In Praise of CNN

November 8, 2012

Talented anchors, judicious use of analysts, and a more-or-less nonpartisan approach made it the channel to watch on election night.

One great problem of our broken political system is the proliferation of opinions over facts.

One of the great virtues of CNN -- certainly compared to its cable competitors Fox News and MSNBC -- is its old-fashioned commitment to reporting facts and keeping reporters clearly separate from its electronic "news analysts" and "op-ed writers."

After 50 years of watching election returns (yes, I am old enough to have begun with the Kennedy-Nixon race), and despite deep respect for friends at NBC News, my channel of choice on election nights is CNN for a simple reason. I want highly relevant information as fast as possible.

On Tuesday night, CNN provided it.

John King clearly had mastery of the electoral map and the emerging dynamics in each state as the returns came in. When early returns showed Mitt Romney leading or pulling
even in key states, he pointed to key counties with large percentages of uncounted votes and how they would impact the total vote count. He got Florida, Virginia, and Ohio right -- with a lot of insight. King's magic board was also very useful in comparing this election with past elections to show trends -- for instance, how Obama was doing in 2012 versus 2008, or how Romney was doing versus McCain in 2008 or Bush in 2004.

Wolf Blitzer is calm and professional, and offered important perspectives: exit polls (which he heavily qualified but which turned out to be generally accurate); the make-up of the electorate nationally and in various states and how it was breaking down; and the on-site reports from numerous CNN reporters in key counties with early returns, which were harbingers of things to come.

The reports from the reporters at campaign headquarters, while generally bland, had enough hints early to indicate a critical difference. The Obama camp felt things were going well; the Romney camp was concerned.

The "analysts," David Gergen and Gloria Borger, provided relatively bipartisan or nonpartisan perspective. But their appearances during the key 7-to-11 p.m. time slot were kept to a minimum. And the "op-ed writers," the experienced politicos from each party, had an even smaller role as the critical facts were developing, but were useful in reflecting on trends based on their experience (and less prone than they might have been to quote from canned partisan speeches, though not immune).

In sum, CNN had the right mix: heavy on information, salted with analysis of trends, and peppered more occasionally with partisan perspectives and implications for the future -- which for the most part, and necessarily, had to wait for another day.

I write this because relatively straight reporting of facts in a democracy is so important in an era of demagogic, hyperbolic opinions -- and because, although CNN ratings were respectable on election night (bunched in with ABC and Fox after NBC, the clear leader), it is in financial danger, compared with its much more partisan-slanted cable competitors.


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