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By Howard Kurtz
Washington Post Staff Writer
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I swear I'm not making this up.

I had just finished reading a story about the media going overboard about missing young white women when I turned on the set and saw . . . a cable story about the missing young white woman in Aruba.

It does seem, tragically, that there's a seemingly endless supply of them, and that, equally tragically, television is addicted to them.

I've fulminated on this subject before, but I've got to say, when you look at which missing-persons stories get heavily covered (female, white, usually middle class) and those that don't, it's hard to avoid the conclusion that selective news judgment is at work.

If there's a logical explanation for this, I've yet to hear it. And after JonBenet Ramsey, Chandra Levy, Elizabeth Smart, Jennifer Wilbanks, Natalee Holloway, etc., the pattern is unmistakable. In fact, I tried to look for stories about Holloway for the past month and Nexis interrupted my search, saying it would return more than 1,000 documents.

Here's the USA Today piece by [Mark Memmott](#) that got me thinking anew about this:

"Tamika Huston's family reported her missing a year ago this week.

"When police in Spartanburg, S.C., began investigating the 24-year-old woman's disappearance, her loved ones swung into action. They distributed fliers, held news conferences and set up a Web site. Huston's story became a cause célèbre in the local media.

"Huston lived alone and obviously hadn't been home for days, if not a week or two. Her dog, Macy, had given birth to puppies.

"Rebkah Howard, Huston's aunt and a public relations professional in Miami, tried to get the national media interested in the case. 'I spent three weeks calling the cable networks, calling newspapers -- even yours,' Howard said this week.

"Not much happened.

"Last August, Fox News Channel's On the Record with Greta Van Susteren briefly noted Huston's disappearance. Fox network's America's Most Wanted did a story about the case in March (it will be repeated this Saturday). National Public Radio did a report last month that, like this story, focused on the lack of interest in Huston's case.

"Now, the disappearance of Alabama high school student Natalee Holloway, 18, in Aruba is getting lots of airtime on the cable news networks and morning news shows. Those networks, which drive such stories, are being asked a tough question: Do they care only about missing white women? . . .

"Tamika Huston is black."

Here are some useful statistics from an AP report:

"Most of the missing adults tracked by the FBI are men. More than one-in-five of those abducted or kidnapped are black. But you might not get that impression from the news media. . . .

"Television executives, who receive much of the criticism, defend their coverage. They stress that cases such as the recent disappearance in Aruba of 18-year-old Natalee Holloway of Alabama are extraordinary, and would be newsworthy no matter her background."

But: "'To be blunt, blond white chicks who go missing get covered and poor, black, Hispanic or other people of color who go missing do not get covered,' said Tom Rosenstiel, director of the Washington-based Project for Excellence in Journalism. 'You're more likely to get coverage if you're attractive than if you're not.' "

Memo to ugly people: Be extra careful.

WashPost columnist [Gene Robinson](#) has been deluged with e-mail since writing this piece on missing-women stories:

"A damsel must be white. This requirement is nonnegotiable. It helps if her frame is of dimensions that breathless cable television reporters can credibly describe as 'petite,' and it also helps if she's the kind of woman who wouldn't really mind being called 'petite,' a woman with a good deal of princess in her personality. She must be attractive -- also nonnegotiable. Her economic status should be middle class or higher, but an exception can be made in the case of wartime (see: Jessica Lynch). Put all this together, and you get 24-7 coverage."

Poll after poll brings bad news for Bush -- we're now at the point where only a good-news survey would be surprising. The latest numbers from the [New York Times](#):

"Increasingly pessimistic about Iraq and skeptical about President Bush's plan for Social Security, Americans are in a season of political discontent, giving Mr. Bush one of the lowest approval ratings of his presidency and even lower marks to Congress, according to the New York Times/CBS News Poll.

"Forty-two percent of the people responding to the poll said they approved of the way Mr. Bush was handling his job, a marked decline from his 51 percent rating after of the November election, when he embarked on an ambitious second term agenda led by the overhaul of Social Security. Sixteen months before the midterm elections, Congress fared even worse in the survey, with the approval of just 33 percent of the respondents, and 19 percent saying Congress shared their priorities.

"Despite months of presidential effort, the nationwide poll found the public is not rallying toward Mr. Bush's vision of a new Social Security that would allow younger workers to put part of their payroll taxes into private investment accounts. Two-thirds said they were uneasy about Mr. Bush's ability to make sound decisions on Social Security. Only 25 percent said they approved of the way Mr. Bush was handling Social Security, down slightly from what the poll found in March. . . .

"Still, Mr. Bush continued to have majority support for his handling of the war on terrorism -- 52 percent -- one of his strengths throughout his 2004 re-election campaign."

Fifty-two percent is not exactly overwhelming, though.

Oh, and 37 percent approve of Bush's handling of Iraq.

I hear the media playing taps on Social Security. The [Washington Post](#) began warming up the trumpet yesterday:

"With the Senate Finance Committee at an impasse on Social Security and House leaders anxious about moving forward, Republican congressional leaders have told the White House in recent days that it is time to look for an escape route."

Now the Wall Street Journal is playing a few more notes:

"Congress's Republican leaders, convinced they are staring into the jaws of defeat on overhauling Social Security, are scrambling for an alternative approach to President Bush's top domestic priority that would allow him -- and them -- to seize some measure of victory.

"In coming weeks, the separate efforts of Senate Finance Committee Chairman Charles Grassley and House Ways and Means Committee Chairman Bill Thomas will determine whether even that is possible, numerous Republicans say. What has become clear after months of meetings with Republicans on their respective panels, however, is that their packages won't include Mr. Bush's proposal for personal accounts carved from Social Security payroll taxes and may not meet his demand to keep the program solvent."

[Paul Janensch](#) of the Hartford Courant ties the scant coverage of the Downing Street Memo to certain other subjects:

"If you are unfamiliar with the memo, that's understandable because it received little attention in the American news media. The trial of Michael Jackson on child-molesting charges and the disappearance of a young Alabama woman in Aruba were considered more important. . . .

"Digging up information about the planning for the war is time-consuming and might draw the ire of the Bush administration. Stories about the trial of a pop star and the disappearance of a young woman on a Caribbean island are more dramatic, safer and a lot easier to do."

Slate's [Fred Kaplan](#) deconstructs the memo:

"When the scholars write the big tomes on this sordid saga, they'll want to base their findings on primary-source documents -- and here is one, flashing right before us. The Downing Street Memo will be a key footnote in the history books; it should have made front-page headlines in the daily broadsheets of history's first draft.

"In other respects, though, the memo doesn't make as strong a case against Bush as some have claimed. Read in conjunction with the six other British documents, the case weakens further. The memos do not show, for instance, that Bush simply invented the notion that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction or that Saddam posed a threat to the region. In fact, the memos reveal quite clearly that the top leaders in the U.S. and British governments genuinely believed their claims.

"For instance, at one point during the July 23 meeting, the British ministers are discussing some of the risks of going to war. Saddam might 'use his WMD on Kuwait,' one official cautions. 'Or on Israel,' adds

the defense secretary."

Salon's [Joe Conason](#) was the first major columnist to weigh in on May 6:

"Are Americans so jaded about the deceptions perpetrated by our own government to lead us into war in Iraq that we are no longer interested in fresh and damning evidence of those lies? Or are the editors and producers who oversee the American news industry simply too timid to report that proof on the evening broadcasts and front pages?"

[Now](#) Conason is charging a "press coverup."

[Harry Shearer](#) at HuffPost reacts to my Downing Street Memo piece yesterday:

"It's a sad litany of excuses Howard Kurtz pries out of the editors of mainstream newspapers as to why they gave the original Downing Street Memo such cursory, if any, attention. My favorite is Tim Russert's, who says he's learned that anything from the British press has to be vetted first. This is about a Times of London report, quoting, by name, the head of MI6, Richard Dearlove, issued during the height of the British election, at which point neither the Prime Minister nor any of his minions denies the authenticity of the published memo. Yeah, gotta do some heavy vetting.

"Why that and subsequent memos leaked out of Britain are, contrary to some of those editors' contentions, news is clear from the new batch published in the Los Angeles Times: in revisionist versions of the Iraq story, conservative opinionators now blame anti-war liberals for 'obsessing' about the issue of WMDs. But here is British foreign secretary Jack Straw in March of 2002:

" 'Colleagues know that Saddam and the Iraqi regime are bad,' he wrote. 'But we have a long way to go to convince them as to: The scale of the threat from Iraq, and why this has got worse recently; what distinguishes the Iraqi threat from that of e.g. Iran and North Korea so as to justify military action; the justification for any military action in terms of international law; and whether the consequences really would be a compliant, law-abiding replacement government.

" 'Regime change per se is no justification for military action; it could form part of the method of any strategy, but not a goal,' he said. 'Elimination of Iraq's WMD capacity has to be the goal.' "

Dick Durbin is getting whacked by conservative bloggers such as Opinion Journal's [James Taranto](#)

"Sen. Dick Durbin, an Illinois Democrat, took the Senate floor yesterday and likened American servicemen to Nazis."

Durbin read descriptions of abusive treatment of detainees and said: "If I read this to you and did not tell you that it was an FBI agent describing what Americans had done to prisoners in their control, you would most certainly believe this must have been done by Nazis, Soviets in their gulags, or some mad regime -- Pol Pot or others -- that had no concern for human beings. Sadly, that is not the case. This was the action of Americans in the treatment of their prisoners."

Says Taranto: "We are fighting an enemy that murdered 3,000 innocent people on American soil 3 1/2 years ago and would murder millions more if given the chance -- and according to Dick Durbin, our soldiers are the Nazis."

The [Washington Times](#) (which didn't see fit to front the Terri Schiavo autopsy, despite a zillion earlier

Page 1 pieces) goes with the headline "Durbin Rebuked on Floor of Senate":

"The Senate Armed Services Committee chairman yesterday accused Sen. Richard J. Durbin of insulting American soldiers with a 'grievous error in judgment' by comparing U.S. treatment of al Qaeda suspects to the crimes of Adolf Hitler, Josef Stalin and Pol Pot, and demanded that the Senate's No. 2 Democrat apologize.

"The rebuke followed a similar rebuke by the commander of the Veterans of Foreign Wars, who called Mr. Durbin 'totally out of line.' "

Such criticism has sparked a passionate pushback from liberals, such as [John Aravosis](#) of Americablog:

"What I warned about a few hours ago is now coming true. The far-right slime machine is going whole hog on Senator Durbin for, oh my, telling the truth about the deplorable things we have done to prisoners in Gitmo, in violation of every concept of decency our country once stood for.

"Apparently, the Republicans who dominate the party today, on the radio, online, and in the halls of Congress, think that the only good American is a Stalinist, a Nazi, a fascist, or any other brand of totalitarian thug who beats the crap out of innocents because he can, because we're Amurrikans, God damn it, and if we want to throw you in jail for an eternity, with no lawyer and no charges, and torture you until your head explodes and you go absolutely insane, that's our right. . . .

"That's the thinking and the mantra of today's brand of Republicans who run the party and run the right-wing noise machine. The law is irrelevant, the norms of humanity are irrelevant. With God on our side -- well, the Baptist fundamentalist God on our side, thank you -- they can do no wrong. The irony is, under the form of totalitarian lawless government these right-wing extremists would wish us have, many of them would be the first to disappear."

Looks like Michael Jackson still wants to party, according to the [LAT](#)

"To thank selected fans for their allegiance during his child-molestation trial, Michael Jackson and his family plan an invitation-only bash Saturday night at the Chumash Casino in Santa Ynez, Calif. -- although it is not clear if the self-described King of Pop will be on stage."

The [New York Post](#) has a very different lead:

"A judge yesterday ordered authorities to fork over Michael Jackson's passport and vowed to release every sealed document in the case, but the King of Pop still wants to know: Where's my porn?" The Gloved One wants his stuff back.

[Jeff Jarvis](#), the pied piper of downloading, continues his crusade:

"The BBC is wowed at 650,000 Beethoven downloads in a week. Repeat after me: John Stewart on Crossfire got 150,000 viewers on CNN but likely more than 10 million downloads. What's more powerful: The networks that Time Warner and the BBC own or the networks no one owns? Obvious lesson to all broadcasters: Let there be downloads. All the folks who are bragging about their streams would be blown away by floods of downloads. Distribution is so yesterday."

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