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The incredible blight of TV punditry

When super-pundit Robert Novak stormed off the set of a live CNN show Thursday – just after uttering what the New York Times delicately calls “a profanity” – it was an unusual episode of TV punditry. With rare exceptions, the slick commentators of televisionland keep their cool. But we’d be much better off if they all disappeared.

Novak’s unscripted exit from the telecast may have been a preemptive strike – a kind of semiconscious work stoppage – to avoid squirming under the hot lights. “The moderator of the program, Ed Henry, later said on the air that he had warned Mr. Novak that he planned to ask him ‘about the CIA leak case,’” the Times reports. As a bottom-feeding big fish in the pond of political journalism, Novak wants control over the sunlight in his face.

It has become a cliché to complain about the cable news channels. Fox News is notorious – or revered, depending on one’s political outlook – for a hard-right style that sometimes resorts to shouting down dissenters or cutting off their microphones. Bombast has become professionally respectable; many TV journalists yearn to be the next Bill O’Reilly.

CNN used to pride itself on offering a more tamped-down, supposedly erudite version of political debate. Yet the formula, in its own way, has always been heavily ideological. The name of one long-running show – “The Capital Gang” – has been an unacknowledged double entendre, with panelists speaking for an array of views that all fit snugly under the big tent of financial capital. Debate might get a little heated, but nobody wants to shake up the corporate system too much, thank you. (No wonder. That system has made everyone in the gang very affluent if not outright wealthy.)

Take a look at prime-time CNN now, and you might think that the really intellectual program in the lineup is the one hosted by Larry King. The latest developments from police departments, courtrooms, and morgues – often overlapping with Hollywood – have become the breaking news most often tracked by the cable network that’s still claiming, with a high jump over lowered standards, to be “the most trusted name” in

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news.

The downhill slide of CNN is about entertainment that masquerades as journalism. It runs parallel with MSNBC's plunge into right-wing blather that poses as discourse. The tipping point came in late February 2003 (three weeks before the U.S. invasion of Iraq began), when management at MSNBC cancelled the nightly "Donahue" program.

An in-house report that leaked from the network said Phil Donahue's show would present a "difficult public face for NBC in a time of war." The problem: "He seems to delight in presenting guests who are anti-war, anti-Bush and skeptical of the administration's motives." The danger – quickly averted by management – was that the show could become "a home for the liberal anti-war agenda at the same time that our competitors are waving the flag at every opportunity." So, to steer clear of any such catastrophe, MSNBC made itself a home for the conservative pro-war agenda.

During wartime – and the current U.S. war efforts have no end in sight – corporate media managers see waving the flag as a very good business practice. In sharp contrast, offering challenges to militarized mind sets is apt to be viewed as quite hazardous.

This process is mostly unspoken and maybe even unconscious. But the results can be seen, heard and read every day in the U.S. mass media. Tactics and specific politics of war may be hotly debated in major news outlets, but the coverage scarcely raises a peep about the fundamentals of the USA as a warfare state.

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"War Made Easy: How Presidents and Pundits Keep Spinning Us to Death."

For book excerpts and other information, go to: www.WarMadeEasy.com