



THE BLOG 06/27/2013 11:59 am ET | Updated Aug 27, 2013

Cable News's Journalistic Suicide



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GETTY

CNN and MSNBC are giving wall-to-wall coverage to the Trayvon Martin murder trial. Fox News is taking brief breaks from the courtroom to empathize with Darrell Issa and Paula Deen, because George Zimmerman isn't the only victim around who needs defending, but otherwise the cable news channels are all race-crime-porn all the time.

They have three good reasons for doing this.

First, their business model is delivering audiences to advertisers. They fear that Americans will change the channel if they actually cover the news. Thus the Supreme Court's nullification of the Voting Rights Act was a one-day story. So was President Obama's attempt to put climate change on the nation's agenda. The NSA's Big Brother turn is been-there-done-that. Syria's a snoozer. Sandy Hook is so last year. There's always the chance that a police chase with the potential to deliver a real-time death crash will mandate a split screen with the trial, but the name of the cable news game is always Capture the Eyeballs.

Second, they're right. This trial is a good story — not in the sense that it deserves this kind of journalistic attention, but rather that our lizard brains love this kind of stuff. Fear, hate, danger, death, suspense: it's reality television, minus the unreality. As citizens, we may sheepishly acknowledge that other news is more important for us to follow. But as animals, we're like those lab rats that would rather starve to death than abandon the lever that once dispensed cocaine.

Third, there's an ideological compatibility between cable news's corporate ownership and the kind of content they deliver. It's not beyond the wit of those networks to grab and hold audiences by actually covering the daily assault on democracy in America. The disenfranchisement of voters now going on across the country will turn out to be the biggest story of the 2014 elections. Women's rights are being rolled back in state after state. Wall Street is still getting away with murder. The stranglehold of big money on Congress is a horror show. But if you're a media conglomerate with talons sunk deep into both political parties, why draw attention to the corrupt system that also empowers you? Covering the Sanford, Florida circus won't jeopardize your sweet deal in Washington, D.C., and it's cheaper to boot.