

**THE BLOG****Balls & Eyeballs**

By Marty Kaplan

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Whatever biz you're in — entertainment, news, or politics — the name of the game is capturing the nation's attention. USA Today grabbed the country by the eyeballs with its NSA data-mining exclusive. Now Tony Snow is making his macho play to grab them back, by asking the networks for free primetime so Bush can talk about immigration. The networks, meanwhile, are in the midst of the stunt month called May Sweeps, whose primetime Niensens set ad rates, as well as the Upfronts, where advertisers are conned (against all odds and experience) into betting on future bombs' pulling power.

The new player on this block, of course, is the internets. Big Media, Big Entertainment and Big Politics no longer have the agenda-setting, attention-grabbing game to themselves. They may own the biggest distribution pipes, attract the biggest audiences and possess the biggest brand names, but viral distribution (think JibJab) and blogosphere MSM pushback (from Judy Miller to Stephen Colbert) have stormed the gatekeepers, bewildered the editors and busted the content-providers' monopolies.

To be sure, it's still an uneven fight. In terms of gross ratings points (which is how politicians measure ads), a blogosphere wildfire means a lot less than a national newspaper's front page or a cable news mediathon (where runaway brides inevitably trump runaway presidents).

On Monday night, the president will make an Oval Office pitch to turn our attention away from the danger of an unaccountable executive branch and toward the danger of runaway Mexicans. There's nothing wrong with attempting to deal with immigration, and Bush's plan isn't nearly as awful as the other Republican options on the Hill, but the reality is that if his goal is to get immigration reform through, his problem is with his own party in Congress, not with the American people, whose view of the issue is encouragingly nuanced. Going up to the Capitol, or hauling the Republican demagogues down to the White House, would be a much better strategy, if what he really wants to do is get some much-needed legislation through.

But that's not the real priority. The administration desperately wants to change the subject, to move the nation's attention from Big Brother to Broken Borders. Will it work?

The best thing the White House has going for it is the MSM's ADD, how easily it gets distracted, and how easily it's bored — a function of its laziness, its shocking reliance on an astonishingly small number of investigative reporters

who actually do enterprise journalism.

It may be wishful thinking, to imagine that a ballsy blogosphere could keep the media's eye and the nation's eyeballs on the real ball. Maybe a key to helping the press out is showing it how disparate breaking stories all fit into the same master narrative. The data-mining news is part of the big story of a silent coup. So is the revelation about Bush's 750 this-law-doesn't-apply-to-me signing-statements part of that narrative. So is the new stomach-wrenching evidence in the New York Times that Diebold Election Systems touch-screen voting machines contain "the most severe security flaw ever discovered in a voting system." After studying the security flaws, a Johns Hopkins computer science professor said, "I almost had a heart attack. The implications of this are pretty astounding." We're not in tinfoil hat country any more, Toto.

Do you remember "Seven Days In May," Fletcher Knebel's 1962 political thriller about a coup in the US government? Our constitutional system — its checks and balances, its Bill of Rights, its war powers, its rule of law, its transparency and accountability — has been systematically, secretly, and sometimes not-so-secretly set aside ever since the Supreme Court put George W. Bush in the Oval Office. Isn't that a story worth telling at least as well as who'll win American Idol?

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