

“Monetizing” Electoral Politics: TV Networks Are Out To Sell, Not Tell

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Already the projections are in—not for who is going to win the election in 2012—but for how much it is likely to cost.

Public Radio International concludes: “Campaign spending in the 2012 US election could reach \$6 or 7 billion dollars as outside groups pay for electoral influence.”

Here we are in the middle of a deep recession that’s getting deeper by the day, with austerity the unofficial slogan du jour while Republican scheme up new ways to trim, cut and decimate government spending, and parties are spending billions on political horse races.

They decry government spending but they don’t talk much about their own spending, do they?

And neither do the Democrats who are also backing an orgy of spending cuts if only to show their opponents how “responsible” they are.

As both parties slash spending that benefits people, they are in a manic overdrive effort to raise more for themselves and their campaigns.

PRI’s Here and Now program reported, “In 2008, Barack Obama raised some \$778 million for his presidential bid. The total cost of the national election, including Presidential and Congressional, was about \$5.3 billion. Since then, court decisions like Citizens United have made spending by outside groups easier.

“In 2012,” Dave Levinthal, director of the Center for Responsive Politics told PRI’s Here and now, “you’re easily looking at 6, maybe even 7 billion dollars nationwide.”

The Center for Responsive Politics has already reported that Wall Street “bundlers” have generated more money for the Obama campaign than they did four years ago even as anger with the financial behemoths grows in the base of the Democratic Party,

Spending by outside groups was about 4 times higher in 2010 than it was in 2006. Much of that can be attributed to new, looser campaign laws.

Levinthal explains that “the laws changed in a way that effectively allowed these outside groups to raise and spend unlimited sums of money to say whatever they want, to do it whenever they wanted to, and they could do it in as strong a term as they wanted to.”

These developments get scant media attention for one good reason: the media is a prime beneficiary of a political system dominated by big money.

Much of these billions are raised for political advertising. The networks get it. No wonder, they are out to sell more than tell.

Listen to the editor of Cable Fax, an industry publication that is planning a Webinar to help TV executives “monetize” (i.e., make more money from) the 2012 elections and its vast “political spend.”

Here’s editor Amy Maclean pitching her media readers in high places:

“The 2012 elections will be here before you know it, so now is the perfect time to start planning your strategy and make sure to maximize your share of the political ad spend. Join us Tuesday, August 30 for our CableFAX Webinar: Monetize Election 2012: Advanced Political Advertising. You’ll get sound advice and practical tips to make the most of interactivity and multiplatform campaigns.

“While cable’s total of campaign ad dollars continues to climb to record levels, (emphasis mine) the next question is how to make that two-way plan more attractive to campaigns through the use of Video On Demand (VOD,) RFIs, online and other interactive elements.

“Last year, California Republican gubernatorial candidate Meg Whitman helped put RFI (Request for Information) political spots on the map, using the technology to allow viewers to request things such as bumper stickers and volunteer info. The innovation continues, with 2012 expected to really help the industry further distinguish itself with its advanced political advertising offerings.

“Additionally, the recent Citizens United Supreme Court case opened the way for corporations and unions to drop major coin to back candidates and issues.”

Cable Fax wants its readers to know how best to “navigate the race in November and drive additional advertising revenues,” i.e. (“drop coin” in their pockets.)

The irony is that while most TV networks insist they are bi-partisan and don’t flack for any candidates, their coverage is, in effect, flacking for themselves — to bolster revenues by siphoning off as many political donations that they can slip and slide into their own coffers.

This corporate self-interest is rarely explained or even admitted but in a tough advertising market—with the economy in collapse mode—politics primes the media pump.

Campaigns are windfalls for broadcasters. The networks that oppose stimulus programs for workers with so many snarky stories, don’t oppose this stimulus for themselves.

Promoting elections has become an industry of its own and TV networks are at the center of it. They are not devoting much time to promoting voter registration or voter education. They don’t provided many free ads and in fact often refuse to run issue-oriented ads bought by activists.

This agenda is wrapped up in the mantle of enabling democracy but it is of course much

more than that. Most of the coverage is about the personality parade and horse race, not the issues. It focuses on candidates more than political organizing. There seems to be little concern with new measures like voter ID cards designed to suppress the vote, or electoral fraud designed to steal it.

The fact is that the political circus is good for business, not democracy. The Providence Phoenix reports, "Political coverage on television is diminishing, and revenue from political advertising is soaring. Critics say free airtime for candidates could help solve the problem:

Writes Ian Donnis, "The Alliance for Better Campaigns (ABC), a Washington, DC-based nonpartisan group that advocates for political campaigns that inform voters and increase their participation in the political process, is pushing a proposal that would force broadcasters to offer free air time to political candidates before elections — in addition to increasing political coverage overall. Proponents say the idea is the next frontier in campaign-finance reform.

These proposals have been around for years, endorsed by former Presidents and the late Walter Cronkite, but they have gone nowhere. Why? Why should the networks give away air time when they are paid so handsomely for it?

"Nearly every democracy in the world has some kind of mandate for free television time during campaigns. Broadcasters can afford it: profit margins of 30 percent, 40 percent, and even 50 percent are common in broadcasting, according to Paul Taylor, the former Washington Post reporter who serves as president of the Alliance for Better Campaigns. And, since the Communications Act of 1934 was enacted, broadcasters' free and exclusive use of the airwaves has also been conditioned on their agreement to function as public trustees."

Ha!

It's hard not to conclude that their inaction, and unwillingness to reform their own practices, is caused by network's own bottom-line greed— always justified in the name of preserving the first amendment, of course.

The truth is our valiant TV networks are undermining democracy, not bolstering it. These campaigns create jobs for their own pollsters, pundits and partisans. This spectacle does not serve a public deeply disenchanted with sleaze in suits and political corruption,

Instead "monetized election coverage" is a fixture, a part of the problem. The New York Times reports in detail how Rick Perry's high net worth donors benefited financially when state money went, tit for tat, into their businesses.

The watchdogs have become lapdogs when it comes to monitoring and disclosing their own agendas and profits.

Who will watch the watchers?

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