

POLITICO

CNN Feasts on Baltimore Riot Coverage

But cable shouldn't ignore the conditions that spark riots.

By Jack Shafer

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A casual CNN viewer would have had good reason this morning to think that the rioting, looting and arson that took place yesterday in Baltimore after the Freddie Gray funeral was still happening because the signature airborne shot of the [pillaging](#) of that CVS drug store was still airing.

I isolate my criticism on CNN, but it's not the only cable network to loop scenes of Monday's violence as video wallpaper for Tuesday's jabbering anchors—even though the real rioting had ceased. Nor is such looping unusual. Cable news routinely recycles and re-recycles the most striking video from newsworthy accidents, plane crashes, riots, and natural calamities without adding a time/date stamp to indicate that they're not “live.”

Nor am I the only one complaining. Today, President Barack Obama [groused](#) about the practice. “One burning building will be looped on television over and over again,” Obama said, adding his disappointment that the peaceful demonstrations that preceded the uprising were relatively ignored by the press.

Of course, Obama is wrong to think that two days of peaceful demonstrations outrank one day of violence. He'd last five minutes in my profession with news sense like that. In fact, violent and graphic footage is almost always newsworthy in its first dozen airings. If video exists of an unarmed man being repeatedly shot in the back, that's news. If floodwaters transform New Orleans streets into a river delta, and cameras are there to record the images, that's news, too. If the trade towers fall, that's news, as well. But Obama is right to slam cable's tendency to use yesterday's clips to bolster viewer interest in stories that have already peaked. TV news reruns and reruns sensational footage because it knows sensational footage, no matter how dated, is an easy way to keep viewers *emotionally* engaged—and, in turn, keep them tuned in.

More than ever today, CNN feasts on unfolding, breaking news—after all, its [ratings are always best](#) when there's real legitimate news. (Anyone remember the disappearance of Malaysia Air Flight 370?) Network chief Jeff Zucker understands that viewers love actual stories; CNN's brand, try as hard as they might in recent years, has never been about the punditry that has marked other cable networks. Its brand is news, so real news means real viewers.

Riots are particularly complicated for the media to cover. TV's preferred presentation of any riot is the live shot, and who can object to that? But its next favorite is montage, the stacking of ghastly image upon ghastly image, of looted pharmacy upon [burning](#) senior center upon [flaming](#) automobile, which it can run in a loop. Not to diminish the horrors of the Baltimore riots, but looping of the Baltimore news makes it look as if the entire city is ablaze and scores have died, even though—praise be to glory—damage is localized and a human life has yet to be taken. (The latest [toll](#) by CNN: 200 arrests, 144 vehicle fires, 15 structure fires, 20 police injured, one person in critical condition.) Intelligent viewers know that endless loops of action footage signal that a cable station has temporarily depleted its news stocks and that the TV set can be safely switched off.

So how best to report on riots? In a July 2000 [paper](#) titled “The Diffusion of Collective Violence,” sociologist Daniel J. Myers notes that the newsworthiness of a riot is traditionally proportional to property damage, injuries, deaths and repression. This would suggest that the Baltimore coverage will recede as quickly as it advanced. Because news—especially riot news—erupts in the macro and the micro, reporters often oscillate between generalities (All hell is breaking loose!) and extreme specifics (A squad car is burning at the corner of Main and Vine!). When TV news goes micro on riots, it opens itself to accusations that it's transmitting GPS coordinates to aspiring rioters, turning tiny disturbances into conflagrations.

I think the press over-worries this one. Two decades ago, scholars David Haddock and Daniel Polsby looked at formation of urban insurrections in a paper titled “[Understanding Riots](#)” for the Cato Institute. While they conceded that TV broadcasters give precise directions to a riot scene, thereby lowering the “search costs” of finding a burn-and-loot-without-consequences location, they discounted the idea that a riot can't be located without a television guide. Long before live, mobile television feeds, there was radio, a mobile medium that informed the citizens of Watts where the riot was. Today, social media cuts out the traditional media by beaming even more detailed information from citizen smartphone to citizen smartphone, making every riot a potential flash riot.

Riots begin with a trigger, Haddock and Polsby write: A single actor believes he can smash a window or set a car on fire at no risk of punishment, and when he does, the mob follows. And once a riot has started, it's hard to stop. Even without an enabling media, a kind of spontaneous disorder directs rioters to the scene of a riot, Haddock and Polsby write. Riots tend to happen at intersections (“action nodes”) that have long sight-lines, naturally funneling human beings to terminus points where, not so coincidentally, commercial districts are usually located. Given that, when you think about it, it's probably impossible to conceal a riot.

The best way to stop a riot, they hold, is to block the action node and other nodes the would-be rioters might congregate in should their preferred nodes be blocked. All this node-blocking takes lots of manpower, which explains the difficulty local police have in stopping big riots. Stopping a riot often requires the overwhelming force of the National Guard or federal troops (as was the result of last night in Baltimore). At the same time, Haddock and Polsby caution against summoning the Guard too soon, as it may inadvertently signal a “riot's incipency,” which is what we sort of saw in Ferguson, Missouri.

The easiest riot to stop is a riot that never spreads, which is why the writers counsel a policy of *preventing* over *stopping* riots. Urban police forces should maintain auxiliaries made up of citizens to help them in times ripe with riot. Citizens don't look as militaristic as the guard, eliminating the incipency problem, and can be deployed within hours instead of days. And indeed last night in Baltimore we watched on TV as community members, from ministers to black-shirted representatives of the 300 Men March, self-deployed to halt the spreading disorder.

But enough about preventing and stopping riots, and back to media coverage. Should we suspend the First Amendment and censor riot coverage in the name of saving lives and property? That might have been a technological possibility a generation ago, but YouTube, Vine, Periscope and other mobilized platforms make radical censorship moot. Haddock and Polsby say no, too, warning of the "serious danger of political opportunism if authorities were permitted to interdict the flow of news merely because they asserted a fear that riots might otherwise ensue."

And so we're left with this: The best way for the press to get riots right is to study their causes and their trajectories and to report on them as accurately and dispassionately as possible. If there was more attention paid to the conditions in places like Ferguson and Baltimore, more media attention that pushed for political solutions, the media could play a key role in preventing riots from starting in the first place. That's my long-term instruction.

For the short term, though, do me and Obama a favor and get rid of the video wallpaper.