

Best Chicago media coverage of 2010 Illinois races

With so much sloganeering and mud-slinging leading up to the Nov. 2 mid-term elections, the challenge for Chicago's news media—print, broadcast, online—was whether to echo the races' shallow bombast ... or cut through to the issues.

By and large, the metropolitan press held to the latter, more difficult course. Which is saying something, given the staff cutbacks and news hole shrinkage of late.

The problem for readers and viewers was finding the good stuff. It's not easy to navigate today's choppy, changing sea of hard news, personal opinion and outright propaganda.

Readers and viewers face their own challenges: Was that a TV anchorman going over polling data or a political party operative doing some wishful thinking? And on those election night panels of pundits, how much credibility ought one accord a news columnist, like the *Sun-Times* Esther Cepeda, when paired against an outright partisan like Dan Proft, the glib libertarian who ran and lost in the GOP primary? And what, exactly, are we to make of that menacing rat logo/cartoon that the *Tribune* runs, sometimes on the front page, when its editorialists go off on the performance of Chicago Democrats?

In other words, how's a thoughtful reader, viewer, or Web surfer supposed to weigh what's being put out there by an increasingly indistinguishable mix of straight-leg journalists, seasoned op-ed commentators/editorial writers, and clever political operatives or axe-grinding ideologues?

The answer, of course, is "LOL." It's almost impossible to divine who's telling it straight and who's rep-ing some special interest. Are we hearing from an employee of the host media outlet? Or a respected newspaper op-ed writer or

academician? Or is he or she from the tea party? Or the SEIU?

That criticism notwithstanding, this last electoral go-round produced some of the best reporting and analysis in memory. What follows are my very personal—and perforce incomplete—awards for the best of the best:

Grand Prize: Phil Ponce and Carol Marin's series of live, in-studio debate-style interviews with the major candidates on WTTW/Channel 11's *Chicago Tonight*. The traditional League of Women Voters' forums were never like this. Ponce and Marin cut off candidates when they digressed into talking points, shushed pols who talked over or interrupted, and demanded specific answers to specific questions about tax increases and spending cuts. This is how political debates should be run, with well-informed journalists empowered to cross-examine candidates and get at the real differences ... not simply keep time and count platitudes.

Best issue coverage: The *Tribune's* News Focus series cleared out entire front-section pages for detailed comparisons' of the major U.S. Senate and gubernatorial candidates' positions on taxes, spending, health care, immigration and more. It was the *Sun-Times*, however, that better pinned down specifics, especially in the Sunday-before-the-election roundups. On taxes, for example, the Trib's thumbnail said Republican gubernatorial candidate Bill Brady "favors an audit of state programs and cutting 10 percent of spending." Hmmm. The *Sun-Times* blurbed that Brady "opposes every tax increase; favors eliminating state sales tax on motor fuel and the state's estate tax. He proposes requiring a supermajority in the legislature to raise taxes." That's saying something.

Best election night TV coverage: A graybeard like me can't help but favor Bill & Walter's color commentary on WBBM/Channel 2. The highlight for me occurred shortly after 1 a.m., when Jacobsen turned to Kurtis, as soon as it looked

like Democrat Pat Quinn would hold on to the governor's mansion, and observed that Illinois Attorney General Lisa Madigan might now reconsider and run for mayor of Chicago ... rather than challenge an incumbent Democrat in the 2014 primary. That's pretty sage for the wee hours.

Best online coverage: The Jim Kirk-edited "*Early and Often*" an adjunct of the *Chicago News Cooperative* site, especially its daily "*Morning Palm Card*" e-alerts, were a newsy mix of inside baseball, savvy analysis and deft aggregation. This is what this talent-rich CNC, funded by subscriptions and philanthropy, ought to be doing ... not slavishly covering Blago's corruption trial. Or mailing FOIA letters to public agencies to obtain embarrassing expense accounts. We get that elsewhere.

Best column: Hard to beat Greg Hinz' election eve primal scream in *Crain's Chicago Business*. "At a time when Illinois is ethically and financially bankrupt," Hinz wrote, "when voters are desperate for officials who will stand up, tell it like it is and do what's needed ... we instead get this year's sad crop" nearly all of whom ran attack ads featuring an "unending stream of ominous music, doctored photos, screaming headlines and distortions (that) would make Mother Theresa wince."

Then again, Greg, Mother Theresa ain't registered to vote in Illinois.

A 40-year veteran of Chicago media, John McCarron now teaches, consults and writes freelance on urban affairs.