



THE BLOG 05/11/2015 06:05 pm ET | Updated May 11, 2016

These Two Dudes in Denver Should Moderate All the Debates



By Marty Kaplan



BRANDON RITTIMAN/YOUTUBE

Here's Kyle Clark grilling Republican Cory Gardner, who went on to oust Mark Udall from his Colorado senate seat in 2014:

You continue to deny that the federal Life at Conception Act, which you sponsor, is a personhood bill to end abortion, and we are not going to debate that here tonight, because it's a fact. Your co-sponsors say so, your opponents say so, and independent fact checkers say so. So let's instead talk about what this entire episode may say about your judgment more broadly. It would seem that a charitable interpretation would be that you have a difficult time admitting when you are wrong, and a less charitable interpretation is that you're not telling us the truth. Which is it?

And here's Brandon Rittiman holding Udall's feet to the fire:

Senator, the Denver Post editorial board is calling yours [an] "obnoxious one-issue campaign" that is an insult to women. Are reproductive rights really the most important issue facing Colorado, or is this just about gathering enough female votes to help push you over the edge in the election? ... [M]ore than half of the ads on your side of this race are about this issue, yet it does not rank as Issue No. 1 in any public-opinion poll that you ever see. Is it really at that level that it needs to be at the top of your campaign?

Rittiman and Clark are political reporters at KUSA-TV, the NBC affiliate in Denver. Their station says it has “adopted a ‘pro-fact’ philosophy ... which requires tenacity in a world full of tailored-to-fit narratives cooked up by political operatives.” I’d love to see Rittiman and Clark go all pro-fact on Scott Walker, Marco Rubio and Jeb Bush, and on Hilary Clinton too, the way they did with Gardner and Udall. I’d love to see Rittiman fact-check presidential campaign ads as mercilessly as he has for state races in Colorado. That these two guys in local TV news are getting the airtime and resources they have is an industry exception that ought to be the rule.

Do you watch local TV news? Do you know many people who do? I don’t. Most people I know have written off local news as all crime, all the time, plus vapid chatter about weather, sports and accidents. I don’t think that’s wildly unfair. In Los Angeles, if I want hard news, the last place I’d think to look for it would be a TV set tuned to local news.

But that just proves what a freaking bubble I live in.

In fact, local TV news is the number-one source of news for most Americans. Not broadcast network news. Not cable news. Not comedy news. Not radio. Not social media. Not (sigh) newspapers. The news no one watches is the most watched news in America.

That’s why the quality of local TV news matters. If that’s where most people go for information, it makes a big difference when a KUSA has a Rittiman and a Clark. But that difference doesn’t happen by accident.

It’s cheaper to hire general-assignment reporters to cover an ugliest-dog contest on one day and a visiting candidate on the next than it is to make politics a beat and hire the reporters, producers, researchers and Web team needed to cover it. It takes guts for station managers and news directors to prioritize politics and not buy into dire warnings from industry consultants that politics is ratings poison. It takes storytelling skill to turn complex issues into compelling viewing. It takes courage to risk blowback from partisans and interest groups.

Those qualities are uncommon, but they’re not extinct, and they deserve acclaim. They’re getting it Friday at the National Press Club in Washington, D.C., as Rittiman, Clark and KUSA receive Walter Cronkite Awards for Excellence in TV Political Journalism. Since they began, those awards have been administered by the Norman Lear Center, which I direct, at the USC Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism.

Cronkite Awards also go this year to Mike Lowe at WITI-TV in Milwaukee; stations KXAN-TV in Austin, KPBS-TV in San Diego and WDSU-TV in New Orleans; and the Hearst Television station group, which includes WDSU. You can see the work they won for, as well as two documentaries being honored for investigative journalism — from Dina Gusovsky at CNBC.com, and María Elena Salinas

at Univision — at <http://www.learcenter.org/project/ca/>. For Rittiman's ad watches, KUSA has also won a prize named for Brooks Jackson, the founding director of FactCheck.org at the University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg Public Policy Center.

The first Cronkite awards for TV political journalism were presented in 2001, for coverage of the 2000 election. Cronkite gave his name and blessing because he feared the conquest of news by ads; he saw how fundraising for those ads corrupts politicians; and he was galled that stations reaped billions for carrying toxic messages on airwaves the public licenses to them for free. He was glad to lend his halo to good work being done against long odds that steps up to the news business's obligations to a democratic society.

In recent years, that business has become a principal sponsor of political debates. I don't want to depress you, but the start of the 2016 presidential debate season is just three months away. Republicans have so far sanctioned 11 primary debates, all hosted by media companies: Fox News, Fox Business, CNN, CNBC, ABC, CBS, NBC/Telemundo and Salem Media, a Christian radio network. The Democrats have announced six primary debates, which will seek "diversity of media outlets, moderators and formats."

Who will moderate them? Handicapping the likely suspects has already begun. Personally, I can't think of a better plan than to have all the presidential candidates subjected to Rittiman and Clark.

I don't doubt that current White House contenders are preparing their own versions of Newt Gingrich's attack on CNN's John King at the 2012 South Carolina GOP debate; the base loves that stuff. But Rittiman and Kyle aren't easy marks for press baiters. There's an ingratiating wonky quality about them. They're not in this to jack up their Q scores or position themselves for contract negotiations. They do what they do because — cornball alert! — they care how well we govern ourselves. I don't know their salaries, but I bet they deserve a raise, not because they're so good at making politicians squirm but because they're so committed to making citizens smarter and democracy stronger.

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

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