Pants fall; video of incident stirs debate on airing footage

By HOWARD KURTZ
Washington Post

WASHINGTON — Don Imus wanted to run the footage but couldn't get permission from his bosses at MSNBC. Fox News Channel aired the footage as an example of life's embarrassing moments. CNN refused to carry the footage on grounds of taste. C-SPAN edited out the footage — which it now says was a mistake — from the videotape that many Washington journalists were anguishing over. Wednesday involved the receiving line at Tuesday night's state dinner for South Korean President Kim Dae Jung. A renowned video artist, Nam June Paik, left his wheelchair, grabbed his walker and was shaking hands with President Clinton when his pants suddenly dropped to his ankles.

The embarrassing moment — compounded by the artist's lack of underwear — lasted more than 10 seconds until another Korean came to his aid. Clinton's expression did not change. (Fox resolved the question — to air or not to air — in the affirmative.)

"We digitized his face and private parts in order not to embarrass him," said Dennis Murray, executive producer of Fox News Channel, which used the footage on its "X-Press" morning show. "It was a jumping-off point for a discussion about your most embarrassing moments . . . We really went out of our way not to be tasteless."

But network executives later discussed the matter with Fox News President Roger Ailes, who said he was disappointed with the decision and would not have run the footage because it provided a laugh at a disabled person's expense.

Imus joked about the incident through much of his radio show, which is simulcast on MSNBC. "It doesn't get any better than this," he said. But his MSNBC producer refused to air the videotape.

Said Frank Sesno, CNN's Washington bureau chief: "This fellow apparently is the victim of a stroke. What happened to him is unfortunate and it serves no editorial purpose, other than voyeurism, to put that on television."

C-SPAN did not carry the state dinner live because Congress was still in session, but aired selected portions of the receiving line — not including the incident — at 3 a.m. "In retrospect, we should have aired the whole thing," said spokesman Rich Fahl. "It's not C-SPAN's style to edit anything. . . . A decision was made to protect this person, and that's not what C-SPAN is around to do."

A Washington Post story in Wednesday's Style section mentioned the incident in the second paragraph — "a disabled guest accidentally dropping his pants in the receiving line" — and provided further detail on an inside page.

"Confronted with a difficult deadline decision, the editors and reporters involved in this story made a choice that we regret," said Robert G. Kaiser, the Post's managing editor. He said the second paragraph "was utterly lacking in context or explanation," but that the later passage, "recording that this unusual thing occurred, explaining why it occurred and how, is absolutely appropriate. It's a freakish event . . . and a lot of important people saw it, and it should be noted."

The Post received several calls of complaint. But Jim Dickson, director of community affairs for the National Organization on Disability, did not fault the newspaper's coverage.

"Embarrassments happen any time you're in public life," he said. "But if anyone's pants fall down while shaking hands with the president, I can't imagine The Post not covering it. And I don't think we want special treatment as a disabled group."

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There is a beauty to my approach to life, you might say," Ms. Toll says. "In my art I was able to separate. It was my escape to a better world. I would turn every negative into a positive. If the peasants were hateful, in my pictures they were wonderful. I had scarlet fever; all my mother could do was put cold compresses on my head. In my paintings when a little girl is sick, a doctor comes to see her and she is visited by friends."

Where does the trick come from that enables one to do a reverse print of reality, throwing up pretty watercolors in yellows and reds when you are living in the colors of genocide and war?

Ms. Toll painted 64 watercolors in the 13 months she and her mother were hiding. (Six will be auctioned at Sotheby's next Friday.) All show scenes of a happy childhood.

Ms. Toll, who favors dangling earrings and has an accent evocative of borscht, is a welcoming, exuberant sort.

"I feel like I know you a million years," she says a little while after meeting, which actually is how people feel meeting her. An hour into lunch, understanding there is no need to ask, Ms. Toll has moved on to the war to scenes of seeming normalcy, of realities for the peasant girl who says to him, 'There will be a new drug.' I would turn everything into a positive. It's the peasants's fault, she says, because he comes after them in the night, the video artist.

A Dancer's Debut

MIKHAIL BARYSHNIKOV did something last night that he had never done before: He danced at a political event, a fund-raiser for PETER VALDONE, the City Council Speaker and a candidate for governor. "Peter Vallone has always worked hard for arts in New York City," Mr. Baryshnikov said, "and I'd like to see him continue this work for the state."

JAMES BARRON

with Phoebe Hoban