Broadcasting Operation Iraqi Freedom: The People Behind Cable News Ethics, Decisions, and Gender Differences

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ABSTRACT. In March 2003, President Bush declared the start of Operation Iraqi Freedom, the anticipated commencement of intensive American-led military operations in Iraq. With this declaration, the media began intense coverage of military operations from the field. For the first time, viewers were able to see images of actual events. This was due to three developments: the advancement of technology allowing immediate transmission of text and images, the actual presence of journalists identified as “embedded journalists” at military sites, and the fierce competition among networks for viewers. One result of this constant coverage was significant pressure on decision makers within the television and cable news networks to decide within a matter of seconds which images to air. Though the radio and broadcasting industry has a published code of standards, it is “general and advisory rather than specific and restrictive.” Therefore, it did not address the unique time sensitive decision-making required within this new environment. Issues such as the security of soldiers, confidentiality of troop maneuvers, and the safety of the embedded journalists were critically important. Equally serious were the concerns about the impact of the immediate airing of information and violent images to the public. This research used Patrick Primeaux’s ‘mind–heart–soul’ model of decision-making as its theoretical framework. The study investigated the gender and industry experience of selected professionals in a cable news network, MSNBC, to explore how ethical codes of behavior are integrated when people make decisions. Decision-making in both their professional and personal lives was examined. It is from this perspective that their professional decisions to air/not to air material from Operation Iraqi Freedom were studied. The findings on decisions about airing/not airing material from Operation Iraqi Freedom yielded both expected and unexpected results. There was no clear gender difference regarding ethical decision-making, but there was a difference when analyzed by industry experience. When the study focused on questions regarding the respondents’ personal lives, the original hypothesis that there was a gender difference was validated.

KEY WORDS: ethics, decision-making, gender differences, broadcast media, Operation Iraqi Freedom

Introduction

When a major news event occurs, it is a common practice for TV/Cable audiences to stay either with one station or switch between channels of respected news stations and, by and large, get a comprehensive view of the event. Those stations with personnel and equipment actually in the field have the best capability of bringing immediate events to their audiences. However, given current technology, even those stations without active personnel can also very quickly bring breaking news to their audiences. Thus, while audiences may be served by any number of stations, this ability to bring breaking news to audiences is critical to the success of a station and a specific show. Viewership leads to station and show ratings, which, in turn, lead to financial success, via increased program sponsorship or advertisements.

This research examines the issues of gender, ethics and decision-making as demonstrated by selected professionals at a cable news network. It studies their decision-making processes to determine if there is an ethical difference between men and women. Both males and females identified as having decision-making responsibility within a cable news network were interviewed. A structured set of questions was employed and the responses were used to identify the processes they employ in applying both personal and organizational ethics to their decisions.
In 2003 the outbreak of the war in Iraq and the subsequent media coverage of the news presented significant opportunities and raised new and possibly provocative questions for the media. A number of television producers needed to make instantaneous decisions about showing actual images from the U.S.-led war with Iraq. It was the first time that journalists were allowed to be right in the middle of the troops in a time of war. These journalists gave rise to a new term, that of “embedded” journalists. With the advancement of technology, viewers sitting in their living rooms in the United States could see journalists and troops in the line of duty live from Iraq.

Journalists were given strict orders that they were not allowed to report on certain details of their location or on anything that would jeopardize the safety of the troops. Actually, there were a few incidents where journalists crossed that line or got close to crossing that line, in terms of divulging too much information over live airwaves. Generally, in these cases, action was taken to ensure lapses would not be repeated.

Two issues came into play: the need to “break” a story and the need to guard the safety of the troops. In the media business, a sign of great reporting and a way to build strong professional reputations is to report facts accurately and get the story on the air swiftly. Speed is critical. Every network wants to be the first to break a story or show new or exclusive images to their viewers. This is valuable in securing viewer loyalty. It is also very important that a network be fair and accurate.

During this war, journalists, producers and management personnel were put in uniquely challenging situations. They needed to decide within seconds what was acceptable to show to the American public. Most importantly, they needed to make sure that nothing they broadcast would threaten the security of the troops in any way. With the new ability of newscasters to broadcast from their active military field positions, there was increased concern by the networks about the safety of these non-military “embedded” personnel. Executive Producer Mark Lukasiewicz wrote in an NBC company wide email, “please remember that the safety and security of our many colleagues in the war zone is our highest priority” (Kusnetz et al., 2003, p. 30).

Suggested principles of the broadcasting industry are stated in the “Statement of Principles of Radio and Television Broadcasters.” These provide guidelines about program content including what is too violent or too gruesome to air. Though television broadcast professionals are trained in company policies, final decisions are a reflection of not only these policies, but also of the professionals themselves and their ethical standards. “We think, speak, and act accommodating our own interests and concerns to the immediate demands of that situation, or bracketing them to focus attention on meeting the demand of job descriptions, the requirements of maintaining employment, or the prerequisites for advancing up the corporate ladder” (Primeaux, 2000, p. 48).

Background of the study

Though the challenge of accurately reporting about the war is only one example, broadcasters come in daily contact with stories and situations where an ethical conflict arises. These professionals need to make important decisions that can affect millions of people due to the fact that their viewers generally trust them to report truthful and accurate information. An example of widespread concern from viewers about the accuracy of information was seen in the pre- and post-presidential election coverage of 2004. The CBS network broadcasted a story about President Bush’s military records and the accuracy of this report was subsequently questioned with significant debate and discussion broadcast nationally.

There are many advocacy groups that fight for change in the broadcasting industry. Some may want less violence shown or some may think that certain news programs are biased. The meaning of a free press in a free society leaves a great many decisions up to the judgements of managers. For this reason, it is very important to look at how some employees in decision-making positions arrived at their decisions.

Prior to the beginning of this study in Fall 2003, the mass media was broadcasting allegations about top-level executives involved in or making highly unethical decisions. One of the researchers was involved professionally in the production of cable news programs where references to these allegations were made. In viewing the stories covered by the