A quick scan through our Indians message board and one will see ... there's alot of angst amongst Indians fans right now who feel the national media is openly cheering for the Red Sox to come back and win this series. Gary Benz tackles the subject in his latest, and says that while FOX may prefer a Red Sox/Rockies World Series, he doubts the national media as a whole does. And as far as ratings go, Gary says they'll never get back to where they used to be. And that it's FOX's fault, not the participants.

As if Cleveland fans didn't have enough to worry about, up 3-1 in the American League Championship Series. Now we have to fight against the big bad "national media" and its blatant cheering for the Boston Red Sox to win this series.

It's a popular theory, repeated on these pages and elsewhere, that the "national media" has it in for Cleveland and would rather see the Red Sox in the World Series. But while oft repeated, it's done so without so much as a source or even a drip of logic. In fact, to the extent that this amorphous "national media" wants anyone to prevail, it's probably Cleveland. It's the better story.

Cleveland fans are notorious for seeing conspiracies where none truly exist. There may be hordes of people rooting against the Indians and for the Red Sox, but at best an Indians win is a nightmare for Red Sox Nation and the Fox Network, nothing more.

The "national media" is not some homogenous entity that moves with a collective conscious and even if it did, it could hardly care who wins what. Its interest first, last and always will be in a good story and on that score, an underdog team with the second longest streak of World Series futility is a far better read or listen than another victory by a high payroll team that got the World Series monkey off its back just a few years ago.

I'll concede, on the other hand, that there likely are certain executives at the Fox Network that may be wringing their hands a bit, but that hardly qualifies as a national consensus. Besides, these same network executives wring their hands at almost anything. It's what happens when you pay billions to televise sports and other crap and realize that it was a pretty lousy investment in the first place.

The Fox Network's woes in the ratings game are hardly a proxy for the concerns of the national media except as one of a billion angles to cover during the downtime between games. But a preference by Fox for a Boston World Series as the answer for ratings magic is more myth than reality, couched less in truth than in perception.

The truth is that the World Series ratings will suffer irrespective of the participants; something Fox probably realized when they signed their latest deal with Major League Baseball in 2006 at slightly less than the previous deal that first gave it the exclusive rights to the World Series.

It matters little, for example, if Boston, the seventh largest media market, has a direct stake in the game vs. Cleveland, the 17th largest market. Again, irrespective of the participants, the ratings have been trending downward since Fox took over in 2000. In fact, the last time that baseball had at least a 30 share, meaning at least 30% of the viewers watching television watched the games was, ironically, in 1995 with a 33 share. That translated into a 19.5 rating, or about 21 million viewers. That series, of course, featured the Indians and the Braves and was broadcast by both ABC and NBC.

But since that time, the ratings have trended downward to the point last year when the Detroit-St. Louis series got only a 17 share and a 10.1 rating or slightly more than half the viewers that watched the 1995 series. While that may be the all-time low, it wasn't much lower than 2005 which featured the Chicago White Sox, a team in the nation's third largest media market and a team also suffering Cleveland-like World Series futility.

In 2004, when the supposedly beloved Red Sox finally broke through, that series only had a 25 share, a 15.8 rating and about 17.3 million viewers. This is a full eight points and about four million viewers less than the Cleveland-Atlanta series in 1995 and, by the way, four points and about 1.1million viewers less than the Cleveland-Florida series in 1997.

The point, I think, is that if Fox is having problems with television ratings, it might want to start examining how it's doing business.

For example, why did the Tuesday night game not start until 8:20? Forget about the appeal to the kids who might want to stay up, what about the adults? Last time I looked, not only do kids have school in the morning, their parents have to go to work. And as romantic as it sounds to be able to party late and get up early, it's not such a fun or healthy thing to do on a regular basis.

This late starting times in the east is a question that's constantly raised and rarely satisfactorily answered by Fox. The usual response is that the networks want the games to start at a time when folks on the west

coast are coming home from work. Any earlier and they're still at work. That's true, of course, but hardly a compelling reason if you're looking strictly at ratings as your guide.

Of the top 10 media markets, only two are on the west coast-Los Angeles at number two and San Francisco at number six. The remaining eight are evenly split between the east and central time zones, meaning that the overwhelming majority of the viewers in the top 10 markets combined would be home from work if the games started at 7 p.m. in the east. The story isn't much different when you expand it to the top 20 or even the top 20 media markets.

Fox then compounds the problem by having extra long breaks at the half-inning. Certainly they need to sell extra time slots to pay for the broadcasts (witness, for example, the ever-lengthening and increasingly meaningless pre-game shows) and you can't begrudge them that point. But it's becoming a self-defeating proposition. The longer Fox waits to start the games and the longer they take to broadcast the games, the more likely they are to lose viewers, in which case the more commercials they'll need to sell to recoup their costs, meaning even longer broadcasts, and on and on.

And these are just the most obvious issues. What about the strange off-day while still in the same city? If someone can offer a coherent explanation as to why Fox has chosen to kill the momentum of the Cleveland/Boston series by inserting an off day on Wednesday with the series still in Cleveland, drop me an email. And if Fox really wants to get deep into self-analysis instead of opting for easy answers, then address the continuous mystery that is Tim McCarver.

Though there is much that Fox can control and doesn't, there are some things that are simply out of their reach. Baseball may be the great American pastime, but it's hardly the national sports obsession. That belongs to football. For comparison purposes, Fox's typical Sunday afternoon football broadcast garners a similar share and a nearly identical amount of viewers than its World Series broadcast did last year.

Another factor is that playoff baseball plays out like an extended cricket match. The Super Bowl is a one-time event, even if it comes around each year. Except perhaps for Game 7, none of the other games seem to capture much of the imagination of the casual fan even if the series can end sooner than that.

Just because Cleveland fans are paranoid doesn't mean that others aren't out to get them, but just not in this case. Whatever the concerns of Fox, it's really nothing personal, just business. What Fox knows but just doesn't say is that there really isn't a match-up that exists that is likely to ever return the ratings to what they were in the early 1990s, let alone the '80s or ‘70s. The landscape has simply changed too much.