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Local Television Journalism: Developing Ethics through Discussion

By Chris W. Allen, Jeremy H. Lipschultz, and Michael L. Hilt

Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to examine the views of local television news producers about ethical policies and situations they face. A majority of respondents agreed that it was important for a television newsroom to have a code of ethics or discussion of ethics in the newsroom. Most often producers perceived that their newsrooms were involved in discussions of fairness, balance, and objectivity; allocating air-time to opposing interest groups or political candidates; and, providing right of reply to criticism. Producers support a written code of ethics, or occasional discussion of ethics in the television newsroom, but see the competitive nature of local news and the current philosophy of the newsroom as a profit center as eroding ethical standards. Political orientation did not appear to make a difference. This study found that television news producers, who are often the final gatekeepers of the newscasts, want to maintain fairness, balance, and objectivity in the station's reporting of events. The producers feel the competitive pressures to relax ethical news standards, want to resist it, and see newsroom discussions as one means of defense.

Local television journalism is commonly criticized for its decision-making. Viewers often question the lengths to which television journalists will go in their reporting of news. Additionally, people sometimes claim that television newscasters are "biased," and that they let their politics get in the way of objectivity (Weaver & Wilhoit, 1991). The purpose of this paper is to examine the views of local television news producers about ethical policies and situations they face.

Literature Review

In recent years news media, and television in particular, have from time to time engaged in public self-examinations. Discussions of ethics have appeared on public television, in popular magazines such as *Time* and *Newsweek*, and on C-SPAN.

This concern over ethics and practices is nothing new. It was not long after the first journalism schools were established that articles about standards and practices began to appear. Cooper (1988) provided an excellent bibliography of early journalism studies. The pace has quickened in the past decade or so. Merrill (1985) found that journalists viewed ethics as adherence to a code of defined behavior, and equated ethical behavior to objective news coverage in his survey of reporters, editors and journalism educators. Mills (1989), in a qualitative study of newspaper journalists, found about the same. In a study of two newspapers that same year, Pritchard (1989) found that codes of ethics did not necessarily influence the decisions journalists make. The code of ethics "is one ingredient in a rich stew" (Pritchard, 1989, p. 940). He concluded that unwritten professional norms play a big role in the decision-making process, and that codes may only be symbolic. Wulfemeyer's 1990 study of news directors found that 40

percent had adopted codes of ethics for their newsrooms, and about 95 percent said they thought electronic journalists should follow the guidelines in those codes.

Anderson and Leigh (1992) conducted a similar study. Building on their previous study of newspaper managing editors, they surveyed television news directors about codes of ethics and practices in the newsroom. They found that 100 percent of the news directors believed journalists who worked for them should be made aware of codes of ethics. Just over a quarter of them had posted a code of ethics in the newsroom, but more than half said they distributed copies of a code to the staff. More encouraging, nearly 60 percent said they had held seminars or meetings with their staff to discuss ethics, and just over 60 percent had sent memos to the staff about a particular ethical situation. They concluded that concerns about ethics are likely to continue.

A number of authors have tried to meet that concern by writing journalism ethics books. A complete bibliography of texts is not the purpose of the paper, but a sampling is appropriate. Generally, the texts fall into two broad categories: those that define and argue for a system of ethics for the practice of journalism and discuss the philosophical foundations to reach it; and those that, after providing a basic education in the foundations of ethics and philosophy, go on to present case studies of ethical situations.

Among the former are Merrill, who has written several books on the subject. His *Philosophy of Journalism*, co-authored with Odell (1983) provides a complex examination of the roots of journalism ethics and the application of journalistic philosophy in broad categories facing the profession. More to the point is his *Journalism Ethics* (1997), but it is also a development and explanation of the ethical process, devoid of cases. Lambeth (1992) also brings together philosophies, journalistic realities and moral reasoning in developing what he calls five principles of journalism that combine the profession's ethics and social responsibility. Fink (1988) relates ethics to a variety of settings after providing the framework: the pursuit of news, the pursuit of profit, and media and society. Goodwin (1987) offers a chapter each on various topics in news ethics, and Rubin (1978) brings together a collection of essays on media ethics issues. Matelski (1991) includes an overview, evolution and philosophical foundation specifically for television news. One of the most recent is a collection of commentaries on ethical issues and an examination of the status of journalism ethics by Cohen and Elliott (1997).

Christians, like Merrill, has written several books about journalism ethics, and has staked out a place in both camps. His 1980 book, co-authored with Covert, examined the state of journalism in the United States. He concluded that the real challenge to the journalism profession lies in applied ethics. Another book, co-authored with Rotzoll and Fackler (1983), presented a series of cases and commentaries on them, after first providing the ethical overview and application of the Potter Box in resolving ethical questions. Day (1991) described journalism ethics in a number of topic areas, then provided cases and commentaries, as did Patterson and Wilkins (1991). And the tide is not receding: yet another book presenting the philosophical foundations before moving on to case studies is awaiting the nod from the publisher.

Yet despite the swell of books designed for the classroom, Lambeth (1992) reported that nearly 90 percent of reporters said day-to-day newsroom experiences was the greatest influence on the development of their ethics.

That, in fact, was what Weaver and Wilhoit (1991) found in their in-depth study of news people. Nearly 90 percent said that newsroom learning was the greatest source of influence on ethics, and only 53 percent said journalism school teachers were influential (135). In an earlier study, Meyer (1987) surveyed newspaper publishers, editors and reporters about the newsroom ethical culture, certain ethical dilemmas and the nature of discussions in the newsroom about ethics.

Weaver and Wilhoit (1991) asked similar questions in their study of journalists in all media. Although Wulfemeyer (1990), and Anderson and Leigh (1992) touch on similar questions, there has been no replication of Meyer's work for broadcast.

The interest in broadcast journalism ethics comes at a time when market forces are important. Research has identified the importance of consumerism in the organizational culture of broadcast newsrooms, and the relationship of consumer knowledge to ethics (McManus, 1994):

If news departments follow journalistic code of ethics, they pledge themselves to deliver accurate, fair accounts of significant current issues and events in a context that gives them meaning. The condition of informed purchase, therefore, requires assessment of at least three qualities of a newspaper or newscast: (1) that the accounts presented be accurate and fair to all sides; (2) that those events and issues the community ought to know about are chronicled; and (3) that enough context be reported to permit widespread comprehension (p. 64).

Unfortunately, in the case of local television news, a consumer-based approach more often has led to commercial pressures and "sensationalism" in the name of ratings (Kaniss, 1991, p. 46). While Kaniss acknowledged the importance of the late-night newscast and its emphasis on timely coverage of crimes, fires, and accidents, she ignores the role of the late-night producer in deciding the treatment of those news stories. In making those decisions, local television news producers encounter ethical issues on a daily basis.

This study attempts to replicate that part of the Meyer (1987) study dealing with newsroom ethics. Questions were taken from Meyer's original survey form. Where necessary they were adapted to a broadcast newsroom culture, but all attempts were made to keep the questions unaltered.

Research Questions

Research Question #1: In the view of television news producers, what elements are important in the practice of newsroom ethics?

Research Question #2: In the view of television news producers, how often are ethical situations discussed in television newsrooms?

Methodology

A national mail survey of local television news producers was conducted in Summer 1997. The research focused on a group of individuals responsible for the writing and editing of local late-night television newscasts. One station from each of the 211 television markets was randomly selected from the commercial stations listed in the 1997 Broadcasting & Cable Yearbook. The selected stations were called to identify the late-night news producer. Those producers were mailed a copy of the survey (Dillman, 1979; Babbie, 1992; Lipschultz & Hilt, 1993; Wimmer & Dominick, 1997). A second mailing of the survey was sent ten days after the initial wave. Ethics questions were one section of a larger study on television news producers.

Respondents were asked whether they agree or disagree with the following statements about ethics using a five-point Likert scale (1=strongly disagree; 5=strongly agree):

- It is important for a television newsroom to have a handbook with a code or discussion of ethics.
- A TV newsroom should be able to adjust its ethics according to the story.
- Pressure for ratings points is causing an erosion of ethical standards in TV news.

Respondents were also asked to estimate how often the following cases were discussed at their station. For these seventeen questions, a seven-point scale was used (1=never; 7=several times a week).

- Newsgathering methods using false identity, stolen document, concealed recording, eavesdropping.
- Protection of sources.
- Granting and preserving confidentiality.
- Disguising the nature of a source with a vested interest or otherwise withholding relevant information from the viewer.
- Invasion of privacy.
- Causing injury to feelings.
- Disclosing embarrassing private facts.
- Fairness, balance and objectivity.
- Allocating time to opposing interest groups or political candidates.
- Providing right of reply to criticism.
- Conflict of interest.
- Interest group activity by managers.
- Service on boards and committees.
- Campaign donations.
- Stories involving financial interests of station management.
- Spouse involvement.
- Suppression of news to protect the community, factory relocations, school closings, highway expansion, etc.

In order to replicate the Meyer study, frequency analysis was conducted. The television news producers also responded to a series of demographic questions.

Results

A total of 87 of 211 television news producers responded from across the country. This represented a response rate of 41.2 percent. The respondents came from the largest to the smallest television markets, and everything in between. The typical producer of the late-night television newscast in 1997 was a 29-year-old white (96.5 percent) female (59.3 percent) who had completed college (89.6 percent) with a journalism or mass communication degree (59.3 percent), and considered herself to be politically independent (39.5 percent) and middle-of-the-road (65.5 percent). She was as likely to be married (46.5 percent) as never having been married (44.2 percent).

Research question one asked what elements television news producers thought were important in the practice of newsroom ethics. A majority of respondents agreed that it was important for a television newsroom to have a code of ethics or discussion of ethics in the newsroom (82.8 percent).

Table 1: Adapted Meyer Questions Concerning TV Newsroom Ethics

	Strongly Disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Neutral (3)	Agree (4)	Strongly Agree (5)
It is important for a TV newsroom to have a code or discussion of ethics.	1.1	4.6	11.5	39.1	43.7
Pressure for ratings points is causing an erosion of ethical standards in TV news.	1.1	9.2	9.2	55.2	25.3
A TV newsroom should adjust its ethics according to the story.	23	37.9	12.6	17.2	8.0

However, a majority also see an erosion of ethical standards in television news caused by the pressure for ratings (80.5 percent). A majority of respondents disagreed that a TV newsroom should engage in situational ethics (60.9 percent).

Research question two asked television news producers to estimate how often ethical situations are discussed in newsrooms. Most often producers perceived that their newsrooms were involved in discussions of fairness, balance, and objectivity; allocating air-time to opposing interest groups or political candidates; and, providing right of reply to criticism.

Table 2: Adapted Meyer Situations concerning TV Newsroom Ethics Discussion

	NVR	>1/YR	1-2/YR	SEV/YR	1/MO	NEAR/WK	SEV/WK
Fairness, balance, objectivity (6.45)	0	0	3.4	1.1	9.2	18.4	66.7
Time to opposing groups (5.50)	0	4.6	4.6	14.9	12.6	36.8	25.3
Providing right of reply (4.93)	6.9	3.4	11.5	18.4	11.5	21.8	25.3
Confidentiality (4.79)	0	4.6	16.1	24.1	18.4	21.8	13.8
Protection of Source (4.43)	2.3	10.3	13.8	27.6	16.1	18.4	10.3
Causing injury to feelings (3.88)	9.2	14.9	18.4	18.4	16.1	13.8	6.9
Conflict of interest (3.78)	6.9	23.0	16.1	17.2	16.1	10.3	8.0
Disclosing embarrassing private facts (3.74)	9.2	19.5	11.5	25.3	20.7	5.7	6.9
Service on boards and committees (3.36)	11.5	21.8	16.1	23.0	17.2	5.7	1.1
Invasion of privacy (3.22)	20.7	12.6	21.8	21.8	10.3	8.0	2.3
Interest group activity by managers (3.17)	17.2	23.0	14.9	20.7	11.5	6.9	2.3
Withholding relevant info about a source from the	26.4	25.3	9.2	14.9	10.3	8.0	3.4

audience (2.95)							
Newsgathering methods - false identity, stolen documents, hidden recordings, eavesdropping (2.52)	34.5	21.8	17.2	11.5	9.2	4.6	0
Stories involving financial interests of station management (2.42)	32.2	27.6	19.5	6.9	8.0	1.1	2.3
Campaign donations (2.22)	43.7	20.7	11.5	16.1	5.7	1.1	0
Suppression of news to protect community, etc. (2.09)	51.7	18.4	10.3	11.5	5.7	1.1	1.1
Spouse Involvement (2.05)	40.2	31.0	18.4	1.1	0	4.6	1.1

Least often producers perceived that their newsrooms were involved in discussions of spouse involvement; suppression of news to protect the community; and, campaign donations.

Additionally, a series of post-hoc chi-square tests was performed, cross-tabulating political party affiliation and political stand with the seventeen ethical discussion items. A remaining concern was if the political affiliation of television news producers helped explain the perceptions about newsroom ethics. The answer is a resounding no. There were no statistically significant results in the cross-tabulation of political party or political stand with each of the seventeen ethical discussion items.

Discussion

The implications of these findings are important in terms of the development of ethical standards for television news, and the role discussion plays among newspeople in evaluating ethical situations. The results of research question one indicate that producers want to be ethical but find it increasingly difficult based on economics and ratings. Producers support a written code of ethics, or occasional discussion of ethics in the television newsroom, but see the competitive nature of local news and the current philosophy of the newsroom as a profit center as eroding ethical standards.

Most producers disagree with the idea that ethics should be adjusted according to the story. However, the interpretation of that response is difficult. One might take the view that producers see a code of ethics as a protection against situational decision-making. At the other extreme, it could simply mean that ethics is just talk. On this point, future research should examine the reasons why producers claim to be opposed to situational ethics.

The findings in Table 2 support the overall contention that "Objectivity is the defining norm of modern journalism" (Patterson, 1998, p. 21). It is also the same conclusion that Merrill (1985) and Mills (1989) found in their surveys of newspaper journalists. This study goes one step further, however, in detailing the issues most often raised in a television newsroom. Previous surveys asked journalists what ethical issues they thought were most important. This study indicates that issues of fairness, balance, and objectivity were the most frequently discussed. Future research may want to determine whether these discussions of ethical issues actually helped the newsroom maintain its ethical standards against the perceived threat of erosion. The producers' political orientation does not appear to make any difference in their views toward fairness, balance, and objectivity, and the frequency of those discussions in the newsroom.

As mentioned at the beginning of this research, local television journalism is commonly criticized for its decision-making. Viewers often question the lengths to which television journalists will go in their reporting of news. This study found that television news producers, who are often the final gatekeepers of the newscasts, want to maintain fairness, balance, and objectivity in the station's reporting of events. The producers feel the competitive pressures to relax ethical news standards, want to resist it, and see newsroom discussions as one means of defense.

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