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Reform TV News for the Sake of Our Democracy

By Allan Chernoff

The most outrageous feature of this year's historic race for the presidency is not that Donald Trump refuses to pledge to accept the election results, not that he bragged on videotape of groping women, nor that he has insulted minorities, the disabled, American P.O.W.s, and the gold star parents of fallen American soldiers. It's the fact that a man so utterly unqualified in character, temperament, judgement and knowledge to lead the nation was able to become the presidential nominee of the Republican Party. As a journalist who was a network television correspondent for three decades and reported extensively on Trump, I believe the TV news industry deserves a substantial amount of the blame. Print, online, and radio news organizations all gave Trump disproportionate attention during the primaries, but what we saw on television, particularly cable TV news, was a hijacking of political coverage - Donald Trump manipulating and dominating the airwaves - in which television executives were willing accomplices. Our democracy deserves better.

Did the 13 million Americans who cast their primary ballots for Trump do so because of any of the above mentioned Trump behaviors? Surely not. Racists and bigots who slithered into the dregs of the Trump coalition comprise only a small percentage of his supporters. Millions of patriotic Americans disappointed with Washington and searching for a change agent put their faith in Trump because they believe in the personal brand he has built, his carefully cultivated reputation as a hugely successful, glamorous businessman with a Midas touch, a strong leader who tells it like it is and always gets what he wants. Trump was able to project this image to the entire nation with a huge lift from extensive television coverage, particularly the live, unfiltered airing of Trump speeches on the campaign trail.

The fact is, news organizations were well aware Trump's image was based on a long series of lies. Numerous journalists, particularly business reporters like myself, had investigated Trump for decades, reporting how he overloaded companies with debt; shafted investors who had bought his bonds; drove companies into the ground; destroyed the career of a Wall Street analyst who had

accurately pointed out the huge risks and likely failure of Trump's multiple Atlantic City casino ventures; was frequently sued for his business practices; cheated working class people who paid as much as \$35,000 for his Trump University get-rich-quick scam, and greatly exaggerated the extent of his wealth, never mind his years of antics with the gossip media to promote himself as New York's leading ladies' man. Journalists know that Trump obsessively tries to control his coverage through intimidation, phoning to complain when they report unflattering facts, as he called me, warning, "I'm watching you", and even threatening to sue. Reporters understand that Trump relies upon the media to build his brand, while having little regard for the First Amendment.

But rather than feature the facts about Donald Trump during primary season, TV news executives largely ignored the deep archive of Trump reporting, instead focusing on the horse race, as they always do. In this case, they highlighted the horse that was a proven ratings magnet because of his larger-than-life personality, willingness to make outrageous comments that draw attention, and successful history on the entertainment side of television. "I've known who he is and what he is for a long time," CNN President Jeff Zucker told the [Harvard Institute of Politics](#) in October. Zucker knows, because as head of entertainment at NBC he signed Trump to star in "The Apprentice", the platform that enabled Trump to greatly expand his image as a master business mogul to the entire country.

During the primaries, the cable TV networks virtually handed a free microphone to Donald Trump, while giving other candidates a small fraction of his attention. By February, Trump had "earned" [nearly \\$2 billion of free media](#), more than six times that of his closest Republican competitor, Ted Cruz, and almost nine times the next closest candidate, Jeb Bush. The tens of millions of Americans who most often get their news from television, [57% of U.S. adults](#) according to the Pew Research Center, had been fed a steady diet of Trump PR. TV gave scant attention to the long history belying Trump's claims that his personal successes would surely "Make America Great Again". Instead, the all-Trump-all-the-time media attention permitted the presidential candidate to perpetuate the myth he had built as the savvy billionaire who would be America's savior. Millions of Republican voters fell for it. Even during Republican primary debates, many of the questions were Trump-centric, focusing on his statements and positions. While Trump sucked up air time, little was left for other candidates, a huge disadvantage in their efforts to connect with the American public.

As ratings soared, CBS CEO [Les Moonves](#) said of Trump's dominance in the election coverage, "It may not be good for America, but it's damn good for CBS.....the money's rolling in and this is fun." Indeed, the Trump ratings boost has been manna for an industry that had been under assault from the internet, suffering years of shrinking audience, a rapid aging of viewer demographics, and declines in profitability.

So, why shouldn't TV executives be celebrating? Because the news business is about more than making money, more important things like ensuring the public is well informed. An informed electorate is crucial in a democracy where citizens are responsible for electing their leaders. Unfortunately, millions of Americans who rely upon television as their primary source of news were misinformed; TV news coverage of the primary season, particularly cable TV news, failed the American public.

It's true that earning a profit is important to sustaining any business. The days of news as a prestige loss-leader for the TV networks are long gone. But, the news business must measure itself by factors other than ratings and revenues because of its responsibility to the public. So, it's high time for TV news organizations to take a look in the mirror, commit to a serious review of their coverage of the presidential race, and determine how they can better serve the viewers who depend upon them for accurate information.

Here are a few suggestions for starters:

- Less media manipulation.

From the White House down to the city council, all politicians try to influence and direct media coverage. But Trump plays the media like a puppet. The fact that he is a ratings draw is good reason for him to host a "reality" TV show, but no justification to grant him unfettered access to TV news viewers, and even to permit him to hawk his steaks, wine and hotels during political coverage. News directors and assignment editors need to be highly cognizant of efforts to blatantly manipulate them and have the integrity to resist.

- More facts, less fiction.

The public deserves hard facts, which means more reporting. Reporters and producers do the bulk of the journalistic digging at TV news operations, so they deserve more air time to share their reportage. Commentators with their own agendas that often deviate from the truth should receive substantially less airtime.

- More perspective.

There's far too much parroting of the candidates' spin doctors in TV news political reporting. Reporters must be well-informed enough to put candidates' comments in perspective, calling them when they twist the truth. Rushing to a candidate's spinmeisters and parroting their words adds no true value to a journalist's reporting.

- More fact checking.

It's not just the major political debates that should be fact checked. Every speech that is covered should be fact checked. The Pulitzer-Prize winning website [PolitiFact](#) serves as an excellent model. Had TV news more thoroughly fact checked Trump's speeches, the viewing public would have known there was little substance to many of Trump's assertions. It was only after Trump won the Republican nomination that he received a serious vetting in the news media.

- More focus on the issues.

The public deserves to know where every candidate stands on the issues that will affect their lives and impact America's place in the world. A dedication to exploring the issues should guide editorial decisions that determine which stories get on the air. Given their 24-hour coverage, cable TV news networks should have plenty of air time to devote to the issues, but it's the horse race that always gets the bulk of the attention. TV news can do a much better job of reporting on the substantive issues, while still covering every angle of the all-important horse race.

The First Amendment is a wonderful privilege journalists enjoy in the United States, a foundation upon which our free society is built. News organizations should not abuse that privilege by placing the pursuit of profits above their obligation to accurately inform the public. As this election season has demonstrated, the health and strength of our democracy depend upon a responsible news media.

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