

# **My 2020 Cable TV “Breaking News” (Not Really) Recap**



## **(Will Program Realignments Improve The Products?)**

*Arthur Solomon*

It's been several weeks since program changes have been made by the major cable TV networks. My questions are, "Will it make the products any better?" My answer, based on past changes at the networks is, "Probably Not." But there's always the slightest probability that I might be wrong. So I'll take a wait and see attitude and opine on last year's cable programming.

Because I didn't think that the year 2020 would change cable TV political commentary for the better, I wasn't surprised when it didn't. But I was surprised on January 4 by a comment made by the respected retired Army General Wesley Clark that S.E. Culp left unchallenged on her S.E. Culp Unfiltered CNN show. General Clark said if Iran retaliates against the U.S.

for the killing of General Qassim Suleimani, it would strengthen President Trump because Americans always rally around the president during times of war. If President's Johnson and Nixon were still alive, they might refute that. The least Ms. Culp should have done is remind viewers of the negative reactions by Americans to the two presidents during the drawn out Viet Nam war. General Clark is entitled to his opinion. It was Ms. Culp's job to put the remark into historic context.

The above is a prime reason that cable TV is held in such disrepute by many journalists. The programs are filled with mistakes that are not corrected, opinions that are unchallenged, incomplete headline type reporting, and soft ball questions by hosts not wanting to upset their guests.

In the past, I have faulted Howie Kurtz for letting Trumpians sprout lies on his program without correcting them. But perhaps the comments that were most malevolent, evil and odious occurred on his August 16 Media Buzz, the Fox so-called examination of the week's media coverage show, when host Kurtz permitted Trump hatchet woman Katrina Pierson to say that you have to be deaf, blind and dumb not to know that Joe Biden doesn't have all his faculties in place, as well as letting the fabulist say more than once that the Democratic policies were Marxist. Kurtz remained silent, reminiscence of the many Republican politicians during the McCarthy era, except to tell Pierson, "Great to see you." (*The difference between Kurtz, Sean Hannity, Laura Ingraham and Tucker Carlson is that the latter three do not pretend to be journalists. Kurtz does, but anyone who watches his show knows differently. To call his program a factual review of the week's media coverage is to insult journalism.*)

It was no surprise that as the year ran down, on December 20, what might be the most ludicrous comment on 2020 TV Sunday morning programs occurred on the Kurtz show and, also no surprise, that it was uttered by Mollie Hemingway. During a

discussion about the potential use of martial law by the president, Hemingway said she believed Trump saying it was “Fake News,” because it came from “the horse’s mouth.” She disregarded stories confirming the discussion in the New York Times, Washington Post and the pro-Trump Wall Street Journal. Instead the always Trumper Hemingway believed Trump, even though at the time fact checkers had detailed more than 22,000 times that he didn’t tell the truth.

## **A few Other Examples Of Sub-Standard Reporting On 2020 Cable Political Shows:**

I’ve long faulted Fox News for disseminating false information and helping to cause the schism between Americans. But during its coverage of the coronavirus, the far-right network has also contributed to the death of Americans, according to Dr. Ashish Jha, director of the Harvard Global Public Health Institute. In an article in the March 23 New York Times by Ben Smith, when asked if some people will die because of Fox’s mis-coverage, Dr. Jha said, “Yes. Some commentators in the right-wing media spread a very specific type of misinformation that I think has been very harmful.” *(Among the Trump PR team, posing as Fox commentators that have distorted the coronavirus situation are Laura Ingraham, Sean Hannity and Trish Regan. Not a surprise.)*

Unexpectedly making his debut in this column for the first time was Brian Stelter and his CNN Reliable Sources show. Not that he misrepresented something, or let his guests do, like happens almost every Sunday on Fox’s competitive media program, Media Buzz. What landed Stelter on list was that he devoted a segment to the Prince Harry and Meghan Markle saga on Sunday, January 12, just a few days prior to the Democratic candidate’s presidential debate, the start of President Trump’s first impeachment trial and while the U.S .- Iran crisis was still percolating. *(The Harry-Megan tale is more suited to the hyper-excitabile commentary and skittish*

*performances on The View than on a serious media show like Reliable Sources.)* Media Buzz also devoted a segment to the young Royals. Doing so limited the time of conservative propaganda that is usually heard on the supposedly non-partisan analysis of the week's news program that is hosted by the one time impartial journalist Howard Kurtz.

Unlike Stelter, Kurtz gained his usual place on my yearly evaluation of faulty, incomplete or biased journalism TV shows because of his not uncommon practice of acting more like an opinion commentator than host of a supposedly media evaluation show. Prime Example: On his February 9 program, during a discussion of the State of the Union speech, he defended President Trump's use of "exaggerations" by saying every president does it. They might. But there's a difference. Trump told outright lies during his address and the lies were detailed by fact checkers. Perhaps, the reason that didn't matter to Kurtz is that his program is filled with misleading statements by his panelists each week, without corrections by the host. *(There's an old race horse term, "Horses for courses." Kurtz' program is a magnet for right-wing propagandists.)*

The rightward slant of Media Buzz, a show that supposedly reviews how the press covers important news, was on display once again on March 8. During a week when the big news was the spread of the coronavirus, Kurtz spent time highlighting Sen. Schumer's remarks regarding the Supreme Court and the documentary during which former President Clinton talked about Monica Lewinsky, both definitely not among the most important news stories of the week, but definitely favorite topics to delight his right wing audience.

However, what might have been the most fact-less program of his fact-less Media Buzz program might have occurred on November 15, when he turned over his program to two of the most fabulist Trump supporters, The Federalist's Mollie Hemingway and Jason Miller, the senior advisor to the

president's 2020 re-election campaign. (*Was Rudy Giuliani ill?*)

Hemingway refused to say that Trump lost the election and said that there was mounting evidence being uncovered of fraud in the voting. She also said that Trump was the most popular politician in America, ignoring the fact that Joe Biden had more than 5-million more votes (at the time) than Trump. Her comments about the election came as no surprise. What did surprise me was when she accused the media of falsifying how Americans feel about Covid-19. Her commentary left Miller with nothing new to say and he concurred with Hemingway's statements. As usual, Kurtz did not correct the disinformation. (*Perhaps both learned how to lie from reading the 1952 Great Soviet Encyclopedia, which defines disinformation as "false information with the intention to deceive public opinion."*)

One last 2020 example of how Kurtz lets misinformation go uncorrected. On his November 29 program, Kurtz let his conservative guests claim that the press is already giving Biden soft ball coverage, despite the NY Times' front page article on the same day pointing out the ethics questions facing some of Biden's top appointees and in another article reporting on how the extreme left wing of the Democratic Party is pressuring Biden to select more liberal cabinet members and advisers.

Chris Wallace of Fox, the best interviewer on TV, made a rare appearance on this list because of his October 11 telecast. First, he allowed President Trump's daughter-in-law, Lara, guest as a Trump spokesperson. It was evident that Wallace was not his usual aggressive self during his questioning, perhaps because of who she is, (and maybe because she's a woman) and, more important, he let Bret Hume call Joe Biden senile without correcting him, perhaps because Hume is on the same network as Wallace?

The following is an aggregate journalism crime, because so many cable anchor, pundits and news people have been found guilty of doing it: During the discussion of who will defend President Trump during his Senate impeachment trial, Alan Dershowitz's name was often mentioned, usually followed with the phrase, "he has baggage."

His "baggage" was hardly ever explained, a major journalistic mistake that deserves a minus-F grade in journalism 101.

Another aggregate journalism crime for the cable news industry occurred when reporting that despite President Trump and the Pentagon initially saying that there were no American injuries after the Iranian's attack on the Al Asad Air base on January 8, in response to the U.S. killing of Iranian Gen. Qasem Soleimani, there were. Instead of just reporting the facts, on January 17, the cableists, apparently to get viewers to think that they were listening to Breaking News, kept saying, "We have just learned that..." In actuality the news was first reported the previous evening. *(This is a continuing problem with cable news reporting. Maybe it's because their news reports are inferior to that of major print media that they have to pretend that the cable industry doesn't have an inferiority complex.)*

And here's an example of a major cable news problem: When Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi, on July 31, told CNN's Brianna Keilar that she didn't want to respond to a question about a tweet from President Trump, because the reason he tweets is that cable news reports on it, Ms. Keilar responded, "We have to ask about it because the president did it." What Keilar said goes against the very tenets of good journalism. It is a reporter's job to decide what is worth reporting on and what is not, (as every [PR](#) person unfortunately knows). But, of course, no one ever said that cable news is good journalism.

There were many other problems that I had with reporting on

the cable political shows during 2020. Instead of repeating what I previously have written, if you're interested in learning more examples of what I consider sub-par reporting, I suggest that you refer to my November 16 column on this website titled, "A Few Problems I Have With Cable TV Political Reporting during The 2020 Presidential Election Season."

But as fans of the New York Mets, Giants and Jets know, even in their most dismal seasons bright spots occur. On cable TV, in my opinion, the constant bright spots are John King's daily CNN mostly political program and Shepard Smith's hour-long general news telecast on CNBC. King's program is an hour of informative information that unlike the overwhelming majority of cable political news programs presents news in a manner that could appear in respected print publications. Smith's program provides a mixture of hard and feature news unlike any other news telecast, cable or broadcast.

To sum up, once again, 2020 proved that for people who want the entire story without biased commentary cable news is not the venue to provide it. Reading a respected major print publication is necessary to get the entire story.

But for many people the most interesting news emanating from cable news political reporting in 2021 and for years after will have nothing to do with politics. It will be how the networks will defend itself against lawsuits filed by Smartmatic and Dominion Voting Systems, both of which are suing conservative news sites and their personalities for defamatory statements related to the presidential election.

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**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) or [artsolomon4pr@optimum.net](mailto:artsolomon4pr@optimum.net).