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## Hillary, Helmets, Crossfire and Cash



By Marty Kaplan

Money, they say, is the mother's milk of politics. Also of news, sports and the rest of the entertainment industry. Three recent stories drive that home.

When Reince Priebus pressured Comcast's NBC to drop a miniseries starring Diane Lane as Hillary Clinton, the hostage that the RNC chairman threatened to snuff was the network's access to the 2016 presidential primary debates. When the N.F.L. forced Disney's ESPN to pull out of a documentary about concussions jointly produced with PBS's *Frontline*, the league's leverage was its deal with Disney's ESPN to air *Monday Night Football*. And when Time Warner's CNN hired Newt Gingrich for its exhumed edition of *Crossfire*, its motive wasn't political journalism in service of democracy; it was stunt casting in service of ratings.

On the surface, the fight between the GOP and NBC is about the effects of media on audiences. The party's presumption — based on no evidence — is that the miniseries would put Clinton in a favorable light, and — also based on no evidence — that the halo would translate into votes. But if a movie could do that, then John Glenn, heroically portrayed in the 1983 movie *The Right Stuff*, would have been the 1984 Democratic presidential nominee. The real issue here isn't the impact of entertainment on audiences, it's the coup that took presidential debates out of the hands of citizens and handed them to party hacks.

Once upon a time, groups like the League of Women Voters sponsored the debates, and all cameras were welcome to cover them. But starting in 1988, the Democratic and Republican parties wrested control of the process. Since then, the general election debates have had an aura of patriotic respectability, but in reality they've been run by the same folks who've earned an eight percent approval rating for Congress. The primary debates have become cash cows for the networks, interest groups and faux think tanks. They're spectacles that provide free media to candidates, attract eyeballs to sell to advertisers and offer co-branding opportunities to burnish the images of the evenings' co-sponsors. The right question isn't whether NBC's miniseries would put a finger on the scale. It's why the hell a political party should be permitted to use the money that can be milked from the democratic process as a bargaining chip.

When ESPN withdrew its logo and credit from *Frontline*'s "League of Denial," a two-part investigation of the N.F.L.'s handling of head injuries, its explanation was that "the use of ESPN's marks could incorrectly imply that we have editorial control." The N.F.L., of course, denies that it coerced ESPN, but as the *New York Times* has reported, ESPN's turnabout came a week after a heated lunch between Roger Goodell, commissioner of the N.F.L., and John Skipper, ESPN's president. For more than a year, the ground rules

covering editorial authority had been working just fine; *Frontline* and ESPN each had control over what each aired. PBS and ESPN executives had even appeared together this summer at the Television Critics Assn. to promote the coming documentary. But when the N.F.L. belatedly realized — *hello?* — that they were about to get slammed for their see-no-evil response to players' brain traumas, they took ESPN to the woodshed. Disney is paying \$1.1 billion for the lucrative rights to broadcast *Monday Night Football* this season, and \$2 billion next season. "Nice deal you've got here. Too bad if anything were to happen to it." Surely nothing like that got said over the salad.

What makes this especially grim is its impact on the ESPN newsroom. Ever since CBS discovered that *60 Minutes* could make a profit, the networks have treated news as a revenue center within their entertainment businesses. For sports reporters operating within that corporate structure, there's an inherent conflict between the network's financial contracts with sports content rights-holders, and its journalistic contract with its viewers. The fate of "League of Denial" is a case study of who wins that fight.

CNN, like NBC and ESPN, lives and dies by ratings. Outside of the new morning show *New Day*, CNN president Jeff Zucker's efforts to resuscitate the network have not much tested the possibility that actually covering the news, rather than filling time with blowhards, food fights and murderers, could be a winning strategy. Anyone who's watched CNN International while traveling abroad knows that CNN can in fact deliver solid, round-the-clock journalism, but apparently management thinks Americans are too ADD-addled, or maybe just too dim, to have a hearty appetite for real news. So it shouldn't come as a surprise that CNN is pulling *Crossfire* out of mothballs, or that it's giving a certifiable demagogue like Newt Gingrich a regular seat at its table.

When Jon Stewart appeared on *Crossfire* in 2004, he was the guest from hell. "Stop, stop, stop, stop hurting America," he told its then hosts, Tucker Carlson and Paul Begala. "I'm here to confront you, because we need help from the media, and they're hurting us... I would love to see a debate show," he said, but calling *Crossfire* a debate show was "like saying pro wrestling is a show about athletic competition... You have a responsibility to the public discourse, and you fail miserably... I watch your show every day. And it kills me... It's so — oh, it's so painful to watch... Please, I beg of you guys, please... Please stop." That clip went viral.

The story goes that King Canute had his throne carried to the shore, where he ordered the waves to stop. When they didn't stop, he said he'd done this to demonstrate that kings were powerless compared to God. Three months after Stewart's "stop hurting America" appearance, when CNN announced it was cancelling *Crossfire*, I thought he was a god. Now, with *Crossfire* coming back, it looks like the god with the last laugh is Mammon.

*This is my column from The Jewish Journal of Greater Los Angeles. My JJ columns won the 2013 Best Columnist award from the LA Press Club. You can read more of them here, and email me there if you'd like.*

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