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HEADLINE: Stars shot down over Iraq

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BODY:

When the stars came out on Tuesday to protest the White House's inexorable march to war, most media shot them down. In a celebrity-obsessed culture, this speaks volumes about how dissent is a dirty word nowadays.

If even movie stars - the modern day equivalent of Olympian gods - must negotiate media minefields to get an anti-war word in, imagine how tough it is for less exalted citizens.

Tuesday, both CNN and MSNBC devoted no more than a minute to live coverage of the news conference held by Mike Farrell (Providence, M*A*S*H), Janeane Garofalo (The Larry Sanders Show), Martin Sheen (The West Wing) and about 100 other performers and military experts, including Kim Basinger, Matt Damon, Marg Helgenberger, Camryn Manheim, Chris Noth and Noah Wyle. They all signed a letter, titled "Win Without War," to coincide with the launch of a new coalition of organizations opposed to an unprovoked war with Iraq.

"We support rigorous U.N. weapons inspections to assure Iraq's effective disarmament," Farrell said, reading from the letter. "However, a pre-emptive military invasion of Iraq will ... increase human suffering, arouse animosity toward our country, increase the likelihood of terrorist attacks, damage the economy and undermine our moral standing in the world. It will make us less, not more, secure."

With few exceptions, notably the hometown Los Angeles Times, most major papers either downplayed the story, or killed it. It's not surprising the hawkish Wall Street Journal ignored it. But the usually star-struck USA Today?

At least the latter reported on the anti-war protests that were held on Tuesday throughout the U.S., as did most other American papers, as well as the Star and The Globe and Mail - but not the National Post.

However, most reports, both on TV and in print, focused on the dozens, if not hundreds, of arrests that took place on the very same day that White House mouthpiece Ari Fleischer said, "The president welcomes peaceful protests - it is a time-honoured tradition."

Just not at this time, apparently.

Well, I suppose proponents of the freedoms of assembly and expression should be grateful that the media paid some attention this time, unlike in October when at least 100,000 marched on Washington and got virtually no coverage at all.

Maybe the celebs, so used to getting attention, thought that their star power would win them media play. After all, think of all the hours of airtime and rivers of ink devoted lately to Winona Ryder's shoplifting dramas, Michael Jackson's spider bites, Paula Poundstone's child

custody battles, Whitney Houston's drug woes and Mariah Carey's mental health problems.

Then there's how, when stars have shows or CDs to sell, they get all the face time their synergistic media corporate masters would like, complete with fawning interviews and puffy hour-long biographies. Is there anybody on the planet who hasn't yet heard of Jennifer Lopez' fragrance, Glow, or her J.Lo line of girls' clothes?

But if any stars open their mouths against the administration, it's ready, aim and fire.

According to the L.A. Times, it got downright ugly at the news conference where reporters "grilled the stars with the intensity of the White House press corps."

The same attitude prevailed on the right-wing Fox News Network, according to media critic Danny Schechter. As he wrote on his blog (Web log) at www.mediachannel.org, "Pundit Monica Crowley, a big-mouthed blonde, was sitting stage right, natch, questioning what right they had to speak, since they don't have access to all the 'secret' data available to our president. I would assume she didn't either, but that didn't stop her tongue-lashing. She was so extreme, even the Foxophiles in residence had to defend free speech."

It was no better on CNN and MSNBC where Garofalo was subjected to hostile questioning by Stepford anchor Connie Chung and crankster Jerry Nachman.

When Garofalo said that the mainstream media were "guilty of under-reporting a vast and growing peace movement," Chung got defensive. And well she should.

It was worse over on the more liberal MSNBC where Nachman denounced celebrities for being idiots "whose knowledge of the subject seems to be informed by a bumper sticker and not much else." Garofalo, a stand-up comic, retorted with "I would say most people are guilty of that."

And so they are.

But considering the state of the mainstream media, most of which is beating the drums of war while pausing only to drum up publicity for celebrity wares, who can blame them?

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GRAPHIC: NICK UT/ AP Actor Hector Elizondo speaks during a news conference by actors Tuesday in Hollywood. The group, including Martin Sheen, left, and retired Rear Admiral Eugene Carroll, unveiled a letter to President George Bush urging a peaceful approach to disarming Iraq.

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