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They need to own this

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We don't know which candidate will come out on top when the presidential debate season is over. But we know who the biggest loser is.

The national broadcast media.

The Republican presidential debate on CNBC in October was universally panned, and rightly so ("Rude, hostile and immaterial," Oct. 30). The moderators were a complete disaster. With petty personal "let's you and him fight" questions, they did what no one else in the nation has been able to do: unite the Republican candidates.

And, of course, moderators at the first Fox News debate were so combative and trivial that Donald Trump bowed out of the Jan. 28 encore with the network.

If Republicans can't brook a debate on Fox – which, truth be known, is widely regarded as more conservative than it really is – then Houston, we have a problem.

After the 2016 elections are over, the Republican Party needs to find a way to bring order and substance to the debate process.

We suggest taking the approach of major sports leagues: Take control of your events. Own them. Have networks bid to air them. And exercise veto control over the "announcers."

Individual candidates shouldn't be picking and choosing moderators, as Donald Trump seemed to want to do Jan. 28. That's the top of a very steep and slippery slope. But the party itself, which acts as referee at such events, is better positioned to police the players. And it should.

The party should schedule the debates, then put their broadcast rights out for bid. Further, not only should the party approve the moderators, but perhaps it should provide its own. And it should forgo the usual national broadcast celebrities, who've had their chance and blown it.

Many people believe the national media outlets have become too powerful, and their stars too full of themselves and too much the story. That has to stop. We're there to see the politicians, not the peacocks.

Moreover, as one observer noted, the national networks have an interest in unproductive fireworks between candidates, since that helps drive up ratings and profits.

And what does it say that a panel of media pundits before the Jan. 28 debate discussed the candidates' need for breakout "media moments" – suggesting we elect those with the best one-liners? The medium has become the message.

At the risk of sounding parochial, we'd suggest adding some major newspaper figures to the moderator panels. It may be less sexy, but it would probably result in fewer staged cage matches and more illuminating exchanges.

In addition, how about adding the best thinkers and talkers? On the Republican side, that might mean folks from the Heritage Foundation or Cato Institute, or such conservative pundits as Laura Ingraham, Mark Levin, Charles Krauthammer, Stephen F. Hayes, Rich Lowry, Dennis Prager or Bill Bennett.

What the party is doing now is clearly not working in either the party's or the public's interest.

They need to own this. Literally.