

Matt Lauer Under Fire

✘ By *Virgil Scudder, President, [Virgil Scudder & Associates](#)*

What happened? Here you have Today Show host [Matt Lauer](#), an experienced, respected, and skilled interviewer and moderator, being blasted by fellow journalists and others for his handling of NBC's Commander-In-Chief Forum on Wednesday night.

The criticisms from some fellow journalists are withering. One unidentified NBC executive called Lauer's performance "a disaster." Others said he was unfair, being a lot tougher on Democratic nominee Hillary Clinton than on Republican nominee Donald Trump. It's true that Trump often seemed to get a free pass on evasive or non-responsive answers where Clinton did not. Some critics cited an unfair, sexist approach to moderating.

Author and Cornell University Professor Peggy Drexler commented to CNN: "(Lauer) devoted about a third of his time with Clinton to questions about her emails while rushing her through other weightier topics. He interrupted her, while allowing Trump to talk over him in his usual way and he left unchallenged Trump's contradictory statement about not supporting the war in Iraq (he did) among other things."

NBC correspondent Peter Alexander said on the Today Show Thursday that Trump spoke "almost completely in generalities." It's true and wrong. It's an interviewer's job to insist that speakers back up their points. Lauer fell far short in this regard. On another program, Council on Foreign Relations President Richard Haass repeatedly said the event was "frustrating."



(Photo Source: Twitter)

To me, the problem is clear: Lauer was in over his head. He was the wrong person for the job. He was like a 20-game winning pitcher sent up to bat with the bases loaded in the ninth inning. Political reporters spend hours over many months researching every aspect of key issues and the candidates' positions on them, something a general reporter like Lauer does not have time to do. Therefore, he is unqualified to challenge mis-statements and force answers to the really tough questions.

New York Times TV critic James Poniewozik wrote that Lauer seemed "unprepared on specifics of military and foreign policy: He performed like a soldier sent on a mission without ammunition, beginning with a disorganized offensive, ending in a humiliating retreat."

As Poniewozik wrote, "Lauer's interviewing skills are second to none." I agree. But, such skill is inadequate when one is not thoroughly grounded in the subject and the issues.

As a former journalist myself (NBC News, ABC News, WINS all-news radio) and regular columnist, I have been very dissatisfied with news media performance in this election year. In the debates, the "reporters" chosen to fire the questions were too often partisans, not objective journalists. And, they were too soft or compliant. There was far too little follow-up on mis-statements or controversial

statements, and some speakers, especially Trump, were disgracefully allowed to interrupt and talk over others. Journalism, and the public, were ill-served by this dereliction of duty.

Another media problem today is the issue of false equivalency. If someone baselessly says you are a thief, it is not balanced coverage to simply carry your statement that you are not. But, too often journalists will call that fair and equal coverage. Responsible journalism requires digging for the facts and making the accuser back up the accusation. Unfortunately, much of journalism today, especially in this election campaign, is just "he said, she said." That's lazy and unprofessional journalism.

Why aren't TV interviewers tougher? When asked this question, the host of one of the Sunday morning talk shows was quoted as saying if he got really tough, the show wouldn't be able to get any guests. For truth-seekers, that's a disturbing statement. So much for hard-hitting, unintimidated journalism.

Let's hope the upcoming presidential debates set a new standard. The American public needs and deserves it. To NBC's Lester Holt and the debate moderators who follow, I say "do your job. Be fair, unbiased, but tough and probing. And don't let Trump and Clinton evade and dodge important questions."

We should expect no less.

About the Author: Often referred to as "The Dean of Media Trainers," Virgil is considered one of the world's foremost communication experts. In a 30-year career that has covered 26 countries on five continents, he has provided coaching and counsel to heads of some of the world's largest corporations and government leaders. Virgil is a prolific writer and speaker. His book, World Class Communication: how great CEOs

win with the public, shareholders, employees, and the media, written with his son Ken, was named one of the 25 best business books of 2012. His column, In the C-Suite, appears in every quarterly issue of the Public Relations Strategist and is read by leaders of major public relations agencies and global heads of public relations of large companies. He has written or been featured in articles that have appeared in The New York Times, The International Herald Tribune, Reuters, Investors Business Daily, and numerous professional publications. Two of his speeches have been reprinted in the prestigious Vital Speeches of the Day. Prior to founding Virgil Scudder & Associates in 1990, Virgil headed the media training units of two of the world's largest public relations firms, Hill & Knowlton and Carl Byoir & Associates. Earlier, he was an award-winning news broadcaster at major radio and television networks and stations in New York City. He was a first-night Broadway drama critic for six years during that period, broadcasting reviews on NBC's all-news radio network and all-news WINS radio.