

**THE BLOG**

The Nielsen News Networks

By Marty Kaplan

06/06/2006 11:47 am ET | Updated May 25, 2011

What would cable news look like if it covered the deaths and injuries of American armed forces in Iraq and Afghanistan at the same rate that it covers domestic mayhem?

Anyone who's watched CNN, MSNBC or Fox News Network has noticed that what has long been a staple of local television news has now gone national. A murder story, or a feared-murdered story, that once would be covered only in its own media market, is now a candidate for coast-to-coast airplay. Of course, if the victim (or presumed victim) is white, female or blonde, chances are it'll be a runner for months; hit the trifecta, and we're talking practically 24/7 coverage.

So let's see. If you take the amount of time that Greta and Rita and Anderson et al currently spend on a typical day on sensational crimes here at home... and divide that by the number of victims, and then multiply that per capita coverage times the number of Americans daily wounded or killed in the war... let's see... carry the seven... it looks like there would no time left for any of the cable channels to cover anything but casualties. No Michael Jackson, no runaway bride, no Natalee; just American troops, doing their patriotic job, and paying a terrible price.

There is no risk that this will happen. American correspondents in Iraq and Afghanistan note that they are getting less and less airtime for their stories. War coverage is now considered by news executives to be a "downer." While it's believed that missing and presumed dead white women are inexhaustibly thrilling to American audiences, comparably detailed stories about American soldiers fallen in battle are thought to depress and fatigue viewers.

That the Bush administration has thoughtfully banned coverage of returning coffins; that the president has refrained from attending military funerals (can't show favoritism by being selective, can he?); that it's too dangerous for tv crews to venture out of the green zone to report on our troops; that Bush and Rumsfeld relentlessly mau-mau the press about excessive coverage of "bad news" and scant attention to all the swell progress being made: these make it especially easy for cable news, so dependent on pictures, to excuse its disproportionate blindness to war casualties.

But every killed or wounded American has a grieving family to cover, stunned friends and neighbors to interview, a courageous story of service to be told. Why should reporting about these Americans be limited to three seconds of respectful silence, and a still photo? If cable news executives decide how much airtime to allot to what kind of stories

exclusively on the basis of the ratings they'll pull in — and they do — then they might as well admit they're really in the entertainment business, and replace the N in their names with an E!

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