

**THE BLOG**

I See Dead People

By Marty Kaplan

08/12/2007 04:02 pm ET | Updated May 25, 2011

Compassion alone can't account for television's blanket coverage of the Utah coal mine accident. If media concern for the six victims and their families were the main motive, then where have they been while 600 times that number of Americans have fallen in Iraq, not to mention the tens of thousands wounded, nor the hundreds of thousands of Iraqi civilians killed?

News producers will tell us that disasters like the one in Utah are tailor-made for television. They're human-scaled; hundreds or thousands of victims can't really be comprehended, but journalists can comfortably get their story-telling arms around half a dozen potential casualties. What's more, this is a real-time tale, whose ending we don't yet know; television's ping-ponging of its audience between possibilities — the exhilaration of heroic rescue, the heartbreak of fatal tragedy — is exactly the kind of suspense that keeps us watching.

And that, of course, is the key. The television news business isn't about information; it's about attention. It isn't about telling us what we need to know in order to be good citizens; it's about attracting our eyeballs so they can be sold to advertisers. The "best" news to air is emotional, has life-and-death stakes, plays out before our eyes, and dares us to look away. In other words, it's soap opera. The "worst" news to air, on the other hand, is wonky, needs context and background, takes longer to explain, doesn't have only two sides, and promises neither funerals nor cameos in the First Lady's box during the State of the Union. In other words, it's the kind of storytelling formerly known as journalism.

The vulture instinct of mainstream TV news doesn't require an actual accident. The gouge on the belly of the space shuttle Endeavor, which last week carried schoolteacher Barbara Morgan — Christa McAuliffe's Challenger backup over twenty years ago — into space, has provided coverage of this current shuttle mission with an awful, and riveting, subtext: Oh my God, not again. On the other hand, if you are looking to television not for melodrama, but rather to understand why the space shuttle is still flying at all, why the international space station is still worth our billions, and whatever happened to Bush's diversionary promises about the moon and Mars, you will be sorely disappointed.

Political news, too, gets framed as a deathwatch. Coverage of this past weekend's Republican straw poll in Iowa could have truth-squadded what the candidates actually said, or at least have contained enough of their words to enable viewing audiences to discover for themselves what foamy demagogues the field contains, but only CSPAN delivered that horrifying pleasure, along with straw poll emcee Laura Ingraham — you know, Glenn Beck's fill-in over at The Most Trusted Name in News. But instead of offering viewers a scary sampling of what Republicans say to one another when

there's no adult supervision, TV news offered a who-shall-live-and-who-shall-die suspense narrative. Will Romney survive unscathed? Will Tommy Thompson and Tom Tancredo meet their Waterloo in Ames? Stay tuned, folks, political body count at 11.

The somber, tasteful circus that the Utah mine accident has become is of course nothing new for news. In 1925, explorer Floyd Collins was trapped in a Kentucky cave accident that — thanks to coverage by *Louisville Courier-Journal* reporter “Skeets” Miller, which won him a Pulitzer, and which was amplified by wire services and radio reports around the nation — became one of the biggest media events in America between World Wars I and II. Tens of thousands of tourists showed up at Sand Cave, along with food and souvenir vendors. A quarter-century later, screenwriters Walter Newman and Lesser Samuels, along with director Billy Wilder, based *Ace in the Hole*, a vicious but prophetic film about media sensationalism, on the Kentucky incident; in re-release, it has been re-titled, not inappropriately, *The Carnival*.

There have been, mercifully, no corn dog stands at the Crandall Canyon mine, as there were in Ames. But even without carnivalesque trappings, the ghoulish camera lens has transformed misfortune into grief porn. If you want to know why Bush's Mine Safety and Health director, coal industry executive Richard Stickler, had to be put in the job with a recess appointment, you won't hear it on TV; if you want to know about the safety record of mine owner Bob Murray, you'll have to turn elsewhere, to print and online sources.

But that should come as no surprise. Television's not much good at understanding. But when it comes to kidnapping our cerebral cortex, it's killer.

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Marty Kaplan 

USC Annenberg professor and Norman Lear Center director