Television Finds House Expert on New York's Neurosis

Jonathan Alpert has become the media's go-to guy for psychoanalyzing the city, from the Madoff scandal to 'sexual problems'

BY FELIX GILLETTE

On the morning of Sunday, Jan. 11, while many New Yorkers were looking around to find a place to watch the Giants-Eagles playoff game, NBC News correspondent Mike Taibbi was looking around to find someone to interview about the mind-set of the victims ripped off in Bernard Madoff's alleged $50 billion Ponzi scheme.

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NBC News correspondent Mike Taibbi was crashing a piece for that Sunday's *Nightly News* about the latest developments in the case against Mr. Madoff: Prosecutors were seeking to remove him from house arrest in his $7 million penthouse on East 64th Street to a Manhattan jail cell while he awaited trial.

Looking for an angle involving Mr. Madoff's victims, Mr. Taibbi did what a lot of people are doing on television these days: He turned to Jonathan Alpert, who had been quoted in an article in *The Daily Telegraph* about his work as a psychotherapist counseling some of said victims.

Shortly thereafter, at around 1:30 p.m. on Sunday afternoon, Mr. Taibbi met Mr. Alpert, in Herald Square, across from the Macy's on 34th Street. There, the 37-year-old therapist sat for a quick interview. That night, when Mr. Taibbi's piece aired on NBC, it included footage of Mr. Madoff wading through Manhattan paparazzi, followed by a quote from Mr. Alpert.

"My clients are feeling enormous hurt and pain when they see those images and a lot—a whole lot of anger," said Mr. Alpert.

Perfect. It was exactly what he had been looking for, Mr. Taibbi later told *The Observer*. "He did it on short notice, which is always what you need in television," Mr. Taibbi added.

While 2009 might be a historically grim era for car manufacturers, investment bankers and newspaper scribes, it's a go-go market for any media expert able to go on camera and speak convincingly about the psychic ills afflicting New Yorkers.

Mr. Alpert, who is emerging as Manhattan's most media-friendly psychotherapist, is keeping busy.

"Most therapists sway they do not want to go on TV or the radio because they're very concerned about privacy and confidentiality," said Mr. Alpert in a recent telephone interview. "Honestly, I think they're just not ballsy or creative enough to present themselves in a way that they can give valuable information while protecting a client."

Mr. Alpert, who graduated from Yeshiva University in 1997 with a master's degree in psychology, runs a private, goal-oriented practice located on 34th Street, where he treats the gamut of mental issues, including depression, addiction, phobias, sexual problems and professional anxieties.

Jonathan Alpert.

In his spare time, he writes an advice column for *Metro*; makes guest appearances on TV news networks; and works on developing his network of reporters, editors and producers.

"I have high-profile people that come to see me, whether it's a business leader or an actor or a judge, and I'm privy to their inner thinking," said Mr. Alpert. "Obviously, I have to protect people's identities, but it does really give me a unique view of what's going on."

Like any good media expert, Mr. Alpert is game to talk to reporters on just about any psychological condition that might be of interest to their readers or viewers. He has spoken to Geico Direct magazine about how drivers can overcome road rage. He's counseled *Ladies' Home Journal* on what to do when your husband's sports addiction is ruining your marriage. He's held forth on the Fox Business Network about the psychological dimensions of rice rationing. And he's talked to *The Star-Ledger* of New Jersey about the potential long-term ramifications of naming your kid "Dick."

But over the past year, he has become particularly adept at fielding questions about how New Yorkers are coping with the economic downturn.

Back in October, Mr. Alpert received a phone call from a reporter at the *New York Daily News* working on an article about sex addiction (thank you, David Duchovny!). Mr. Alpert told the *Daily News* that he had recently seen a spike in sex addiction among his patients who worked in finance. With Wall Street tanking, he explained, some of his banker clients were visiting massage parlors three or four times a week.

As it turned out, there's a robust market in television news for stories about down-on-their-luck Wall Street titans spending their precious remaining bucks on lunchtime hand jobs and strippers. In December, Mr. Alpert appeared on *CNN Newsroom*, where he elaborated on the trend. "I've had one patient tell me that he was spending at least $2,000 a week on this," said Mr. Alpert. "For someone who lost a job, that can be a significant amount of cash that digs into perhaps their mortgage payment or to pay for their child's schooling."

> **'There's just acute panic.'**
> —*Jonathan Alpert*

In early January, when reporters at *Crain's* were putting together a cover story, "Stress and the City," Mr. Alpert was there to speak about his practice's 10 percent bump in patients since Lehman's collapse. "People are coming in and mentioning wild scenarios, like they need to pull their kids out of private school, sell their condo and move in with their in-laws in the Midwest, and they haven't even lost their jobs yet," said Mr. Alpert. "There's just acute panic."

Mr. Alpert, who is unmarried and grew up in a Connecticut suburb east of Hartford, said his burgeoning second career as a public interpreter of New Yorker's private psychoses doesn't interfere with his day job. If anything, he says, working in the media has helped him refine his therapeutic delivery. "With TV, you don't get a whole lot of time and space," said Mr. Alpert. "Your advice has to be practical, direct and succinct."

Given the city's ongoing economic *Sturm und Drang*, the media's need for a quotable Manhattan therapist seems unlikely to flag anytime soon. Along the way, Mr. Alpert will continue to do his part to help TV producers—charged with cranking out countless "From Wall Street to Main Street" features—assure Americans in the heartland that while they are busy losing their houses, New Yorkers are busy losing their minds.

For his part, Mr. Taibbi of NBC said he'd be happy to work with Mr. Alpert again. "He's an inquisitive guy, who is an insightful observer of what's going on around him, and there's a lot going on around him," said Mr. Taibbi. "He's articulate. He's a good speaker on a range of topics. And he's good on TV."

And he's available on weekends.

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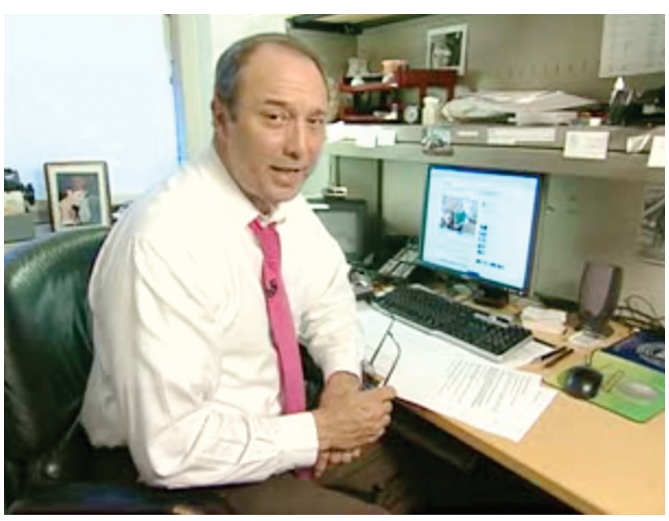

NBC News' Mike Taibbi.

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