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Conventional news wisdom of network TV

The same broadcast networks that eagerly devote endless prime-time hours to vacuous sitcoms and unreal "reality shows" couldn't spare a total of more than a few hours last week for live coverage of the Democratic National Convention.

It's true that complaining about scant news coverage from NBC, ABC and CBS is a bit like griping about small portions of meals from restaurants that serve lousy food. But still: the conventions are worth watching, if only to keep up with the rhetorical needles that party strategists are trying to thread these days.

Gathering for the convention in Boston, several network anchors participated in a high-profile panel at Harvard University. One of the more interesting moments came when the panelists responded to a question about the scant amount of air time the commercial broadcast networks were devoting to the convention.

In rapid succession, the trio of anchors from those networks (Tom Brokaw, Peter Jennings and Dan Rather) squeezed themselves into verbal contortions as they tried to avoid blaming the cutbacks of air time on the managements of the media companies that provide their hefty paychecks. To hear them tell it, the blame could be affixed many places – but General Electric, Disney and Viacom didn't merit a mention.

In response, Jim Lehrer of PBS and Judy Woodruff of CNN challenged the rationales for reducing coverage. Lehrer pointed out that the public's interest in this election is extraordinarily high. And Woodruff debunked the claim that the convention didn't deserve much coverage because it was "scripted." Many presidential events like the State of the Union address are also scripted, she said – and the networks don't claim that those events are unworthy of media attention because they're orchestrated by the White House.

It was unusual to see Lehrer or Woodruff become so vehement about anything. Not coincidentally, both of them work for employers offering products that compete with the broadcast networks. The PBS "NewsHour" prides itself on long-form coverage without commercial interruptions. And CNN, while highly commercialized, still devotes dozens of prime hours to covering each major-party convention. On the subject of air

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time for convention coverage, each of the five anchors put out a perspective that suited their management.

The discussion offered a rare look at Brokaw, Jennings, Rather, Lehrer and Woodruff all lined up in a row. Perhaps it would have been more prudent for one of those network superstar anchors to stay away from the panel as a precautionary measure. After all, the president, vice president and Cabinet members are never all in the same place at the same time – lest a catastrophic event potentially decapitate the entire government leadership.

Fortunately, there was no missile strike or other disaster when those superstar network anchors shared the stage at the Harvard forum, and the country's media governance remains intact.

So, there will be no disruption of presidential campaign coverage, with the major TV networks mostly providing glib punditry while "horse racing" the latest strategic outlooks for the candidates. On the network evening news programs, the situation has hardly improved since 2000, when – according to Meredith McGehee, director of the Alliance for Better Campaigns – 71 percent of the election coverage "dealt with the horse race aspects of the campaign, rather than substance."

Meanwhile, local TV stations around the country have been content to join with the networks to rake in big fees for campaign commercials while doing an atrocious job of providing news coverage. "More than half of all top-rated local news broadcasts that aired in the seven weeks leading up to Election Day in 2002 contained no campaign coverage at all," the Alliance for Better Campaigns reports.

The networks do devote some air time to the presidential race. But viewers are apt to get most of their "information" about the contest from the onslaught of paid campaign commercials. And the news reporting is usually so mired in the muck of cliches and corporatized assumptions that the spin often renders the coverage worthless or worse.

Several months ago, during the most intense period of the Democratic presidential primaries, the quantity of reporting – on ABC, CBS, NBC and Fox – was so limited that the Alliance found the networks "devoted just 8 percent of their news hole to election coverage in the two weeks leading up to the Super Tuesday primaries."

As superficial and rhetorical as the convention speeches tend to be, at least they allow the public to hear directly from national candidates and their advocates in more than mere snippets. Right now, much of what passes for televised discourse about the Kerry-Bush race doesn't go deeper than bumper-sticker phrases.

The top news shows are a big part of the problem, as the Alliance for Better

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Campaigns points out: "The average length of a soundbite by a presidential candidate on the network evening news went from 43 seconds in 1968 to less than eight seconds in 2000."

With three months to go till Election Day, the limitations of media coverage are painfully apparent. From now until the final frenzied days of coast-to-coast campaigning, Americans will be getting their most vivid impressions of the presidential race via commercial TV networks that operate to maximize profits for investors – and minimize public-interest broadcasting in the process.

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