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# Maintaining Credibility for TV News

By SIG MICKELSON

The recent case of Geraldo Rivera and his problem with WABC-TV's news department focuses attention again on the curious dilemma television news executives face in trying to maintain a reasonable degree of objectivity. They are confronted with the challenge of carrying off a respectable news coverage job in a medium which owes more of its heritage to show business than journalism and its very existence to a license granted by government. This is a sufficient challenge during a period of normal news flow but becomes an almost insuperable burden during the heat of a political campaign.

Mr. Rivera, a prize-winning reporter of the local New York scene, was recently discov-

*This is the first of a series of articles on television. The second article will appear in tomorrow's edition.*

ered by WABC-TV news executives to be campaigning openly and actively for Senator McGovern during his spare time. He was given, based on ABC's news policy which is virtually identical with similar policies of CBS and NBC, three options: (1) cease and desist (2) take a leave of absence for the duration of the campaign, or (3) resign. He chose the leave of absence and was restored to good standing on the ABC staff after the conclusion of the campaign. Former Yankee pitcher Jim Bouton was set down on similar grounds, but his position as a sportscaster was considerably less sensitive.

The existence of the policy and its enforcement are not particularly surprising. Political reporters for the national wire services, large city newspapers including The Wall Street Journal and the national news magazines would not be likely to take sides overtly in a political campaign, at least not with the approval of their managements. But Mr. Rivera is not a political correspondent. His specialty has been doing local features. The features have been hard hitting and frequently controversial but only tangentially political.

## Noisy Protests

As might be expected, the Rivera case stimulated a noisy protest from groups insisting that Mr. Rivera's rights and freedom as an individual had been interfered with, and equally vocal dissents from broadcast news executives contending that they had not only the right to set policies but the obligation under Federal Communications Commission regulations to maintain "fairness."

The protestors, led by the American Civil Liberties Union, argued that Mr. Rivera's civil rights were being denied, and that there was no evidence that his support for Sen. McGovern would influence his work at WABC-TV. Network executives countered by suggesting at least by implication that he had no constitutional rights to a job in television journalism and that his credibility, thus the credibility of the organization for which he worked, would be damaged by identification with a political cause.

This type of controversy is not new in broadcast journalism. CBS news discharged three newswriters in 1960 during the Castro controversy, which followed shortly after the '59 Cuban revolution, on grounds that they were actively and publicly assuming leadership roles in the pro-Castro movement in this country. Widely disseminated pamphlets bore their signatures. After examination of the potentially damaging effects on CBS's news credibility, a CBS policy statement prohibiting open support for a cause or a candidate was written at that time. ABC news cited its policy in dropping Lisa Howard in 1964 for campaigning in behalf of Sen. Kenneth Keating in his bid for re-election over Robert Kennedy.

The uncomfortable position of the broadcast news organization is magnified by the special nature of television's editorial pro-

cess. The television performer in news is much more clearly identifiable as a public figure or even as a show-business personality than his byline counterpart in print journalism. His success or failure is predicated in large part on his personal hold on his viewers. In that sense, his role is only slightly less dependent on public acclaim than the stars of entertainment programs. It is true that Shirley Maclaine, the Smothers Brothers, Sammy Davis Jr., John Wayne and a host of other Hollywood celebrities become deeply involved in election campaigns. But it is also true that their roles on the screen are make-believe. The news broadcaster, to the contrary, plays himself and deals in the most sensitive of commodities—actuality and reality—which are likewise the substance of politics.

There is, however, a more fundamental reason for television journalism's skittishness when faced with bias charges. It derives from the exceedingly complex process of gathering and editing news for television dissemination. A single editor or two or three editors at most, all from the top echelons of executive responsibility in a publishing organization, normally read all the copy that goes into a newspaper or a news magazine. They are well positioned consequently to exercise tight control over all the copy that ultimately appears in print. They are in a position to enforce policies and to insist on revision or re-writing as required to make a story conform to standards of objectivity and style.

The process in the broadcast news organizations, at least the larger ones, is vastly different. There, the individual reporter, producer, or camera crew must, because of the complicated mechanics involved, assume a much larger share of responsibility than the newspaper reporter. The assignment desk designates the story to be covered and the crew to cover it. It may furnish guidelines and it may request specific results, but from that point on, the creation of the package is in the hands of the crew to whom the assignment is given. Within the relatively broad framework of the assignment, the correspondent must determine what elements of the story make for good pictorial coverage, what sound (including interviews or narration) should be recorded, and what supplemental atmospheric footage should be added.

The story as it is returned to the newsroom is not wholly sacrosanct. The film can be cut and trimmed, offensive footage can be discarded, sequences can be shifted so the order of presentation is rearranged, and lead-outs and lead-ins can be written to add emphasis or soften impact. But the essence of the picture can't be changed. It leaves the transmitter and appears on the home screen exactly as it was caught by the camera lens. Essentially, the story is transmitted the way the reporter and camera crew visualized it. The options of the chief news executives are restricted to taking it essentially as it is, modifying it slightly, or discarding it. The editor can't hand it back to the copy desk or a re-write man for extensive repairs. The damage has been done in the field and the mistakes are frozen into film or tape.

There is one other major difference. The correspondent who covered the story in all likelihood appears as its narrator. He thus becomes closely identified with the event and could hardly have avoided putting some of his personal stamp on it as the story was constructed and shot in the field.

Even the method of scripting and editing contributes to the inflexibility of the television news operation. The script, in order to achieve any unity, must be tightly harnessed to the motion picture. Unlike the copy that goes across the top of the desk, which can be changed with the flick of a pencil, repair of a film story is a tedious and time consuming process and even then, genuine and substantial changes are much less likely than superficial modifications.

The central copy desk of the newspaper gives way to the isolation of the individual cutting room where film editor and writer work as a team constructing the package which will be delivered for air. The combination of geographical separation from other similar units, the complexities of blending script and film and the pressures of time, virtually rule out anything but casual supervision.

The net effect of the technical and mechanical problems of editing news for television is to throw much more responsibility into the hands of each member of the news organization and to loosen the grip of the executive in charge. A newspaper editor can gamble on an inexperienced reporter because damage can be repaired. A television news executive can't take equal risks. Not only does he have to have confidence in the skills of the man he sends to do the job, but he also has to have confidence in his integrity, objectivity, and knowledge of FCC regulations if he wishes to avoid falling into traps in the regulatory maze.

Add to that the show-business quality of television news, the tendency of the viewer to identify the correspondent with the events taking place, and television news reporting becomes a very sensitive business indeed. A Geraldo Rivera may be wholly competent. Even though he speaks for Sen. McGovern in his off hours, he may maintain complete objectivity while interviewing a Harlem junkie. At the same time, however, something may happen to his credibility and the credibility of the news organization for which he works, if his identification with the cause is too clear. On the other hand, if he has any tendency towards bias, or if his own attitudes are so pronounced that they would have a tendency to intrude in his reporting, the results are virtually uncontrollable because he is his own master in the field.

## Winds and Whims

Broadcasters have consistently been excessively sensitive. They have a tendency to run for the storm cellar before the winds start to blow. But they sit in the eye of a hurricane which all too frequently moves sufficiently to give them a sample of the force of the encircling winds. They are constantly subjected to the whims of a fickle public. They must adhere to the FCC "fairness" clause. Every three years they must lay their records on the line when they apply for license renewals. And they always live in fear of punitive legislation or other types of retaliatory action by government.

The Rivera case represents, in microcosm, the dilemma of the broadcaster. He wants to be objective, fair, courageous and interesting enough to attract an audience large enough to pay costs, yield a profit, and stay ahead of the opposition. At the same time, he has to live with the constraints imposed by regulation and licensing, and the even more burdensome complications involved in being a blend of journalism and show business weighted down by inflexible procedures required by the technology of his trade.

Having one of the stars of his team suffer an erosion of confidence because he is committed to a political cause, whether it is a winning or losing one, is enough to rip open the scar tissue from previous wounds. The only solution is to insulate television from capricious regulation or self-serving threats from governments in power but even then it is doubtful whether a reporter is serving his public if he overtly commits himself to a political cause. And he may do untold damage to the organizations for which he works.

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