to one another's points. They just talk past each other. And the moderator who does not interrupt quickly is sitting on two press conferences going on.

I see my mission is to protect the integrity of the debate. So if somebody dodges a question, I will jump on him—not because I'm on the other guy's side, but because I'm on the debate's side. If somebody ignores a really good point landed by their opponent and tries to change the subject, I will intervene because the audience wants to hear what the response is. The presidential debates are not set up to do that. That's not what the parties want, and the parties control what the debates are about. It's very frustrating to watch those things.

[Read Donovan's Washington Post article regarding the structure of modern presidential debates.](#)

Oftentimes you see that audience members changed their minds on certain issues, when you compare how they voted at the beginning of the debate to how they voted at the end. Do you think that's something special to Intelligence Squared in its format, or is any well-structured debates capable of the same thing?

I don't think that's just us. I think any really, really good debate can do the same thing.

The social contribution that a debate really makes is that by definition the audience is forced to listen to a point of view that may oppose their own, and they're also forced to listen (for the first time, probably) to a well-articulated dissection of the weaknesses of the views they already hold. They may go in wanting to root for their side, and they may leave still rooting for their side, but they'll very likely have been exposed to arguments against their side or for the other side that they never really had to sit and pay total attention to. If the debate works well, and the debaters are really engaging in an intellectual Ping-Pong match, with real intellectual integrity, really listening to each other in real intellectual

combat—that sucks people in, in such a way that maybe they do end up acknowledging the flaws in the arguments they favored or strengths in the other guy's. Doesn't mean you have to switch sides. That's particularly relevant today when there's no middle space anymore. People for the most part have retreated to their chambers in terms of ideas they're going to hear. This little show we put on—it's a show, but it's got value and integrity. It's really an experience.

I always go to the lobby afterward because I love that moment of the debate when people spill out on the streets and sidewalks on 67th Street arguing with each other. They're really alive with it. Who knew that the fusty old model of the Oxford style debate would be so relevant and alive and engaging and entertaining? It's because they're seeing a real debate. I've come to the conclusion that there's a hunger for it, for debating civilly. We're actually pulling it off, and it's not boring. It's a tough conversation. I'm not saying it's Kumbaya. But it's not done by screaming, rather by being as smart as they can be.

Have you ever had any difficulty remaining impartial?

I came up in the tradition of ABC News, which is not so much the ruling tradition in journalism anymore. It was always in the vein of "try to keep your personal views out of it." That's where my training was and that part comes naturally. I'm really careful in not having the audience members feel what I'm thinking or that I'm trying to steer the debate in any way, because that would really kill the integrity of it. I've found it's been easy to pretend to be impartial.

What have been the most memorable debates you've moderated?

I like the cultural topics that are more about the human condition and less about what the government should be doing. We've done [whether there's life after death](#), [whether religion is a force of good or evil](#), [the state of men in society](#). We've done [whether college football is a good or bad thing for the university and the players](#). Nobody's really debating these topics. Whereas all the policy issues, you can hear debates on them all the time. You'll hear lots of panel discussions on life after death, for example, but to actually hear actual evidence mounting on both sides, it's an interesting thing.

The most difficult one we've done was a few years ago on [whether or not the U.N. should recognize Palestine](#). The debate was between two opponents who were both Jewish, and it became very bitter and very personal to the two of them. They began to berate each other, each calling the other a traitor. They each took the charge so personally that they began to scream at each other. For the first and only time, I left my position at the podium and I walked around to the front of the stage, and with my back to the audience I faced them and raised my hands, quite consciously hoping to invoke Moses parting the Red Sea, and asked them to please be silent. They finally stopped, and I told them that what they were doing was essentially opposite to the goal of our debate and that they need to pull it back. And they did, though that was probably the roughest moment.

What would you like our *Utne* readers to know about Intelligence Squared if they haven't heard about it before? There's a lot of overlap between the intellectual aspiration of the *Utne* readers and Intelligence Squared. There's open-mindedness and curiosity, a thirst to know, and desire to be entertained. These are entertaining. When you hear the word "debate" it doesn't sound like it's going to

be fun evening, but it is. People come on dates and romance each other at the event. It's a lot more fun from an intellectual point of view than it sounds like.

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