

# The Timely Arrival of 'S.E. Cupp: Unfiltered'



Last month, conservative commentator S.E. Cupp started off the premier episode of her hour-long panel-driven show on HLN, *S.E. Cupp: Uncensored*, by offering up a bit of a disclaimer:

“I’m a conservative and a Republican, but I have some serious concerns about my party and my president...and I’ll say so. I’m also a grownup, so I can defend this administration when it makes sense to.”

It was a statement that wouldn’t be thought to be particularly provocative if shared between friends in everyday discourse. But in the world of cable-news commentary, where ratings trump just about everything, it was actually a pretty brave point of view to express – especially from a host of a new show, faced with the daunting task of trying to build new audience.

You see, criticism of our president is an easy sell for liberal pundits who work for liberal news organizations. The Left is unified in their opposition to the Trump, and MSNBC in

particular has reaped the rewards of that consensus. *Conservative* skepticism of Trump, however, has not been a winning formula over the past couple of years. Trump's populist takeover of the Republican party was a rejection of traditional party ideals and principled ideology. It transformed the base, and ushered in a sycophantic, trollish sentiment that conservative commentators have been under immense professional pressure to comply with.

Some of these media-righties saw the writing on the wall early. Like actors switching roles, they dumped their long-preached doctrines to serve as fawning Trump proxies. Others got on board after the election, having finally succumbed to the realization that they were dealing with a different audience – one whose appetite for Trump-train tribalism could only be satisfied with a nightly feeding of red meat.

The conservative hold-outs, who've remained intellectually-consistent and brutally honest in their analysis (which has been known to include sharp critiques of Trump), have been met with fierce resistance from their own side of the political aisle. This has included persistent calls for their firings and ongoing Internet harassment that has gone well beyond standard trolling. Producers have been privy to the discontent, and the results, in some cases, have been less screen time and fewer opportunities for advancement.

So *HLN* deserves a fair amount of credit for taking a chance on a conservative-leaning Trump-skeptic like Cupp, whose new show has already provided a stark contrast with the network's top-rated competitor, *Fox News*. While Tucker Carlson, Sean Hannity, and three fifths of the panel on *The Five* have focused almost exclusively on filleting "crazy liberals" and presenting Trump as a folk hero of the modern day, *Cupp and company* have been producing a smart, laid-back, and well-rounded product.

Immediately identifiable when watching *Unfiltered* are some of

the elements that once made Fox News's *Red Eye* (which was cancelled earlier this year) fun to watch. The most notable among them is the involvement of the show's senior producer, Andy Levy, who does double-duty as Cupp's on-air sidekick. The libertarian-leaning Levy worked on *Red Eye* for eight years, where he presumably met Cupp (who was once a regular guest on the show). The two have good chemistry (if not perfect comedic timing), and Levy's dry, honest commentary is truly at the top of its game.

Another similarity is the show's tone, and the demeanor of its rotating guests. The panel is fairly hack-free, which in itself is an achievement and a breath of fresh air. Part of the reason is that the guests typically aren't political operatives, but rather journalists, radio personalities, and entertainers – people whose varying views are harder to fit inside an ideological box. And even the guests who *are* political operatives seem to make a conscious decision to let their hair down for the hour, and not take themselves too seriously. Rarely is anyone promoting or defending partisan narratives, or spewing out reckless hyperbole. No one's shouting angrily over the person sitting next to them, or firing out whataboutisms like confetti from an air-cannon.

On the few occasions when hackiness does rear its irritating head, Cupp or Levy kindly calls it out, and manages to get the conversation back on track. That's not to say that the discussions aren't passionate. They often are, and most importantly, they're *actual discussions* – productive ones...not the breathless reading of predictable talking points. Another bonus: the show is by no means limited to political topics. Cultural issues are tackled too.

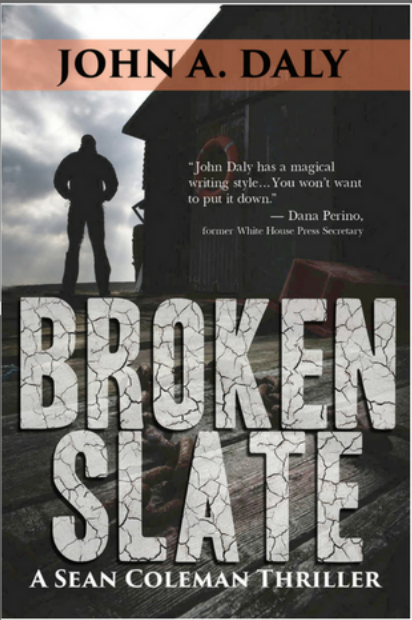
It's important to note that despite its kinship with *Red Eye*, *Unfiltered* is its own show. The topics are more serious, the discourse is more pertinent, and the viewer comes away gaining just as much insight as entertainment value. What's particularly helpful are that discussions on complicated

items, like federal legislation, are premised objectively from a “Here’s what you need to know” position.

Sure, there’s still some program experimentation going on. Not every segment flows well, and not every guest has been a good fit, but heck...the show’s only a month old. Things will only improve.

And come October, *Unfiltered* may well be the last remaining cable-news platform available on weeknights to still include any semblance of thoughtful conservatism. That’s when Laura Ingraham’s new show on *Fox News* will begin, assuredly reserving three straight hours in prime-time – five nights a week – of unadulterated *Trump TV*. The new lineup will likely be good for FNC’s ratings, but unless you’re a Trump enthusiast, it’s hard to imagine being able to stomach anything that comes on later than *Special Report*.

Thank goodness *HLN* has given us an alternative. Let’s hope it defies the odds, and becomes a cable-news contender.




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