

Did Cable News Pick up Where Pro Wrestling Left Off?



Those who've followed the professional wrestling industry at any point over the past 15 years will probably recognize the name Eric Bischoff. He was the Executive Producer (and later the President) of World Championship Wrestling (WCW) in the mid to late 1990s.

While Bischoff's pop-culture notoriety doesn't rise to the level of WWE's Vince McMahon, he was once a very important man in the business. During his tenure, WCW revived a stagnant period in the wrestling industry with big-name talent, stunning athleticism, and innovative storytelling that drew in new viewership by the millions. WCW was so successful, in fact, that the company nearly put McMahon's WWE out of business. WCW's flagship television program, which ran head to head with WWE's on Monday nights, won the ratings war 83 straight weeks, achieving something that no one in the industry had previously thought possible.

McMahon, of course, eventually made a comeback. Desperate times called for desperate measures, and in a last-ditch effort to survive the WCW assault, he employed what became known as the "Attitude Era." WWE abandoned its long established, kid-friendly format and embraced outlandish, adult-oriented programming that included lots of profanity, over-the-top sexual content, and depicted violence that went well beyond the confines of a wrestling ring. The *car-crash* TV strategy worked, slowly peeling away fans from WCW while attracting many brand-new viewers.

At the peak of the "Monday Night Wars," a combined 10 million viewers were tuning in every Monday to watch wrestling. The companies were even pulling away once reliable *Monday Night Football* fans, which had network executives spending big ad money to try and win them back.

Those days are over. Wrestling audiences are a small fraction of what they were back then, the decline having started long before the pandemic hit.

Eric Bischoff suspects he knows why, at least in part. In a recent episode of his podcast, aptly named "83 Weeks," he weighed in on the topic.

"I think there are millions of people out there... that used to really love professional wrestling, because it was one of the first forms of real, alternative entertainment in the television world," said Bischoff. "It wasn't sports, it wasn't comedy, it wasn't drama, it wasn't news, it wasn't any of the above, but it was a little bit of everything... The question is, 'Where did they go, and *why?*'"

Bischoff's theory is that those millions of viewers from the coveted 18-49 ratings demo, who once sat in their living rooms cheering on The Rock as he dropped the *People's Elbow*, or Bill Goldberg spearing an opponent out of his boots, have found a new home.

“Look at Tucker Carlson’s 18-49. Look at CNN’s 18-49. Look at MSNBC’s 18-49, in prime-time,” said Bischoff. “That was the wrestling audience. Where have they gone? They’ve gone to cable news. *Why* have they gone to cable news? Because cable news is now more like professional wrestling than professional wrestling used to be.”

Bischoff described the “promos” on cable news as being “f***ing awesome.” (A *promo*, in pro wrestling lingo, refers to the impassioned monologue a wrestler delivers in front of a microphone.)

“They get up there and they f***ing argue, and they cut great promos on each other,” Bischoff said of cable news commentators. “It’s great narrative. There’s almost always somebody up there that you want to choke, and there’s almost always somebody up there that’s saying what you believe in. So guess what? You have more emotion. You’re investing more emotion watching cable f***ing news than you get from watching wrestling...”

Bischoff believes that pro wrestling fans left and never came back because they’re now “watching something that provides more entertainment for them, because of the quality of the emotion that’s created in news versus the quality of the emotion that’s created in professional wrestling. They’ve actually flipped!”

Bischoff predicted that the emotion fueled by cable news personalities will eventually lead to physical altercations on-air. “They are escalating the emotion to that level, and they’re doing it intentionally, by the way. I don’t think these people all believe the sh*t that they’re saying when they’re on television.”

To illustrate his point, Bischoff talked about the audio tape that was leaked a while back of CNN’s Chris Cuomo secretly coaching President Trump’s former lawyer, Michael Cohen, on

the types of things Cohen should say in their scheduled interview.

“It reminded me of *me* laying out the NWO promo to Hulk Hogan at *Bash at the Beach* in '96,” said Bischoff. “... I don't think that's an exception. I don't think that Chris Cuomo did anything that anybody else *isn't* doing. I think they *all* do it. It's a gimmick. It's a f***ing work. It's just silly. But it's more entertaining than wrestling in some respects.”

I made a number of these same points in a piece I wrote for *National Review* back in 2017, and it was pretty interesting to hear Bischoff (a man with a lot of credibility on the topic) essentially agree. But Bischoff took the argument a step further, touching on an area I hadn't thought about at the time. He shed some light not only on the behavior of cable news personalities and producers, but also the audience.

It really did boggle my mind in 2015 and 2016 (the beginning of the Trump era) how so many cable news pundits managed to flip their personas and various positions on a dime, and embrace conduct and policies that they had adamantly denounced for years (in some cases decades), without the bulk of their audience seemingly even noticing.

For example, conservative commentators who'd been very vocal proponents of good character, small government principles, and free markets were suddenly singing the praises (and trashing the critics) of Donald Trump, a fundamentally dishonest and morally corrupt man with big-government, populist ideas that ran counter to conservatism. By and large, these people not only kept their audiences, but actually grew them. Those who stuck to their principles and remained intellectually consistent, however, not only lost viewers, but were suddenly deemed “washed up” and irrelevant.

It never made sense in the framework of principles, policy stances, and ideological beliefs... but it actually makes

perfect sense in the context of *sports entertainment* – specifically when you think of the pundits as professional wrestlers.

Professional wrestlers *reinvent* themselves quite often. It's a standard practice in their profession. Sometimes it's as simple as changing gimmicks or how they look. Other times, it's a complete character overhaul. *Good guys* "turn heel" and become bad guys. *Bad guys* "turn face" and become good guys. There's not always an explanation for it, and that's just a discrepancy the audience accepts as part of the product. A willing suspension of disbelief, and the entertainment value of emotional theater, simply allow for it.

Professional wrestling audiences, of course, don't tune in to be informed. They don't insist on truth from the product. What they want is to be taken on an emotionally addictive ride. When watching a match or skit, they don't fret over things like hypocrisy. They don't expect intellectual honesty or consistency. In fact, consistent characters actually tend to wear thin on wrestling fans. If wrestlers stick with the same gimmick for too long, they're viewed as stale, and fans become less interested in them.

If these fans have indeed migrated to the cable news networks over the years, is it any wonder why the same exemptions from realism and credibility have been extended to cable news pundits?

Such audiences, after all, want a spectacle. They want entertaining, animated, conflict. And as Eric Bischoff suggests, cable news has been better at delivering it, in recent years, than professional wrestling. The same is undeniably true of Donald Trump (a man with his own background in the wrestling industry), who has led practically every national news cycle over the past five and a half years with his own performative brand.

None of this is to say that the spectators don't *want* what they're watching, and listening to, to be real. As was the case in the golden era of wrestling, they absolutely do. But therein lies the problem. While today's wrestling fans are well aware that professional wrestling programs are heavily fictionalized, the same isn't true in regard to cable news. Many cable news viewers believe what they're hearing on the commentary shows are genuinely held beliefs, and honest, good-faith representations of legitimate stories. Sadly, that often isn't the case.

And unlike professional wrestling, there are very real public consequences that come from popular cable-news themes – consequences that go well beyond absurd narratives, general disinformation, and cultural fearmongering. Baseless conspiracy theories erode faith in vital institutions (like our electoral system), and bring great pain to innocent people (like Seth Rich's family). Politically-motivated character assassination derails innocent lives (as with the Covington Catholic schoolkids). Egregious acts by fringe groups and individuals are presented as systemic crises and coordinated threats to society, eroding all sense of perspective.

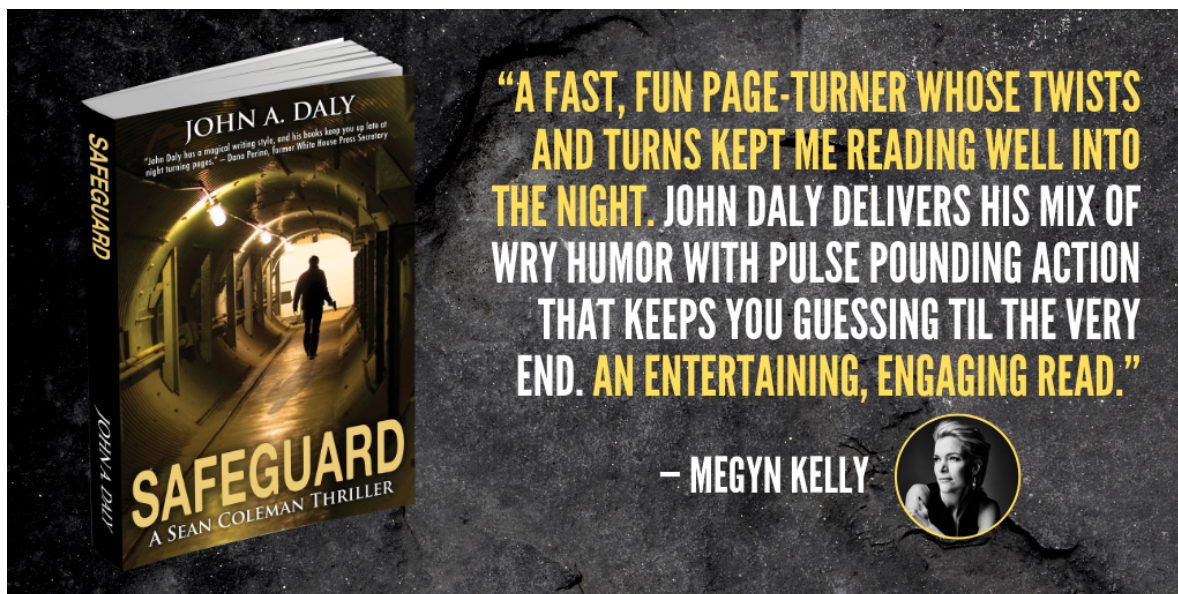
But it's entertaining... and it evokes emotion... and it's satisfying. It gives us heroes to cheer and villains to boo. And when that's the bar that millions of viewers hold their news providers to, how can those viewers ever expect anything in return more substantive and intellectually stimulating than lowbrow performance art?

Personally, I'm done with cable news commentary shows (and have been for some time). There are too few remaining, featuring too few people with integrity, that provide any kind of real-world, informative value. When I want earnest, knowledgeable political commentary, there are a number of news sites and podcasts that provide it.

And when I'm looking to be entertained, there are also much

better options than cable news, with better actors and actresses, whose performances are neither insultingly contrived, nor culturally toxic.

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