

Craig on TV? Not as funny as you'd think

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This started out as a joke.

The punchline was to be something like this: If disgraced former New York Gov. Eliot Spitzer can get himself a primetime slot on CNN, why can't disgraced former Idaho Sen. Larry Craig do the same, albeit on a statewide or regional network?

It's funny - until you talk to someone who knows television.

Then you'd hear about the curiosity factor. Spitzer was a political car wreck people couldn't avoid watching - the hard-charging governor was caught frequenting call girls and had to resign his office. Now CNN is pairing him with Pulitzer Prize-winning columnist Kathleen Parker, and the thinking is Spitzer's notoriety is just enough to lure viewers.

You'd hear about the new standard of celebrity. It no longer matters how you got famous. Just that you are. Think former Illinois Gov. Rod Blagojevich on "Celebrity Apprentice."

You'd learn how the standards of entertainment now apply to news.

It's an "extremely troubling precedent," former NBC News correspondent and Fox News host Eric Burns told the New York Times last month. "The most troubling aspect of it to me is that there is an example being set here; that one can be rewarded for vice as easily as virtue, if one gets enough attention."

Actually, vice may trump virtue. It's hard to imagine Spitzer getting this job had he completed his terms in Albany without scandal.

And you might also discover this apt Hunter S. Thompson quote: "The TV business is uglier than most things. It is normally perceived as some kind of cruel and shallow money trench through the heart of the journalism industry, a long plastic hallway where thieves and pimps run free and good men die like dogs, for no good reason."

Enter Craig, who pleaded guilty in a 2007 airport sex sting operation and then announced his "intent" to resign, only to renege and serve out his term through 2008. Thanks to Jay Leno and David Letterman, Craig may be the most famous elected official Idaho ever produced.

Without the scandal, Craig no doubt would still be in the Senate, but virtually unknown outside the Gem State for anything other than being a member of the Singing Senators.

Of course, landing in trouble is only part of the equation. Congressional hopeful Vaughn Ward, whose campaign imploded on charges of plagiarism, couldn't hold an audience. If he can't write his own material, he'd have trouble delivering on television.

Neither could former Boise Mayor Brent Coles, who six years ago pleaded guilty to corruption charges. He's not flashy enough for TV.

But once the curious look in on Craig's program, they might just stick around. They'd find someone whose four-decade political career taught him how to win and keep an audience. Craig could offer unique insights into current events, political figures and historical context. Presumably, he'd know whom to call and what questions to ask. The headline would be Craig's show, not his own receding past.

He's also just shameless enough to pull it off. Watch his performance on Jon Stewart's June 2 "Daily Show." Pure chutzpah. That's what you need to succeed on television these days.

"What matters is a name," Burns told the Times, "not how one gets the name." - M.T.