

**THE BLOG****Crisis Porn**

By Marty Kaplan

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It's the start of World War III. It's a tinderbox about to explode. It's a downward-spiraling crisis. It's the tipping-point of a regional conflagration. It could trigger an oil crisis worse than the late '70s, with gas lines and rationing and \$20-per-gallon fuel. It could spark worldwide inflation, recession, depression. It's the most dangerous moment since (fill in the blank).

That's what they're saying on the news. And maybe much or most of it is actually true. The world scene is indisputably scary; there really are bad people out there, determined to do terrible things; the quality of US leadership over the past five years is hardly a comforting thing to extrapolate forward from.

But I wonder what portion of what we're getting from the media right now is crisis porn, delivered to an insatiable audience, and itself a possible cause of the escalation of the crisis.

Television news has tremendous ability to control the tone of what it covers. The quantity, the music, the graphics, the word choices can all be dialed up or down. The notion that professional news judgment — a reliable journalistic rulebook — is what really drives the nature and kind of coverage: well, that's a sweet thought, and while it may still be true in some broadcasting precincts, mainly public ones, in practice it's pretty much a fossil.

The truth is that a missing white woman can easily be turned by the media machine into a global red-alert, and a holocaust in Africa can effortlessly be marginalized as a sidebar story. What matters most to commercial networks is not context, not perspective, but ratings. And when it comes to holding audiences' attention, the only thing better than suspense is suspense about carnage, and the only thing better than suspense about carnage is suspense about the apocalypse.

Terrorists, especially stateless terrorists, depend on the news's (and news viewers') addiction to fear and crisis. They have gamed the media system; they bank on getting their message amplified. This is not to diminish the legitimate news value of the horrors they perpetrate. But it's also true that attempts to cool things off, reduce tensions, and back off from the brink are at odds with the sexy Niensens that accompany real-time coverage of the end of the world.

There's no doubt that what's going on in the Middle East right now is awful. But is it really Armageddon? And might saying so perhaps contribute to making it so? It's unfortunate that the arbiter we've depended on in the past to tell us

what's really the case — the news media — is itself now a stakeholder with a vested interest in imagining the worst.

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