

How CNN Shapes Political Debate

Exclusive: CNN was happy to add a right-wing questioner for the Republican debate but won't add a progressive for the Democratic debate, another sign of how the "mainstream media" shapes what's acceptable in political discussion, a lesson that ex-CIA analyst Ray McGovern has learned from personal experience.

By Ray McGovern

CNN, the sponsor of Tuesday's debate among Democratic presidential candidates, has gone to extraordinary lengths to avoid being sullied with the stigma of "liberal bias." The four CNN journalists handpicked to do the questioning have carefully protected themselves from such a charge.

As Jeff Cohen noted Friday in "[CNN's Double Standards on Debates](#)," CNN made a point of including a bona fide right-winger in the Republican debate but "is not planning to include a single progressive advocate among its panel of four questioners ... CNN presents as neutral: CNN's [Dana] Bash and three CNN anchors (Anderson Cooper, Don Lemon, and Juan Carlos Lopez of CNN en Espanol.)"

The significance is that while a person from the Right or Left might break out of the usual frame of these debates, "mainstream" panelists can be counted on to ask predictable queries with maybe a "gotcha" question or two tossed in to show how "tough" the reporter can be. CNN's line-up fits that description to a tee.

Dana Bash, who was also a panelist at last month's debate among Republican candidates, has been a godsend to me as I hunted for examples to illustrate what has become of the so-called "mainstream media." Speaking to college and other audiences, I often show this short but [revealing video clip](#) of Bash plying her "neutral" trade.

Perhaps you will agree that, although less than a minute long, this clip is worth far more than a thousand words in making clear how CNN crackerjack reporters like Dana Bash and CNN senior statesman Wolf Blitzer apply their peculiar brand of "fair and balanced."

What leaps out is how they, and their acutely attentive technical support, were prepared at a second's notice to nip in the bud any favorable (or merely "neutral") allusion to Iran, on the one hand, and any possibly negative reference to Israel, on the other.

In Iowa, reporting on the Republican caucus 3 1/2 years ago, Bash singled out Army Cpl. Jesse Thorsen for an interview. The young soldier sported on his neck a large tattoo of the Twin Towers with the words "9/11 Remember" making Thorsen

seem an ideal candidate for the kind of “neutral” super-patriotic interview that Bash had in mind.

Although he supported libertarian Ron Paul, this young corporal on his way to his third deployment to Afghanistan looked like an easy mark for a fast-talking reporter whose “neutrality” was infused with Official Washington’s disdain for Paul’s anti-interventionist stance on foreign policy.

Pointing to the tattoo, Bash closed in for the kill, suggesting Ron Paul would endanger U.S. security if he pulled troops out of conflict areas like Afghanistan. Alas, Thorsen had not been briefed on the intended script, and the encounter did not work out the way Bash expected. The young soldier went off message into dangerous territory, mentioning or, rather, trying to mention Iran and Israel in ways that didn’t mesh with what all the Important People know to be true: Iran always bad, Israel always good.

Just in the nick of time, there was fortunate glitch cutting off the discordant message. Or as Blitzer explained, “we just lost our technical connection, unfortunately.”

Personal Experience

For good or ill, I have had some rather instructive personal experience with two of the other three panelists on CNN’s all-star team for Tuesday evening Anderson Cooper and Don Lemon. Those experiences might help potential viewers know what to expect as the Democrats go under their magnifying glasses.

Minutes after the impromptu four-minute Q & A debate I had with then-Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld on May 4, 2006 in Atlanta in which I challenged Rumsfeld about his false pre-war claims about Iraqi links to Al Qaeda and Saddam Hussein’s possession of WMD I got a call on my cell phone from CNN star Anderson Cooper. He noted that I had been causing “quite a stir here in Atlanta,” adding that he wanted to interview me that evening.

“But first,” he said in an awkwardly halting way, “I need to ask you a question. “Er ... weren’t you afraid?”

Not really, I replied. The experience was, rather, a real high. I went on to suggest that Cooper could experience the same high, were he to do a little homework and ask folks like Rumsfeld pointed questions quoting them back to themselves, whenever possible.

The Rumsfeld speech and Q &A that followed took place in the early afternoon of May 4, 2006, and was broadcast live. So, in a sense, it fit with the perfect storm for that night’s evening news. It was early enough to fit the evening TV

“news” cycle; there was time to check facts; it was a live exchange of a citizen confronting a powerful official, something that is disturbingly rare in modern America; and it happened on a slow news day when there wasn’t some other story that dominated public attention.

As it turned out, MSNBC’s Keith Olbermann exhibited none of the self-censoring inhibitions that seemed to worry Anderson Cooper earlier that day. Olbermann decided to feature the story that evening, as he put it, “with fact-check.” And for that and no doubt countless other violations of “mainstream media” etiquette Olbermann did not endear himself to his corporate TV brass. (Where is Olbermann now?)

The lesson here seems to be that, if you elect to give priority to having your comely face on the tube rather than speak truth to power, you forfeit the high that can come of being a serious journalist. You get to keep both your fame and your six- or seven-figure fortune for a Faustian bargain.

The issue at the Rumsfeld talk in Atlanta was no trifling matter. During the Q & A, it was easy to use his own past words together with his disingenuous responses to show that the Defense Secretary had lied through his teeth to help get the U.S. into what the post-WWII Nuremberg Tribunal called the “supreme international crime” a “war of aggression.”

Worth emphasizing, though, is the unfortunate reality that – malnourished as most Americans have become on accurate information from the media only those TV viewers who were offered an Olbermann-type fact-check would have gotten anything approaching the full story that evening. Otherwise, it would remain the proverbial whom-to-believe kind of puzzle: “Former CIA analyst said ‘Rumsfeld lied’ ... but Rumsfeld said, ‘I didn’t lie.’”

Last But Not Least

Then, we have Don Lemon. After the publication by WikiLeaks of thousands of official cables many of them highly embarrassing to the U.S. which Bradley/Chelsea Manning gave to WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange, the Fawning Corporate Media eagerly joined an intense campaign by the Establishment to make Assange the *bête noire* of 2010, painting him the same deep black regularly used for the likes of Russian President Vladimir Putin and Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

“Expert” after “expert” on CNN tore into Assange. It was such a one-sided spectacle, that someone must have suggested that CNN invite some dope who might try to defend Assange (ha, ha; good luck) and deny that he was what Vice President Joe Biden called him “a high-tech terrorist.” I was to be the victim.

CNN introduced Lemon's five-minute interview of me with a very violent clip from *Bonnie and Clyde* and additional footage showing other terrorist miscreants at work. (In retrospect, I was glad that CNN barred me from seeing that introduction before my interview; seeing it might have strained my Irish temper beyond the breaking point.)

Don Lemon was loaded for bear, since one of the jobs of mainstream journalists is to prove their "objectivity" by getting tough with anyone who deviates from the conventional wisdom. You have to see it to believe it: You Say Julian Assange Is a Journalist? Wattayou Crazy?

After Lemon's lemon of an interview, I seem to have ended up on CNN's "no-fly" list for me, a small price to pay. I would prefer to be in the company of the gutsy Olbermanns of this world rather than the timorous Coopers.

Let me add here that, in my view, Anderson Cooper is by no means the worst of the bought-and-sold pundits. He *is*, however, perhaps the wealthiest, as heir to the Vanderbilt fortune. So, with all due respect, he would not face the prospect of life on the streets with hat in hand, were he to decide to go for the high of committing real journalism rather than acquiesce in the customary low of showing deference when interviewing powerful war criminals like Rumsfeld.

So as not to raise unrealistic expectations about Tuesday's debate, Cooper has said that there will be no "gotcha" questions. "As a moderator, it's not my job in this kind of debate to try and force anything," he said. "I don't go into this with some strategy for getting people going in one way or another. Even if I did have that strategy, or a strategy, I wouldn't necessarily telegraph that."

But one can expect a focus on many of the usual mainstream topics, framed in the typical mainstream way: What can be done to stop Putin? Why didn't President Obama do more to achieve "regime change" in Syria? If the ongoing catastrophe in Libya is mentioned, it is likely to be in the narrow context of the Benghazi investigation and Hillary Clinton's emails as Secretary of State.

It's not likely that Clinton will be pressed on her disastrous history as a liberal war hawk: supporting the Iraq War, pushing for a pointless "surge" in Afghanistan, orchestrating a "regime change" war in Libya that has left the country ungovernable and opened the door to inroads by Islamic State terrorists. She is not likely to be asked whether she thinks "American exceptionalism" exempts U.S. officials from the constraints of international law.

The reason why she won't be pressed on such questions is that CNN and the rest of the mainstream media accept the same premises that Clinton does. They frame the public debate with an implicit embrace of the U.S. right to invade countries

and topple governments. The debate is only focused on whether the tactics worked, whether mistakes were made, not whether the decisions were wise or legal.

Other debate participants, such as Sen. Bernie Sanders, also will be expected to squeeze their comments into the acceptable mainstream frame. That is why it would have been a good idea – or at least a novel one – to invite at least one out-of-the-box progressive to join the panel and possibly shatter the frame.

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