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**The Pathetic Rick Sanchezization of America
By Lawrence J. Haas**

“This is an unbelievable day,” says a breathless Rick Sanchez, CNN’s mid-day anchor – he of the jet-black hair, earnest face, furrowed brow and frequent hand gestures and, on this day, of the pin-striped suit, powder blue shirt and print tie.

For the next hour, starting at 3 p.m. last Friday, Sanchez led coverage of three stories – Illinois Gov. Rod Blagojevich’s defiant news conference, confirmation of Caylee Anthony’s remains in Florida and a traffic mishap in Seattle that left a bus dangerously close to falling over a busy highway.

Even more than usual for the hour Sanchez holds court, this one was loud, fast-paced, disjointed, colorful and banal – replete with on-camera commentary by CNN’s Roland Martin, Mike Brooks and Ashleigh Banfield and a bevy of outside “experts,” as well as on-line public participation – and it reflected much that’s increasingly wrong with America’s media.

Sanchez personifies far more than media’s descent, however. He epitomizes a cultural infantilizing that corrodes our capacity for deliberation. At just the time we need to get serious – with our economy in turmoil and our enemies taking our measure – we seem less equipped to do so.

“I want you to look at this video,” Sanchez tells us in the Blagojevich segment. “He’s going for a jog . . . do you get the sense that this guy is liking the camera attention . . . treadmills are not that expensive.”

In the Caylee Anthony segment, after broadcasting a news conference with the Orange County, Florida medical examiner, Sanchez asks his guests illiterately, “So, what do we got?” In the Seattle bus segment, he references the film coverage and blurts, “I’m looking at it with you, folks.”

That’s Sanchez – a font of low-brow banality, with observations more appropriate for a barstool than an anchor chair. The point, however, is not to inform, to educate and to elevate, but to engage. He is less a newscaster than a group therapist, taking us into his circle.

Throughout the hour, CNN constantly reminds us at the bottom of our TV screens that “Rick’s on Twitter, MySpace & Facebook” (with a hip ampersand rather than a literate but staid “and”) and, lest we want to join the fun, CNN notes we can do so at www.twitter.com/sanchez.

And we do, as “tweeters” come forth under such silly monikers as Sundaycosmetics, Morningside mom, Queenbee75, Galaxy5007, Curious 1966, Fortitude 1913, Mayhaven, TexDemGal, Comedycopy409 and Solitarydancer.

And what do they “tweet” for all the world to see, as their words stream below Sanchez and his guests? Almost anything, on topic or otherwise, grammatical or otherwise. It’s a verbal fun-fest, one whose words I sought to record as they appeared – making no effort to clean up the mess.

Of Blagojevich: “Self-serving ego bigger than Sears tower” and “BlagoShmago, this man is no SAINT . . .” Of Caylee Anthony: “Very sad about Caylee, but I’m not surprised they were her little bones” and “Rest in peace caylee.”

And of other things on the minds of tweeters: “This is the best show ever . . . Rick Sanchez for Senator . . . I’m shocked no one threw shoes” along with both praise and criticism of Roland Martin: “Remember that Roland is not from here” and “Hey Rick, tell Roland he is AWESOME.” One tweeter even bragged that he had just secured tickets to the Obama inauguration.

It is a superficial and exhausting hour. It lacks perspective, treating each story with equal seriousness and emotion. It is presumptuous, suggesting theories (as opposed to facts) to explain missing information. And it is decidedly low-brow, presenting the news as street theater.

But that is the America of today. We hop from national soap opera to national soap opera, from the important (Obama picks his Cabinet) to the cathartic (O.J. gets his comeuppance) to the parochial (Caylee’s body) to the entertaining (the hanging bus in Seattle).

To us, it’s all equally important, equally entertaining, equally scandalous, equally worthy of coverage and conversation. We lack what you might call “volume control” – the capacity to speak loudly when appropriate, deliberate quietly when appropriate, and ignore things when appropriate.

The soap opera-ization of America deadens our capacity to think, to distinguish fact from supposition, to focus on what matters (economics, national security, scientific discovery, cultural achievement) and keep the rest in perspective (e.g., whether police on the Caylee case acted appropriately after a meter reader told them he had found something suspicious).

These are serious times of monumental challenge. We should re-learn the capacity to separate the important from the trivial.

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