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MARKETPLACE

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HEADLINE: Martin Kaplan on the media's role in major news stories

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BODY:

DAVID BRANCACCIO, anchor:

If this isn't your first time at a radio or TV today, you will know that two people have been arrested in the Washington-area sniper case. No charges had been filed by late today, but President Bush has been briefed that the US Army vet and a teen-ager born in Jamaica are probably the ones who killed 10 and wounded three over three weeks. This has not been one of those stories the mainstream media has shied away from. Martin Kaplan is associate dean of the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Southern California. Mr. MARTIN KAPLAN (Annenberg School For Communication, University of Southern California): In some ways, I feel as though I want to take a bath, partly because of what the media have done and partly because what I, as an audience member have done. This has played into legitimate news interests but also our lurid appetites. It's a k--you know, it's sniper roundtables and theme songs and chyrons turning it into a running piece of entertainment. The question is, is there any sense in which this is out of proportion given the--the nature of risk and modern life? Is there a sense in which the kind of information, which has been on these shows, has given ideas to the snipers? There have been reports of different commentators and profilers saying something which in principle could have provoked the sniper to their next move. We'll find out, of course, perhaps, if that's the case.

BRANCACCIO: That's just part of being the media, the idea that the people involved in this crime spree might actually be watching or listening or reading. Nothing you can do about that.

Mr. KAPLAN: No, you can't, except that we all live in this kind of world of attention sickness in which when you want fame, what you do is try to grab the nation by the networks. But when you provide that fame, you only inflame the problem in the first place. What we don't know is whether doing this is performing journalism's responsibility appropriately or each time making a tremendous pathology even worse. And the truth is, I suspect that in the boardrooms of most of these media companies, they don't know the answers either. But even if they do give that kind of attention, there's no textbook to look up the answer to. No one really knows how this thing works. It's one of the scary things about the 21st century.

BRANCACCIO: Agonizing, but the ratings have been very good for the cable television news channels.

Mr. KAPLAN: Yes, indeed. The TV ratings are now at their highest for those channels since September 11th, proving both that they know how to deliver scary goods and that we, as consumers, like scary goods. But the question is, is catering to those appetites part of our public interest? Yes, it's an important story. Yes, it certainly affects a major area in our country, but is there a line at all and how does anyone draw that line? No one really knows the answer to that.

And my fear is that the people who have their hands on that switch are paying as much attention to commercial interests as they are to public interest.

BRANCACCIO: Marty, thanks. Martin Kaplan watches media and business. He's also director of the Norman Lear Center at USC.