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TELEVISION WITH TEARS: THE 2016 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION by Toby Miller

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The recent General Election in the US shocked politicians, pollsters, political scientists, and progressives alike. [How did two absurd people end up as the principal parties' picks](#), and why will the most ridiculous *coiffure* since Jefferson's enter the White House in January? The rest of the world is [reeling in shock \(social democracies\) or revelling in pleasure \(Russia has its first-ever puppet in the Oval Office\)](#).

The victor broke the mould by disobeying the norms of US electoral success. He didn't have a thorough grassroots organization or raise vast sums for television commercials from ordinary people or major donors. He used his Twitter account to scream at people and tendencies he didn't like, and was inarticulate, angry, ill-disciplined, and asinine in interviews and Presidential debates.

So was this a case where we can say that television really didn't matter? Did a distinctly non-millennial figure, a child of the 1940s and of a [far-right father](#), draw a line through, and under, TV's political dominance?

Not exactly.

Trump is unusual among politicians in being a longstanding prime-time television celebrity. His public face as a self-anointed hero of US capitalism derives as much from that as from his putative business acumen.

In addition, Trump's use of Twitter was a classic update on the [two-step theory of political communication](#): social-media success provided a perfect headline for *bourgeois* media outlets, which then amplified on a given Tweet.

He got lots of free television coverage because his Twitter outbursts were like those of a spoilt child. Toys were ejected from the stroller and pacifiers spat out at a rate rarely seen in the post-War era. The white man went so far as to boast that [‘I don't even need commercials,’](#) though he spent almost [US\\$25 million](#) on them in the last week and a half of the campaign.

[Trump's rants gifted a lifeline to news cyclists](#) that was equivalent to the OJ Simpson trial or Bill Clinton's impeachment:

[The press covered Hillary Clinton like the next president of the United States. The press covered Donald Trump like a future trivia question \(and a ratings cash cow\).](#)

Those who work with the genre's double jeopardy of 24-hour rolling programming and diminished resources to undertake what we once filed under the heading 'journalism' got an easy task.

A *New York Times* headline for November 8 reads: [“Can the Media Recover from this Election?”](#) This was because the

false balance of US journalism schools and publishers—their infantile if sensationally Hegelian notion that for every thesis there is an antithesis, and binarism rules—ran aground when confronted with serial mendacity. The *Times* hopefully argued that ‘Mr. Trump’s asymmetric, weirdly brazen dishonesty has broken reporters of the bad habits of false equivalency, euphemism and forced balance.’ I look forward to seeing that.

The last two candidates left standing gave commercial TV [fabulous](#) revenue over the life of the campaign. The three principal cable-news stations (CNN, Fox, and MSNBC) did particularly well from the ongoing drama and brutality of the Republican primaries and the juvenilia and scandal of the General Election campaign proper.

Consider these figures from the first quarter of the year by contrast with 2015:

CNN was up 165 percent in prime-time total viewers and 143 percent in the core news demographic of adults ages 25 to 54. Fox News was up 38 percent and 60 percent in those metrics, respectively, compared to last year, while MSNBC, with its still in-progress transition to emphasize breaking news, was up 66 percent and 71 [percent](#).

[That generated US\\$2 billion in advertising revenue for these stations—an increase of 15 percent on last year and 25 percent on the previous Presidential election.](#)

[CNN has admitted](#) that it did too much coverage, unedited, of Trump’s rousing rallies, paeans to demagoguery that they were, while noting that he never refused requests for interviews, unlike his Republican counterparts in the primary race, and that the unpredictability of an irrational, oleaginous

capitalist attracted viewers. Trump needed, and received, TV attention.

Two of the three Presidential debates set ratings records. [Over 84 million people watched the first—well under three million tweeted about it.](#) [On election night itself](#), more than 70 million people tuned in during prime time, just a hundred thousand below the record figures of 2008. CNN easily won the most prime-time viewers, followed by Fox News, NBC, ABC, CBS, MSNBC, and Fox broadcasting. When the disappointed majority of voters (Democrats) went to bed around 1030-11, Fox News dominated ratings, though I am pleased to report that [Bob's Burgers](#) attracted [0.5 of the 18-49 year-old audience](#) at that time.

The [Hollywood Reporter](#) called the 2016 election 'a postmodern reality show without rival,' in a world freed from expertise and evidence alike. The egregious head of CBS, Leslie Moonves, memorably remarked that ['It may not be good for America, but it's damn good for CBS.'](#)

In my view, TV should be crying in shame—but not because its day is done.

Toby Miller is Emeritus Distinguished Professor at the University of California, Riverside, the Sir Walter Murdoch Professor of Cultural Policy Studies at Murdoch University, Profesor Invitado at the Universidad del Norte, Professor of Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies at Cardiff University/Prifysgol Caerdydd and Director of the Institute for Media & Creative Industries at Loughborough University in London. He can be contacted at tobym69@icloud.com and his adventures scrutinized at www.tobymiller.org.