

Guest commentary

Tony Kornheiser ruined American politics while Joe Six-Pack stood idly by



Christopher Cooper

OPINION

Two reporters, Tony Kornheiser and Mike Wilbon, make fun of each other's male pattern baldness and argue about sports. They debate whether Jessica Simpson's presence caused Tony Romo to lose in the playoffs, whether defensive back Pac-Man Jones (a guy who single-handedly made an innocuous and even charming nickname sound sinister) means it when he says he's sorry this time, and whether a bear falling on to a trampoline constitutes high comedy. It's not exactly "Masterpiece Theatre," but Kornheiser is pretty funny, and I'm a sucker for college football highlights on top of dry wit.

Like any successful format, "PTT" has spawned dozens of imitators. Unfortunately, just as all grunge music after Nirvana was merely a poor imitation of the original, the "PTT" imitators miss the mark on what makes the show great. ESPN is littered with virtually unwatchable shows like "Around the Horn" that try (but ultimately fail) to mimic the "PTT" style. Even SportsCenter, once the centerpiece of every middle-aged male's evening television menu, has devolved into contrived and warmed-over arguments about the sports news of the day.

The decline of sports coverage used to upset me, but one day I realized that it isn't that big of a deal. After all, sports don't really matter, and at least we can still rely on quality televised media coverage of politics. CNN still gives us the straight news and even Fox News separates opinion from the news. CBS, NBC, ABC and the rest are reasonable, if not reasoned, attempts to deliver in-

formation to the American public. **Just entertainment?** So for the last few years I've continued to watch "PTT" with impunity, never fearing that it could be, as Jon Stewart once quipped "bad for America." Then last week something terrible happened. About halfway through "PTT," in the middle of a Kornheiser riff about Aaron Rogers' chances to be the next Brett Favre, I came to a realization that caused my work as a political scientist to collide with my enjoyment of mildly amusing television — "Parade the Interruption" has ruined American politics.

Just as it did on ESPN, the "PTT" style of television — take an event, put people onto two sides of it and let them go at it — took over the news this election season. It doesn't matter what the issue is. During the primary season, CNN invariably would designate commentators as a "Clinton supporter" or an "Obama supporter." The Clinton supporter would make an argument for Clinton's point of view, and the Obama supporter would disagree.

The general election coverage was virtually identical — just replace "Clinton supporter" with "McCain supporter" and you've got a Tuesday night on "AC 360."

Facts and opinion

In addition to just being annoying, this approach to understanding politics suggests that there are no durable facts — only opinions. Of course, this is not true. There are no weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. That's fact, not opinion. John McCain has more foreign policy than Barack Obama — fact. Yet might after might these issues are treated as if they are open to debate. They're not, and they shouldn't be treated as such. Newspapers separate opinion pieces from news for a reason. Television used to do the same thing.

This style of media coverage also insinuates that there are always two (and only two) sides to any issue. Although it would be easier if this were the case, many, if not most, issues have more than two sides. There may be three, four or even five sides to an issue. Staying in Iraq isn't an either/or issue and there is no clear liberal or conservative view on this.

There are dozens of shades of gray, but you wouldn't know this from watching Hannity and Colmes.

It's pretty common to hear that American politics is increasingly polarized — that Republicans and Democrats live in two different worlds. There are many reasons for this polarization, but pitting a Democrat against a Republican every night on television can never help. It reinforces the notion that Democrats and Republicans live in different worlds and that they have no better chance of quality deliberation than Mike Tyson does with Evander Holyfield.

We can do better

The mass media have al-

most days when I come home from work, I sit in my favorite chair, pet my dog and watch "Parade the Interruption" on ESPN. The show is pretty simple.

Like any successful format, "PTT" has spawned dozens of imitators. Unfortunately, just as all grunge music after Nirvana was merely a poor imitation of the original, the "PTT" imitators miss the mark on what makes the show great. ESPN is littered with virtually unwatchable shows like "Around the Horn" that try (but ultimately fail) to mimic the "PTT" style. Even SportsCenter, once the centerpiece of every middle-aged male's evening television menu, has devolved into contrived and warmed-over arguments about the sports news of the day.

The decline of sports coverage used to upset me, but one day I realized that it isn't that big of a deal. After all, sports don't really matter, and at least we can still rely on quality televised media coverage of politics. CNN still gives us the straight news and even Fox News separates opinion from the news. CBS, NBC, ABC and the rest are reasonable, if not reasoned, attempts to deliver in-

formation to the American public. **Just entertainment?** So for the last few years I've continued to watch "PTT" with impunity, never fearing that it could be, as Jon Stewart once quipped "bad for America." Then last week something terrible happened. About halfway through "PTT," in the middle of a Kornheiser riff about Aaron Rogers' chances to be the next Brett Favre, I came to a realization that caused my work as a political scientist to collide with my enjoyment of mildly amusing television — "Parade the Interruption" has ruined American politics.

Just as it did on ESPN, the "PTT" style of television — take an event, put people onto two sides of it and let them go at it — took over the news this election season. It doesn't matter what the issue is. During the primary season, CNN invariably would designate commentators as a "Clinton supporter" or an "Obama supporter." The Clinton supporter would make an argument for Clinton's point of view, and the Obama supporter would disagree.

The general election coverage was virtually identical — just replace "Clinton supporter" with "McCain supporter" and you've got a Tuesday night on "AC 360."

Facts and opinion

In addition to just being annoying, this approach to understanding politics suggests that there are no durable facts — only opinions. Of course, this is not true. There are no weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. That's fact, not opinion. John McCain has more foreign policy than Barack Obama — fact. Yet might after might these issues are treated as if they are open to debate. They're not, and they shouldn't be treated as such. Newspapers separate opinion pieces from news for a reason. Television used to do the same thing.

This style of media coverage also insinuates that there are always two (and only two) sides to any issue. Although it would be easier if this were the case, many, if not most, issues have more than two sides. There may be three, four or even five sides to an issue. Staying in Iraq isn't an either/or issue and there is no clear liberal or conservative view on this.

There are dozens of shades of gray, but you wouldn't know this from watching Hannity and Colmes.

It's pretty common to hear that American politics is increasingly polarized — that Republicans and Democrats live in two different worlds. There are many reasons for this polarization, but pitting a Democrat against a Republican every night on television can never help. It reinforces the notion that Democrats and Republicans live in different worlds and that they have no better chance of quality deliberation than Mike Tyson does with Evander Holyfield.

We can do better

The mass media have al-

ways prided themselves on fairness, and this fairness used to mean presenting the facts and allowing citizens to cull through them and form their own opinions.

The new interpretation of fairness seems to be presenting two inaccurate, stereotypical and biased sides and letting the people choose one of them. Unfortunately, two unequal one reasonable do not equal one reasonable one.

Perhaps the news media should realize that the "PTT" formula works well for two smart, funny guys who make careers out of debating the future of a defensive back named after a 1980s video game, but not when you're debating whether we should send troops to Iraq, how we should solve the worst economic crisis we've seen in 50 years or who should be the next leader of the free world.

Christopher Cooper is an associate professor of political science and public affairs at Western Carolina University, where he directs the master's degree program in public affairs and the Public Policy Institute.