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MARKETPLACE

SHOW: MARKETPLACE (6:30 PM ET)

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HEADLINE: MARTIN KAPLAN, ANNENBERG SCHOOL OF COMMUNICATION,
DISCUSSES THE RECENT DECISION OF PUBLIC RADIO TO AIR TAPES OF
PUBLIC EXECUTIONS

ANCHORS: DAVID BRANCACCIO

BODY:

DAVID BRANCACCIO, anchor: Martin Kaplan, the associate dean at the Annenberg School of Communication at the University of Southern California, has been reading up on the nexus between the media and executions.

Dr. MARTIN KAPLAN (Annenberg School of Communication): The truth is that throughout history executions have been used as public entertainment. Certainly, the gladiators were a kind of execution. But--I mean, for example, in the 18th century, Samuel Peeps and James Boswell reported in their journals about going to public executions in London where they were so popular that the upstairs rooms of public houses were--overlooking the gallows were rented out for a year's income in order for spectators to watch. And in fact, here in America throughout the 19th century, lynchings and executions were huge public events. Itinerant photographers used to go around taking pictures of spectators so they could then write postcards to their friends indicating where they had been at the lynching. The change now is that we have a mass medium that brings it to more people. But even at the last public execution in America in Kentucky, 20,000 people did show up.

BRANCACCIO: One of the difficulties for modern-day broadcasters is that they can try to ensure that they have the best intentions in deciding to broadcast these tapes, but they can't control how people will listen to them and how they will react to them and just what they will glean from that broadcast.

Dr. KAPLAN: Of course not. I mean, you can say that what you intend is information or you may even intend some kind of public message about preventing crime by showing how heinous the penalty is or by being anti-death penalty, but what you can't control is whether a person will take from it what you put into it. I mean, in some ways it's entirely possible to turn these things into the equivalent of snuff films. In fact, snuff pornography, which enjoyed a rage a couple of decades ago, got its thrill because you had the sense that

people were really being killed. Today, by showing or playing these tapes in which people are really being killed, in some ways maybe you're serving a public interest but you're just as easily rousing the prurient interests of your audience.

BRANCACCIO: Is it taking a position in an important public policy debate to broadcast these tapes? Is the act of this broadcast essentially anti-death penalty?

Dr. KAPLAN: It could be. The producer of this show says it isn't anti-death penalty. It isn't pro-death penalty. It's just what it is. Well, you look at the slogan for the station that's broadcasting them in New York, and their goal is to bring joy to the human spirit. I'm not quite sure that that's what you do when you broadcast these things.

BRANCACCIO: You're talking about WNYC, MARKETPLACE affiliate in New York City, its mission is to...

Dr. KAPLAN: Its mission is to make the mind more curious, the heart more tolerant and the spirit more joyful. Now perhaps broadcasting these makes the heart more tolerant, but I'm not sure of what. Of murder or the person who is the victim?

BRANCACCIO: That having been said, do you think that public radio is going too far in broadcasting these tapes?

Dr. KAPLAN: Yes, I think it's pornographic. I think that it caters to the lowest appetite that we have, and it can all be tricked out in the rationale of the public needs to know, or it's just news and information and people need to hear what's out there. But in fact, it's getting the main thing that public radio and now all other media have in common, which is attention. Look at us. We're giving to them in spades right now.

BRANCACCIO: Does it matter that public broadcasting doesn't have a slavish devotion to increasing the ratings at all costs?

Dr. KAPLAN: Well, I'm not sure that it doesn't have that. I have a sense that the membrane between public and commercial is more porous than it's ever been.

BRANCACCIO: You mention our New York affiliate, WNYC, because it is the originator of this broadcast, but it's fair to say this is on a number of public radio stations across the country today.

Dr. KAPLAN: Yes, and on television. It's on "Nightline" tonight, which is owned by Disney whose motto is quality family entertainment.

BRANCACCIO: Marty Kaplan, thank you.

Dr. KAPLAN: Pleasure.

BRANCACCIO: Martin Kaplan is also director of the Norman Lear Center at USC. WNYC's Dean Cappello was asked about any conflict between the broadcast of the execution tapes and his public radio station's mission. He told us, quote, "In our mission, we trust our listeners. They are thoughtful people who appreciate information in context. This broadcast is completely consistent with our mission."

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