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Is Campaign News Necessary?



By Marty Kaplan



JIM WATSON VIA GETTY IMAGES

Last week, Gallup asked Americans if they were watching news about the presidential campaign “very closely.” Four out of 10 said yes. I’m one of them. That’s crazy. Are you one of them? That’s crazy, too.

There are plenty of high-minded reasons to follow campaign news. It informs us about the issues. It educates us about the candidates. It makes our choices meaningful. It makes us a polity, not puppets. It honors the blood spilled to secure the freedom of the candidates to speak, of the press to cover them and of the people to vote for them.

But does that describe the campaign news you’re consuming? Ninety-one percent of U.S. adults told the Pew Research Center they had learned something about the presidential election in the past week. Just 2 percent of them — 2 percent! — said that a national newspaper was their most helpful source of campaign information. Maybe they got issues and analysis. But the 24 percent who said cable news was their most helpful source of information? The 14 percent who said local TV news? The 14 percent who said social media? I’m not saying they got nothing civically nutritious. But judging from the hours I waste on campaign news, the word I’d use for what I get from it isn’t information — it’s entertainment.

Great entertainment, actually. Half the adults in the presidential debate audience, and six out of ten under 30, told Pew that the debates were “fun to watch.” You couldn’t want more entertaining characters than Trump, Cruz, Clinton, Sanders, Carson, Christie et al. The story has been riveting, full of shock and suspense, and the stakes just keep on rising. What’s fresh hell is next? What vile version of “Little Marco” or “Lyin’ Ted” will Trump unleash on Clinton, as he told Maureen Dowd he will? Will party maneuvers to prevent Trump’s nomination cause riots at the Cleveland convention, as he predicted on CNN? Will Trump leverage the chaos and violence he provokes and condones in order to present himself as the law-and-order strongman that Americans will be clamoring for? No wonder we can’t look away — we might get to see someone killed.

With that much drama, it's understandable that campaign news is as good a binge-watch as "Breaking Bad." But if I'm glued to Netflix, I don't try to tell myself that what I'm hooked on is necessary, important, that it makes me a better citizen. It's just fun. But cable news, the Sunday morning shows, the rabbit hole of blogs I keep falling down: they're meant to inform me, to make my opinions more sound, my views more valuable, my predictions more credible. It pains me to say it, because I've blown so much time doing it, but a lot of that is wishful thinking. At best, all that intake makes me a classier gossip. At worst, it gives me night terrors.

From the media I take in, I know a dozen scenarios for Trump, Cruz or Ryan to win or lose the nomination or the election. I know the difference between the Sanders and the Clinton college affordability plans. I can handicap the veepstakes for both tickets. Who cares? A year from now, what possible difference will knowing any of that make? What difference does it even make today?

I'll never get back the hours I spent paying attention to Michele Bachmann and Herman Cain, not to mention Carly Fiorina and Ben Carson. What I know about Eric Cantor and John Edwards is a waste of good neurons. I didn't miss a single minute of Clarence Thomas's confirmation hearings, or Bill Clinton's impeachment. They got my blood boiling, they were lurid beyond belief and I was convinced I had an intellectual responsibility and patriotic obligation to witness every moment of that history. But if instead I'd spent that time doing yoga, perfecting my ratatouille or cleaning my gutters, I wouldn't have been a lesser citizen. I watched every one of President Obama's State of the Union addresses, each promoted as once-in-a-lifetime TV, but unless I cheat, I can't now recall a phrase from any of them, and I'd be hard pressed to name a single consequential thing in his presidency, let alone in American history, that would have been different if he'd spent those eight nights helping Sasha and Malia with their homework. That's not a knock on his eloquence or his agenda; it's about how ephemeral spectacle is, and how often "breaking news" deserves the amnesia that befalls it.

Of course we need news. Ignorance is worse than infotainment. Lies require refutation. Investigative reporting is expensive and essential. Though the *New York Times* has sometimes been unfair to Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders, its remains competitive with the best political journalism in the world. Sites like Vox and FiveThirtyEight; writers like Elizabeth Drew and Jim Fallows; bloggers like Matt Taibi and Charlie Pierce; satirists like John Oliver and Samantha Bee; explainers like Rachel Maddow and Amy Goodman: they do make me smarter, and they show how Donald Trump gamed journalistic dysfunction to bring us to the brink of fascism.

But knowing that won't stop Trump or elect anyone else. The impact of the \$2 billion of free media that TV executives gave Trump swamps all the news and all the ads of all the other candidates. Worse, it swamps the rest of the news. The U.S. is at serious risk of another financial meltdown, but when a president of the Federal Reserve Bank sounds that alarm, it's a one-day story. Sixty million refugees are on the march — more than any other time in history — but it's Trump's feud with Megyn Kelly that gets the tweets and clicks. The size of the polar ice caps is getting less airtime than the size of Trump's junk.

I have a professional excuse to follow campaign coverage closely: I write about it. But even if what I wrote about were horticulture or basketball, I'd still be obsessed by political news. I can forgive myself for being hooked on 2016's slimy top reality show. But to confuse having fun with having a democracy — that's crazy.

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

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