Maybe Health-Care Debate Needs a Sex Scandal

Rash Report: Sanford Scandal, Not Scandal of Uninsured, Captivates News Narrative

By John Rash

Published: June 25, 2009

MINNEAPOLIS (AdAge.com) -- Maybe the health-care debate needs a sex scandal. Based on the prime-time ratings race, the debate over doctor visits on ABC's "Primetime: Prescription for America" made viewers' eyes glaze over, while the eye-popping hypocrisy of South Carolina Gov. Mark Sanford was a more interesting news narrative.

South Carolina Gov. Mark Sanford (left) confesses and President Obama on ABC's 'Primetime: Prescription for America.'
Photo Credit: AP/ABC

And it wasn't that "Prescription for America" lacked a big star and an intriguing setting. Instead, unlike a lot of public policy presentations with wonky Washington experts, it was President Barack Obama, live from the White House in a Town Hall-style meeting.
But perhaps even a political and pop-culture figure like Obama can't transplant interest into health-care policy, which has been dominated by debate over a "public option," only to see the public opt out of the argument altogether.

Or maybe, finally, Obama's ubiquity has produced ennui. Ratings would suggest so, as voters turned viewers have begun to tune out.

As with any new president, but particularly one whose election was truly an historical event, initial interest was high -- even beyond November's election and January's inauguration. February, for instance, featured Obama's first presidential press conference and was watched by over 49 million viewers. Three more million tuned in for his Address to a Joint Session of Congress (a rookie prez's State of the Union speech).

In March, his second presidential presser dipped to 40 million viewers. But he delivered big numbers for subsequent sitdowns with stand-up comedian Jay Leno on NBC's "The Tonight Show" and journalist Steve Croft on CBS's "60 Minutes."

But last night Obama only reached 4.6 million viewers, or less than a tenth of his February levels, which led ABC to finish last in the 11 p.m. timeslot and fourth for the night in household ratings. In the ad-centric adult 18-49 demographic, "Prescription for America" only beat the repeat of CBS's "Gary Unmarried" (it wasn't a good night for fidelity) among the big four networks. (Please see attached chart for all show and network ratings.)

Never eager to be distracted by important policy, the cable news networks instead jumped on the personal, riveted by Sanford's tango with his Argentinean mistress.

That may not win them any Peabody Awards, but together, they were awarded with more bodies than ABC got with the president. Ratings aren't yet available for Sanford's mid-afternoon confession, but each network stuck with the story throughout the day, including the competitive 8 p.m. talk shows (Fox News' "The O'Reilly Factor," MSNBC's "Countdown with Keith Olbermann," HLN's "Nancy Grace" and CNN's "Campbell Brown"), which combined were watched by 6 million viewers.

To be fair, the cable-news networks did cover other news. And Sanford's crying confession was big news, as many conservatives considered him their top 2012 candidate to take on Obama.

And even Hillary Clinton and Harry and Louise -- the fictional couple in ads that helped derail "Hillarycare" the last time the nation considered real reform -- might have found Sanford's sex scandal more scintillating than Obama explaining the scandal of over 40 million Americans being uninsured.

But "Prescription for America" didn't only lose to the combined coverage for Sanford, but to CBS's repeat of "CSI: NY" (7.4 million total viewers, 1.7/5 in the demo) as well as the top rated show of the hour -- NBC's program premiere of "The Philanthropist" (7.1 million total viewers, 1.9/6 in the demo). Come to think of it, with the health-care package price tag a trillion dollars (and counting), maybe.

See how all the shows did in the ratings.

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Obama might have preferred "The Philanthropist" as well...

WHAT TO WATCH:
Thursday: The Great Recession might keep you from your dream Tuscany vacation this summer. Get away anyway by watching Federico Fellini's "La Strada" on TCM.
Friday: While it may create a Friday night sci-fi sensation like "The X-Files," Fox runs an original sci-fi movie, "Virtuality," from the producers of "Battlestar Galactica.

WHAT TO WATCH FOR:
NBC's "Dateline" to dominate demographically, as it looks back at Farrah Fawcett, a TV and pop-culture legend who died Thursday morning after battling cancer.

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NOTE: All ratings based on adults 18-49. A share is a percentage of adults 18-49 who have their TV sets on at a given time. A rating is a percentage of all adults 18-49, whether or not their sets are turned on. For example, a 1.0 rating is 1% of the total U.S. adults 18-49 population with TVs. Ratings quoted in this column are based on live-plus-same-day unless otherwise noted. (Many ad deals have been negotiated on the basis of commercial-minute, live-plus-three-days viewing.)

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