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My New Favorite News Network Is Not Liberal (and Not Fox)



By Marty Kaplan



IAN MCKINNELL VIA GETTY IMAGES

This may be the kiss of death, but One America News is my new favorite TV news network.

“If you take the channel lineup, the sources of national news tend to lean to the left... and all we have is Fox.” That’s what OAN Network president Charles Herring said when he and his father, CEO Robert Herring Sr., announced OAN in 2013. There’s more demand than Fox News can meet, and these wealthy, conservative San Diegans were going to increase the supply. They also named their journalism partner: the *Washington Times*, which *Washington Post* editor Ben Bradlee always called “the Moonie paper.”

In a million years I would never have imagined that such a network would one day provide the TV news I turn to a few times a day, the same way I check Twitter and refresh a bunch of websites, to get a hit of what’s going on in the world.

I have warm recollections of dipping into CNN for that, but that was during the Pleistocene, before CNN’s mission migrated to disaster porn and sex crime. (Don’t get me started on Headline News.) Much as I’m a fanboy of MSNBC talent like Chris Hayes and Steve Kornacki, I don’t go there for a running account of current events — I go to get really pissed off about something. Fox News offers a visit to an alternate universe, so I go there for DIY epistemology, not for straight news. BBC World News America is a fine half-hour if you can find it, but like the broadcast networks’ evening news shows, it offers appointment viewing, not impulse grazing. I may have been looking for an authoritative, always-on, 360-degree info-scan, but TV news hasn’t been looking for me.

OAN shouldn’t have filled that gap for me. Its pledge — “just the facts, empowering you to form your own beliefs” — seemed lifted from Orwell, like “we report, you decide.” I didn’t even notice when my cable carrier, AT&T U-verse, slipped it in among the other news channels. The first time I saw it, clicking up from Anthony Bourdain (finally, a reason to watch CNN) on 1202, to Rachel Maddow on 1215, I was surprised, and a bit disoriented, to discover on 1208 an ad-free, non-ideological, non-snarky, non-infuriating, non-boring, nonstop rundown of news I needed to know.

There are two small miracles to celebrate here. One is that the Herrings have so far walked the talk about walling off opinion programming from news. OAN does this largely by licensing its news content from respected syndicators like Euronews and Reuters (and not from the *Washington Times*, which seems to have fallen off OAN's map). It turns out that there's plenty of straight, substantive TV journalism being produced in the world, there just hasn't been an American cable station using so much of it before. Better still, OAN resists cheap shots. A piece about states enacting renewable energy standards to reduce America's dependence on fossil fuel does not shoehorn climate change denial into the story; coverage of the end of the Obama family vacation doesn't rag him for playing golf; an OAN-produced segment gives Grover Norquist plenty of airtime to needle Jeb Bush for not signing his no-tax-increases oath, but the correspondent observes, Norquist notwithstanding, that Bush cut \$19 billion of taxes when he was governor of Florida.

The other miracle is how much news you can cover, and do it well, in how little time. Here's a rundown of a typical 10 minutes of OAN this past weekend:

Air Asia wreckage search

7-year-old survives plane crash

NYPD officer's wake

Ed Brooke obit

Embassy bomber dies

Greek ferry disaster

Palestinians request International Criminal Court membership

Iran nuclear talks

The Air Asia piece ran 1 minute and 10 seconds, which seems about right; CNN has fed exclusively on plane crashes for weeks at a time. Ten minutes of OAN tells me eight stories; 10 minutes of Fox or MSNBC tells me one story, to make me mad. Minute for minute, and nearly 24/7, OAN delivers more hard news about America and the world, more impartially, with less attitude, less lighting up of our lizard brains, and less of a makes-you-want-to-take-a-shower factor, than any other news on TV.

I said "nearly 24/7," because there are three one-hour shows on OAN's schedule, labeled opinion, which can be as delusional and incendiary as anything on conservative talk radio or Fox. The Republican leadership may have taken the impeachment of President Obama off the table, but you wouldn't know that from Graham Ledger's OAN show. When OAN host Rick Amato took some time off recently, filling in for him was conservative voice Dinesh D'Souza, who not long ago avoided 10 to 16 months in prison by pleading guilty to a felony; sentenced to eight months in a community confinement center, he's allowed to leave during non-residential hours for employment, presumably including his OAN gig. The host of *On Point with Tomi Lahren*, says OAN, is, at 22, "the youngest show host in the political talk arena." It's weirdly entertaining to watch some of her Skyped-in guests refute the narrative they've been booked to endorse; their inconvenient grip on reality has no apparent impact on her march through the questions she's planned.

If you can just manage to avoid those three shows, you've got a new go-to news network that's almost always on.

So far, there are no ads on OAN. Between U-verse, Verizon's FiOS and some regional cable operators, OAN claims carriage into 10 million homes — not enough, perhaps, to be in your home, and definitely not enough, as they explain in their promos, to land classy national brands as advertisers. Until they double their penetration, instead of running cash-for-gold and thigh-master commercials, they're slicing up the news hour with splendor-and-beauty footage from around the world, plus 60-second bits of Americana, like the story of the Pony Express, and John Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry. OAN has also produced particularly sly minutes connecting American icons to conservative values. We hear a nativist sentiment — "We have room for but one language here, and that is the English language" — and then learn the words are Theodore Roosevelt's. There's a minute on welfare reform, with Bill Clinton saying welfare should be "a second chance, not a way of life." George W. Bush tells the story of Chanukah, implicitly casting himself as Judah Maccabee to Saddam Hussein's Antiochus. There's even Malcolm X telling Black Americans to get an education and pull themselves up by their bootstraps.

I am so not OAN's desired demographic. I hope this mash note doesn't hurt them with their base. But I also hope they don't become so successful that they can afford to speckle their whole schedule with fire-breathers and clowns.

This is a crosspost of my column at the Jewish Journal, where you can reach me at martyk@jewishjournal.com.