

Networks pledge restraint in Jackson case

NEW YORK (AP) — There was a sinking feeling last week when CNN, Fox News Channel and MSNBC all trained their cameras on a California street to catch Michael Jackson returning from a lunch break during jury selection at his molestation trial. Is this what the next few months are going to be like?

Many in television insist not. While they expect Jackson's upcoming trial to be newsworthy, they don't see it becoming a national obsession, and don't expect to cover it as such.

"It's certainly not going to dominate our air, not the way that O.J. did and not when you think of all the other things that we're dealing with as a nation, like terrorism, the state of the war, the tsunami," said Mark Effron, vice president of news and daytime programming at MSNBC.

Jackson may be one of the world's biggest stars, but there are several reasons why TV programmers aren't anticipating a case that will grab interest like Simpson's murder trial, or even Scott Peterson's.

One is simple logistics. With cameras not allowed, viewers can't get engrossed in the action themselves, or see compelling characters like Johnnie Cochran or Judge Ito develop.

Message devices like

Blackberrys won't be allowed either, eliminating a trick used to keep television viewers up-to-date when cameras were not permitted in the Peterson case, said Marlene Dann, executive vice president of daytime programming for Court TV.

"Because there are no cameras in the courtroom, it's going to lack a certain sizzle," said Jonathan Klein, CNN chief executive. "A lot of the buzz is going to be manufactured rather than real. Therefore, you might see a dwindling of interest."

Larry King will likely cover it more than anybody else on CNN. Nancy Grace is starting a legal-oriented talk show on CNN Headline News, and she has a keen interest in the case, he said.

"It hasn't been at the forefront of our minds," Klein said. "We'll give it the attention it deserves."

Dan Abrams will be covering the trial for his nightly MSNBC legal show, but doesn't expect to offer a steady diet.

While many viewers could relate to Laci and Scott Peterson as personalities, and become engrossed in a murder mystery, that's not the case with the oddball Jackson, he said. Jackson's accuser is remaining anonymous.

"The interest in this case purely stems from the fact

that Michael Jackson is so famous," Abrams said.

"That, in and of itself, doesn't sustain interest in a trial over a long period of time."

Then there's the "yuck factor." Molestation is repellent, and certainly doesn't promote watercooler talk, Klein said. Since such allegations have long dogged Jackson, there's little shock value.

"There will be some interest in this case, don't get me wrong, but there will not be the constant national fascination that we have seen in a lot of other trials," Abrams said.

The cultural barometer Jon Stewart even weighed in last week, comparing the case's newsworthiness to media day at the Super Bowl — usually a cacophony of empty hype.

Court TV has also sensed that there might be more interest in the case internationally, almost like Jackson's music is now more popular overseas than in his home country, Dann said. Court TV correspondent Diane Dimond has already been interviewed by television stations in Germany, Japan and Spain, and Court TV has signed an agreement to offer exclusive trial coverage to Channel Five in England.

(Fox News Channel, whose Geraldo Rivera scored an exclusive pretrial interview with Jackson, declined to talk about coverage plans.)

Another reason to keep coverage at a minimum is the expectation that the syndicated entertainment news programs will be all over the case, Klein said.

Not so fast.

"The Jackson trial will not hijack 'Access Hollywood,'" said Rob Silverstein, that broadcast's executive producer. "There are other things going on in the world of entertainment."

The nightly show won't necessarily cover the trial if

there's not much going on, he said. "Access Hollywood" does, however, plan to cover the coverage of the trial, holding up a mirror if it becomes a media circus.

"We're going to be smart, we're going to be aggressive and not go over the top," he said. "We're not going to be searching for some former housekeeper who met Michael once and put her on the air."

Silverstein isn't surprised to hear many news executives talking conservatively about Jackson trial coverage.

"I think people will say that," he said. "And we'll see if they can help themselves."

Activist

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Regaining his composure, Mack described a lawsuit filed by the NAACP on behalf of the Blacks student.

"It wasn't long before I went to the school district. And when I went to the meeting, I brought the Black press. Because reason and stupid can't talk, we walked out of the meeting," Mack explained.

"With the help of the Black press, the \$10 million we originally asked for ended up being \$50 million. We were able to educate our community about what was going on because of the Black press. That is what I love about Black media."

As much as Mack loved agitating in Seattle, he is in the process of moving to the Washington, D.C., area. Mack and his wife are engineers, and he is looking forward taking on a different kind of struggle as executive director of the National Society for Black Engineers (NSBE). It has more than 10,000 members and is the largest student-run organization in the world.

"The mission of NSBE is to increase the number of

culturally responsible Black engineers who excel academically, succeed professionally and positively impact the community," Mack explained.

"Like Carter G. Woodson [the father of Black History Month] said, real education means to inspire people to live more abundantly. To begin with life as they find it and then make it better."

To make life better, Mack is already exploring ways he can continue to work with the Black Press.

"The NAACP has been successful because of the Black press and NSBE will be just as successful because of the Black press," he said. He ended with a quote by Frederick Douglass:

"Any man who professes to favor freedom, but you detest agitation, well, you are a man who wants crops without plowing the field. You want rain without thunder and lightning."

The publishers gave Mack a thunderous standing ovation as he closed stating, "The NAACP, Black press and NSBE must always be thunder and lightning!"

CBC

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— Democrats and Republicans — for the most part, and the president's not going to change," Waters says. "The president said he's going to cut back all these programs. He said he's going to protect his tax cuts. He said if Iran and Syria [do not] get their act together, he's going to do the same thing he did to Iraq. If he comes out in the State of the Union and tells you what he's going to do, when we meet him in the back room he's not going to change that. That's what he's going to do."

The major issue in the speech was Social Security reform. "We pointed out to him that if we don't pay Social Security, you will double the number of African-Americans in poverty in their advanced years," says Watt.

According to a White House Fact Sheet, the president's plan would, in a nutshell, allow people to choose to put a portion of their money in a private personal retirement account

rather than Social Security per se — with an opportunity for receiving a higher pay out.

Rep. Elijah Cummings (D-Md.), immediate past chairman of the CBC, is suspicious of the privatization plan. "I have to begin to wonder why it is that he is pushing these savings accounts," Cummings says.

"Why would you take, literally, trillions of dollars out of Social Security so that people can then invest them in a questionable stock market, basically with questionable returns, and with a reduced benefit package, when you could leave it there and get the benefit? It doesn't make any sense at all — unless you're trying to do a favor to the financial services community who has to manage these accounts," Cummings questions.

Many non-Caucus lawmakers agree.

"Social Security provides African-American seniors with 44 percent of their total



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income, and it is the only source of income for one in three African-Americans 65 and older," states a report from Democratic Leader Sen. Harry Reid (D-Nev) entitled, "African-Americans and Social Security." Reid sits on the Senate Appropriations Committee.

"For these Americans, Social Security's guaranteed benefit is the only thing standing between them and a life of poverty and destitution," the report concludes.

Del. Eleanor Holmes Norton noted the hedged applause from Republicans at the State of the Union on the privatization of Social Secu-

ity. "His problem is far less with us than it is with them. They want to be here three years from now," says Norton. "The speech showed neither leadership nor courage," she added.

Not all of the president's CBC reviews were bad.

"I'm hopeful because I believe in his commitment to strengthen the community college system; his initiative to increase money to battle AIDS among minorities, and the initiative headed up by the first lady to deal with at-risk youth without criminalizing them is a positive program for the youth. I'm cautiously optimistic,"

says Rep. Bobby Rush (D-Ill.).

Cummings says he was also pleased when the president talked about the rate of AIDS among African-American women and the need for health centers in poor areas. Cummings asked especially about health disparities during the White House meeting.

For example, in 2002, the African-American AIDS diagnosis was 11 times the White diagnosis, 23 times more for Black women and nine times more for Black men. Cummings says he was also pleased about the president's support of increased funding for Pell grants, the federal grant of \$4,000 awarded to eligible undergraduate students.

"With regard to those things, I think that he gave some consideration to things that we had talked about," says Cummings.

However Cummings said it was glaring that President Bush failed to mention any-

thing about voting rights of Americans, even after a major gaffe during the CBC White House meeting in which he reportedly said, "I don't know anything about the 1965 Voting Rights Act."

Cummings says, "It was disappointing to know that here was the president of the United States who was excited about people voting in Iraq and Afghanistan and talking about how important it was and we're spending billions of dollars to help accomplish that. But yet, when it came to the State of the Union Address, he did not mention the voting rights of Americans at all."

Although Rush praised the president, he says he is still bracing himself to see whether the initiatives he mentioned are seriously funded in the budget. "That's what [we want] to see, whether or not there's any monetary commitments. You know, whether he's going to put his money where his mouth is."