

**THE BLOG****Attention Must Be Paid**

By Marty Kaplan

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Who will get your attention today — Anderson Cooper and Angelina Jolie, or Pfc Kristian Menchaca and Pfc Thomas Tucker?

Today's New York Times and Los Angeles Times, plus who knows what other papers, carry half-page ads from CNN promoting Cooper's great get: his TELEVISION EXCLUSIVE interview with "Jolie - just back from Africa - on motherhood and her passionate fight for refugee relief." In politics, and in the entertainment business, these ads are known as "paid media." CNN is spending substantially in order to attract eyeballs to Cooper's show, whose ratings turn out not to be as high as Aaron Brown's, whom he replaced, despite Cooper's appearance in feature stories and on magazine covers ("free media") promoting his new book. Jolie is using her celebrity to get free media for refugees (and herself), just as the UN is using its prestige to get free media by declaring today World Refugee Day. CNN, in turn, is using Jolie's superstar eye-candy in order to demonstrate to advertisers that it can pull decent enough Nielsens to justify paid media by HeadOn, ditech.com, the Schwarzenegger campaign and anyone else competing for your neurons.

Privates Menchaca and Tucker were kidnapped in Iraq on Friday. From then until today's tragic news that their bodies (showing signs of "barbaric torture," according to an Iraqi Defense Ministry official) have been found, the White House has pushed back hard against the news media's attention to these abductions. Tony Snow's handlers would prefer that American casualties be given far less free media (a few seconds of respectful silence per week, say, would be more proportionate), and that the fabulous Bush successes in Iraq be given much more attention. Unfortunately, it is too dangerous for journalists to leave the green zone and cover those splendid achievements, so the Administration has been buying it (paid media) by planting Pentagon-written stories in Iraqi newspapers and offering electronic versions of those press releases to American television stations for airing during the "news" (free media).

The Mujahideen Shura Council, an al Qaeda insurgent coalition, claimed responsibility for the abduction of Privates Menchaca and Tucker. Their motive was to win the world's attention (free media), and it worked; had the soldiers been killed in the line of duty, their deaths would have warranted no more news than a mention, because the media would not have had the elements it needs to attract audiences — a suspenseful, gripping, ongoing story, with reporter remotes outside iconic American homes and interviews with anxious cousins and high school classmates... proving that not all that much has changed since the Iranian hostage crisis of the late '70s, when kidnapers in Teheran had America by the networks for 444 days, except that today there are 24/7 networks as well, plus of course the Web.

Inevitably, the story will now turn to the meaning of these deaths. Bush partisans, with disproportionate access to free media, will depict them as evidence of the evil we are fighting, the righteousness of the US cause, and the treachery of those Americans who dare oppose it. Their trump card will be to declare that dissent from their “strategy for victory in Iraq” (a vacuous brand name in perpetual search of free media) plays right into the hands of the terrorists. Since covering the story, and therefore dispiriting Americans who see it, is precisely the Mujahideen Shura Council’s publicity strategy, the Snow solution is to shoot the messenger — the American media — except, of course, when it enables the Pentagon’s publicity strategy.

Anjelina Jolie and al Qaeda in Iraq both provide networks what they need most: audience catnip. For the purpose of setting advertising rates, it turns out that great beauty and fame, and great ugliness and tragedy, are equally attractive to audiences. We don’t have to choose; we can pay attention to both, plus Jack Black, and YouTube, and a zillion other attempts to capitalize — literally — on our noticing them. In the escalating war for our attention, though, I wonder whether anything can break through long enough to gain some lasting purchase on reality, or whether everything, from refugees to wars, is destined to be marketed and apprehended and monetized as entertainment.

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