IN IT TO WIN IT —*USA*

Preface
How do you make sense of a hugely publicised and entirely unpredictable event? Monocle meets five discerning media figures, from Washington to Des Moines, who are busy covering the roller coaster otherwise known as the US presidential election campaign.

WRITER
Ed Stocker

US ELECTION SERIES

No other election in the world has the hype, money and Hollywood production values of the US. It can seem like a never-ending mental pummelling of state-by-state voting with candidates plane-hopping around the country, trying to cajole the populace with their contrasting, polarised views of America.

Yet for all the town halls and the handshaking, few voters actually get to see a candidate in the flesh, look them in the eye or hear them speak in a room. Instead opinions are formed through the prism of the media, that all-encompassing phrase that somehow pulls in local newspapers, big-name columnists and TV networks. In a country as large and as diverse as the US, the way the media covers an election can have an impact on its outcome.

Journalists can help shape campaigns, whether it's breaking a story about a leading candidate or pinning down a politician during a debate. In recent years journalists have even become an unwilling player. "The media" has become a punching bag for the Republicans, accused of asking "gotcha questions" and having a liberal bias. ("Facts," the satirist Stephen Colbert famously proclaimed, "have a well-known liberal bias.")

Some of the criticisms of American political journalism are valid. Much of the coverage is about the horse race – who's up, who's down, who's going nowhere – rather than anything substantial about policy. That has led some voters to turn more to comedians than journalists. This year is no different. Jon Stewart may have retired from *The Daily Show* but his erstwhile correspondents, Samantha Bee, Larry Wilmore and John Oliver have moved on to front their own shows to critical acclaim. But perhaps the most interesting development is the arrival of aptly named Showtime series *The Circus*, a half-hour weekly programme that attempts to show behind-the-scenes moments of the election that feels two-thirds documentary and one-third reality TV.

Super Tuesday may be behind us but the US elections still promise plenty of surprises. So how to sort the wheat from the chaff? MONOCLE has spoken to five professionals from across the board, spanning radio, television and print. We've got an insight into what it's like to follow the Democrats from *The Boston Globe*'s Annie Linskey. We've spoken to veteran journalists – NBC's Chuck Todd and NPR's Don Gonyea who are heralded for their objectivity; we've had an on-air grilling from conservative radio host Hugh Hewitt (his rules are that he has to interview his interviewers first), possibly the country's most transparent partisan. And we've headed to the midwest to speak to a tiny polling enterprise trying to make sense of this confounding process.

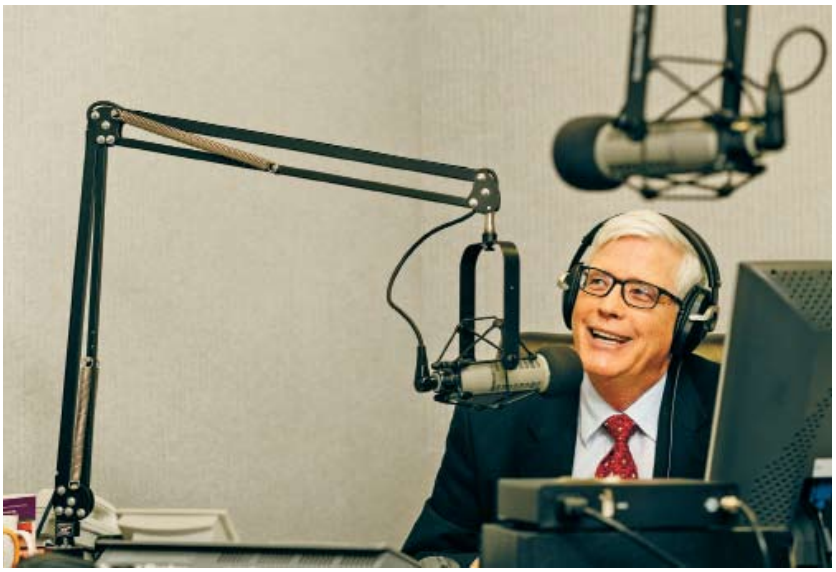
A discerning selection of five figures covering the elections is an almost impossible task but we think they provide the most intelligent, witty and rumbustious way of making sense of it all. — (M)

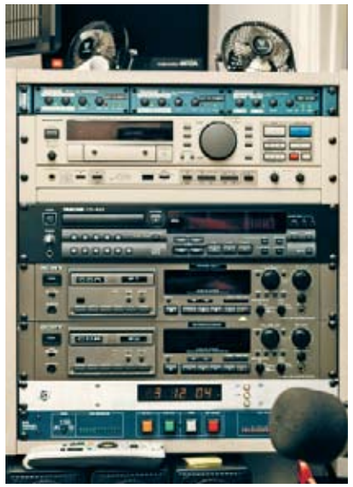
01
Hugh Hewitt
Host of 'The Hugh Hewitt Show', Salem Media Group, Irvine, California

Hugh Hewitt isn't trying to be objective; he wants to make that clear. A devout Christian conservative with an Old Testament approach to the constitution, the energetic radio host broadcasts every weekday from his bases in southern California and Washington.

Hewitt, whose eponymous three-hour show is syndicated around the nation, is squarely in the Republican camp. "That allows for a listener to adjust to the lie of the green and that's better for the consumer of the news to know," he says. His argument is that much of mainstream media in the US is either centre or centre-left and trying to mask that bias.

Whether you espouse or disavow his ideas, it's difficult not to like Hewitt. His terminology can often be simplistic but he's also engaging, humorous and endowed with a fierce intellect that includes an encyclopaedic knowledge of US politics. A lawyer by trade, Hewitt's first political campaign was as youth director to Gerald Ford in his unsuccessful 1976 re-election bid; later he took up several posts under the Reagan





administration. A full-time radio host since 2000 – alongside teaching law in California and continuing to practise – he has gained particular traction during the 2016 election cycle.

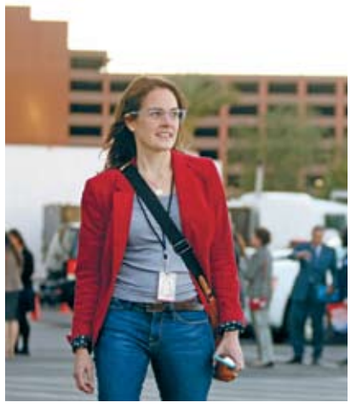
"A friend has said that I'm the most responsible conservative who is only a little bit crazy," he says, smiling. And while he doesn't deny he is "*very* conservative", there's nothing he seems to love more than sparring with Democrats and trying to prove them wrong. As such he regularly hosts guests from the left and right – although pro-Republican voices dominate.

Hewitt isn't aggressive or confrontational, which is why he has become something of a darling of those "lefty" TV networks, including CNN, where he has appeared as a panellist on several election debates. He also regularly appears on shows such as NBC's *Meet the Press* and CBS's *Face the Nation*.

Hewitt has a gift for getting to the crux of complex issues, at one point comparing the sparring between Donald Trump and Ted Cruz to a scene from *The Revenant*. "It's really about expertise – it's my wheelhouse," he says, borrowing a baseball term that refers to a hitter's sweet spot. He has racked up hundreds of hours of interview time with Republican candidates but has decided not to endorse a candidate this time (gunning for Mitt Romney in 2012 made his job harder, he says).

Thick-skinned and intent on "raising the level of civility", Hewitt will move to a breakfast time slot on 4 April. His goal? "To become the dominant radio show in the US." If a Republican gets into the White House, he might even manage it.

PHOTOGRAPHERS: BRAD TORCHIA, RONDA CHURCHIL, CHET STRANGE, RYAN DONNELL, CHET STRANGE

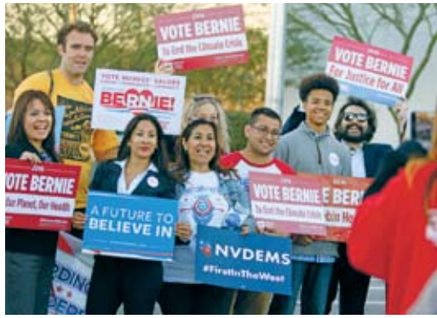


02
Annie Linskey
Political reporter at 'The Boston Globe', Washington

Annie Linskey has been flitting between events organised by the Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders camps since the start of the year; she says it has been fascinating watching the two campaigns. On the Clinton side it initially "felt like the roll-out of a new product and not a campaign" but Sanders was a little different. "He's this guy who would be pulling his wheeled luggage through Minneapolis Airport, rushing to get to his economy seat," she says. "It's charming to think that he is really like the rest of us." Over time – as Sanders' profile has rocketed – things have changed (he now has a charter plane) but many commentators presumed he would have fallen behind sooner.

Linskey gives an interesting insight into the election cycle, from the brief moments of intimacy with candidates to receiving emails from campaign staffers unhappy with an article. So how does she avoid getting swept up in the hype and spin of it all when following politicians at such close quarters? "I try to resist caricatures," she says. "Clinton has this caricature of being power hungry but I think it does better service to our readers to show a fuller picture of her. And the same is true of Sanders, portrayed as a crazy gadfly whose message might sound good but is unrealistic."

Linskey is part of a press corps following Clinton, which is made up almost entirely of women, helping correct a gender imbalance long prevalent in both political and journalistic circles. "If she wins, the front two rows of the White House briefing room will be all women," she says. "It would be a dramatic shift." There's a long way to go yet, of course.



03
Chuck Todd
NBC's political director and host of 'Meet the Press', Washington

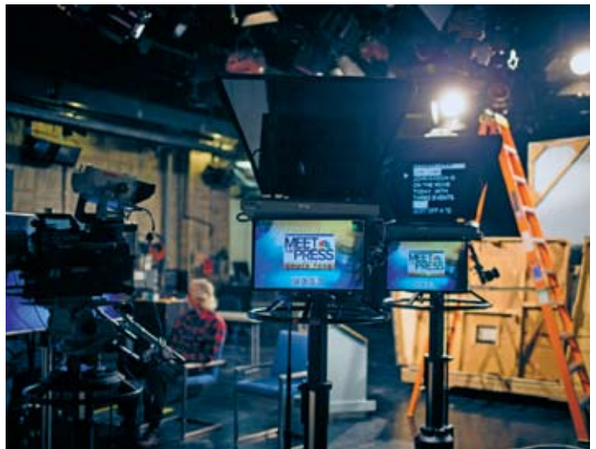
Chuck Todd's desk is an industrious mess. Bits of paper are scattered across its surface, prevented from travelling any further by piles of books. On the wall three TV screens are locked to different domestic news channels. One gets the sense that Todd – NBC's political director and host of *Meet the Press* on Sundays – is something of a workaholic. "I get up between 04.30 and 05.30," he says, looking slightly weary for a second. "I've been doing that for 20-plus years." His job means being permanently abreast of politics. "I have every email alert known to man."

Before he took over hosting *Meet the Press* in 2014 – a review of the week's political shenanigans – the show was in need of a reboot. Under his tutelage a daily MSNBC sister show was added and the Sunday flagship achieved its highest ratings for years – something he suggests is a mixture of his team, his experience and a curiosity that the 2016 election is provoking.

Todd, a former White House correspondent who has covered every election since 1992, also has the brand on his side: *Meet the Press* has been running since the 1940s. "We know it's the longest running television show in the country," he says. "And my joke is that I don't want be its last host."

Todd has won respect from liberals and conservatives alike for his rational interviewing style and direct questioning, whether on NBC or while moderating a debate on MSNBC. For him journalism is all about fairness, which means giving everybody an equally hard time.

Although this year has proved "turbulent", Todd sees it as part of a changing political landscape that can trace its roots back 15 years. He won't be drawn on any predictions but he recognises that Hillary Clinton and the Republican establishment need to shake up their campaigns. Todd argues that his role isn't just about reporting who is leading the pack but "why this is resonating". More than enough to keep him occupied until November, then.



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04
Ann Selzer
Pollster and president of Selzer & Co, Des Moines

Ann Selzer likes to sing. When she's not poring over the twisting contours of the US election cycle, she's belting out first alto in a local choir. "It's the only place outside work where everybody is pushing for excellence and I don't have to be in charge," says the 59-year-old. Selzer has been number-crunching, first as a director of research and then as a pollster, for more than three decades. And despite hailing from Iowa – a midwestern state remarkable for being unremarkable – she is regularly spoken about in glowing terms by the US's political ruling classes. The reason has been her uncanny ability to predict both the outcome of Iowa – the first vote of the cycle – and then the nation, once nominees from both sides have been decided.

The pollster recalls two of her most memorable moments. The first was when she teamed up with *The Indianapolis Star* to call Barack Obama winning that state in 2008 by less than a percentage point – a huge swing away from the Republicans. She also recalls calling the Iowa caucus for Obama earlier that year, assessing that 60 per cent of Democratic voters would be novice caucus-goers, almost bang on the mark.

She has been known to fail, of course. Selzer holds her hands up about Iowa this year when she called Trump ahead of Ted Cruz. "It was Trump's to lose," she counters, pointing to the fact that everyone else was wrong-footed. "And lose it he did."

Trump's hubris and a packed Republican field didn't make the early stages of the election cycle easy and Selzer acknowledges a plethora of issues that makes canvassing a weary populace ever more difficult. But nowadays she goes for the less-is-more approach. She won't be state-hopping every few weeks and has purposely cut down her staff to just one other, focusing on a few key gigs, working with regular clients such as Bloomberg Politics and *The Des Moines Register,* where she worked full-time until the early 1990s.

For Selzer, polling isn't guesswork or "putting your dirty hands on the data" to fit a preconceived notion: it's an obsessive, meticulous science where data rules. "We have a method where we don't presume *a priori* what things are going to look like," she says. That ability to sift through the din is continuing to make the nation's power coveters sit up and listen.

LOOKING BACK

Voices from the front line

Three journalists who shaped past elections.

Walter Cronkite
1952
The contest between Republican Dwight Eisenhower and Democratic nominee Adlai Stevenson marked the first time that Walter Cronkite anchored an election-night broadcast for CBS. Cronkite would become one of the most recognised faces in US journalism, heading the CBS evening news for two decades from 1962. His 1952 election-night coverage also ushered in the giant Univac computer to help pundits predict results; such technology had never been used in an election before.

Hunter S Thompson
1972
The inventor of gonzo journalism hit the campaign trail in 1972, publishing articles for *Rolling Stone* that were released the following year as the book *Fear and Loathing: On the Campaign Trail '72*. Illustrated by his long-term UK collaborator Ralph Steadman, the dispatches focused on the Democratic primaries – often in minute detail but as astute and humorous as ever – and the candidacy of South Dakota senator George McGovern, who would ultimately lose out to Richard Nixon in the general election.

Jon Stewart
2000
The then newly-installed host of *The Daily Show* cemented his career during the presidential race between George W Bush and his Democratic counterpart Al Gore. He mocked the lead-up to November's vote, the fiasco over "hanging chads" and the Florida recount and the subsequent court decision with the now iconic slogan "Indecision 2000". For the disenchanted, Stewart's show became more than comedy consumption: it was a reliable source that exposed the farce and hypocrisies of US politics.

05
Don Gonyea
National political correspondent, NPR, Washington

Every time Don Gonyea hits the road – increasingly frequent in the build-up to November – he likes to do two things. The first is to compile a playlist of music that fits the city or state where he is headed; the second is to make sure he visits at least one place that makes the people there proud, a way of both connecting with his interviewees and setting the scene for his audiences tuning in at home. "I want my listeners to feel like they're in that extra seat in the rental car," Gonyea says, sinking into a cafeteria seat at National Public Radio's (NPR) vast HQ building in Washington.

As national political correspondent for NPR, an organisation that provides content for 900-plus independent stations around the country, Gonyea may not be instantly recognisable for his black-rim glasses and short white hair – but his clear, unflustered voice is a staple for millions of Americans through programmes such as *Morning Edition* and *All Things Considered*.

Although Gonyea is eager to gain new listeners he says working for NPR means he isn't beholden to sponsors or ratings, which allows his pieces to be "thoughtful, long-form and hype-free".

Gonyea started his radio career in rather more inauspicious circumstances as a "way too self-aware" country-music DJ, before crossing into reporting and eventually ending up as NPR's White House correspondent. Along the way he has had a memorable conversation with Rosa Parks, watched the Florida recount in 2000 and witnessed the White House being evacuated during September 11.

An oft-cited critique of NPR is that it is only consumed by white liberals – a suggestion Gonyea is keen to dismiss, saying that he has had virtually no complaints from any of his interviewees about misrepresentation, from both sides of the political divide. He adds that if he ever finds that his personal views are at risk of getting in the way, "it will be time to do something else".

As he crisscrosses the nation, his wife and daughters checking where he is against the political calendar, he still pictures one person to help him communicate his reports. "I still write my stories for my mom, which is really corny," he says. "I picture her sitting in the kitchen listening to the radio and I'm telling her what I learnt. And if I'm explaining it well to her it's going to be just fine for everybody else."