

CNN's flagship debate program is back ... again

May 04, 2014 | Eric Zorn

"'Crossfire' Held Hostage," a crisis in my household, lasted 51 days.

On March 11, three days after Malaysia Airlines Flight 370 vanished from the skies, CNN more or less suspended all regular programming to keep viewers abreast of the fruitless searches and educated guesses in the troubling mystery.

"Crossfire," a half-hour forum on hot topics in the news that airs weekdays here at 5:30 p.m., vanished right along with Flight 370.

I'm a big fan of the show. It pits left vs. right, Democrat vs. Republican in a round-table debate on the hottest issues of the day. Both sides get their say, aided and challenged by a pair of partisan moderators, and viewers generally come away with a better understanding of the points of divergence and disagreement.

It ran from 1982 until 2005, when CNN canceled it less than three months after comedian-pundit Jon Stewart appeared as a guest and begged the hosts to "Stop, stop, stop, stop hurting America."

Stewart compared the rhetorical battles on "Crossfire" to professional wrestling and added, "You're doing theater when you should be doing debate. ... What you do is partisan hackery ... you have a responsibility to the public discourse, and you fail miserably. ... I watch your show every day, and it kills me."

I didn't think "Crossfire" enabled partisan hackery so much as it reflected it by accurately portraying the rigidity and hypocrisy that generate our vast political divides. But CNN President Jonathan Klein didn't see it that way. "I agree wholeheartedly with Jon Stewart's overall premise," he said, when announcing the cancellation of what he referred to as a "head-butting debate show."

But I'd rather watch head-butting than backslapping, which in the intervening years became the stock in trade of Fox News and MSNBC, the partisan cable news channels that are too often self-congratulatory echo chambers for a single point of view.

As much as I admire and tend to agree with MSNBC's wonky Rachel Maddow, for example, I'm weary of how often her guests simply amplify and embroider liberal positions. Their points sound good, but where are the counterpoints?

What's "hurting America" more than stylized bickering is the sense imparted by tendentious news-talk programs that there *is* no other side worth hearing out, that most matters aren't even debatable and that devil's advocates are fitting stand-ins for actual advocates.

"Theater" isn't ideal for public discourse, true, but it beats the hell out of propaganda.

So I was glad last fall when CNN resurrected "Crossfire." Despite the caricature of such programs as mere shout fests, the featured conversations tended to be civil and informative, though occasionally a bit shallow — most of the guests are politicians, after all.

(Those with an interest in invective-free debates among experts should check out the "Intelligence Squared" series at intelligencesquaredus.org)

And I was disappointed when, week after week after the disappearance of Flight 370, CNN persisted in pre-empting "Crossfire" for the network's less and less special coverage of that increasingly stagnant story.

And on days when CNN had absolutely nothing new to say about the jet and no fresh speculation to add, it began filling the "Crossfire" time slot with dispatches on other big stories — the mudslide in Washington state, the strife in Ukraine and the ferry tragedy in South Korea, for example. And since there's really no end to ratings-friendly catastrophes, I began to fear that the network had once again given up on featuring nightly debates.

But then Thursday, with a simple "It's good to be back" from co-host Van Jones, "Crossfire" returned with a 30-minute wrangle about President Barack Obama's foreign policy.

What a relief. I can only hope that this return survives the inevitable world disasters to come.

Best. Silence. Ever.

Ever since the Illinois General Assembly passed a law in 2007 mandating a "moment of silence" to begin each classroom day in public schools I've been informally collecting reports from students, parents and teachers about how this vague, ridiculously meddlesome law is flouted or, as in the three public high schools my children have attended, simply ignored.

Here's the best story I've found: At the Washington campus of Waukegan High School, the "moment" is folded discreetly into the daily (also mandatory) recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance.

Students "pause for five seconds after the phrase 'under God,'" said Nicholas Alajakis, public information officer for Waukegan Public Schools.

Five seconds is certainly enough time "for silent prayer or for such silent reflection as may be desired," as the statute suggests. And right after "under God," too!

It's also enough time to think the words, "As ever, there is no end to the officious yet feckless paternalism of our grandstanding politicians."

Have a better "moment of silence" story? Email ericzorn@gmail.com.

The Fire is fit to be tied

Win, lose or, probably, draw in this weekend's game against Salt Lake City, Chicago's Major League Soccer team has a problem: Too many of its games end in ties.

Indeed, going into the weekend the Chicago Fire hadn't won or lost a game since March 9. They'd played to six ties in row — aggregate score of 8 to 8. Their record was 0-1-6. Salt Lake was 3-0-5. So 11 of the 15 regular season games these teams had played to date had ended in unsatisfying deadlocks.

Yes, die-hard fans appreciate the tension and drama of a draw, but come on. Every other major sport and nearly all minor sports have all but done away with ties — like kissing your sister, as the sporting cliché has it — and if soccer is ever going to grip America's imagination it's going to have to figure out a way to prevent the absurdity of six no-decisions in a row.

OK, shootouts are blasphemous. So why not short overtime periods with increasingly fewer players on a side until one team finally scores? Or a 50 percent wider goal mouth at the end of regulation time? Something ... anything ... zzzzzz.

Re: Tweets

The winner in the reader poll for funniest tweet of the week is this from @PortRooster:

"Due to a tragic 'iTunes on shuffle' incident, I've had to convince the guys at work that I have a 12-year-old daughter they have never met."

I don't usually have a separate category for wisest tweet, but this week's consensus winner was this insight from noted astrophysicist Neil deGrasse Tyson:

"The limits on your enlightenment come not from the age you stopped going to school but from the age you stopped being curious."