

A Few Problems I Have With Cable TV Political Reporting During The 2020 Presidential Election Season (Actually, Many Problems Would Be Truthful)



(Author's Note: This is the second in a series of occasional political columns that I'll be writing for CommPRO.biz until Inauguration Day, January 20. Previously, I wrote 17 political columns leading up to Election Day. FYI – My first public relations job was with a political firm, where I worked on local, statewide and presidential campaigns. In this column, I opine why cable news political coverage is below par. The cut-off date for this article was to be the day of President

Trump's first presser after his election defeat, which was the day this was written, November 13,)

Arthur Solomon

Do cable news reporters mislead viewers because they don't know the facts of what they are reporting? Or are they instructed to limit facts of a story by their producers to keep viewers' interested and lure them back as a soap opera does for more? Or is it that the reporters and producers only read the first few paragraphs of the New York Times, Washington Post and Wall Street Journal for their stories, (in lieu of original reporting), which provides enough factual information for the usual headline type cable news report?

In any event, what they report is too often incomplete or inaccurate, or even worse, simply pundits' conjecturing as they attempt to show the audience how smart they are, when history shows – remember how their 2106 and 2020 Democratic wave elections turned out – the great majority of their gibberish is as accurate as Trump's claim that the election was stolen from him.

TV reporters and pundits continuously told of the disadvantages that some presidential candidates, like Kamala Harris and Elizabeth Warren, had because the two senators, sitting as jurors during President Trump's impeachment trial, couldn't campaign in Iowa and other early primary states. Of course,

everyone in our business knows that's nonsense. Because of technology some old, some new, a person in Washington can use video interviews to pin point media exposure in states across the country. In fact, as president elect Joe Biden proved for many months, with the right technology you don't have to leave your house.

Since the beginning of the 2020 primary season and for months prior to the first one, (oh, so long ago, it seems), cabelists

have been hawking the national polls. But recent and bygone history shows they don't mean much, except to the "inside baseball" crowd, and the TV pundits that need talking points, like predicting Democratic gains in the House and picking up enough new senators to take control of the Senate, which didn't happen.

All during the lead-up to the New Hampshire primary some cabelists kept saying that Sen. Sanders will not be able to repeat winning the primary by the margin he had in 2016, when he won more than 60% of the vote. It would have been nice if they added that in 2016 his only opponent was Hillary Clinton. In 2020, there were enough Democratic candidates in the primary to fill out the roster of a football team. (*Not exactly difficult reasoning to explain why San#Elecders wouldn't match his 2016 percentage.*)

And Then There Are The Exaggerations

If nothing else, cable TV political news has expertise in hyperbole. Their Iowa caucuses' results reporting were the first example of 2020 political exaggeration. For days, the reporters and anchors kept talking about how the mess-up in counting the ballots affected the outcome for the candidates. Ridiculous. Maybe they forgot that there were a number of primaries and caucuses still to be conducted. The major fallout from the Iowa reporting mess was that it provided the cableists with a continuing story line for many, many days. And that was a negative for serious political viewers.

Good, gosh. Did the cable TV political reporters, pundits and program hosts actually know the voting records and policy positions of the candidates during the Democratic presidential primary season? For months, they were labeling every candidate but Sens. Sanders and Elizabeth Warren as "moderates," when in actuality they were all left of center. In fact, after Chris Wallace called Biden a "moderate" during an interview, the former veep said he thought of himself as a liberal. And "From

health care to climate change to criminal justice, Biden has proposed ideas more ambitious and liberal than policies supported by Hillary Clinton in the 2016 campaign, a McClatchy news review of the candidates' platforms found..." "Taken as a whole, Biden's policy platform represents a significant shift from Clinton's. On nearly every major issue, Biden has either exponentially increased the scope of what Clinton proposed or advocated for new ideas that most Democrats would have up until recently considered fringe," reported McClatchy. But nevertheless, the cable pundits kept referring to Biden as a moderate, even though Biden said he considers himself as liberal and progressive.

Is my Puzzlement: Tune in any cable news political show and there's a more than good chance that strategists for defeated candidates will be asked to give their expert advice. If I was the decider, I'd only book strategist who can point to candidates they helped elect.

The hallmark of cable political news remained the same as it has for years: Headline journalism, incomplete reporting, reporters and anchors who ask softball questions (the exception being Fox's Chris Wallace and occasionally CNN's Jake Tapper and Wolf Blitzer, but hardly ever MSNBC's Chuck Todd), mistakes by reporters going uncorrected and symbiotic journalism that relies on major print pubs like the New York Times, Wall Street Journal and Washington Post for subject content, not to mention cable's ubiquitous misleading "Breaking News" assertions. Missing is very much original reporting.

I realize that when your job is talking misstatements and misinformation will occur. No one's perfect. But in the news business when misinformation is reported it must be corrected or many people will think the erroneous report is accurate. Cable news hardly ever corrects its errors. And that, along with its minimum of original content, are main reasons that I believe it is sub-par journalism.

With apologies to the producers of "That's Entertainment," cable political news should ditch its "Breaking News" tag and replace it with "Disproportionately Entertainment."

Writing of apologizing, did Ari Melber (MSNBC) apologize to his viewers for lionizing Michael Avenatti during the Stormy Daniels era of cable TV political programming? (If he did, I missed it.) At least CNN's Brian Stelter sought of apologized about his promotion of the now convicted attorney. At least the then CNN's chief legal correspondent, Jeffrey Toobin, admitted that he feels "kind of snookered, because I took him seriously." Correcting wrongos is major problem with the majority of cable political reporting. The talent hardly ever admits that they were wrong, and anyone with a good story to tell can get free airtime, as long as the viewers are entertained.

Viewers who tuned in CNN on February 22 to watch the coverage of the Nevada caucus should have learned an important lesson why not to take political commentary on cable TV too seriously. Among the panelists analyzing the action was Andrew Yang, a political novice, who dropped his extremely long-shot

candidacy for the Democratic presidential nomination. Given his limited political experience at that time, what made Mr. Yang a serious political analyst escapes me. Another example of what I've always said about cable TV political reporting: Give someone a mike and the person is promoted as an expert.

Say What?

On MSNBC, November 7, immediately after the Allegheny County executive gave a status report on the remaining uncounted ballots, Willie Geist asked a reporter if she agreed with what the county exec just said. (*Came as a surprise to me that she had more information about the outstanding votes than the individual in charge of the counting.*)

The Similarity Of Political Consultants, Football And Baseball Managers And Coaches

Ever notice how campaign managers for losing candidates are hired by other candidates? Or how losing football and baseball managers are hired by other teams? Or how losing campaign managers show up on cable TV as political experts? In none political and none sports businesses, winners, not losers, would be hired by other entities. (*Advice to novice PR people: Consider leaving your job and joining a political or sports organization. Unlike our field, bad work does not disqualify you from advancement.*)

I take exception with the media, led by the sorry cable TV political shows, for dividing candidates into “progressives,” “moderates,” or “conservatives” categories. As someone who has worked on local, state and presidential campaigns, I know that a candidate can have different policy positions on different issues. They can be far left, on one issue and far right on another or moderate on all issues. which according to today’s media labeling would do the candidate an injustice by channeling the person into a one size fits all grouping. (*I’ll use myself as an example: I lean way left of center on most economic issues; slightly left of center on social issues, and center or right of center on military or police issues. In fact, because I am against a volunteer Army and believe in a draft, “progressives” would consider me an “extreme right of center conservative,” which I am not (no matter what they say).* Good journalism would detail how the candidates differ on specific issues, but doing so would go against the formula of the headline driven “Breaking News” reports on cable. Also, I’m willing to bet an expensive lunch or dinner that most of the cable reporters do not know the specific details of the candidates’ positions.

The Fox News Problem

A corporate F-minus grade to the Fox News opinion broadcasters who during the coronavirus pandemic urged viewers to defy the stay-at-home restrictions while broadcasting from the safety of their homes, and to those at Fox who promoted medical advice that went against CDC advice.

The people who live in glass houses department: On his June 14 Media Buzz program, Howe Kurtz led off with a commentary berating the New York Times for denouncing an Op-Ed they published by Sen. Cotton. As a regular viewer of his TV program, I think Kurtz should clean up his own act, which gives a platform on a regular basis to far right journalists like Mollie Hemingway of The Federalist and Guy Benson of Fox's Guy Benson show, without Kurtz correcting their one-sided slant of history. On the program, Kurtz made some of the most ludicrous remarks I have heard from him in the many years I have tuned in: He said that the media down played that the protesters could help expand the reach of the coronavirus, while attacking President Trump for wanting to hold a rally in South Carolina, which makes me wonder if he was in a bunker when the media continually covered the possibility of the virus being spread by the protesters. He also decried some media outlets for having an anti-Trump business model. Did he have a senior moment forgetting that he works for Fox, which has a pro-Trump business model? And his defense of Trump to tweet, even when they inflame a situation, makes me wonder if he's auditioning for the next job of White House press secretary, which history shows could be available any moment.

The Vote Count

Much to my pleasant surprise, cable's coverage of the vote count on CNN and MSNBC was terrific. The reason why was because there was mostly hard news reporting by people who knew the subject; considerably less air time for pundits and

reporters who talk in generalities.

Fox News, of course, still gave free rein to their right wing opinion commentators. But going against the Fox grain was its decision desk, which early on called Arizona for Biden, resulting in condemnation from the White House. At one time Fox News had several on-air personalities that gave the network a modicum of legitimacy – Shepard Smith and Chris Wallace, leaders of the Fox Truth Squad. Smith finally had enough of Fox, quit and now hosts the best news program on cable, an hour long show on CNBC. Wallace, the best interviewer on television, again demonstrated why he, unlike the other Trump Fox lackeys, is the MVP at Fox. After President Trump falsely claimed that he won several battleground states, Wallace said,

“This is an extremely flammable situation, and the president just threw a match on it.” Joining Wallace was another Truth Squad member, Neil Cavuto, who said where’s the proof of voter illegality, and surprisingly Steve Doocy, co-host of the Trump propaganda morning show “Fox & Friends.” Mr. Doocy asked a Trump rep to prove her assertion of “fake ballots” being counted. But the strongest comment defending the election process was, “Lawsuits, schmawsuits – we haven’t seen any evidence yet that there’s anything wrong,” from Chris Stirewalt, the Fox News politics editor and on-air personality.

Especially interesting was how the TV industry covered the president’s November 5 self pity speech, claiming that everything about the election is a fraud and a bag of illegal Democrat tricks, what I call his “why am I the only person who can see that what’s happening is so unfair to me, victim mentality, woe is me, person in denial, out of touch, delusional, sermon from the White House homily, Rodney Dangerfield ‘I don’t get no respect!’”act.

Fox News and CNN televised the entire Trump breakdown, but

ABC, CBS and NBC cut away from the president as his lies about his election grew more outrageous. MSNBC cut away from the president after just a half-minute because, "we just can't have it. It was not rooted in reality and, at this point in where our country is, it's dangerous," said Brian Williams. While Fox News televised Trump's entire speech, reporter John Roberts and anchor Bret Baier did say that they haven't seen any evidence to back up the president's accusations.

On November 4, MSNBC had enough of Trump's lying about the election. Nicole Wallace, the former GOP presidential staffer, now a host of a two hour daily program, said, the network would no longer cover the president's tweets claiming election fraud because we don't want to amplify them.

Of course, cable political coverage wouldn't be cable political coverage without me criticizing it. I found it disturbing that in the midst of record-breaking number of coronavirus cases, the cable's seemed to forget that it is a major problem (and, maybe, why Trump lost the election). Unlike the major print pubs, and my local radio news station, which found space to cover both the election results and the Covid-19 situations, the ever-increasing number of cases was hardly mentioned during the first few days of election coverage.

In some ways, cable TV political reporting resembles people who are addicted to narcotics, alcohol, and chocolate or, yes, cable TV political shows. After their pundits were proved wrong when Trump won in 2016, there was much hand-wringing by cable producers. "We have to stop emphasizing polls," was a common statement. But, of course, that sentiment lasted as long as I type this sentence. If you haven't heard multiple discussions every day in 2019 and 2020 about "what the polls show," you haven't been watching cable TV.

People in the communications business, especially the self-anointed crises specialists, cable TV reporters and political

pundits have a lot in common. They never say, “I don’t know,” or “I was wrong.” It’s as if they all graduated from Trump University, where admitting a mistake resulted in a failing grade and telling the truth resulted in expulsion (unless you still had cash to waste.)

The Fairness Doctrine

(It’s not only the TV pundits that can make ludicrous statements. So can their print counterparts, the political columnists. In her Wall Street Journal November 7-8 column, Peggy Noonan wrote, “I took the polls seriously, including the Republican ones, and saw a big Biden win, not a modest one.” In an election that saw Biden change the political map (for how long remains to be seen) by winning in GOP strongholds of Arizona and Georgia, and doing very well in North Carolina, as well as the president-elect running up a huge winning margin over President Trump by more than 5-million votes, which is certain to increase as votes from California, New York and other big population Democratic states are counted, calling it a “modest” victory is beyond the scope of reality.)

After The Verdict

Immediately after the Associated Press called the election for Biden, the three major cable political networks reverted to their templates: The hard news coverage vanished. Instead it was replaced with opinion and pundit analysis discussions with no new insight. It was as if everyone was reading from the same script while performing at different theaters. The magic boards featuring John King and Steve Kornacki were cut back. Too bad. At least they provided meaningful comments and important information, as well as giving viewers a new betting game, wagering on how long Kornacki would go before changing clothes. (“Maybe MSNBC doesn’t pay him enough to buy new clothes,” said my concerned wife.)

A bit of dramatic irony: It was Trump’s favorite cable

station, Fox News, that first foresaw his defeat by calling Arizona for Biden just a few hours after the polls closed (causing President Trump and his advisers to attempt to bully Fox into recalling the decision, which Fox didn't.) But Fox was the last network to call the election for Biden on November 7. (Make-up time?) The first was Trump's favorite Fake News target – CNN

The Sunday Big Three Political Shows: (On November 8)

Chris Wallace on Fox News Sunday: A rather tranquil program for a change. Missing was his hard-hitting interview technique that makes him the best interviewer on TV. Missed it.

Reliable Sources on CNN: Brian Stelter, as he has done several times recently, provided Newsmax, a minor player compared to the more established political shows, an open mike during which it can sprout its far right propaganda. Doing so elevates Newsmax to the Big Three. Shameful. Stetler should handle Newsmax with his commentary, like he does on other subjects. People know what to expect from the Hannity type commentators because they have been doing so for many years. Newsmax only recently.

Why hype them. Question: Is Stelter trying to create controversy to increase his ratings?

Media Buzz: Mollie Hemingway, a senior editor at The Federalist and a very frequent guest on the program, continued her bashing of any media that disagrees with her Attila The Hun philosophy. (*Actually, I owe an apology to any living decedents of Attila for comparing Attila to Hemingway. Attila is an historical figure; Hemingway just another run of the mill pundit.*) As usual the right wing slant of the Howie Kurtz program was evident in other ways also. A chyron read, "Media Liberals Slam Trump Voters." I don't ever recall a chyron reading, "Media Conservatives Slam Liberals."

But Let's Give Credit When It's Due

On November 13, President Trump spoke to the press for the first time since he lost the election. The topic was the success of his Warp Speed program in producing vaccines and other meds to curtail the spread of Covid-19. As is usual during a Trump presser, his remarks were, to put it politely, not entirely accurate. He misstated Pfizer's involvement in Warp Speed, attacking the company's truthful statement of not accepting any government money during the development of their vaccine. He also gave misleading prognosis about how soon a vaccine will be available for general distribution. In addition, he attacked New York Governor Andrew Cuomo, saying that N.Y. would not get the vaccine until Cuomo requested it, because Trump said that Cuomo doesn't trust it, which was a complete fabrication of the governor's position. A few minutes after the presser, the N.Y. governor refuted the president's statement on MSNBC, explaining what he and other governors are doing. Prior to the governor's appearance, Peter Baker of the New York Times and Jonathan Lemire of the Associated Press corrected the president's inaccurate statements about Pfizer.

In Conclusion

After watching days and nights of the election political coverage on the cable networks, my take-a-way is that less punditry made for better news coverage.

In the months leading up to the 2020 election, some TV commentators finally began calling out the falsehoods told by the president, his two sons, his numerous surrogates and press secretaries, all graduates of The Trump University School of Lying. But in order to fill airtime, some cable shows still permitted Trump supporters, like Rudy Giuliani, Kayleigh McEnany, Sean Spicer, Sarah Huckabee Sanders to dispense lies without correcting them.

As the days shortened to November 3, TV producers let Trump's

master fabricator Jason Miller to be on TV a few days before the election and permit him to provide misinformation – like mail in votes don't count if they reach destinations after Election Day, even though different states have regulations.

I've been asked why I am so critical of cable news' political coverage. It's much more than what I consider their sub-par journalism. The main reason is that I believe that cable news has played a major part in causing the national divide among Americans because of the way they cover politics, playing up the differences among the political tribes in our country, instead of just reporting facts. Cable News is our era's equivalent of yellow journalism, and to me it seems their playbook resembles those of the ones used by Joseph Pulitzer and William Randolph Hearst in the 1890s.

In 1897, Hearst hired the famous artist Frederic Remington to go to Cuba and provide illustrations about the Cuba revolution. After a while, the artist wrote to Hearst saying, "There is no trouble. There will be no war. I wish to return." Hearst allegedly replied "Please remain. You furnish the pictures and I'll furnish the war."

The cable political networks' updated response to the above correspondence might be, "You give us the candidates and we'll provide the controversy."

But you have to have a little sympathy for the cables. Once Trump leaves office, they'll have nothing to talk about.



About the Author: Arthur Solomon, a former journalist, was a senior VP/senior counselor at Burson-Marsteller, and was responsible for restructuring, managing and playing key roles in some of the most significant national and international sports and non-sports programs. He also traveled internationally as a media adviser to high-ranking government officials. He now is a frequent contributor to public relations publications, consults on public relations projects and is on the Seoul Peace Prize nominating committee. He can be reached at [arthursolomon4pr \(at\) juno.com](mailto:arthursolomon4pr@juno.com) and ArtSolomon4pr@optimum.net.