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MARKETPLACE

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HEADLINE: Media coverage of the war

ANCHORS: DAVID BRANCACCIO

BODY:

DAVID BRANCACCIO, anchor: With the avalanche of unanswerable questions surrounding this war, one question at the intersection of the military campaign, commerce and the media has been answered. News media can run advertisements interspersed with coverage from Iraq without turning off viewers, listeners, readers or advertisers. But how much coverage of the war can we take? Business of media analyst Martin Kaplan is associate dean of the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Southern California.

Mr. MARTIN KAPLAN (Associate Dean, Annenberg School for Communication, University of Southern California): The commercial broadcast networks are running, in many instances, their full lineup of shows. After initial movements, like CBS dumping the NCAA o--offshore onto ESPN, things returned to normal, and the schedules include, for example, on Nickelodeon a "SpongeBob SquarePants" special, which attracted seven million viewers, a record, in part because people wanted a safe zone, parents protecting their kids from the relentless barrage. On the other hand, the Oscars had its lowest rating ever, possibly because the viewers of it, though they might be interested in some entertainment, kept dipping back into cable news.

BRANCACCIO: Marty, you've done a lot of thinking in the past about our shorter attention spans. That, in a sense, plays into planning for this war.

Mr. KAPLAN: Yes. The military has to know that the public mood will depend on how things seem to be going. There is a drama that gets launched, and our sense of what time frame the drama's going to be played out will cue us for what our reaction should be. In the early days of the war, with all the talk about shock and awe and inevitability, the administration and the Pentagon were cueing us for something like a video game or two-hour TV movie, in which things would be resolved quickly. When things turned grim, as inevitably they do in virtually every conflict, they had to quickly rush to recalibrate our expectations.

The problem is that no one knows how this is turning out. The reporters in the field, who are doing their best, are seeing tiny slices and snapshots. They don't know what the big picture is, nor do the anchors, nor frankly do the politicians. We may be watching the unfolding of the biggest blunder in American history, or it may turn out to be a stroke of genius. No one really knows. Everyone's covering their tushies in order to make sure that whatever happens is consistent with what they say. And the public is left kind of disoriented in the middle of this. Is this a tragedy, or is this a temporary setback on the road to the American century?

BRANCACCIO: Can an active media consumer, who's flipping through a lot of channels, who's vigorously working the Internet, get the big picture?

Mr. KAPLAN: Well, to the degree that anyone can, the viewer can. It has to be through active, not passive, consumption. You have to be trolling the Web. There are an amazingly large number of options that new media creates, everything from all the bloggers...

BRANCACCIO: These are the Web loggers.

Mr. KAPLAN: ...to the presence of, for example, Al-Jazeera in English now or the BBC or news services from around the world. And you can put together your own composite picture. The difficulty, though, is that many of these outlets are from an ideological perspective, and all you can do, by piecing them together, is face a mosaic which looks just as shattered as the post-modern times that we live in.

BRANCACCIO: Marty Kaplan, thank you.

Mr. KAPLAN: Thank you.

BRANCACCIO: Martin Kaplan is also the director of the Norman Lear Center at USC.

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