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To Interview Former P.O.W., CBS Dangles Stardom

By JIM RUTENBERG

The race to land the most sought-after interview of the war in Iraq intensified as soon as Pfc. Jessica D. Lynch arrived at the Walter Reed Army Medical Center in April, after her rescue from an Iraqi hospital.

Katie Couric of NBC News sent Private Lynch, now 20, a bundle of patriotic books, including Rudolph W. Giuliani's memoir, "Leadership." Diane Sawyer, of ABC News, sent a locket with a photograph of Private Lynch's family home in Palestine, W. Va.

But CBS News, in addition to the usual personal touches, exhibited an apparent new gambit in its pursuit of an exclusive interview with the newsmaker of the moment, known in the television business as "the get." In its letters to Private Lynch's family and officials at the medical center, obtained by The [New York Times](#), CBS News combined its pitch for a two-hour documentary with many other projects envisioned by the other divisions of its corporate parent, [Viacom](#).

In the process, CBS renewed concerns among critics about the independence of news divisions owned by media giants.

"Attached you will find the outlines of a proposal that includes ideas from CBS News, CBS Entertainment, MTV networks and Simon & Schuster publishers," Betsy West, a CBS News senior vice president, wrote to Private Lynch's military representatives. "From the distinguished reporting of CBS News to the youthful reach of MTV, we believe this is a unique combination of projects that will do justice to Jessica's inspiring story."

CBS Entertainment executives, the proposal said, "tell us this would be the highest priority for the CBS movie division, which specializes in inspirational stories of courage." Simon & Schuster, it said, "is extremely interested in discussing the possibilities for a book based on Jessica's journey from Palestine, West Virginia, to deep inside Iraq."

MTV Networks, the letter went on, was offering a news special, a chance for Private Lynch and her friends to be the co-hosts of an hourlong music video program on MTV2, and even a special edition of its hit program "Total Request Live" in her honor. "This special would include a concert performance in Palestine, West Va., by a current star act such as Ashanti, and perhaps Ja Rule," the proposal said.

Private Lynch was not the only recipient of such a proposal. Recently, the CBS newsmagazine "60 Minutes" fashioned a proposal for Aron Ralston, who was hiking in Utah and was forced to cut off his arm to free himself from a boulder. The CBS proposal asked to film his rehabilitation and offered to help him contact other Viacom divisions.

CBS's dangling of movie, television and book deals in front of potential interview subjects has troubled some media critics who worry that in an age of media conglomerates, where news operations coexist with their entertainment counterparts, journalistic independence can suffer in the race for synergy.

CBS News said there was nothing untoward in the way that it approached Private Lynch or Mr. Ralston. The Lynch proposal, for example, made clear that CBS News is independent from its corporate siblings, executives said. And there was no promise of a book or movie deal in return for an interview, only the expression of interest in her story from other Viacom divisions, they added. "We stand by this letter — there's no quid pro quo stated or implied," Ms. West said.

"We were led to believe that because of the media barrage of the Lynch family, it would be helpful to consolidate the various Viacom projects, including the CBS News proposal," Ms. West added. "We made it crystal clear that they were separate projects in no way linked."

But a Walter Reed medical center official who helped the Lynches sift through the media approaches did not find the distinctions as clear-cut as CBS news executives might have hoped.

"It looks confusing the way the letters are," said the official, Beverly Chidel, a hospital spokeswoman. "Someone may think, well, you're going to pay me for this, that and the other."

The CBS News proposal presents the latest development in the long, complicated history of "the get."

A good dose of charm has always been an important part of the media courtship and remains so. Typical of a friendly pitch, Jane Clayson, a CBS News correspondent, wrote a letter to Private Lynch in May reminding her that they shared the astrological sign of Taurus. "I hope you have a great day," said Ms. Clayson, referring to Private Lynch's birthday.

For years such niceties from a big-name anchor or correspondent with the right demeanor were enough to lure the newsmaker in front of a camera. But as larger entertainment conglomerates came to own news operations and declined to treat journalism as a loss leader, some long-observed boundaries have been blurred.

Television news divisions occasionally pay for video and other material like home movies from the subjects of their reporting, technically permitting them to maintain their no-payment-for-interviews policies. And NBC News rebuked a staff member last year for buying clothing for a young kidnap victim in Los Angeles who had agreed to an interview with the "Today" show.

A new wrinkle in the interview booking wars arrived with media consolidation in the 1990's. When the [Walt Disney Company](#) bought ABC in 1996, the network was suddenly connected to movie studios and a book division. CBS, purchased by Viacom several years later, is now connected to Simon & Schuster, the Paramount movie studios and various cable networks like MTV.

Every few months, producers at one network will accuse those at another of luring interview subjects with book or movie deals, with no proof. For instance, some of ABC's competitors were suspicious when the crew of miners rescued from a Pennsylvania coal mine last summer sold the book and movie rights to their story to Disney, after "Good Morning America" scored the first live interview with one of the miners.

Robert Lazar, an agent with International Creative Management, who was involved in the miners' negotiations with Disney, said the "Good Morning America" appearance had nothing to do with the Disney deal.

Phyllis McGrady, a senior vice president of ABC News, said she is not against helping an

interview subject connect with Disney's entertainment divisions if such a request is made. "If you were looking for a book deal," she said. "We have a publishing arm, Hyperion. I'll give you the name of the person there. But I could never, ever speak for Hyperion."

Likewise Bill Wheatley, vice president of NBC News, said his division avoids the sorts of proposals that CBS News put together for the Lynch interview.

"NBC News would certainly not be in the position of advancing projects by other divisions of the company," he said. "We don't want there to be confusion on this overall policy: that we don't pay for interviews."

CBS News executives said there should be no such confusion.

"We make no secret of the fact that we're part of Viacom," Ms. West said. "But the reputation of CBS News for fairness and independence is without question."

But Lawrence K. Grossman, a former president of NBC News who has criticized media consolidation, said, "If they didn't think it was a tie-in deal, why would they mention it in the first place?"

CBS News officials said that the Lynch proposal was unusual, born of the frenzy of offers bombarding the Lynches. But it was not the only time CBS News had raised other options within Viacom while trying to woo an interview subject.

"60 Minutes" did so in an e-mail message last month to a representative for Mr. Ralston.

After emphasizing that "60 Minutes" was the most-watched newsmagazine program, the letter went on to state: "We can put you in touch with CBS Entertainment should you be interested in pursuing a television movie; with Paramount Pictures should you want to explore any movie possibilities; and with Simon & Schuster should Aron be interested in writing a book about his experience. Those are all options for you to consider, and all things that we can help you with."

CBS News officials said that the letter flagged those entertainment possibilities in part because a lawyer and a spokesman for the family had inquired about them. The spokesman to whom the e-mail message was sent, Paul Poister — who was helping on a voluntary basis and is not representing the family now — would say only, "During the time when I was helping field media interview requests, part of that role that I voluntarily played was not soliciting or trying to set up any kind of book or movie arrangements."

The lawyer for the family, Ron Elberger, had no comment on the CBS News proposal, citing attorney-client privilege.

But in the Ralston case, as in the Lynch case, the consolidated proposal was not necessarily a helpful development.

"The struggle that we deal with in looking at some of these things is, news is news; news is not to be bought and sold," Larry Ralston, Aron Ralston's father, said in an interview. "But what's news and what's entertainment?"

A spokesman for the West Virginia Department of Military Affairs, Ron Coleman, said, "The Lynches have absolutely not concerned themselves with specifics of the offers. They just want to see their daughter getting better."

Still, the Lynches are expected to sign with an agent soon.

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