

Woody Allen, whales and a fickle public

It began simply enough. At the end of the evening news ran a human interest story, one of those touching reports network programmers are so fond of. This time it was about a small group of whales trapped inland by shifting ice and unable to reach open water.

But the sight of those majestic animals gasping for air through a tiny, man-made hole touched a nerve. Over the course of a few days, their plight made its way from the back of the newspaper and the tail end of the news to the front page and the top of the hour.

Rescuers flocked to the scene buoyed by emotional and financial support. International cooperatives were arranged between Americans and the Soviets. Ice-cutters raced against time to cut a path to freedom. All of this just to help whales that, some scientists noted, are not essential from an environmental standpoint for the survival of their species.

They are just three — now two — whales. Animals like them are needlessly slaughtered to the point of extinction by Icelandic and Soviet fishermen, among others. Environmental groups like Greenpeace have called for boycotts and other measures to slow the whale's slide into oblivion. But none of their entreaties have attracted as much support or attention as a few seconds of footage tacked onto the end of the evening news.

Is this disquieting? Are we a media-soaked audience able to be aroused only by the stories with the best footage? One *does* get the feeling that if Peter Jennings could show footage of a dark ominous deficit slowly gobbling up land, our national ire would be

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aroused about that impending tragedy as well.

But don't let opinion makers turn a relatively nice, innocuous event into a symbol of a fickle public. Rather, see in it the power of television.

In the Woody Allen film *Radio Days*, a pivotal emotional scene revolved around the plight of a little girl trapped down a well. The vast cast of characters and their attendant plots and subplots came to a virtual halt as everyone huddled around their radios, nervously following the futile attempts of rescue workers.

It nicely illuminated the movie's central idea: that the radio, like television today, could bring people together. That little girl and those whales aren't important in any objective sense. But it is their very lack of importance, their insignificance in the grand scheme of things, that draws us to them. They appeal to our humanity, and the fact that the attention of the world can be focused so resolutely reveals our humanity.

Michael Giltz is not a fascist pig. He is a conservative, which is close — but not quite — the same thing. He's also the 1988 winner of Rolling Stone's Write Stuff Contest (Entertainment Reporting category), with an entirely apolitical article on Philip Glass. Congratulations — Ed.