

**THE BLOG**

# The Lobbyist in the Mineshaft

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It's painful to watch television news producers try to figure out the relative importance of the unfolding stories of the 13 trapped miners in West Virginia, and the more than 13 trapped Congressmen in Washington.

Sending Rita Cosby and Anderson Cooper to the site of the mineshaft tragedy, where cameras can record family members' every painful reaction, is in the great ghoulish tradition of journalism. It's routinely justified as fabulous "storytelling"; these are said to be "human interest dramas" that magnetize audiences. But other than pandering to our ratings-generating appetite for melodrama, is there any legitimate justification for this kind of saturation coverage? Sure, 13 accidental deaths are important, but there are easily as many American deaths, every day, that never get reported, let alone accorded the full anchor-compassion treatment. It can't be the quantity of lives lost, or the virtue of the lives led; church vans tumble into ravines and scores of our countrymen are killed, but their deaths rate only a mention by the wire services. Why? It's hard to escape the conclusion that it's because the mineshaft story *is good television*. We can watch it unfold. It's a voyeur's paradise. The suspense, the anguish, the knife-edge of hope and despair: it's grief porn, dressed up as breaking news.

On the other hand, the Abramoff plea deal may, in retrospect, turn out to be the pivot-point of GOP dominance of national politics. This would be a great day for television journalism to connect the dots: DeLay's K Street project, Grover Norquist's drown-the-baby project, the Christian Coalition's culture wars project, the neo-cons' above-the-law project... The terrific and terrible story to be telling today is how the American people have been played for fools by the fabricators of family values rhetoric. And instead, what the networks are serving up to us is soap opera. Are the pictures from West Virginia really that much more compelling than the shots of Washington hogs at the trough? Will audiences really turn away from the story of how their government was stolen from them because it's too complicated to understand? It wouldn't be shocking to learn that Republicans in Washington were privately, shamefully grateful that the media beast today has something to feed on other than their corruption. The sad truth is that there will always be a runaway bride or baby-down-a-well more worth covering than the innards of Congress, or the vulnerability of voting machines, or (fill in the blank). That's because the geniuses who decide what's worth covering get to call what they do "news judgment" instead of what it really is, which is marketing.

UPDATE: This New York Times piece from 2004 tells the story of the impact of Republican power on mine safety.