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# Donald, Walter And The Not Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad TV News

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Everyone knows TV political journalism failed us during the 2016 campaign.

Everyone knows TV news was clueless about Trump voters and blue states swinging red. Everyone knows anchors let lying candidates roll them. Everyone knows TV coverage hyped the horserace and gave issues the cold shoulder. Everyone knows cable news's default frame for covering controversy is he-said/she-said food fights. Everyone knows local news is all about crashes, crime and fluff. Everyone knows investigative reporting is a luxury local stations can't afford. Everyone knows down-ballot races are ratings poison.

Well, sometimes something everyone knows is wrong.

Those charges aren't baseless. I could program a YouTube channel 24/7 with clips that make me cringe. But I can also beat the drum for TV newsmen and newswomen who know what excellence is, who go for it every day and who make me hopeful that at a dangerous moment, TV news can countervail against propaganda, paranoia and a president who calls news media "the enemy of the people" and "scum."

I say that confidently because over the past couple of months, together with a few dozen faculty colleagues, staff and journalists, we've been screening the nearly 100 entries for the ninth biennial Walter Cronkite Awards for Excellence in TV Political Journalism.

Pick a knock on TV news – ignoring blue voters turning red, say – and it's contested by Cronkite entries, like "Ask Ohio," a *60 Minutes* report listening to laid-off workers talk about trade, or like the Pennsylvania and North Carolina swing voters profiled on *PBS NewsHour Weekend*. I'm glad it was so hard to narrow down the entries – there's that much good work to celebrate.

The award's recipients were just announced. If you want to be optimistic about journalism as advocate for accuracy, an instrument of accountability and a prompt toward civic engagement, check out online what some of these Cronkite winners are up to.

- Jake Tapper, CNN anchor and chief Washington correspondent, tenaciously asking Donald Trump, Saying Judge Gonzalo Curiel "can't do his job because of his race, is that not the definition of racism?" Or Tapper fact-checking whoppers in Trump's

and Hillary Clinton's stump speeches.

- Katy Tur, on the road with Trump for 17 months for NBC News and MSNBC, master of her subject matter and unflappable despite an onslaught by the candidate and supporters he got to taunt her.
- Univision News and Fusion anchor Jorge Ramos's intimate portrait of a divided America in a chillingly candid encounter with an unmasked member of the Ku Klux Klan, and an interview with a Muslim woman beaten in a Minnesota restaurant.
- Brian Stelter's essays grappling with post- and alternate-fact media and politics, the assault on truth and the path for journalists to regain public trust on his CNN program Reliable Sources.
- Investigative reporting on Texas's border war on drugs by KXAN in Austin; on denial of mental health benefits to veterans by WXIA in Atlanta; on the human story of medical cannabis by Sabrina Ahmed at WOI in West Des Moines; on forged voter signatures by Marshall Zelinger at KMGH in Denver; on judicial elections by Brandon Rittiman at KUSA in Denver, whose work also won KUSA a fact checking prize, the Brooks Jackson award, which went to the Scripps chain as well. Public station KCETLink in Los Angeles was commended for Val Zavala's 60-second animated explainers of 17 propositions on the California ballot.
- More than 500 hours of original political programming across Hearst Television's 32 stations and The E.W. Scripps Company's 33 stations, a direct consequence of those chains' executives asking the stations they own to commit resources and air time to quality political news.

In 1972, a poll of voters in 18 states asked trust thermometer questions about a list of candidates for the presidency and statewide offices; Walter Cronkite's name, a ringer, was included. His 73 percent rating topped the list and led to being called "the most trusted man in America." Sure, maybe the competition was lousy. But he earned the public trust they lacked by doing his work so well. Before he said on the air that the war in Vietnam was unwinnable, he went to Vietnam, he asked questions of everyone, he saw with his own eyes what was going on, he weighed the evidence, he told the truth – and people, including Lyndon Johnson, listened.

Since then, sources for news and definitions of news have proliferated. Hostility toward news, never absent, is being stoked to serve a nihilistic itch to blow the state up. The trust thermometer is below freezing. "Public trust in media at all time low," says the *Financial Times* about an Edelman poll. "Americans' Trust in Mass Media Sinks to New Low," says Gallup. An AP-NORC Media Insight Project poll finds that "Only 6 percent of people say they have a great deal of confidence in the press, about the same level of trust Americans have in Congress."

It's always worth celebrating good journalism. But I can't think of a more urgent hour than this to honor journalists for stepping up to their civic responsibility to face reality.

*This is a crosspost of my column at the Jewish Journal, where you can reach me if you'd like at [martyk@jewishjournal.com](mailto:martyk@jewishjournal.com).*