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Maintaining Credibility for TV News

BY SIG MICKELSON

The recent controversy involving Mario Rivera and his problem with WABC-TV's management department focuses attention again on the curious dilemma that television news executives face in trying to maintain a degree of objectivity. They are confronted with the challenge of carrying off a responsible news coverage job in a medium which owes more of its nature to show business than to any other single field of activity. A distinguishing feature 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 discovered to have been working for the controversial but only tangentially political Liberty Union in an attempt to show business than journalism and its very existence to a license granted by governing bodies. This tends to show business than journalism and its very existence to a license granted by governing bodies. This tends to bring off a responsible news coverage job in a medium which owes more of its nature to show business than to any other single field of activity.

The uncomfortable position of the broadcast news organization is magnified by the peculiar nature of television's editorial process. The television performer in news is more clearly identifiable as a public figure or even as a public official than his byline counterpart in print journalism. His success or failure is predicated in part on the degree of public sympathy or adverse feeling which he can arouse among his reviewers. In that sense, his role is only slightly less dependent on public acclaim than the stars of show business. For example, if Ken MacMullen, the Smothers Brothers, Sammy Davis Jr., John Wayne and a host of other entertainers seem to be getting the public eye in election campaigns. But it is also true that their roles on the screen are made-believe. The news broadcaster, to the contrary, not only deals in the most sensitive of commodities—accuracy and reality—which are likewise the substance of politics.

There is, however, a more fundamental reason for television journalism's stickiness 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 of the executive structures in a publishing organization, normally read all the copy that goes into a newspaper or a news magazine. They are well positioned to have an overall executive control over all the copy that ultimately appears in print. They are in a position to enforce policies and guidelines. They are capable of writing as required to make a story conform to standards of objectivity and style.

The process in the broadcast news organization, at least in the United States, is radically different. There, the individual reporter, producer, or camera crew must, because of the complicated chain of events and the extraordinary amount of news, take responsibility for maintaining the highest possible standards. The reporter in the field, in fact, is the one who is most sensitive. They are constantly subjected to pressure 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 under cover, and the fact that some of the nation's most sensitive people are often involved in television news reporting, becomes a very sensitive business indeed. A Geraldo Rivera may be wholly competent. But when he speaks for Sen. McGovern, outside of his regular news discharge time, he may lose his credibility. At the same time, however, the audience may have a tendency to take his bias to heart, thus negatively affecting the credibility of the news organization for which he works, if his identification with the cause is too clear.

One on hand, if he has any tendency towards bias, or if his own attitudes are so pronounced that they would have 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 center before the winds start. They seem to be in the position of an old man who, while frozen into a position, can't hand it back to the copy desk or a rewrite man for extensive rewrite. The damage has been done in the field and the mistakes are frozen into tape.

There is one other major difference. The correspondent who covered the story in the local paper probably has not sold it before the byline staff. He had the right to set policies but the obligation under Federal Communications Commission regulations to maintain the truth. The correspondent, 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 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 news. CBS news charged three newsmen in 1960 during the Castro controversy, which followed shortly after the Cuban revolution, with using their positions on grounds that they had no constitutional right to a job in television journalism and that their credibility, thus the credibility of the organization for which they worked, would be damaged by identification with a political cause.

The central copy desk of the newspaper gives way to the production department where film editor and writer work as a team constructing the package which will be delivered for air. The combination of 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 a 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.

Mr. Mickelson, former president of CBS News, is Professor of Journalism at Northwestern University. He was recently named director of the Politics-Media Project of the Aspen Program on Communications and Society.