

NBC's self-inflicted wounds: Rising above network bias

Okay, I've tried not to stray into the seedy world of network and cable news election coverage, but this one item is too important not to mention.

Let me say two things before I begin: 1) as a former television news producer, I have an unusual (and at times, according to my wife, irritating) interest in how network news is produced, and 2) this column is not any sort of political statement about either of our two (unfortunate) presidential candidates (okay, just that one word, describing both).

This is about encouraging free speech, not blocking it.

As a columnist here, I appreciate the openness and freedom of expression that Mike Buffington and his Mainstreet News team always encourage. The Buffington family's history of journalistic integrity is unquestionable—and while Mike's columns hold strong positions, he welcomes those of others.

But that's apparently not the case with NBC News—and a few of their anchors.

Most of you have probably heard about the pandemonium at NBC News

about the network hiring former Republican Party Chair Ronna McDaniel as a guest commentator.

If you have, you've also seen the outrage by the NBC network anchors, from Joe Scarborough at MSNBC to Chuck Todd at Meet the Press about their boss' decision to hire McDaniel.

The New York Times called the uproar an "escalating revolt" among the network's biggest names.

Talk about closing ranks. Here are some of the comments about Ronna McDaniel, most of them aimed at her support of former president Donald Trump (find me a former national party chairperson who didn't support the incumbent).

MSNBC's Rachel Maddow called the hiring "inexplicable". Joe Scarborough, host of MSNBC's morning show, "Morning Joe", said "We weren't asked our opinion of the hiring, but, if we were, we would have strongly objected to it for several reasons." That's pretty rich coming from Scarborough, himself a former Republican congressman from Florida.

Chuck Todd, the former host of NBC's Meet the Press, also piled on, indicating that "no one" was told (I guess they mean the anchors?) about the hiring of McDaniel, as though you have to check with the network's most familiar faces before hiring someone.

The patients are clearly running the asylum.

The problem is that this philosophy flies in the face of free speech. These guys, after calling McDaniel an "election denier" (McDaniel said that Biden won the election fair and square), were openly hostile to her position on supporting Donald Trump.

The end of this saga is that a few NBC anchors carried the day—and the NBC brass canceled their contract with Ronna McDaniel as soon as the howling began. But my guess is that

this is not the end of this story—as McDaniel might bring legal action.

The irony of this should not be lost on the viewer. Nearly every network has commentators on both sides of the political aisle.

FOX News has Juan Williams, a registered Democrat and Washington Post columnist, while CNN has former Republican National Committee chair, Michael Steele, among others.

I'm trying to recall when all of this anchor-commentary began. Perhaps it was Walter Cronkite, who ended every newscast for more than a year reminding America how many days the Iranian hostage crisis had gone on.

Now you have news anchors from Jake Tapper at CNN to John Roberts at FOX News offering commentary on nearly any political story they cover.

In fairness, you don't hear ABC's David Muir offering much commentary, nor does Wolf Blitzer at CNN or FOX's Brett Baier. David Brinkley and John Chancellor would approve—not to mention the journalist/producers that gave us The MacNeil/Lehrer News Hour.

While some anchors are careful to appear fair, but their producers (who normally decide what news to cover and how it will be covered) don't miss an opportunity to add opinion. Nor do their reporters.

FOX News viewers are treated to the pesky Peter Doocy's cynical reports from the north Lawn about Biden and, if that's not enough opinion-soaked reporting for you, click over to ABC News and watch Jon Karl's constant harping on Trump.

The larger issue here is that our network and cable news outlets reflect the same sort of polarization that is dividing our country. I would argue that these outlets actually lead public opinion, rather than simply reflect it.

The age of political compromise has left us. So has the opportunity to adequately differentiate news from opinion.

Regardless of your political views, don't let the Us vs. Them mentality divide us any further. If you are a FOX News junkie, watch some CNN. If you watch CNN, give FOX a look. Read the Braselton News and the Wall Street Journal. Read Mike Buffington and then Peggy Noonan. Take a break from Facebook. Force yourself to discern what is happening.

Perhaps Yeats was right when he wrote these lines in "The Second Coming":

The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.

In this election year, determine for yourself what is right. We must learn, as the great Norman Cousins once wrote, to feel comfortable in the presence of options.

Start welcoming different opinions and stop this polarizing madness.

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