

**THE BLOG**

Thanks for Having Me

By Marty Kaplan

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As a victim of media bulimia — compulsively bingeing, followed by shame and remorse, the irresistible need to regurgitate the news I've consumed, and then a repeat of the cycle — I've looked without success for 12-step programs to aid my recovery.

So far, I've found a few techniques that help.

On public radio, I heard a movie critic reviewing "United 93" who said that the way he attempts not to be frightened out of his wits by scary movies is to try to concentrate on technique: how the shots are composed, how the scene is edited, the way the score is deployed.

My version of this is to focus on the formal conventions of media foodfights. For example, at the beginning of a segment, after the host thanks a guest for coming on the show, I listen carefully to the panelist's reply.

The gold standard — for example, it's how Nancy Pelosi responded to Tim Russert's initial thanks — is, "Good morning." Or "Hello." Dick Cheney barely manages a grunt. Henry Kissinger, I've noticed, sometimes says nothing at all. Talk about being a pro.

On the other hand, many guests, for whom a guest shot on one of these shows is pure oxygen, say, "Thanks for having me." I don't know how this meme began, but beneath its superficial politeness are ineffable depths of longing and desperation. Sometimes, at the end of the segment, when they're thanked again, they can't help themselves, and they repeat it. Thanks for letting me be had. Thanks for letting me show the nation how susceptible I am to the lure of being seen and heard, no matter how debased the context. It makes me feel not alone in my neediness.

Speaking of the end of the segment, there's also host meme that I love. "We'll have to leave it there," so many of them say, wrapping it up. They mean it to refer to the sad truth that the time allotted for the segment has run out. But what it really communicates is the futility of contemporary journalism. We'll HAVE TO leave it there. There's nothing else we can do — we can't draw conclusions, we can't figure out which of you screamers is a truth-teller and which a lying nutjob, we can't sort out facts from opinions, all we can do, folks, is just leave it there. Vomit on the carpet, a turd in the punchbowl: we'll have to leave it there. (I know, it's not pretty, but recovery sometimes requires facing the pain.)

Like the movie critic, I also listen closely to the music on these shows. Currently I am compiling a podcast of cable news mini-themes. You know them: there's the Iraq theme, the breaking news theme, the Katrina theme, the papal funeral theme, the "Hardball" Plame investigation string quartet... I wonder if the composers get royalties each time they air, and whether they need to listen to all the other themes before they write a new one, just to be sure they use the timpani differently.

Any additional suggestions for beating this disease are warmly welcome. But please, don't tell me just to go cold turkey. I do believe in a higher power, but its name is Rupert Murdoch.

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Marty Kaplan 

USC Annenberg professor and Norman Lear Center director