



Communication Matters: The NCA Podcast | **TRANSCRIPT**
BONUS Episode: VEEPs 2020: Kamala Harris vs. Mike Pence

****Please note: This is a rough transcription of this audio podcast. This transcript is not edited for spelling, grammar, or punctuation.****

Participants:

Trevor Parry-Giles
Karrin Anderson
Darrian Carroll
Sumana Chattopadhyay
Kimberley Hannah-Prater
Shawn Parry-Giles
Kristina Sheeler
Mary Vavrus
Tammy Vigil

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RECORDING BEGINS

Trevor Parry-Giles:

Welcome to *Communication Matters, the NCA podcast*. I'm Trevor Parry-Giles, the Executive Director of The National Communication Association.

Recording of Susan Page:

Good evening from the University of Utah in Salt Lake City. Welcome to the first and only vice-presidential debate of 2020. Please welcome California Senator Kamala Harris and Vice President Mike Pence.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

Hi, listeners and welcome again to a special bonus episode of *Communication Matters, the NCA podcast*. This is the third in a three-part special series of virtual public programs presented by NCA. Now NCA typically holds public programs twice each year and these public programs serve to disseminate relevant information about communication to broad public audiences. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic though, NCA's fall public programs have been reimagined as a special series of *Communication Matters* podcasts as well as video recordings of these important conversations. The public program series entitled *Communicating During a Presidential Election Year* includes three public programs: "The Politics of Health and Healthcare: Communicating about Health in a Presidential Election Year," "Communicating about the Role of Race and Social Change in Politics" and today's conversation entitled "VEEPs 2020: Kamala Harris versus Mike Pence." So, be sure to check out NCA's YouTube channel for a video recording of today's and the other two conversations in this special public program series.



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So, in the wake of the vice presidential debate that occurred on October 7th, we've brought together a panel of experts to discuss "VEEPs 2020: Kamala Harris versus Mike Pence" and I'm going to ask all of our panelists to introduce themselves in alphabetical order, letting us know their name and their affiliation.

Karrin Anderson:

Karrin Anderson from Colorado State University.

Darrian Carroll:

I'm Darrian Carroll from the University of Maryland.

Sumana Chattopadhyay:

Hi, I'm Sumana Chattopadhyay from Marquette University.

Kimberley Hannah-Prater:

Hi, I'm Kim Hannah-Prater from the Community College of Baltimore County.

Shawn Parry-Giles:

I'm Shawn Parry-Giles from the University of Maryland.

Kristina Sheeler:

Hi, I'm Kristy Sheeler from Indiana University-Purdue University, Indianapolis.

Mary Vavrus:

Hi, I'm Mary Vavrus from the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities.

Tammy Vigil:

Hi, I'm Tammy Vigil from Boston University.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

I'm so thrilled you all could join us today and thank you so much for appearing on this public program and on *Communication Matters*. Listeners, you can view all of our panelists' full and very extensive biographies by heading to our website at natcom.org/PublicPrograms, all one word. I also wanted to mention that today's public program is co-sponsored with The Mark and Heather Rosenker Center for Political Communication and Civic Leadership at the University of Maryland and The Communication Research Center at Boston University.

So, the commission on presidential debates took over the organizing and hosting of the presidential and vice-presidential debates in 1988 and since then, we've had 30 of these



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presidential and vice-presidential debates. And of those, five debates have included female candidates and six debates have included a candidate of color. Now Sumana, I know you have an extensive understanding and history of the presidential debating process and the commission's role in that process. Could you maybe talk a little bit about the history of these debates and some of the highlights that we need to be familiar with?

Sumana Chattopadhyay:

Sure. So, I guess you sort of mentioned a little bit about the commission. The commission's primary purpose was to actually sponsor and produce the quadrennial general election debates and also to undertake research and educational activities relating to the debates. So, and this is a non-profit, non-partisan corporation and it has conducted debates in '88, '92, '96, 2000, 2004, 2008, 2012 and 2016 and of course, in this current year of 2020. And so, this commission actually has a big educational role. It wants to educate voters and it engages in various activities beyond just producing and sponsoring the presidential debates because it also creates a lot of educational materials. And also, the reach of the commission is not just in the U.S. It has also worked with other countries around the world in recent years like Bosnia, Burundi, Colombia, Ghana, Romania to mention a few where they have also done political debates in their campaigns there. So, it's interesting in terms of how the commission works with the debates. They meet with both parties and also there's some kind of discussion about the format for the different debates during the season and both parties sort of have to approve and then that they sort of like right now for in this current election, the COVID-19 pandemic and the President testing positive, the commission has said that the next debates have to happen virtually. So, there is a lot of things they do with format as well which plays a role in how the debate proceedings happen. So, and we can get into this a little bit further with the VP debate later in terms of why certain questions were asked and in terms of time limits and everything else. So, and of course, there are many interesting debates and I know we'll talk more about gender and race later in terms of candidates. Right? So, I'm going to save that for maybe later. But yeah, so, of course, Barack Obama was the first black candidate to be on the national stage for a debate and we've had five debates with women candidates in the past. And so, we'll get into that a little bit more I think after this.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

Karrin, one of the preceding moments before the commission took over was in 1984 and that was the first set of debates that featured a female candidate. Do you have any thoughts on the legacy of Geraldine Ferraro and how that influences what we're thinking in terms of our assessments of Kamala Harris and the Mike Pence debate?

Karrin Anderson:

Yeah, absolutely. Thanks, Trevor. 1984 was an exciting moment for women candidates in the Democratic Party because Geraldine Ferraro was the first woman to be on a major party ticket as



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the vice-presidential nominee. There was at the time a perceived real imbalance between her level of political and particularly foreign policy experience compared to the Democratic Party vice presidential nominee George H. W. Bush who was, of course, a sitting vice president and had been the head of the CIA. In the international part of the debate, they took a question about Lebanon and Ferraro answered and then Bush responded. He followed up by trying to correct some of the information that he thought was wrong and he called her Mrs. Ferraro instead of Congressmember, Congresswoman and he used the phrase let me help you and he sort of explained a little bit about the situation in Lebanon. And this is how Ferraro responded, she said, "Let me just say first of all that I almost resent Vice President Bush your patronizing attitude that you have to teach me about foreign policy." And the audience clapped and it's the moment that gets played most frequently from that debate. It's the one we see kind of over and over and that was in my mind at the moment in the debate when Pence and Harris had been asked about the killing of Breonna Taylor. And Pence was expressing surprise that as a former prosecutor Kamala Harris questioned the actions of the police or the decisions of the grand jury. And she responded by saying, "I will not sit here and be lectured by the Vice President on what it means to enforce the laws of our country. I'm the only one on this stage who has personally prosecuted everything from child sexual assault to homicide."

And so, to me, there are two things illustrated by that exchange. One is how decades after the first vice presidential debate featuring a woman, women are still articulating their qualifications and credentials because it's not assumed. But secondly, that Harris really kind of turned that on Pence. So, rather than trying to have to compensate or explain why she is qualified to be in this position, she basically said you don't know what you're talking about. I'm the only one who's been in this position and she was able to use her professional and political background to really flip that script on Pence and take the position as the qualified person to answer that question. And that was frankly an exciting moment in the history of presidential and vice-presidential debates.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

I thought of that Geraldine Ferraro moment when Rick Santorum on CNN after the debate criticized Harris' answer about foreign policy and it occurred to me that mansplaining has not gone away in the decades especially about foreign policy which is a weird thing and we can talk about that when we get to talking about gender. No, that's really fascinating and I think the Geraldine Ferraro legacy is still there. What about Hillary Clinton's legacy as the only woman to participate in the presidential debates? What would we say about her experiences and her legacy and the impact that it may or may not have had on Kamala Harris?

Shawn Parry-Giles:

I kind of want to juxtapose, we can juxtapose Hillary with Sarah Palin but I don't think given that we're talking about vice presidents to the base that we want to ignore Sarah Palin. And so, one



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of the things that going into these debates is the meta debate. There's all this expectations game and how people are going to do, what they're going to do poorly or not. And of course, Palin went in as an underdog candidate. She had already showed that she may not have the intellectual rigor to do the job and with McCain who was an older candidate, there was worry whether or not she could step in. So, rather than try to rise to show her intellectual rigor, in many ways she played up the populism that she could play up. So, if you go back and listen to that debate, she's using a vernacular more of the people. So, she started off by whispering to Joe Biden and said hey, can I call you Joe? And it got picked up by the sound and she would use expressions kind of like Bill Clinton did. So, it's not that she's the only one who'd play that kind of role but she'd be like oh, shucks, Joe or she'd say darn right, we want some tax breaks. And so, throughout the whole thing, she was trying to play up her populism to undercut this idea well, yeah, she may not be the smartest person on the stage and know all about it but she knows the people. Then you get to Hillary Clinton which is just the juxtaposition of Sarah Palin. And so, her expectation was to come in and show that she wasn't too wonkish and then not relatable and this is where a lot of this issue about likability comes into play we'll talk about I'm sure with Harris and this fine line you got to be smart enough but you got to be likable. And I was just looking at, I think it was in *The Atlantic*, they did all these freeze frames of both candidates from Harris and Pence and you see Harris smiling through much of it. Sometimes it was sarcastic smile. And if Pence smiled at all, it was a smirk like I can't believe I'm having to manage this and be on stage and deal with it. So, I think this historical performance of the people who came before them is always ever present I think in the ones who come thereafter.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

Did we see any evidence of Harris attempting to calibrate or navigate these gender dynamics in the debate in other ways besides smiling? I mean are there other instances for how gender played in the debate in Harris' performance and in Pence's? How did Pence make adjustments for the role of gender here that may or may not be reflective of past debates? Kim, what do you think?

Kimberley Hannah-Prater:

One thing I noticed pretty early on was how when Mike Pence would say something that seemed to contradict the Joe Biden/Kamala Harris positions, that Kamala would then kind of quietly say like that's not correct or that's not right and even when she first reclaimed her own time, it was a very kind of steady neutral tone because I knew that there was going to be a lot of surveillance of her tone of voice when asserting herself during the debate. So, from the first time that she was just basically saying I don't agree with your interpretation of our positions, her tone had to be very somewhat feminine in order to kind of deal with the backlash she would inevitably get from just speaking up at all. So, that's one thing I noticed.



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Tammy Vigil:

And to sort of just build on that too, thinking about Pence, Pence's tone was one that I thought was very interesting. He has this very soft-spoken way of presenting himself and he's saying things and doing things that are actually extremely aggressive. But the fact that he's doing it in such a soft-spoken manner makes that aggression sort of seem to fly under the radar for some people. I think most of the time a lot of women watching could see that and feel that familiarity of that happening in other places. But when he does that, it sort of helps the rest of folks who don't want to see the aggression ignore the aggression. So, that soft spoken tone I think helped. The other thing I would say too is that at some points, I would think he operated almost like what I would consider the father in an old American sitcom who was reprimanding his wife or maybe his daughter where he would say things to the moderator like now, Susan, this is important so I'm going to continue on. And he would assert himself in a way that seemed polite and familiar but was still an act of aggression.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

So, Mike Pence imitating Ronald Reagan, imitating Ward Cleaver. Right? Yeah, Mary.

Mary Vavrus:

Yeah, I wanted to build on that too because as I was watching the debate, I was finding myself getting more and more uncomfortable with Mike Pence's style, not only what he was saying which was problematic but how he was saying it. And I was realizing that so much of his tone and style, Tammy, that you were just mentioning give him credibility. He's just naturally credible because he's got this white patriarchal authority working for him and it gives him a pass and absolves him of responsibility for two of the most horrendous pandemics he's presided over. Right? The one in Indiana that led to an enormous amount of infection and deaths from HIV/AIDS and then, of course, the coronavirus pandemic. And simply by virtue of the fact that he can modulate himself to such an extent and get away with saying terribly aggressive things in a very reasonable rational way I think allows him to take a pass on being responsible for an enormous amount of suffering and death. And that made me uncomfortable. But then also when you yoke that to the fact that he refused to take no for an answer, when he refused to stop when Susan Page kept saying your time is up, your time is up, he steamrolled right over her and I was just thinking how much he could get away with by virtue of the fact he refuses to follow the rules but does so in this way that seems so non-threatening. He could probably get—well, we know he's gotten away with some pretty horrendous things and the fact that he just naturally is able to do this because he's white, male and patriarchal in that way was chilling to me. Absolutely chilling. And I just walked away from—I'm still disturbed by him, but I walked away from that feeling like wow, he's even worse than Trump.



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Tammy Vigil:

But at one point, he gave the moderator permission to do what she had actually said she was going to do anyway and it all gets then compounded by the fact that Kamala Harris had to moderate her own responses. And so, she couldn't really attack back because that would have made her look like she was the rude one because he was so soft-spoken. And so, that caused additional problems for Kamala Harris.

Sumana Chattopadhyay:

So, and also interestingly going back to what Trevor was saying earlier, Hillary Clinton predicted it because she did an interview earlier before the debate and she specifically said that that Pence would try to undermine Kamala but without bombast. In fact, to quote her, she said, "Pence will somehow subtly undercut Kamala. He will try to say well, that's not the way it's done." And so, then and she went on to say that Kamala had to be firm while at the same time being polite. So, it's like in going back to Hillary's legacy, I think part of it is she was there. She's done this three times and also, she was ready to talk about what Kamala would likely experience on that stage with somebody like Pence because Pence is very different from Trump. And so, he gets away with things because he speaks in a certain way. So, it's kind of interesting that people did bring that up. Absolutely. That bothered me as well.

Kristina Sheeler:

I also watched Hillary Clinton's new podcast where she spoke with Kamala before the debate and she said some of the same things that you just mentioned, Sumana, about Pence being very subtle. And so, he's going to try these, what she called slights at the time and paint Harris into a box. And he certainly tried to do some of those things. And I'll have to say being from Indiana, Pence's style is I guess something that we're used to. He's very skilled at pivoting and not necessarily answering the question but then pivoting to something that he wants to say. And in particular, he often shifts it to some concern or trust in the American people and some sort of kind of generic statement that you really can't argue with. I trust the American people. I trust the justice system. And so, then by contrast, the suggestion is well, Harris, former prosecutor, don't you trust the justice system, or don't you trust the American people? And so, it's that classic suggesting but not really saying it, that Trump is also very skilled at. He has proven that he's very skilled in that way as well. I also, building on the Harris awareness of not wanting to be perceived as aggressive, I feel like there's a level of emotional labor there that women and in particular, women of color often know that they have to deal with. I mean she's smiling. She's not raising her voice. She's choosing when and where to jump in. She for the most part cut herself off when the moderator tried to cut her off except for as the debate went on and she became more assertive. But it's just that awareness that I have to do this with a smile on my face. I have to seem calm and soft-spoken because I have to be aware that if I'm not, I could upset someone. I could make someone



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feel uncomfortable. And so, just all of the weight of all of these various stereotypes and expectations I felt were on her shoulders.

Shawn Parry-Giles:

But even as she did that, I thought she was assertive in the sense she would just stop it and it's like I need to speak, I'm talking, you know, the meme and things. But if you go on, if I went on Twitter with a Republican bent and the same thing just like Trump said, she's unlikable. I mean this notion of likeability is playing a lot in the press. I mean we've talked about it as scholars for a very long time. But it really has been become picked up by the right to say she's not likable and everything was about oh, she's too pushy, she's too confrontational. And so, they're trying to hype that up as she's trying to play it down.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

That assertiveness and aggressiveness versus nice and pleasant has always been and continues to be a double bind that female candidates face, right? We know that. How does that intersect with any kind of racially charged double binds? Aside from Barack Obama, Kamala Harris is the only person of color to participate in any of these debates at the general election level. So, it seems to me and I think Kristy's point about emotional labor is really fascinating because she seemed to have a double whammy of emotional labor, right? She had to negotiate all the gender things but then she had this additional dynamic of the racial identity and how that played. How do you think she did in that regard? How did she navigate all of that? And it's probably artificial to separate them out. But how did they intersect? How did they work together?

Darrian Carroll:

I thought one thing that was interesting is kind of how she seemed to be left alone on the stage in the sense that the moderator was able or more willing to try and bring her in than the moderator seemed to be willing to try and bring Pence in. And what I thought was interesting also was how there seemed to be a willingness to allow that to happen early in the debate, to be like I'm going to go with moderator even though this time doesn't seem equitable. But as the debate gets to be later, there's even a moment where Kamala is like he interrupted me, I need more time here. And I think that that distinction really highlights how her existence was pushed to a place where she didn't really feel helped by the moderator but felt like she still needed to do work that was important for her side of the campaign that I think is unique to both her being a woman and being a black woman in America.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

That's interesting.



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Tammy Vigil:

I think the labels that come along with being a woman and being a woman of color often inform the way that people are going to read whatever is going to happen anyway. And so, like for example, I've been accused of being a fiery Latina more often than I would like by deans, by department chairs, no matter what I do. And so, I kind of watch what I'm doing around them to say that and I think that the stereotype of the angry black woman was something that was going to be brought up in relationship to Kamala Harris and she kind of tried to moderate that in some ways and try not to be too forceful but being forceful enough. There's that weird fine line that she had to walk and no matter what happened, people are going to bring up those stereotypes in their critiques and we even saw that in some of the post analysis already that's come out. And so, one of the things that I keep sort of wishing for her and wished for her before the debate was that she just knows that that's going to be a critique and then just could be her authentic self anyway. I think there were a lot of people in looking at some of the sort of Facebook and Twitter responses to the way that she behaved, there were a lot of people, of women and women of color who identified with both the restraint and then the need to be assertive to sort of help yourself because others aren't going to help you.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

Isn't it also interesting that the assumption is that she modulated her true self which is more aggressive and more angry or whatever? She did the work to modulate herself and that assumes something about racial authenticity, that she is really deep down, she would have just taken him to the woodshed.

Tammy Vigil:

I think that's a very keen assessment but I think also part of that might be the reflection of self in the critique. Like I watched that debate and I thought yeah, I would have had to control myself a lot more because that was offensive what he was doing. And so, for me, that's kind of what that is. But you're right. There is an underlying assumption about her and her nature that is unfair and I think unfounded.

Sumana Chattopadhyay:

Yeah. So, if I may add, Trevor, what I found particularly interesting in terms of her identity as a woman as well as a woman of color, I found that in the answer though people would say that that was a question that wasn't answered satisfactory by either which was about the age of the president. But I found it very telling because in that particular answer, she actually talks specifically about she was the first woman of color that was elected to be Attorney General of California and she talked about her experience with the United States Department of Justice and also talked about serving on the Senate Intelligence Committee and how she has traveled around the world and has all this experience. And so, that kind of made me think that it was a question about



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whether she was ready to be commander-in-chief and she had to throw it in there in a very subtle way. So, yes. So, people said she didn't answer the question but I thought she indirectly did by talking about how she was ready if needed to be but she was not doing it in a blatant in your face kind of a way. So, that was something that I did pay attention to and I thought she did it pretty well I think.

Tammy Vigil:

She also though has that reputation in the Kavanaugh hearing. I mean it's not just the assumption that she can do it. She can do it. She could have taken him to lunch and just gone after him. And so, she did. It wasn't what we have seen her do, what she has done time and time again which was really stand up and put these people in their place. And I think she did have to modulate that for the occasion.

Kimberley Hannah-Prater:

I saw some news coverage in the days leading up to the debate that basically expressed how Kamala would have to scale it back from her skills as a prosecutor and what we saw in the Kavanaugh hearings and in some of the other hearings and just pull back from that more questioning since she was in a different genre of the debate. I wanted to follow up with something Sumana was talking about where Kamala was basically addressing her biography in response to the question of the President and Vice President Biden's ages. So, it was interesting how after Kamala went over a lot of her personal and professional biography, how she said that she shares similar goals with Biden and that's why Biden selected her. I thought that was really powerful because it definitely expressed like it's less about her identity of being a black woman but like here's how I grew up but also here are my professional qualifications for serving in this position. And even though Kamala didn't directly address a response to that question, she kind of subtly said like I've had so much professional experiences relevant to this job that I could potentially step in if necessary. So, I thought it was very interesting how she kind of merged the personal biography, her professional experiences so far and how that could potentially serve as a benefit if she needed to step in as president.

Karrin Anderson:

I'd like to follow up on that as well because the other question that, of course, has gotten a lot of attention that she didn't answer directly was the court packing question. So, both she and Biden got that question and they both handled it really differently. Biden gave sort of a what I would call a standard dodge of that question and just shifted the conversation to the confirmation process or whatever. Harris came prepared for that question and gave an answer that I think is quite surprising in the history of presidential debates and didn't really get as much attention as it should have gotten. She's like yeah, let's talk about court packing. Let's talk about the fact that in all of these appellate court judges' nominations that Trump has made, 50 or so, not one is a black



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person. And so, right there, she's shifting the conversation to structural racism and the ways in which yeah, we pack all of these roles in different ways. There's ways to pack the court that isn't just adding numbers to the Supreme Court membership. To me, that really made an impression about the importance of having people with diverse intersectional identities at these tables and in these conversations because I had never, I didn't even know that statistic until she told us in the vice presidential debate and I certainly hadn't thought about it to be directly connected to the question of court packing. So, I really appreciated the way that she started to shift some of those terms in ways that are not the standard kind of response that you hear typically from candidates.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

Yeah. You're unique in your praise of her acumen in answering that question. Everybody else is just she didn't answer the question. So, yeah, I appreciate that. I think that's right. It's also, of course, true that she is unique in her capacity to make that point and that's the point you're making about the importance of having people of color in these situations and in these debates. So, that's good.

Mary Vavrus:

This is such an interesting thread that we're on. I wanted to mention that prior to Biden picking Harris, you remember all the talk about the folks he was interviewing and considering for the job. And so many of them, the women of color, in particular Harris, were getting the advice don't look too ambitious. You don't want to look like you're auditioning for the role. And so, somehow she's managed to work this double bind really effectively or challenge the double bind really effectively by showing how incredibly smart and experienced she is without looking like she's trying to push Biden out of the position, something that we might all be concerned about, right? So, somehow she's managed to show that she's really experienced, ready to do the job, willing to point out the issues about structural racism that are very present and worrisome and still not make us overly concerned that she's ready to push Biden off the stage and take over as president.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

Stage a coup on January 21st. No, that's good. That also bleeds into the next question I think that we should probably talk about and that's the sort of dynamics of what's going on the far-left wing or the progressive end of things with regard to Kamala Harrison. Progressives are maybe not overly enthusiastic about the Biden-Harris ticket especially given Kamala Harris' prosecutorial past. How did she navigate all of that? The Black Lives Matter movement, the calls for defunding the police, the discussions about structural racism. How did she—did she I guess is the first question. Did she attempt to placate the progressive wing of the party or did she just get an assist from Pence when he indicated that she's according to *Newsweek* the most liberal senator in the United States Senate?



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Sumana Chattopadhyay:

I've heard a couple of takes on that. Like I do think that she, being Biden's running mate, because this is something that has come up often, that would she embrace her primary platform, or would she talk more about Biden's platform? So, I think she managed to do it in a somewhat effective way because she talked about the Green Deal or fracking and Biden doesn't want to end fracking. And so, but one thing that I've heard is that maybe when Pence actually called her out and said oh, you want to frack and this, but at the same time he also said you are this prosecutor or whatever. So, he was going all over the place with her. So, I think one thing she could have done is highlight that hypocrisy, that at one point you're saying I'm too liberal and I and Biden are going to do this and at the other side, you're saying oh, I'm too conservative or too not progressive. So, I think maybe that's one area where she could have done a little bit more with that. There was an opening but maybe she did not want to attack a lot in this debate. So, maybe that's what it was. But in my opinion, she did okay but maybe she would have done a little bit more there.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

Just let it sit out there as an enthymeme, right?

Darrian Carroll:

I guess for me I think that as one of the people that might be part of the progressive wing of the Democratic Party I guess, this is as proud of the Biden-Harris campaign as I've been. What really stood out to me was the part where they get to the Breonna Taylor question and Harris notes that justice was not served for Breonna Taylor at the same time that Pence wasn't as good as Trump was against Biden and being like oh, you don't care about law and order. You can't say law and order. I think that Harris finds a way to both show that she continues to believe in law at the same time that she understands that law and systemic racism is happening in America and is a problem. So, I was happy with that during the debate. I was really proud of that.

Kristina Sheeler:

I'll add one more thing, Trevor. I agree with what Darrian and Sumana said. I would only point out a couple of other things where Harris had to I think moderate because Pence was really trying to paint her, as Sumana said, as the liberal wing. I mean kept bringing up Green New Deal, kept bringing up, I think he used some language that really tried to paint her in that particular box. And so, she had to sort of step away and say no, this is what Joe Biden's platform is about. So, I thought she did a nice job of saying well, she didn't say it this way but I'm not the one running for president now. It's Joe Biden. These are his policies. This is what he stands for. These are the facts. I think all of that helped to try to moderate. Maybe she's not—she's not I guess the radical or progressive candidate that maybe some want but I thought she did a nice job of toeing that line.



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Kimberley Hannah-Prater:

I just wanted to add one other thing about Kamala as prosecutor. I found it interesting when they were discussing Breonna Taylor and George Floyd, how when Mike Pence responded, he used such terms as seems to be opposites in his book such as rioting and looting versus like rule of law and then saying Kamala believes the police are or the law enforcement are systemically racist. So, it's kind of like on one hand saying like oh, she's happy with rioting and looting AKA Black Lives Matter but also she criticizes law enforcement. So, I found it very kind of peculiar that Mike Pence would kind of hold two opposing judgments about Kamala while still criticizing her for being a former prosecutor.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

You found that peculiar, huh? Shawn, did you want to follow up on that?

Shawn Parry-Giles:

Well, there's a part when she was listing up all the people that were supporting the Biden-Harris ticket and it was like generals and it was all these kind of middle of the road non-political. We didn't get a list of progressives who were coming on board. I mean I just felt there were times I agree that she did give a nod towards more the progressive side, Black Lives Matters but other ways, David Brooks' column today was all about how in the COVID response, she was like we need a—she wasn't talking about such a huge government intervention. She was talking about the American people need to know this information so they can make choices for their own families which is a very kind of conservative response to it. So, I think she was very strategic going into it as many do move towards the middle to pick up more independents rather than progressives and we'll see what happens with the progressive side when it comes to voting.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

Well, if Darrian was so impressed, maybe that's a sign that she did okay.

Tammy Vigil:

So, I think there were a couple of things just to mention. One was I really liked the line that kind of got hidden that she said about bad cops are bad for good cops. That was a good way of sort of threading the needle that she needed to thread there. But she also I think one of the things that we can't underestimate was how effective—I think Trevor, you kind of alluded to this before—Mike Pence was at making the case for her. So, in doing that though, one of the things that he did was he created a contrast that if you are on the far end of the progressive scale, you're looking at these two people representing the two tickets and you're saying okay, which of them is at all closer to where I stand? And I think he provided that comparison to say that the right was way right compared to where Biden and Harris stand.



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Trevor Parry-Giles:

That's really interesting. So, a lot of the commentary afterward, after the debate on Wednesday was that this probably isn't going to move the needle, but this vice-presidential debate was really important. And it was important because the candidates at the top of the ticket in both cases are septuagenarians and advanced septuagenarians in the case of Joe Biden and that Donald Trump's kind of a sick guy. I mean he's got this COVID thing going and that's having an impact. So, this vice-presidential debate was really important. Do you think that's right and do you think that maybe we need more vice presidential debates in the future or just if the candidates are really old and sick? How did the candidates deal with the importance of this debate if it was important at all and what does that tell us about moving forward?

Kristina Sheeler:

Well, I for one would love to see more vice-presidential debates. I'll say it. I think it was and is important for another a reason. I mean arguably the stakes were really high for Pence. He's the sitting vice president that their campaign is behind in the polls. President Trump is ill. President Trump didn't move the needle during the presidential debate. So, Vice President Pence really had to do some damage control and move things forward and I think he held his own with his followers. I don't know that he, as you said Trevor, I don't know that that minds were changed at this point in time. But I feel like the two vice presidential candidates are sometimes also the adults in the room and I would like to see more of them in public.

Sumana Chattopadhyay:

Yeah, I agree. Like vice presidential debates add a different flavor to the campaign and also, I was thinking more from the perspective of the diversity of voices because if you look at Joe Biden, he's this old white guy and the Democratic Party is looking different now. It's not just about old white men. So, also Kamala being there, she's a woman of color and not only she's black, she's also Asian-American half. So, there is a broader identity that she appeals to. So, even bringing that and from the Democratic standpoint, I think that is also something that adds to the whole piece because, like Darrian mentioned, the progressives are getting more on board with the ticket and I think if it was just, if we did not see enough of that extra voice there, even for the Democrats, I think it's a positive. Even though Joe has been doing well in the polls in general, I do feel that Kamala's candidacy has added more energy to the race in many ways. So, just for that reason, I think—also, thinking back to past elections like even with somebody like Sarah Palin. She had issues but that was a debate that a lot of folks watched. So, sometimes it's also the entertainment part of the piece which comes more in VP debates. We had the whole fly incident in this one. It's always like VP debates have something happening there that is not necessarily all about the politics. So, I think that there's a little bit of that as well with the VP debates bring to the fore as well.



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Trevor Parry-Giles:

Okay. Anybody who had the fly box on their VP debate bingo card, check that off. I was wondering how long it would take for that to come up. I think you're right, Sumana. But let's say moving forward, Dick Cheney versus Joe Lieberman or Tim Kaine versus Mike Pence, I mean that diversity piece may not always be there. Should we still have more vice-presidential debates? John Nance Garner once said that the vice presidency is worth a warm bucket of spit. Maybe spit was what he said. So, are we trapped in this weird place with this weird office that nobody seems to like despite Kristy's call for more vice-presidential debates?

Karrin Anderson:

So, one thing that I kept thinking, I mean a lot of people were anticipating this debate because so many of the norms of presidential debates were broken in the first one and I think people were looking towards this debate to say okay, can the format or ritual be salvaged after that last debate. And so, although political scientists want to focus just on did it move the needle or not and if it didn't immediately move the needle, it's a useless exercise, I think we as communication scholars know that things like televised presidential debates are rituals that help us construct Democratic culture. And so, yeah, I mean I want us to continue to nurture these and also to protect them as sort of exchanges of ideas that everybody is contributing to in good faith and not trying to sabotage or derail. Because if we don't do that, it's just another step away from sort of Democratic norms in our political system and as we all know, that so many of those Democratic norms have been just obliterated in the last three years that I think that's why this the vice presidential debate felt additionally important.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

And Mike Pence arguably calibrated his performance to sort of respond to what happened with Donald Trump a week ago, right? Yeah, Mary, go ahead.

Mary Vavrus:

Yeah. And I also would like to see more vice-presidential debates because at the debate itself, I learn a lot if not substance of platforms necessarily, I'm learning a lot about the demeanor of the two candidates. But I also think that it's not only the debate itself that is so important in the media environment today. It's the way in which the debate generates means, the way parts of it get taken up and circulated across different social media platforms that gives people an opportunity to interact with it in really particular ways. A lot of that has played against Kamala Harris prior to the debate anyway. There was a lot of really racist, sexist stuff that was circulating across Facebook in particular about her prior to the debate. And all of those moments of interaction and the intertextuality of the debates has an important role in helping us to figure out who the candidates are, how they will be in office when one of them is in office but also just help us to give meaning to the office itself as well, right? And negotiate what that means now in the face of so few



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Democratic norms holding up now in the face of a president who's very sick apparently. All of these things are really important moments for allowing us to figure out the meaning of all of these different aspects of the office and the candidates who are vying for that office.

Darrian Carroll:

Yeah, I agree. I think that vice presidential debates do a lot to produce what we think the candidates will be. The other thing that I thought was interesting is that it seemed like for some recipients of the debate, this was an opportunity for Harris to gain ground surprisingly. Like for example, I watched the MSNBC coverage directly after the debate and there was like focus on Harris' ability to remain stern yet to clearly identify that there was a problem there. So, like one of the anchors noted that that was the kind of look you get from a black mother and then like Michael Steele comes on and Michael Steele was like yeah, that is the kind of look you get from a black mother. And I was like I think these kind of things are helpful at this moment even if it's not moving the needle but to kind to shore up some parts of who they are looking to get to vote for them to be like I can be comfortable with this, there's something I can identify with here that I wouldn't have seen Kamala Harris do if we hadn't watched the debate.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

And that leads nicely into the next sort of question that I'm interested in your take on. How did the news media intertextually or otherwise engage and the pundits and how is the democratic culture processing and thinking about this vice-presidential debate? What can we expect to see on *Saturday Night Live* with Maya Rudolph and whoever that guy is who plays Mike Pence? How is the culture processing all of this do you think?

Kimberley Hannah-Prater:

Yeah. So, I want to kind of briefly address parts of that question.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

Okay.

Kimberley Hannah-Prater:

So, after the debate I kind of was flipping through different networks. But I did catch Van Jones' response or part of his response saying as far as like how Harris performed, that she was definitely navigating that tightrope as a black woman. Kind of like you don't want to come across as the angry black woman but also you want to not be just run over by Mike Pence especially when he said things that were untrue about the Biden-Harris positions. So, it was interesting seeing that dynamic between Ben Jones and Rick Santorum. So, just hearing the interplay about was race important and how she depicted herself. There were other commentaries I heard on NBC kind of like that it did not move the needle as far as some of the pundits believe there. So, it was very



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interesting how immediately after the debate, it just seemed kind of a consensus that both candidates seem to do what they were kind of expected to do. To mention as far as humor on the show directly following the debate, of *The Late Show* with Stephen Colbert, Colbert states that I spent the whole debate on the middle of my seat. So, just talking about how less chaotic the debate came across, that, of course, there were jokes about the fly on Mike Pence's head. And even last night on *The Daily Show*, Trevor Noah kind of like made light of the fact that Mike Pence actively avoided responding to several questions that he was directly asked about and there was a whole game show where basically it would be a quote from Mike Pence's response and then there would be four options of what was the question that Pence was asked. So, it was very interesting to see how some of these hosts have responded. I have a couple of predictions about SNL. Of course, we'll have to wait and see but I think while there'll be some jokes about the fly on Mike Pence's head and about Kamala Harris' facial expressions, I really think that there's going to be—oh, yeah and I wanted to mention the person who's played Mike Pence the past several seasons is Beck Bennett. So, he will probably be back but I think what's going to end up happening in this weekend's episode is a lot more cameos by celebrities. So, I think there's going to be interruptions of the vice presidential debate by Alec Baldwin playing Trump, by Jim Carrey playing Biden and who knows what else? There may even be references to the recent news about Amy Comey Barrett having served within a political group as a handmaiden. So, I wouldn't be surprised if there's not references to Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*. So, I think that there can be some humor that comes directly from this debate and I definitely think Maya Rudolph is well equipped to portray Harris. But knowing how SNL has treated VP debates in the past, I wouldn't be surprised if there's more interruptions by the celebrity guests.

Tammy Vigil:

I wouldn't be surprised to see if maybe they got Jeff Goldblum to come in and be one of those interruptions. Ask the fly, right?

Trevor Parry-Giles:

Oh, yeah.

Tammy Vigil:

For reference. I think that would be one. I'm also interested to see if they end up doing Maya Rudolph referring to Pence as Michael because there was the moment when Conway called him Michael Pence. And so, bringing back that Mamala role that they had her step into the first debate as the first time. So, I think those are going to be a couple of things that might be fun and interesting ideas for *Saturday Night Live*, not that there isn't a plethora of them. And I think, Kim, you've done a wonderful job of like outlining a whole ton of them plus I'm sure Plexiglas will come into play somehow too.



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Trevor Parry-Giles:

Yeah, no doubt.

Tammy Vigil:

But I was a little disappointed I have to stay in the larger discussion of the debates and maybe I'm not disappointed or shouldn't be surprised. But I am disappointed that people didn't pay more attention to Mike Pence's aggression because it was so subtle and I know that people actually have been framing his performance as much more polite and even I think I've heard the word genteel a couple of times. And so, while it's not surprising, it is disappointing that folks aren't seeing that aggression.

Karrin Anderson:

Yeah, I wanted to pick up on that because I think one thing that this debate allows us to do or the two debates allow us to do if we take them together is talk about how Pence and Trump are two different faces of this authoritarian masculinity, that we sort of saw the boorish Trump version of it in 2016 when he was sort of menacing Hillary Clinton on the stage and people talked about that quite a bit and women were talking about sort of recognizing the men in their workplaces and lives who had intimidated them in that way. But what Pence adds to that discussion is he is also a face of authoritarian masculinity but he's the face that people see in sort of conservative evangelical circles and it's this very solicitous, polite, almost chivalrous but also very condescending articulation of his authority. And so, as people kept saying, as pundits especially said Mike Pence's debate style is very, very different from Donald Trump's, I think it's up to us to point out the things we were talking about at the beginning of this conversation which is it's the same power dynamic. It's the same thing going on. And in fact, this notion of authoritarian masculinity is also shaping how people are evaluating Harris. So, yeah, the debate that's going on implicitly in all of these debates is what is the continued role of authoritarian masculinity in our political culture?

Shawn Parry-Giles:

Yeah, I wanted to pick up on that and this goes back to what Mary talked about in the beginning and however we talk about it, I think about is kind of this crisis of white masculinity and how that's playing out. And I don't think—I know this isn't part of the debate but now we have a governor who's a woman who's had a plot by militants against her. I mean this kind of misogyny that's played out within the Trump campaign is certainly not new to Trump. Then we've seen it over and over throughout these debates is now really at a high level and I think as we all know, the backlash to when you see any progress that's being made whether it was Obama and the backlash of white supremacy and now the fear I think is that as you see a candidate who could be the next vice president who is a black woman, southeast Asian woman, that that's just even going to empower and threaten the sense of white masculinity even further which worries me tremendously.



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Trevor Parry-Giles:

Well, that's an optimistic way to end things. Thank you all so much. This was a really insightful and penetrating discussion of the VEEPs 2020 and the Kamala Harris-Mike Pence debate that has just happened. And so, listeners, I also want to thank you for listening to this third in a series of NCA public programs and special episodes of *Communication Matters, the NCA podcast*. I hope you enjoyed the discussion. I hope you learned a great deal from the discussion as I certainly did. For more information about NCA's public programming efforts, be sure to visit the public programs page on the NCA website at natcom.org/PublicPrograms, all one word. And also, of course, as always, be sure to subscribe to *Communication Matters* wherever you listen to your podcasts.

In NCA news, the NCA 106th Annual Convention will be completely virtual this year and will include both synchronous and asynchronous sessions. Asynchronous content will be available beginning November 1st on NCA Convention Central. Most synchronous sessions will take place as originally scheduled on November 18th through the 22nd. Visit natcom.org/convention to register today. On that page, you'll also find links to NCA's guide to the 2020 convention and a best practices document for participating in the convention virtually.

Conclusion:

This has been a special episode of *Communication Matters, the NCA podcast*. *Communication Matters* is produced by Chelsea Bowes, NCA Assistant Director for Digital Strategies. Additional writing and content development support for this special episode was provided by LaKeshia Anderson, NCA's Director of Academic and Professional Affairs and Caitlyn Reinauer, NCA's Academic and Professional Affairs Manager. Thanks for listening.

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