

# Media cash in on Michael Jackson

**NEW YORK, FEBRUARY 9, 2005** – There was no shortage of enthusiastic prospective jurors in Santa Maria, Calif., for what promises to be the trial of the century for their town and lives.

Many are farmworkers, people picking grapes and strawberries in the hot sun. No wonder the prospect of sitting in judgment on multimillionaire Michael Jackson in an air-conditioned courtroom is so attractive, and the longer the better. The hot lights of media attention are seductive, something many long for. Look, Mom, I'm on TV.

Celebrity trials all too often dominate cable news channels with constant updates and endless buzz, especially during pro-forma arrivals and departures. Jackson does not disappoint as he dresses up for the occasion in virginal white.

In an age when news business and showbiz merge, this trial is the kind of “reality” soap opera that producers long for. It has celebrity, day-to-day drama and the promise of titillation. Together, that promises high ratings.

Jackson is not just a person. He is a brand. Record companies worry about sales of his “inventory” and the targeting of other superstars with deviant streaks. If Jackson is guilty of molestation charges, he can be jailed for a long time.

Sometimes when Jackson is made up to look witchy, one senses a witch-hunt. It's happened before in American history. Remember the trials in Salem, and Hester Prynne and her scarlet letter. Jackson been demonized as badly as she was.

Everyone knows that, beyond the trial by jury, a reckoning must come before the court of public opinion – which can easily be manipulated. Just like the Romans throwing the Christians to the lions, the media can't stay away when big names become “red meat.” The trial will be as punishing a spectacle as the verdict. Jackson' lifestyle is on trial.

But his is not the only future that will be determined by the trial. How many “experts” will build their careers on the media exposure? How many books and TV docu-dramas will result? There is a media multiplier effect built into this exercise. I am sure studio chiefs are asking if it has series potential in reruns.

Wouldn't it be more compelling if media outlets explored why our culture seems so addicted to celebrities and how we can put our collective need for such celebrities into perspective?

A year ago, CBS was paying Jackson for a prime-time concert while interviewing him for a “60 Minutes” show that was exploited to the max. He danced around the questions as well as the music on the stage. No one cared. CBS ratings soared.

Was it journalism or pandering or do we know the difference anymore? Writing on MarketWatch (just sold by CBS), Jon Friedman denounces the media exploitation that has already “flooded the zone” for the trial with 1,100 “journalists” – almost twice as many as were embedded in Iraq.

“Mind you, it's not as if any of their coverage on the trial actually broke any new ground (heaven forbid!). The media's real business is to maintain the panting pace as they keep Jackson in the news.”

Jackson is still good box office. That's why so many fans have turned up from as far away as Poland.

It's a media spectacular with newspapers and magazines competing for the best pictures and juiciest sleaze. The media are paying the county for the right to clog the roads with their microwave trucks. It's costing them a combined total of \$7,500 a day. If it goes six months or more, it could run into a million.

The Observer of London reports that the media have already paid \$36,000 to rent office and parking space in Santa Maria. Lawyer Michael Clayton is charging \$2,500 a day for six spaces on top of his roof, which can be used as vantage points for cameras, as well as \$500 a day to park.

Many of my media colleagues can't wait to get into the “action.” It beats covering storms and traffic jams.

If we were not living through a cycle of bigger news events like the tsunami, Iraq elections and State of the Union, newscasts would probably lead with the Gloved One. His bizarreness and internal family food fights almost guarantee that something (anything, really) will be deemed newsworthy.

As the trial moves into high gear, more wall-to-wall coverage is assured.

That may be good for the media bottom line, but is it good at a time of coverage of war and media consolidation?

Do we really have a need to know? Friedman nails it: “It’s junk-food TV at its worst, like subsisting on a diet of cotton candy. The TV networks can plead that the public demands all of the grisly details. But TV can show whatever it wants and people will follow.”