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MARKETPLACE

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HEADLINE: Martin Kaplan of the Annenberg School of Communication on unpredictable events stemming from "American Candidate"

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BODY:

DAVID BRANCACCIO, anchor:

This is MARKETPLACE. I'm David Brancaccio.

Here's the equation. "The War Room," that famous documentary about President Clinton's first presidential candidacy, meets "American Idol," and we get what, Marty Kaplan?

Mr. MARTIN KAPLAN (Associate Dean, Annenberg School of Communication): "American Candidate," a new, unscripted or reality show, in which 100 people that none of us have ever heard of gets a chance, ultimately, to run for president, courtesy of the FX Channel.

BRANCACCIO: Marty Kaplan, associate dean of the Annenberg School of Communication at USC, by the way. This is your area, this place where popular culture meets communication of political ideas. Is this going to work?

Mr. KAPLAN: Well, in some ways, displaces it. The problem we have in an attention economy is that people don't pay attention to candidates because there are so many other things clamoring for them to notice. Political candidates are forced to resort not to the so-called free or earned media because that's considered ratings poison by most broadcasters and, instead, have to buy it. And so the sad truth is that squeezed out of the equation are ordinary folks, who may not have a million bucks to spend on ads or may not know a million people with a million bucks to line their pockets with money that they can pay to broadcasters, but instead languish because they can't be heard.

And so now we have, coming to the rescue, the same genre that brought us "Survivor" and "American Idol." So just as Kelly Clarkson's single has just reached number one on the pop charts, the thought is that maybe somebody who can survive the television primary season, as created by FX, can actually worm their way into national affection.

BRANCACCIO: Sounds almost dangerous, though. It's sort of unpredictable, with great costs, potentially.

Mr. KAPLAN: Yes. And in the past, there have been some very sobering movies about this sort of thing. One of the classics: Andy Griffith played a character called Lonesome Rhodes, a sort of folk singer plucked from jail, who ultimately became a national demagogue.

BRANCACCIO: What's that? *Face in the Crowd*?

Mr. KAPLAN: Yes, *A Face in the Crowd*. And *Meet John Doe* and *Bob Roberts* also depicted the way in which people who can grab America by the media can, in turn, become such popular

figures that, when you add political power to it, can cause consequences. I'm not suggesting that someone in *American Candidate* might turn out to be a demagogue. The sad thing is that people already don't pay enough attention to politics, so now they're going to have something which is even more entertaining, which they might pay attention to instead of to politics.

And the irony is that politics was the original reality show. I mean, imagine, there is something with characters, high drama, suspense, and the way in which the outcome gets determined depends on what people do on a given day. And so, in principle, instead of calling an 800 number and voting for Justin vs. Kelly, you go to the polls. Problem, of course, is that only a quarter of us do turn out for the polls.

BRANCACCIO: It's very close to a plebiscite, isn't it, in a way?

Mr. KAPLAN: Yes. Our Founders didn't want us to have plebiscites; they wanted to protect us from our mob urges by putting intermediaries and representatives. But now we have the ability to express our urges on a kind of minute-by-minute basis. Whether this is good for politics, uh, we're about to find out.

BRANCACCIO: Thank you very much, Marty.

Mr. KAPLAN: Thank you.

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