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The Importance of Being Michael



By Marty Kaplan

“Why aren’t you talking about Michael Jackson more?”

The question, from a caller to Larry Mantle’s KPCC-Pasadena public radio program “AirTalk,” interrupted a discussion of the budget mess in Sacramento. Actually, it was more a wail than a question — a crack about the Michael mania that had hijacked the news media.

Ninety-three percent of cable news on the days after he died was given over to Michael Jackson, according to a study by the Project on Excellence in Journalism. At the start of the week, nearly a third of the stories monitored — 58 outlets, covering print, online, network, cable and radio news — were about the protests in Iran. By the end of the week, the velvet revolution wasn’t the only story that had largely been abandoned by journalism. The economic crisis, health care reform, the energy and global warming bill: you’d need an FBI investigator to find coverage of them. Only Governor Mark Sanford’s soap opera could compete, barely, with the death of the King of Pop.

By going all-Michael-all-the-time, cable news wasn’t jamming this story down America’s throat. Even though nearly two-thirds of Americans said last week that the Jackson story was getting too much coverage, the same HCD Research survey said that four out of five people were engaged by the Jackson stories they saw. If people were more interested in the president’s trip to Russia than the singer’s memorial at the Staples Center, then the news would drop Michael for Moscow in a heartbeat.

You can’t blame audiences for the addictiveness of the Jackson melodrama. As stories go, the tragedy of Michael Jackson has everything: death, mystery, celebrity, pop, money, custody, revenge, sex, drugs and arguably the weirdest superstar in history. Shakespeare would have killed for a broth this rich.

The question for journalism, though, isn’t whether people are interested. You’d have to be brain dead not to be interested; our synapses are hardwired to pay attention to that kind of stimulus. Instead, the right question for the news media has to do with proportionality, importance, judgment, compared-to-what? trade-offs and service to the public interest.

Sensation has always been a part of the news business. A business must make money. Until broccoli is as popular as ice cream, journalism will keep on covering entertainment, sports, gossip, crime and plenty else that's part of being human and proven to drive circulation and ratings.

But until the news business decides to throw in the towel and admit it's just another branch of show business, until freedom of the press is as irrelevant to journalism as it is to Disneyland, covering what's inherently important is as essential to democracy as covering what's inherently interesting.

In the summer before September 11th, 2001, the big news was Chandra Levy and shark attacks. As the economic crisis incubated, Anna Nicole Smith got more media attention than the housing bubble. Today, while the world's attention is riveted by Michael Jackson, who knows what rough beast slouches toward Bethlehem to be born?

Important doesn't have to mean boring. If you've heard the Planet Money guys on National Public Radio, you know that credit default swaps and collateralized debt obligations can be as interesting as Natalee Holloway's disappearance. When Arnold Schwarzenegger suggests that negotiations on California's fiscal crisis should be broadcast ("Budget talks as a reality TV show?" was the headline in the *Los Angeles Times*), there's a truth lurking about the intrinsic drama of public issues that the news media ought to pounce on.

The rise of the Internet, of course, has meant a profusion of channels for news and opinion. Any motivated Web surfer can be well-informed about the debate on cap-and-trade, the public option in health care, California's credit rating or the rift within Iran's clerical leadership about the legitimacy of their presidential election.

But the impact of journalism on the health of American democracy is too important to depend on the aggregation of individual consumers' appetites. Just because everyone can now be their own editor doesn't mean that editors no longer have something crucial to contribute to the meaning of being an informed citizen. "Pull" news is marvelous, niche news is swell, but the audience is not yet so fragmented that "push" news is irrelevant or that mass media don't matter. Twitter is a wonder, but if you look at its trending topics, the majority of the crowd's tweets are about pop culture.

On the same morning that the "AirTalk" caller complained, tongue-in-cheek, about the program's neglect of Michael Jackson, the *New York Times* ran a [story](#) about the daily 4 p.m. meeting where the paper's editors decide what stories warrant front-page treatment. In the *Times*' Page 1 conference room,

"[T]he belief remains that editing isn't tyranny but perhaps a little closer to curating. Pick whatever metaphor you like: wheat from chaff, signal from noise, gold from dross. Without that process of selection, one is left to find the news on a Borgesian online map that is as big as the world itself."

I'm glad that anyone who needs to can Google the meaning of Borgesian. I'm just a teeny bit less glad that no one on the planet needs to Google Michael Jackson.