By Howard Barbanel

Guest Opinion Columnist

If one subscribes to the blather emanating from the incessant talking heads on cable TV news one would come away thinking that four states or 11 states or 15 states have already predetermined the outcome of the 2016 presidential season – that it's unstoppable manifest destiny that Donald Trump will be the Republican nominee and Hillary Clinton at the helm for the Democrats. What's the point for people in the other 35 states to even vote? National composite polls are presented as a fait accompli even though there is no such thing as a "national primary" and this arguably help skew actual election results as voters are influenced by supposed "inevitability."

Declarations to the effect that both Donald and Hillary are "electoral juggernauts," are "running the table" never cease, yet the crimes of omission on the part of the anchors, reporters and pundits are stupendous.

Key omission number one – hardly anyone on TV mentions that many of the primaries are "open," meaning that voters often don't have to be a registered voter in the party's primary they're voting in. In many states Independents can vote in either party's primary thereby substantially skewing the results and the wishes of the core party members. Voter registrations and party affiliations can be switched pretty quickly, also throwing off the wishes of the party faithful. Why many early voting states allow this kind of open and chaotic cross-party pollination is beyond me. Why should non-Republicans or non-Democrats determine who their respective parties will nominate for the highest office in the land? Primary results are then presented as though they were authentic gauges of party members' sentiments when in fact they're often not.

Key omission number two – anchors and reporters for example will say that "Trump is winning in every state" or "Hillary is sweeping the primaries" without explaining how many or how few delegates may come from being victorious in any given state's race. All state wins aren't created equal. For example, winning in Texas is worth a whole lot more than winning in Vermont but the TV news folks just tally-up how many states someone won without giving any perspective or reference and based on that a candidate is either inevitable or over. Also, because the cable news guys are all in New York, late-breaking results from the center or the

west of the country are given short-shrift in the big picture. For example, on Super Tuesday, Bernie Sanders won in Colorado and Minnesota but all the talking heads had written Sanders off by 8:00pm without those results.

Key omission number three – There's been few delegate count tally screens (especially on Fox), just screens showing results of who won which state. This is incomplete information because not all states have equal delegates and therefore are not necessarily as significant. You can win small Southern states all day long but if you can't win in New York, Illinois, Florida, Pennsylvania and California, you can't be nominated. Context is missing in its entirety. For example, Sanders isn't "over" when as of March 2 nd he's only 191 delegates behind Hillary with 35 states to go and 2,383 delegates needed to secure a nomination. Likewise, Ted Cruz is only 90 delegates shy of Trump with the same 35 races still to go and 1,237 delegates needed to win. Ninety is not Mount Everest but if you listen to the cable people you'd think it might as well be Mars. Why they declare the races to be over so early if baffling because you would think it's in their interest to keep the horse races rolling on and on to generate ratings. The composition of the populations of many state races ahead favor candidates other than Trump and Hillary but you just don't hear any of that.

Key omission number four – Donald Trump hasn't even reached 50 percent of the vote in any state or any race anywhere yet his wins by slim pluralities are presented as resounding mandates and crushing victories over his rivals. No one discusses why Trump can't reach 51 percent and what it means that roughly 60 to 65 percent of GOP voters are voting against him. If you want to see a resounding victory or mandate from the voters look at Hillary's results in Alabama where she got 77 percent of the vote or Georgia where she garnered 71.3 percent. Likewise, Sanders snatched 86.1 percent of the vote in Vermont. Those are mandates and crushing victories. In other states like Oklahoma, Sanders got 51.9 percent to Hillary's 41.5. That's a clear majority because it's over 50 percent. In Minnesota, Sanders received 61.7 percent. Another clear majority. When Trump gets 38.8 percent in Georgia, this is not any kind of majority. Likewise he got 32.7 percent in Arkansas and just 38.9 percent in Tennessee.

Also omitted are what Trump's electoral results may mean in a general election (again, limited context) because let's take one of his best results, Massachusetts at 49.3 percent (with heavy voting by Independents and Democrats in the GOP primary). Since Republicans are just 23 percent of registered voters in the nation, extrapolating his win means that if he got the same support across the GOP nationwide that would translate into just 11.3 percent of the entire American electorate which is a sure way to replicate a Barry Goldwater-like crushing defeat in the general election (Goldwater got 38.47 percent of the popular vote and just 52 votes in the Electoral College). If Trump were racking-up results like Hillary and Sanders in their big wins then it would mean he's got the backing of the Republican rank-and-file but this context is never mentioned on air.

Key omission number five – no pressing follow-ups – on-air personalities hardly ever press Trump in particular with follow-up questions on any given subject when he evades or ignores the question or gives an obfuscating answer. Most on-air people just move on to the next question hoping for a better answer to that one so he gets away with providing no answers to the American people. A key example of this has been an utter dearth of follow-ups about his releasing of his income tax returns despite the IRS clearly saying that anyone can release their returns even if those returns are being audited and that non-audited returns from earlier years can also be released and Trump gets away with this time and time again.

Key omission number six – Poll results and bandied about with much breathless excitement but hardly ever mentioned are the dates when the poll was conducted, how many voters were polled out of how many registered voters (a quarter percent anyone?), how the poll was conducted (i.e., by landline telephone which is how most polls are done, which is not an accurate way to reach a broad cross-section of Americans in 2016) and what are the demographics of those polled? Yet a poll of 1,000 people reached via landline three days before is presented as the sentiments of the American people and can become self-fulfilling prophesies.

What all this says is that sadly broadcast news is terribly superficial and ephemeral and underscores the essential nature of print and web journalism to provide deeper analysis, context and perspective for the average American voter. Unfortunately, most Americans still get most of their news and information from broadcast and cable news which may partly explain why the country is beset and saddled with the kind of underwhelming candidates we've got for 2016 from both parties.