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Richard Ellis / Newsmakers

Says Kurtz, "There was a constant sense of going live for the sake of being live."

Broken News

The election's biggest loser?
The media, according to The Washington Post's Howard Kurtz. A Q&A with the critic

NEWSWEEK WEB EXCLUSIVE

Dec. 15 — No room for appeals here: Howard Kurtz, the longtime Washington Post reporter and co-host of CNN's "Reliable Sources," thinks the media blew it.

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ONE OF THE COUNTRY'S preeminent media critics, Kurtz spoke with NEWSWEEK's B.J. Sigesmund on the morning of Dec. 14, the day after Vice President Al Gore conceded. Let 'er rip, Howie!

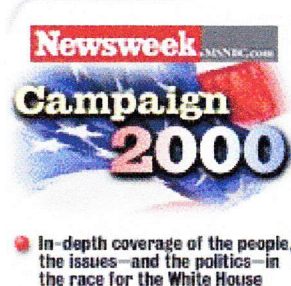
NEWSWEEK: Give us your thoughts on TV coverage the night of Nov. 7.

Howard Kurtz: Election night was probably the biggest blunder in the history of television. It was an electronic "Dewey Defeats Truman" that had the big-time anchors looking absolutely silly and jerked the country around in the most dramatic fashion possible. Nobody at the networks is defending this fiasco, which is just as well, because it's basically indefensible. Particularly inexplicable was the second call of Florida for Bush at 2:16 a.m. because it was based upon raw votes. Had these geniuses simply waited another hour, they wouldn't have made the mistake. Besides, why go out on such a shaky limb when half the country's asleep?

I know some people believe the networks were trying to help Al Gore with the early declaration that Florida would be in his column. But I think there's a more basic explanation: incompetence. That and the feverish desire to be first, or at least to catch up with the pack once your rivals are calling states for one candidate or the other. There's an awful lot of peer pressure involved here.

What about the newspapers the morning after the election?

Some of the nation's best newspapers, including The New York Times, allowed themselves to be stampeded by television and ran those "Bush Wins" headlines, at least in some editions. I suppose now they



can claim that they were right, just too soon.

Talk about the 24/7 coverage of the past five weeks.

Cable news really dominated this story, but, unfortunately, they also pumped it up into some sort of “crisis” that was acutely felt by journalists but not by the great mass of Americans. This is very much in keeping with the “Big Story” philosophy that drives these round-the-clock networks and boosts their ratings. But it can also create a deafening drumbeat and help polarize the country by giving a giant megaphone to the most shrill and partisan voices, which sometimes includes the commentators themselves.

There was plenty of *good* reporting during this 36-day miniseries, and at least there was no Gap dress or bloody glove, so media people can feel good about having immersed themselves in a story far more important than the O.J. and JonBenét frenzies of the past. But I still think that the need to milk and merchandise this story—even on the many days when nothing was going on—adds to television’s reputation as a hype machine. Even as it pulls in some of those all-important eyeballs.

Which of the on-air people did the best jobs?

Some of the legal commentators such as Dan Abrams, Jack Ford, Greta Van Susteren and Roger Cossack did a good job of leading viewers through the judicial thicket, although they occasionally succumbed to groundless speculation about what would happen next. MSNBC showed what it can do with a stellar lineup of reporters when it’s actually covering news as opposed to endlessly rerunning taped programs about celebrities and crime. CNN, where I host a program, was extremely solid both in the analysis by folks like Jeff Greenfield and Bill Schneider and in the shoe-leather reporting of people like Candy Crowley, Jonathan Karl and John King, who scored a scoop on the Gore campaign’s statement after the Supreme Court ruling Tuesday night by reading an e-mail off his pager. The big three networks brought their usual gravitas to the story, but NBC missed a real opportunity when it chose Leonardo DiCaprio over George W. Bush by refusing to break into the movie “Titanic” to carry Bush’s address after Florida certified him the winner. CBS deserved plaudits for running the entire 90-minute audiotape of the first oral arguments before the Supreme Court while ABC and NBC carried just a few minutes, switched to some anchor chat and then returned to soap operas and other daytime fare.

**What have you thought of all those big
“Breaking News” moments?**

Those “Breaking News” logos seemed a little worn out when cable kept hopscotching to these endless press conferences by Jim Baker, Warren Christopher, David Boies and virtually every member of Congress and other assorted attorneys, strategists and hangers-on. I doubt there’s a former Supreme Court clerk in America who hasn’t been on TV talking about this case. And you have had to feel sorry for the correspondents standing in the cold in front of the Texas governor’s mansion or the vice president’s residence, who would constantly be asked for reaction to this or that blip of an event when obviously they had had no time to call anyone. So there was a constant sense of going live for the sake of being live.

**What about the Dec. 13 papers, all of which
seemed to call George W. Bush the winner even
though Gore hadn’t conceded?**

I thought the newspaper stories the day after the 5-4 Supreme Court ruling quite properly reflected the fact that the election was essentially over, confusing as it seemed when the frozen TV reporters were reading bits of the high court’s ruling late on that Tuesday night.

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There was no question that the justices had slammed the door on Al Gore’s presidential hopes and that the melodrama was finally coming to an end. That’s an instance where I think newspapers can serve an important role on a fast-moving, made-for-television story.

They can cut through the live rhetoric and endless chatter and distill the essence of a court ruling and a political impasse that cried out for closure.

Any other thoughts before we wrap this up?

One last thing. There were few winners in this election mess. The candidates didn’t shine; the lawyers looked manipulative; the partisans shouted themselves hoarse; Florida took a drubbing. But I think the media—particularly with their sorry performance on election night—fell a notch further in public esteem and have some repair work to do.