Best Practices for Television Journalists

A handbook for reporters, producers, videographers, news directors and other broadcast professionals on how to be fair to the public

By Av Westin

For The Freedom Forum's Free Press/Fair Press Project

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About the author

Av Westin began his career in broadcast journalism at CBS News in 1949. He later served at ABC News as executive producer of the "ABC Evening News," as vice president and director of television documentaries and as vice president for program development. Westin left ABC in 1987 to become senior vice president and executive producer for King World, where he redirected the editorial and production content of the syndicated newsmagazine "Inside Edition." After three years, Westin transferred to Time Telepictures Television as the senior vice president and executive producer.

Introduction

By Robert H. Giles, senior vice president, The Freedom Forum

What's fair? That's an old question for journalists, one that has always been hard to answer. In spite of the enormous changes in the techniques of gathering news and the technology used to distribute it, the question remains: What's fair?

What fairness means to television journalists and what it means to viewers differs significantly. The public defines fairness more broadly. Its expectations of fairness in the professional behavior of journalists and in the editing practices of their news broadcasts frame its opinion about the credibility of television news.

Journalists are inclined to think the public is upset about such mega-phenomena as a "liberal" political and ideological bias in the news media. Journalists also tend to rationalize public concerns as being influenced by multiple factors: a diminished interest in serious news, a broad decline in trust and respect for most major institutions in society, the commercialization of news, the blurring of the line between journalism and entertainment/gossip, the corporatization of the news media, and the fascination of younger people with the Internet.

Each of these perceptions looms large and, consequently, it is convenient for the press to become resigned to them as contemporary realities about which little can be done.

But when The Freedom Forum met with members of the public in communities across the country and asked them to say what bothered them about the news media, they told a different story. They spoke compellingly of their experiences with television news and their observations about the behavior of journalists. Their comments evoked a sense of belief in the press as an important institution in our democracy, but they were unsparing in expressing concerns about basic journalistic practices they regard as unfair:

- Television news gets too much too wrong too often; it is not factually accurate often enough.
- National networks and local news stations are unwilling to correct mistakes fully, candidly, prominently, promptly and gracefully.
- TV news is biased — not a liberal bias but a negative one. There is too much focus on what is wrong and what is in conflict, and not enough on reporting and explaining what is working and succeeding. There is too much focus on the "failures" of the system and not enough on the "victories" of life and the

people who live in our communities.

- The public respects the professional and technical skills journalists bring to their craft, but it fears journalists don't have an authoritative understanding of the complicated world they must explain to the public.
- Journalists are seen as arrogant and elitist. Too often they convey an attitude that "we are better than you."
- Television news broadcasts are too inclined to jump to conclusions too soon about where truth lies and are unwilling to challenge their initial take on stories.
- Broadcast journalism does not reflect the entire community fully and fairly. Specifically, the public is concerned that progress in coverage of minority communities is leveling off, and — because there are not enough journalists of color on staff or in leadership positions — stories are not sufficiently attuned to cultural differences and nuances in an increasingly diverse society.

We think the problem of fairness in the nation's network and local news broadcasts may threaten not only the future commercial viability of television news as trusted conveyors of news, but it also may weaken public support for the First Amendment.

Yet the concerns we heard, both from viewers and from public figures who have been the subject of news stories, led us to conclude that they can be corrected. It was this conviction that framed the compilation of this handbook of best practices for television journalists.

As Av Westin, the handbook's author, discovered, many television news organizations have examined their journalistic practices and have devised effective solutions that embrace both the spirit of fairness and the values of good journalism. Many of these best practices are described in this handbook.

One additional discovery we made in talking with television viewers: The public is willing to listen, willing to give credit when it sees good or improved practices, and willing to change its mind when the news broadcast explains what it is trying to do and why.

Our purpose in putting this handbook of best practices in your hands is to encourage you to read it, talk about it, use it.

Our ultimate goal is journalism that is both free and fair. With this handbook we hope to encourage practices that the public will see as being fair, thereby helping assure that television news gathering remains free.

Foreword

How we got where we are

By Av Westin, former vice president, ABC News

In the beginning, in the days of Bill Paley and Frank Stanton at CBS, David Sarnoff and Bob Kintner at NBC, and Leonard Goldenson at ABC, a television news department often was described as the "jewel in the crown" of the network.

To measure how different TV news is today compared to its earlier days, read the introduction to the *CBS News Standards and Practices* manual from 1976. Richard Salant, then president of CBS News, wrote the opening paragraphs of the manual, which for many years was recognized in the industry as the "bible" of television news and public affairs. In part, Salant wrote: "It is particularly important that we recognize that we are not in show business and should not use any of the dramatic licenses … or the underscoring and the punctuation which entertainment and fiction may and do properly use. This may make us a little less interesting to some, but that is the price we pay for dealing with facts and truth, which may often be duller and with more loose ends than fiction and drama."

In those days, money was allocated for news coverage because top management believed it was the right thing to do. It was not unusual for budgets to be augmented and for regularly scheduled programming to be interrupted if special events required more funding or more air time. News was a "loss leader," bringing prestige but little or no monetary profit.

Use of the airwaves, regarded as the public's property, was granted in the form of licenses to station owners. Local stations — perhaps goaded by Federal Communications Commission regulations requiring fair and balanced coverage of issues of public importance — offered newscasts and "public affairs" programming. There is still a residue of that era among older members of the broadcast industry's executive corps.

In the early days, few stations' news operations made a profit. Some broke even; many lost money. That was part of the cost of being in the news business.

In 1970, things changed dramatically because of events at KCAU-TV in Sioux City, Iowa. KCAU-TV was affiliated with the ABC television network, laughingly regarded in those days as fourth in a three-network race. If a network is No. 1 in the ratings, its local affiliates usually are strong in their markets; if the network is No. 3, the local stations also find their standing sagging. Even though ABC's prime-time schedule was a distant third behind CBS and NBC, the news programs at KCAU-TV were so widely

watched in Sioux City that the overall station ratings remained respectable all night long. The quality of the news operation had developed viewer loyalty, which produced a ratings miracle.

The message from KCAU-TV was not lost on other stations. All across the country in the early 1970s, the light bulb went on over the collective heads of station executives. If local news was strong, a station's overall ratings could be strong and local commercial time would sell for higher prices.

At first, as money-saving technological improvements came along (videotape, microwave transmission, satellite feeds), management invested most of the savings in more equipment and larger staffs. The rationale was simple: Better news programming meant higher ratings, which meant increased revenue.

But gradually, television news became the business of television news. Financial considerations like the bottom line and profit margins began to edge their way toward becoming the paramount elements in decision-making, instead of good journalism. That change in priorities affected several areas: staff levels, the amount of air time to be filled each day by the news department, and ratings. Any desire by station management for good will or prestige became secondary to the desire for more revenue.

Then the question became how to increase ratings. The answer: Make sure that what was supplied was what viewers wanted to watch. Sensational stories of local concern including crime and scandal began to outweigh the attraction of "real" news as presented by the network newscasts. By contrast, the network news programs came to be perceived as more complex and less interesting, even when they dealt with important developments.

The "tabloidization" of news did not occur overnight. It evolved. Its roots are traceable as far back as 1964, when network news was redefined by a doubling of its nightly air time from 15 minutes to a half-hour. Local news expanded similarly, first to a half-hour, then to an hour and eventually to three-hour blocks in some cities. As producers looked for material to fill the programs, they discovered a growing demand for stories rooted in gossip, crime and glamour, and the trend toward "pop news" accelerated.

Next, taking a name and an editorial cue from the gossip-laden tabloid newspapers, syndicated "tabloid television" shows were created. They pursued celebrities and murderers with equal vigor, and unlike conventional news programs, they were more than willing to pay for access to stories. Titillation meant ratings, and even staid network news executives began covering stories that previously had been ignored. It can be argued that the proliferation of newsmagazines in prime time, competing against cop shows and hospital dramas, forced the news divisions to focus more on ratings and production values than on substantial journalism. This led to lowered standards in news judgment and started the spiral of "dumbing down" the news.

There is another factor in producing fair, accurate and balanced news: the news judgment and perspective of the people who produce it. The responsibility for credibility — for fairness, balance and accuracy — is in the hands of the generation of broadcast journalists now assuming command. These men and women have grown up with different standards than their predecessors. Quality is decreasing because many "new generation" television managers lack the eye for detail and the seasoning

that once gave stories extra depth and sensitivity. This lack of perspective, coupled with a smaller budget and a shorter deadline, allows much substandard content to make it on the air on a regular basis.

As a result, the audience has become accustomed to shoddy reporting to the point that the average viewer does not necessarily expect quality journalism and probably could not discern the difference between a well-produced story and a below-average one. The sad truth is that because the mass audience cannot perceive this difference, management is reluctant to spend more money to improve the product. The perceptive audience is the older generation of the past. The ratings, and the money, are with the younger and less-discerning generation of the future. One producer told us that her station had doubled the amount of air time yet had cut the news staff by a third.

The new leaders who are taking over at network and local newsrooms are part of a generation that was raised watching television. Their thought processes and attention spans have been shaped not by ideas themselves but by the way those ideas were presented *on television.* Shorter is better. Imagery is as important as substance. And because so much of the information this generation has absorbed came *from television*, it has little interest in, or inquisitiveness about, anything beyond what it has seen on the tube.

In some cases, today's television producers, reporters and managers have no interests besides television news itself. It has been argued that if today's television professionals spent less time being obsessed with "producing television" and more time having lives in their communities, they would plug into a whole new world of subject matter for their newscasts. In response, very few news directors have urged their employees to become more actively involved in real-life activities, even to the point of avoiding social engagements with their office colleagues. Presumably, the broader perspective those individuals gain from such an approach increases the quality and humanity of their broadcasts and gains audience by reflecting actual needs.

An important question remains to be answered: Even if every reporter turns in a balanced story, if every producer gives equal time in a broadcast to diverse viewpoints, and if every executive bases his or her programming decisions on substance and relevance instead of style and ratings points, how long will it take before viewers once again trust what they see on the news?

This handbook is the first step toward rebuilding that trust.

Executive summary

This handbook of best practices for broadcast journalists is designed to be a ready reference for news executives. It's meant to help when they are under the gun for quick decision making — trying to solve problems in news gathering and presentation while maintaining standards of fairness, accuracy and balance. In the real world of television news, credibility is the fundamental attribute of a news organization.

Reader, take heart! You are not the first person to face tough calls. Your colleagues in other newsrooms have faced similar, perhaps even identical, challenges. The best practices in this handbook have been field-tested by your peers. They were developed from extensive interviews with broadcast professionals at networks and local stations at all levels, from researchers to reporters, from producers to top executives and news directors, from librarians to camera operators and videotape editors across the United States.

To supplement the best practices, we have included many "sound bites" drawn from those interviews. In broadcast journalism, the sound bite is, of course, a distinctive part of the newsroom culture — a familiar device that finds daily application in news reporting. Adding sound bites from some of the leading minds in television news is intended to make this handbook more useful, not only in television newsrooms but also in classrooms where broadcasting is taught. In effect, this is a direct line of communication between people in the field and you.

In this handbook, many of the sound bites state the problems that television news professionals have experienced. These sound bites emerged from the personal recollections of news professionals who are deeply concerned about what they see happening in broadcast news. The people interviewed also were asked to describe what steps they had taken to cope with the identified problems. We have refined many of these observations and suggestions as best practices. They are the conclusions of men and women who are trying to maintain standards while doing their jobs.

There is no direct attribution in this handbook, an arrangement that assured maximum candor from each of the television news executives and journalists we interviewed. This reflects a standard practice on television news programs in which the subject's identity is disguised or hidden to enable important and revealing information to be broadcast without putting life or livelihood at risk. The names of the individuals interviewed for best practices as well as sound bites are listed in the Appendix.

Here are some highlights of what you will find in this handbook, chapter by chapter:

1. Journalist by training, teacher by example and protector of news values, the news director shapes coverage day by day. It is her or his responsibility to set the tone for fairness, accuracy and balance in the newsroom. Knowing when and how to hold meetings is essential. Building staff consciousness about ethics is equally important.
2. Editorial competence is not always the top priority in filling staff vacancies. Good looks and on-air performance often trump reportorial skills. But hiring based on journalistic values and potential abilities can be the rule. It is also incumbent on news executives to build racial and ethnic balance into today's news staffs.
3. Preconceived notions about race and ethnicity and a lack of racial sensitivity can influence story selection and content. This problem is at the heart of fair and balanced presentation of television news. Mature judgments need to be made on everything from assigning stories to deciding what file footage to use. Some new ideas can help bring about balanced news reports, including the creation of a "rainbow Rolodex" and the formation of an in-house Diversity Council.
4. Research and fact checking are fundamental practices that help ensure a fair, accurate and balanced script. For routine stories, this means preparing the crew going into the field so that they have an authoritative understanding of the subject. On longer pieces, it means providing background in greater depth and range.
5. Investigative reporting has become a flash point for viewers concerned about fairness in TV news. Although thought by many people to be unfair, hidden cameras in certain circumstances can serve the public interest. The challenge is knowing when and how to use them. Several basic best practices can help newsrooms make the right call.
6. The on-camera interview is essential to providing a fair and undistorted version of events. What the audience sees and hears obviously should reflect the substance and the tenor of the interview, which requires careful editing.
7. News sources often are reluctant to be interviewed or captured on videotape. In their zeal to overcome these objections and get the story, broadcast journalists create the impression of news sources' being deceptive or devious. There are best practices to help researchers, reporters and producers get what they need without breaking the rules of good taste.
8. News executives have the responsibility for knowing when to seek legal advice and how and whether to follow it. The first best practice is, know when to consult your company's lawyer.
9. Getting a newscast ready to go on the air is a demanding task, driven by competitive urgencies and the crush of time. Best practices can help keep good news values in focus. Reporters and producers must resist hyperbole. Obtaining more than one source, even under time pressure, is essential. Being accurate and fair to all sides while covering controversial issues should be rule No. 1.
10. Sweeps madness prevails, despite efforts to change the system. Nevertheless, there are best practices to maintain news standards against front-office pres-

sures to hype coverage for higher ratings. Careful planning and solid reporting can improve coverage and image during the sweeps months.

11. Technology has made the "live shot" a staple of television news, but exercising editorial control to ensure high standards is a demanding task for which there are best practices to be considered.
12. The use of helicopters for news coverage is accelerating, raising issues about unedited video that shocks audiences and may interfere with police work. Use the "chopper" to enhance coverage, not to sensationalize it.
13. As technology enables television journalists get closer to the action, law-enforcement agencies are increasingly inclined to initiate controls on the news media at the scene of breaking stories. In some cities, police and news media have devised formal agreements to balance safety requirements with news-coverage needs. News media also need to know how to be fair when police parade a suspect in a "perp walk," and how to avoid provocation when covering street demonstrations.
14. The perception that television news rarely corrects its mistakes is accurate. Audiences recognize it and complain about this consistent shortcoming. Best practices can help determine when a correction is required and how to prepare one that is appropriate and fair.
15. The same standards of quality that apply to news stories also pertain to promos and teases for news programming. And beware: Promos and teases can lead to lawsuits. Best practices call for editorial control over a part of the newscast that typically is not produced in the newsroom.
16. Fully produced videos scripted by corporate public relations departments are being shown as news by some local television stations. These video news releases are a growing threat to the integrity of news programs. Best practices call for full disclosure to viewers of the source of any such video.
17. Some television news organizations have developed guidelines for journalistic performance in response to public concerns about the erosion of credibility and fairness. One such system, developed by NBC's owned-and-operated stations, is know as FAB, for Fairness, Accuracy and Balance.
18. There are many examples of how conflicts of interest undercut fairness and balance in news programming. Often, violation of basic ethics is involved, but best practices can help control serious lapses.
19. Money has become an overriding influence in television news. Fiscal decisions intrude on news judgment at nearly every step of the broadcast news process. Best practices can help news executives cope with staff shortages and other bottom-line-driven realities in ways that minimize adverse effects on journalistic quality.
20. General managers of local television stations often come from the sales side or the programming side of the business. They have little journalistic experience to serve them in their role as the highest-ranking station executive accountable for news-staff performance. By following best practices, the general manager can develop an understanding of news values and an appreciation of news programming.

Chapter 1

The news director

Credibility is the fundamental attribute of a news organization. If viewers do not trust the information they get from broadcast journalists, there is absolutely no point in presenting news and information on television. At the heart of credibility are standards for fairness, accuracy and balance.

Executives at networks and local stations (maybe even you, reading this right now) are fearful that some junior staffer will get the organization into trouble, not because of malice but because of ignorance. There are employees in every newsroom who do not understand the thresholds they can easily cross en route to a major lawsuit. When it comes to making routine decisions affecting fairness and balance, entry-level and other young employees are being thrust into positions of responsibility without understanding what's required.

Concerns for ratings on the part of news management are transmitted to personnel who actually produce the broadcasts. Ratings are published weekly in newspapers, tracked minute by minute by producers and chewed over in hallway conversations by news staffers. Many techniques accepted as news "production values" are adopted to heighten drama and to avoid being dull at all costs.

"24/7" non-stop news coverage with its relentless repetition of speculation and rumor (frequently with no new details reported for hours on end) has fundamentally changed the real world of broadcast journalism.

Cost cutting to improve the bottom line is combined with the drive for higher ratings — and the larger advertising revenues they produce. In many cases, non-journalists have an increasingly strong, if not the final, say in determining staffing levels, money for coverage and, in extreme cases, even decisions about content.

Sound bites

"I don't know how many really, truly, professional managers, news directors and producers there are to handle this explosion of 24-hour news and overnight news by the networks and cable news services."

"Ten years ago there was a pre-selection process that people went through, and you assumed they knew about fairness, accuracy and balance. That is no longer true."

“Producers have become so smart about promotion, production and strategies, they’re not thinking as much about the journalism. It becomes important for the news director to make sure we keep connecting the content to the journalism.”

Setting the tone

The responsibility for setting and maintaining standards rests squarely on the shoulders of the news director: the man or woman who shapes news coverage on a day-to-day basis. The news director is a teacher by example and explanation, finding ways to instill an understanding of the need for fairness, accuracy and balance among the staff.

Sound bites

“You want a news director who is a compassionate, humane, sensitive, understanding human being, and who is [gutsy] enough to stand up to the bosses in the corporate ownership and say, ‘I don’t care if the other six channels have this story, it’s not true and we’re not going there!’ That is leadership, and it will trickle down and influence people below.”

“People who work here understand that the news director considers her role as a journalist (that of) a servant: I am here to serve and help the people.”

“Somebody within the shop has to set the tone of what our values are and what is important to us. That individual has to make sure that everybody knows what it means to work for the organization from the minute he or she walks into the newsroom on the first day on the job. They have to know that we have a proud tradition here, and damn it, we’re going to keep it that way!”

Best practices

- Exercising leadership and being a role model has to be done within a positive framework communicating to the staff the importance of fair, accurate and balanced coverage of issues. The news director has to set the tone of what values are and what is important. One news director, speaking from experience, challenged the prevailing newsroom view that workfare, a program to get people off welfare, was not fair because welfare recipients simply were not going to get good jobs. She grew up on welfare, she said, and presented herself as an example of people on welfare who really want careers. Drawing on her experience in a dramatic way significantly affected the tone of coverage of that story.
- The news director should create and maintain a clear and understandable review process. People have to be held accountable and responsible for what they’ve done, but they must know what the limits are, particularly when facing deadline pressure.
- Executives and senior staff members should walk the halls and talk more often to the lower ranks. At ABC News, for many years what was laughingly referred to as “Hallway Productions” served an extremely useful purpose. Chance

encounters enabled staff members to pass along comments informally, and managers then could respond quickly and directly, resulting in rapid problem solving and giving the middle and lower rungs of the organization greater understanding of journalistic standards.

- In an environment that increasingly strives for higher ratings, it is up to the news director to insulate the staff as much as possible from non-journalistic pressures. This is not easy. Producers have become so smart about promotion, production and strategies that they're not thinking as much about the journalism. As a best practice, it becomes important for the news director to ensure that the program's content is solid journalism.
- Because a common complaint is that the level of experience among younger staffers no longer matches the level of responsibility, there has to be more emphasis on reporting and less on production. Reporting is at the heart of credibility. If you're not a good reporter, you shouldn't have this job because everything else is bells and whistles — useful tools but no guarantee of good journalism.
- Create a clear line for promotion, recognizing the skills and interests of personnel. Editorial types go in one direction toward researching and reporting; production types go in another toward show and piece creation.

Producers have become so smart about promotion, production and strategies that they're not thinking as much about the journalism.

Meetings

Sound bites

"Every once in a while something slips through the cracks, and the morning meeting is a wonderful vehicle for us to put a stop immediately to anything that violates our standards."

"By having one-on-one discussions and then having group discussions and post-show meetings, the best comments come from just raising something as a question with the staff. 'How did you feel about that? Did that report come off as seeming a little too slanted?'"

"Create an atmosphere where people are not afraid to come forward and say, 'I didn't think that was the right thing to do.' Don't ever be afraid to say 'no' to a story. That's probably the most courageous thing that you can do. It's a non-threatening kind of atmosphere where people know they're not going to be punished for disagreeing on something."

Best practices

- Men and women who bear the responsibility for setting and maintaining standards in newsrooms generally cite one best practice for increasing employee awareness. This best practice is so simple that it might be called "News Directing for Dummies." The overwhelming consensus is: *Hold a meeting!*
- Maximizing attendance by clever scheduling is usually the biggest hurdle.
- Schedule meetings when almost every member of the staff can be present. Everybody from the engineer to senior news management to the general manager is invited, but it is really intended for reporters, producers and assignment people.
- The typical 8:30 a.m. story meeting is a useful beginning. You can generally hold a solid, though smaller, meeting around 1:30 p.m. with your nightside staff. General meetings for about 45 minutes often can be scheduled about 6:30 p.m.
- The first item on the agenda could be a discussion of about three to 10 minutes on the previous night's show. It becomes a point of expressing and re-expressing policy in an institutional way. Keep restating what your principles are, e.g., We don't use certain kinds of pictures. We don't interview young children at a crime scene.
- As a best practice, it doesn't hurt at all if the news director makes it clear he or she is speaking from personal experience.
- An alternative approach involves *individual* meetings every month with the photographers, producers and reporters, and then a general staff meeting, usually every other month. At each meeting, tackle different problems — from ethnic portrayals to overall fairness.
- At some stations, news management is blessed by having a staff that is loaded with experience. The veterans hold counseling sessions with junior staffers. Self-policing happens because senior reporters consider themselves to be guardians of the station's heritage. They may spot things they like or don't like in other people's work, and they take care of it in an informal way.

Formal ethics training

There is no magic formula for building staff consciousness of ethics and fairness, accuracy and balance. Best practices vary from station to station and network to network. In fact, there is no consensus among news executives about the need for formal ethics training. The issue is not at the top of management's concern. It ought to be because of the increasingly litigious environment in which news departments now work.

Sound bites

"Reporters need to understand that the context within which they are operating now is one of hostility. The media [are] viewed with a great deal of animosity whereas in previous eras journalists were regarded as heroes á la Woodward and Bernstein. The public frequently saw reporters or editors as members of their own working class. Nowadays, the media [are] viewed as an arrogant elite and a

rich elite. As a result, courts and jurors will sorely test whatever news broadcasts present when it seems to push the boundaries of news gathering and reporting. The benefit of the doubt is not going to be in favor of us.”

“Many, particularly younger, inexperienced journalists, do not realize that the First Amendment is not a license to trespass. It's not a license to break the law. It is not a defense to say, 'I was covering a very important story when I stole something out of somebody's office or a safe.' ”

Best practices

- At many stations, the news director says, “Here's a consultant to talk about ethics,” and then leaves. Executives of station groups and individual station managers should insist that news directors schedule regular sessions for ethics training. News directors should be required to attend along with anyone else who is engaged in reporting and producing the news.
- Bring in outside First Amendment experts, libel lawyers and experienced investigative reporters on a regular basis to be certain the staff knows the law as well as unethical methods of news gathering.
- One network keeps an informal running total of new hires. When a critical mass is reached, usually every six months, top management holds seminars to expose them to the fundamentals of fairness, accuracy and balance. They concern themselves with court decisions and federal and state laws governing libel, privacy, and trespass. These seminars are provocative reminders for young producers that they are in the news business, not show business.

Chapter 2

Building the staff

In the real world of television news, editorial concerns are not necessarily at the top of the list when applicants are considered for job openings. Interviews for this handbook suggest an ongoing conflict between those who value good looks and on-air performance abilities vs. those who are seeking reporters with some specialized knowledge — or at least the interest and intellect to try to develop general knowledge.

Sound bites

"It's one of the most troubling aspects of television. Three or four members of the senior staff here have what could probably be best called veto power, standing in the way of a new hire. Most of the potential candidates for on-air positions get here because their tapes had passed certain looks tests."

"If you talk to agents about reporters, they'll tell you, 'They're really good live.' I can't remember the last time an agent said to me, 'He's a really good storyteller.'"

"You would think that people who were applying for jobs in a top-10 market like Boston or Dallas could bring you a tape that has five great stories on it. Maybe they've been in the business five years, so that would be their one best story of the year. Instead, we get a lot of fires, a lot of live stuff. I generally say, 'Well, that's very interesting.' Now send me a tape with your best stories on it.' Maybe a week or two later you'll get the real tape. I don't know why they don't send that out the first time."

"There are always going to be people who get into the news business for the wrong reasons. They want to get their face on television. Hopefully, you weed those out before you hire them."

"I'm not sure the journalism schools are doing a very good job in hammering writing. Writing and reporting are the basic skills of anything that you do. They are turning out technicians, people who know how to be videographers and

videojournalists and know how to work an Avid machine but don't know how to write a sentence."

The interview

The news director, sometimes in conjunction with the general manager, usually does the hiring. Some of the larger stations and the networks have executives in charge of searching for new talent. All of them are inundated with résumés, videocassette demonstration reels and enthusiastic endorsements from agents who represent many of the candidates.

Potential candidates for on-air positions frequently get appointments for interviews because of their appearance. Agents market reporters with videotape reels and, unfortunately and increasingly, content is the last thing seen on the tape. Agents talk about reporters' ability to do "live shots" rather than their skills at good storytelling.

No doubt everyone has his or her own techniques and questions to find out if a prospective employee is qualified. Still, as best practices, some news directors have figured out variations on the theme of sorting through the clutter.

Potential candidates for on-air positions frequently get appointments for interviews because their tapes have passed certain looks tests.

Best practices

- Use the face-to-face interview to uncover what makes the candidate tick. Make the interview seem more like a conversation: "When you're not at work, what do you do? Where do you go? Do you like to roller skate? Do you salsa? Do you fish? Do you exercise your brains out? How do you interact with people?"
- Find out whether the candidate has had an acceptable level of experience and testing. Keep the questions simple and to the point. "What have you covered so far that you are proudest of? What have you done that separates your reporting from reporting of your competitors? Have you ever found yourself in a situation where you had to retract something that you reported?"
- Be aware that some of the candidates you interview want to get into the news business for the wrong reason. They want to get their face on television.
- Check peer-group references. Call everybody on the candidate's reference list and then get one or more recommendations from people who are not on the list.

Diversity

Every news director in the country probably has an opportunity to fill at least one or two job slots a year. There are plenty of good reasons to be sensitive to the need for ethnic or racial balance in the newsroom.

Sound bites

"All the ideas for products or stories must not come out of Caucasian heads. The point is balance."

"The producer asked me, 'Okay, what do you think about this story about African-American women? What do you think about showing it to some other African Americans and your co-workers?' I just was stunned. I said, 'It's a great idea, because who will know more about an African-American female's experience than an African-American female?' "

Best practices

- Look at your community when you hire, and make sure the people around the table at your morning meeting and the people in the newsroom reflect the communities you serve.
- Hire based on potential. Recognize that every job candidate has potential for learning and growth.
- When you have minority people on staff, it helps sensitize people to issues that otherwise would be ignored. They're more inclined to jump up and say, "Shouldn't we be doing this story?"
- When story topics involving race or age come up, solicit opinions from people who fit that particular category.

Chapter 3

Bias

It's safe to say that in almost all newsrooms, blatant bigotry and intolerance do not exist. What does exist, however, are preconceived notions about race and ethnicity that can shape story selection and content. The conventional wisdom among many assignment editors is that white viewers will tune out if blacks or Latinos are featured in segments. That view can influence the choice of the person who will provide the "expert" sound bite. There is no question that a lack of racial sensitivity affects news judgment. It is a problem that goes to the heart of fair and balanced presentation of the news on television.

Every business has its code words. "It's not good television" is a phrase many have heard when participating in discussions about story selection and the "casting" of experts and characters for longer pieces. "It's not good television" really means: "Don't use members of certain racial or economic group as subjects."

Sound bites

"My bosses have essentially made it clear: 'We do not feature black people.' Period. I mean, it's said. Actually, they whisper it, 'Is she white?' "

"If I gave my boss a choice between a black female doctor at NYU (a teaching hospital in New York City) and a white male doctor at Lenox Hill (an upscale private hospital on the affluent East Side), she's going to pick the white male doctor at Lenox Hill, even if what they say is identical. Period."

"We needed a family that has [a mentally disabled] child for an hour on that disability. I found a great, great upper middle-class family in Miami, but they were black. I was told, 'Find another family. I don't care how well they speak. Since [the condition] is found in both white and black children, we should go with the whites.' "

"One of our bureau chiefs is a black woman who constantly asks her staff questions like, 'Why was the interview with the black guy conducted standing outside his house while the interview with the white guy was in his living room with a picture of his family and his dog behind him?' It's a small thing, but small

things can make a difference in shaping a newsroom's attitude. Viewers get the message too."

"It's subtle thing. A story involving blacks takes longer to get approved. And if it is approved, chances are that it will sit on the shelf a long time before it gets on the air. No one ever says anything. The message gets through."

Best practices

- Be pro-active in dealing with racial and ethnic issues and attitudes in the newsroom. Management has to set standards as a best practice or break away from any existing standards that justify biased news judgments.
- Engage in a little self-examination of your own behavior that, after all, sets the tone for everyone else in the newsroom. Do stories on your programs feature blacks, Hispanics or Asians only when the story is about their particular groups? Do minorities appear as regular people doing regular things that aren't just associated with their ethnic backgrounds?
- What is the approval schedule for stories involving blacks? Is it longer? And if a story is approved, will it sit on the shelf a long time before being aired?
- Discuss race. Discuss culture. Cultivate an environment where it is possible to explore issues, and then figure out how to transfer the insights to the coverage of news stories.
- Listen to and learn from staff comments. They go a long way toward rectifying what minority staff members may perceive as management's insensitivity.

Who gets the assignment?

A sensitive area for news directors and assignment editors is deciding which reporter gets assigned to cover what story. A question faced routinely is: Should there be a conscious effort to assign minorities primarily to stories about their own ethnic or racial groups? It can be a controversial judgment call. Some African-American and Hispanic participants in The Freedom Forum roundtables said nuances of minority community culture or attitudes are overlooked if the reporting is by someone not from that group. It was cited as a benchmark of fairness and accuracy in television's coverage of racial and ethnic matters.

Sound bites

"We don't like discussing race in our newsrooms because it can make us uncomfortable. And if we're uncomfortable, how can we have a team? We want everyone to be working together. Newsrooms themselves first have to be prepared to deal with issues of race before covering issues of race."

"To be honest with you, every day we look at the lineup and we look at which producers are assigned to do the stories. We look at who is going to be on the air doing them. Is it just going to be all white males, as it has been for a long time? If it is, then there's a problem. We literally will go through the lineup and say, 'What can we do about this?' On the one hand, it's not fair to penalize a

particular producer or a particular reporter because of who they happen to be. On the other hand, we need to reflect diversity.”

“I encourage our desk to avoid assigning stories based on gender or based on race. On the other hand, you try and match up your reporters when you're doing a story. Always put the round pegs in the round holes and the square pegs in the square holes. For me, it's who can do the best job and who can have the best approach.”

“If you walk into the newsroom, you're going to see Caucasian, Asian-American, African-American and Latino producers and assignment desk people. I do that deliberately. It helps if this place is a microcosm of 'out there,' because the same issues that are 'out there' will then work their way back here. So, we have white reporters doing stories about African Americans. We have African Americans doing stories about white people.”

“If there was a story that had to do with the historically black side of town, and I had a reporter who was African American who lived there, interacted there, got his hair cut there and shopped there, I probably would send him. He'd have people he could call on easily. There's an understanding of the context.”

Best practices

- Encourage the assignment desk to avoid automatically assigning stories based on gender or based on race. If you are so hemmed in that you have to send a person of a particular culture or color or gender to cover particular kinds of stories, then you better have the money to have a huge staff.
- In newsrooms where racial and ethnic diversity exists, take advantage of the mix of backgrounds and interests, because the issues their in communities will then work their way back into the broadcasts.
- A well-rounded reporter should be able to handle any subject matter. On the other hand, in a complex story involving sensitive community feelings, it can be productive to assign a reporter who brings special insights or experience to the story. The decision of whom to assign should be influenced, finally, by who can do the best job and who can have the best approach.

Confront the question

If there is a story focusing on a special community within the coverage area, try to assign a reporter who has a direct connection to that community. If he or she lives there, shops there and has contacts there, take advantage of it. Otherwise, rely on the reportorial skills of the news staff generally.

In Freedom Forum roundtables around the country, the public raised concerns that African Americans were more typically shown being arrested as suspects than other minorities or whites. In some newsrooms, producers have adopted proactive procedures to make as certain as possible that blacks are not automatically seen as the villains in crime reporting.

There's a lively debate in newsrooms about what constitutes an “incomplete

Sometimes skin color is the only description you get. It is obviously a judgment call requiring editorial sensitivity.

description" not worthy of broadcast. Some news directors argue their mission is first and foremost to report facts, and if only racial or ethnic characteristics are available, there is reason to go on the air with what is known. Example: If police are looking for a "black male, six-foot-three, in blue jeans," and a reporter had just seen a six-foot-three-inch male in blue jeans in the area, but he was white, this meaningless lead would not be part of the news report. Sometimes skin color is the only description you get. It is obviously a judgment call requiring editorial sensitivity.

Sound bites

"A few years ago most of the blacks at CNN lodged a protest about the material we were using on the air. They complained that every time we did a story on poverty, we rolled out 'b-roll' showing blacks, and every time we did a story on crime, we rolled out 'b-roll' with blacks in it. We went back and looked at our file tape and, in fact, it was all black. I said, 'All right, I'm going to authorize the overtime. I want a team to produce a tape that raises the sensitivity of the reporter, of the cameraman, of the tape editor and of the anchor.' "

"Someone at this network, who is a minority person, called attention to the fact that in lot of our library footage showing arrests, all the 'perps' are black. We started reviewing it, and it raised our consciousness. You just have to keep noticing it."

Best practices

- Every new CNN staffer is required to view the 20-minute CNN production, "Through the Lens." Showing it in your newsroom could be helpful. "Through the Lens" identifies types of news coverage susceptible to imagery and narration that promote unintentional stereotyping. CNN anchors and reporters — white, black, Hispanic and Asian — provide instructive commentary with examples from the cable network's coverage of financial news, international matters, crime, drugs, single parentage and alternative lifestyles. A few selections illustrate why "Through the Lens" is itself a best practice:
  - Coverage of events in the gay community should not be linked with medical coverage of the AIDS epidemic, because AIDS is not exclusive to gays.
  - Showing a black member of Congress when the president mentions welfare reform in the State of the Union address reinforces the false stereotype that welfare mainly reaches black people.
  - It is ill-advised to use such terms as "Third World" and "terrorist" casually, and it is incorrect to equate "fundamentalism" with violence.

- The indiscriminate use of racial characteristics when describing a suspect in a crime goes to the heart of the fairness issue.
- Make it clear that your reporters, producers and writers have to cite specific things like clothing or facial marks before a racial reference gets on the air.
- Do not identify people by race unless the description is complete enough to actually identify the person. One standard requires that a person should be able to recognize the suspect if he or she was seen in public, based on the characteristics being broadcast.

Unintended bias

Sound bites

"We were working on a story about whether parents or peers have more influence on kids. We were showing kids playing games in a video arcade, and the cameraman shot some general cover footage including an image of a little black boy with a gun. In the edit room, the editor picked it. I flinched when I saw it. My producer immediately realized why when she saw the look on my face. She said, 'Black kid holding a gun, it's a stereotype.' She changed the shot. We see so many African-American boys with guns in the newspaper and magazines. Every black boy does not own a gun."

"Very often you'll see, 'black male, mid-30s, 180-200 pounds.' That probably describes six people in my newsroom. Clearly, that's not enough to identify a person."

Best practices

- Don't include a description unless it is germane to the story, unless it can be used to identify somebody in a particular way: a good clothing or height description, or an unusual feature (e.g., "seen carrying a black bag"). If a description isn't accomplishing any purpose other than perpetuating negative stereotypes and infuriating some members of the community, it doesn't advance the story effectively.

In a story about unwed mothers, should every unwed mother pictured be black?

- Video editors should be sensitized to the possibility of racial or ethnic stereotyping when they select images to include in stories. Case in point: In a story about unwed mothers, should every unwed mother pictured be black? The answer, of course, is no. The fact is, more unwed mothers are white than are black.
- Assign crews to get new "cover video" for crime stories and poverty stories. Make sure the new material is balanced.

- Bias may be unintentionally "stored" in film or tape archives. Review stock footage files and clean out any residual prejudiced material from less-sensitive days. Make sure the staff looks at all arrests in an incident and looks at all victims to avoid misrepresenting a racial or ethnic component of stories.
- Create a racially diverse "rainbow Rolodex" for experts in medical, financial and scientific subject areas.
- Create a mechanism to raise and maintain staff awareness of minority attitudes and concerns. At NBC News, a "Diversity Council" meets regularly to deal with fairness and balance. It consists of about a dozen news employee of all ranks including bureau chiefs, reporters, producers and people on the assignment desk. Council members also are called upon in breaking news situations to review sensitive scripts before broadcast.
- Stress the precise use of language — for example, by advising against the casual use of words like "Third World" and "terrorist" and the automatic equation of "fundamentalism" with violence. Similarly, avoid an automatic linkage of coverage of events in the gay community with medical coverage of AIDS.

Chapter 4

Researching, fact checking and writing the script

There is a considerable difference between handling the challenges of breaking news and dealing with the less-hectic demands of assignments that allow time for preparation. A high-intensity editorial metabolism comes into play when researchers have to dig up facts and background in a hurry to support coverage of a breaking news story.

Understand this: Producing a piece for a newsmagazine takes time. Background material has to be assembled. Interviews have to be scheduled and videotaped. Illustrative video footage has to be shot or acquired. Then, the scripting and copy-editing process begins. Errors can occur at any point in the production process: Information can be wrong, sources interviewed on video can provide inaccurate quotes or an unfair context, inferences in the script can be unfair, conclusions can be overstated.

The copy and video editing and the fact checking should ensure that the final script is fair, accurate and balanced.

Researching

There is a clear line between researching a story and checking facts once the story has been reported. *Researching* means all the prep work that precedes going into the field with a camera to record material for inclusion in a broadcast. *Fact checking* is making sure everything to be reported on the air is correct.

Sound bites

“Accuracy is getting it right. Balance is making sure that the other side gets its say. It’s as basic and simple as that.”

“Learn the nuts and bolts. The first thing you do is read as much as you can. Then start making calls.”

“You get zillions of documents to look at. That’s part of the news-gathering process. Slow down and look at all those things.”

Best practices

- Approach the task of researching a story as a process of discovery. Read as much as you can, then make phone calls to people involved in the story or who can speak authoritatively about it.
- Conduct the inquiry with an open mind. Avoid the tendency to see the story through the lens of your own perceptions. Gather information widely as you assemble background information for the reporting team. Don't be tempted to draw conclusions about the information you've gathered.
- Seek documents that put information on the record. If the subject of the story responds with an avalanche of documents, examine all of them carefully and distill the salient information succinctly and fairly. To do this may require back-and-forth correspondence to ensure that all of the critical documents are in hand.

Fact checking

Sound bites

"Sometimes we say we know something because so-and-so said it. Well, just because so-and-so said it doesn't mean that it's a fact. We have to have a second source on it, or we have to have some kind of documentation."

"Take the script and go through it line by line. Ask stupid things like, 'How do we know his first name is James?' You've said the wrong name over and over and over to yourself so you don't know if it's the right name anymore. You can easily think you know things to be true when they may not necessarily be true."

"Nine times out of 10, the videotape editors actually catch the mistake. They're the ones sitting there handling the material hour upon hour."

Best practices

- Go through the script line by line. Challenge every fact. Be aware that you may think something is true when it is not. Ask basic questions, such as, "How do we know this is his name, occupation or real role in the story?"

Be aware that you may think something is true when it is not.

- Be meticulous about the sources for the story. Know what their biases are, what their agendas are and whether they can speak with authority on the subject. The credibility of the sources will reflect on the credibility of the broadcast.
- Be skeptical of the accuracy of quotes. Just because someone said it on tape does not make it so. Demand a second source or other documentation to affirm the accuracy of each quote.
- Call the source and read back the language that will be used on air. And ask,

"Am I correct in saying this?" Or, "Can you think of a better or more accurate way of saying this?"

- On a longer story produced in advance, triple-check the script right up to the broadcast, particularly if it is a sensitive story. Something may have changed from when the story was developed.
- Share everything with everyone involved in reporting and production. Videotape editors, for example, catch many mistakes because they work with segments to be aired hour after hour.
- Double-check print articles that are the basis for television news stories. Newspaper or magazine articles can be wrong. Don't assume the story is factual or balanced or fair just because it has been printed in the local newspaper. Call the sources and re-report the story.

Writing the script

In both network and local television newsrooms, the information gathered from research and from field reporting is condensed into a written script. The content of the script is what the viewer sees and hears. Often a segment on air lasts only 45 seconds. It puts a great premium on maintaining fairness, accuracy and balance while introducing the most rigorous demands for brevity.

Evidence of inaccurate information or unethical decisions in script writing underscores the need for best practices. Researchers, production associates and associate producers tell of practices during the writing of scripts that, if left unchallenged or uncorrected, would result in stories that were unfair, inaccurate or unbalanced.

Often a segment on air lasts only 45 seconds. It puts a great premium on maintaining fairness, accuracy and balance.

Sound bites

"Once there is a great line in a script, they don't want to change it. They want you to find the reason and enough documentation for them to use it. 'Check this out for me, I really want to say this!' Most of the time sources are saying, 'We don't know that right now; we can't attribute that to anything right now.' After the Columbine shooting, any of the kids that saw their friends killed were so traumatized by the situation and they were so angry at the shooters, they were willing to say whatever it is that you told them to say. Does that give you enough to use that line in your track? Sure. Is it true? I don't know."

"The powers-that-be sometimes say, 'Wait a second, this isn't the story that we asked for. Give me this story.' That can be troubling. In that case, insist, 'You really can't say that.' "

“My boss kept asking me, ‘Is there a study on this?’ And I said, ‘No. You cannot say that in the script.’ They keep coming back to me — ‘Can you talk to somebody else? Is there any way … ?’ ‘No. The bottom line is: No, we cannot say that.’ But, in the real world, what’s going to happen is, we’re going to figure out a way to substantiate it in some way, shape or form.”

“When producers are writing scripts, they will often make up a ‘fact.’ When they are crunching along on a script, they don’t want to stop and make 15 phone calls. After five revisions of the script, that ‘fact’ is still in there. Producers should write as if no one is going to fact-check them.”

Best practices

- Start the fact-checking process early. Go through a first draft of the script and mark every fact, every name, anything that can be questioned. Work through statistics, correct names and titles that were given to the producer writing the segment but may not be in the script.
- Don’t make up a fact just to put something down on paper. Invariably, the fact will be wrong, it will not be checked, it will survive several rewrites of the script and be aired.
- Don’t set the editorial direction of a story before gathering all the facts.
- Management should coach producers to write as if no one is going to fact check the script. This guards against the tendency of producers to be less vigilant about accuracy because they know someone is going to check what they have written. As a practical matter, support people are spread very thinly in many newsrooms, and the producer has to be the last stop for assuring fairness, accuracy and balance.
- When an insistent producer is so committed to a point of view that he or she suggests the truth be bent a little, respond by saying the story is not there, but another interesting story could be developed.

Signposting

“Signposting” means putting language in the script to help the viewer understand exactly what is being shown. A few extra words in the narration can become extremely important in complex stories where nuances need to be understood. A signpost is a convenient way for the producers to share background information with the viewer. In complicated stories, a signpost may be inserted several times, helping the viewer keep track of editorial threads or characters who may be playing different roles as the

A few extra words in the narration can become extremely important in complex stories where nuances need to be understood.

story develops. The thread of a story can become obscured if the video is distracting or because the sound bites are emotional and dramatic. Putting in a signpost recaptures the editorial line and helps alleviate viewer confusion. Not putting in a signpost can also mean that a completely erroneous impression may be left with the audience.

Sound bites

"Tell them what they're going to see, tell them what they're going to hear, tell them and then they'll know. Then you're not being duplicitous in any way, shape or form."

"You can do virtually anything on television you want to, as long as you tell people what you're going to do. Take it to another step. Fairness is not just fairness to those upon whom you're reporting. It's also fairness to the viewer. You've got to let the viewer in on what you're doing because, in the end, the viewer — not the journalist — is the judge and jury."

"As long as you level with the audience and they know what's going on, they will accept a lot of things. The only limits are having it make sense and having a good reason for doing something that proves your point. Disclosure cures a lot of ills. There's no question about that."

Best practices

- Tell the audience what you're doing even if there are times when "signposting" seems to take attention away from a story line. If there is something that can be misconstrued without full disclosure, opt for disclosure.
- You can do virtually anything on television you want to, but explain what you're doing and why you're doing it. If you're doing something that's somewhat unorthodox, but you believe it to be justifiable, tell the viewer why you're doing it.

Preparing for a scheduled event

Wall-to-wall presence at many events can be, and is, planned. By examining the program in advance, a producer can create an editorial "lineup" that encompasses all the angles that must be covered, reducing chances for errors like misidentifications, faulty history or unbalanced perspective.

Another essential tool is the "book." Now available to the anchor and to the correspondent in the field via a laptop computer, the "book" includes pre-scripted items of information that can be dropped into the running commentary. It also contains pre-scripted lead-ins for video packages that have been prepared in advance to illustrate aspects of the story.

Those packages make up the "bank." The lineup, the book and the bank should help producers keep track of all the editorial points that need to be included in a broadcast if it is to be factually accurate and complete.

Best practice

- Pre-scripted material can be introduced into a news report when the anchor, control-room producer or field reporter believes the information or taped segment will enhance the flow of the broadcast.

Chapter 5

Investigative journalism and hidden cameras

Investigative reporting has become a flash point for viewers concerned about fairness, accuracy and balance on television news programs. No other form of broadcast journalism generates more reaction, both negative and positive, than pieces that dig up and present facts that alleged malefactors want to conceal.

Many viewers believe that the use of confidential sources to validate a story is wrong and that journalists should not report stories unless all their sources are willing to be identified. Where investigative reports were once regarded as a sure shot for increasing ratings by going "undercover," our increasingly litigious society has made it a riskier business, resulting in expensive court challenges.

As a result, there are some prudent steps that can be taken to maintain investigative reports while ensuring they meet journalistic standards.

Sound bites

"There's a temptation on behalf of some producers to get 99.9% of their [report] done. Then 24 hours before air, they knock on the door of the aggrieved party, show them about a million documents and put it on the air that night. You do get incredibly dramatic TV that way, but you often don't get the fairest TV that way."

"Some of the biggest mistakes in journalism are made when people get immersed in one side. They understand that one side. They then go in for the big interview and haven't bothered to examine the other side. In the interview, the subject comes back with one or two good responses, and the story is gone. You've built up this house of cards, and then, when you finally deal with the other side, they knock it down."

"Guard against a natural enthusiasm on the part of investigative reporters. They start talking like DAs. They start talking like cowboys. They talk about whom they're 'going to get' and whom they're 'going to make' and whom they're 'going to nail.' For a lot of reasons, that's bad."

Best practices

- Some form of executive approval should be required before producers undertake an investigative report.
- A reporter does not "induce" a crime even though he or she may take a legal step that sets in motion a chain of events that may include illegal acts by others. It is important when engaged in "sting" operations not to take steps that might be seen as crossing the line from appropriate investigation and revelation of crime to causing criminal conduct.
- It may be difficult, but stay with two-source confirmation on most stories.
- Go to the people surrounding the issue. Ask your primary source for the names of other knowledgeable people.
- Determine if the information is firsthand — coming from a primary source intimately involved in the story — or hearsay. Hearsay is the worst kind of information in many ways because it whets your appetite without giving you a verifiable starting point.
- Mine publicly available documents to the fullest extent possible — court records, corporate financial reports, etc.

Hearsay is the worst kind of information in many ways because it whets your appetite without giving you a verifiable starting point.

- If sources give you documents, ascertain whether the materials are authentic. Would the person who provided the documents have routine access to them?
- A "must" for an inexperienced investigative researcher is to dig up a potentially compelling document or source that drives a stake into the heart of the piece. Do that as soon as possible. There are lawyers who will be glad to provide the deposition their client gave. Remember to ask for the deposition that the other lawyer's client gave. Look for the cross-examination that may have ripped a person's testimony to shreds.

Going undercover with hidden cameras

The basic tools for print reporters are the pencil and notebook. The basic tools for television reporters are the camera and videotape. For years, print reporters had an advantage; they could slip unnoticed into a location to cover a story; indeed, they could even keep a pencil and pad in a jacket pocket, making notes after leaving a news-gathering scene. Broadcast journalists were encumbered by a TV camera's size and by the requirement for special lighting; unobtrusive news gathering was impossible.

Today, TV reporters have smaller, more versatile cameras at their disposal. Some of the gear is no larger than a shirt button. A "lipstick camera," for example, can be

concealed in a reporter's makeup kit. Cameras can and do go everywhere. As a result, undercover investigative reporting has become the newest darling of broadcast journalism. Hidden-camera videotape has become a very valuable asset in the highly competitive arena of television news ratings and promotion.

But as has been the case with some other new "toys" developed at the request of broadcast journalists, hidden cameras sometimes have been used too aggressively. Moreover, some critics say the mere inclusion of a hidden camera's very identifiable (usually grainy) videotape in a news report suggests that someone has been caught red-handed in the commission of a crime or an unethical practice. One byproduct has been a public backlash. Many viewers now seem to focus more on the practices of investigative reporters and their use of hidden cameras than on the information that has been uncovered.

The most notable example was the Food Lion case. A jury found that ABC News was guilty of using fraudulent tactics when going undercover with hidden cameras to investigate reports of unsanitary conditions in a local Food Lion supermarket. The issue before the court had nothing to do with ABC News' documentation of the supermarket's unhygienic operations; jurors never saw a tape of that report. They were asked to decide whether ABC News producers had committed fraud by falsifying job applications to get inside the supermarket to gather evidence. The jury concluded that they had and therefore should be punished. The quality of the journalism was not judged; the perceived arrogance and deceitfulness of the journalists was. Because of the Food Lion verdict, many news organizations have modified their use of undercover reporters and hidden cameras.

Many viewers now seem to focus more on the practices of investigative reporters and their use of hidden cameras than on the information that has been uncovered.

Sound bites

"Almost every local market now has a hidden camera. In 'sweeps,' there are news directors who say, 'Go get me a hidden-camera story; go use that rig you've got, and get me a SpyCam story.' They think it spikes up the ratings because people really want to watch it."

"Obviously, if [the TV crew] has got a hidden camera, you must be wrong, you must be a terrible sinner. You are the bad guys on the other end of that lens."

Best practices

- Management should grant explicit permission before any hidden-camera project is undertaken.

- Ask and answer these questions: Will the story expose matters of significant public concern, reveal “system failure” at the top or prevent profound harm to individuals? Is there no other way to get the story/information effectively? Will the hidden-camera video play a supporting role by backing up documents, research or other findings uncovered by traditional reporting? Is it lawful? And if so, are the legal risks worth it? What are the ethical issues? Is there an invasion-of-privacy concern, particularly for innocent people captured on camera while taping is under way? (For more on privacy, see page 41.)
- These questions should be reviewed throughout the reporting, writing and editing. You can and should pull a piece right up to the last minute if there’s any doubt about its content.

Chapter 6

The interview

Editing is essential to the practice of journalism; the objective is to produce a clear and succinct statement that reflects fairly, honestly and without distortion the spirit, context, tone and reality of events and interviews. Even when an on-camera interview is edited for time or any other reason, what the audience sees and hears should still be an accurate reflection of what the reporter, camera and microphone saw and heard. The sense of the interview must not be changed.

Conducting and editing the interview

Sound bites

"You have to let the guy have his say. That will solve so many problems for you."

"I've always found it's really helpful to ask if I could explain this to my mother or any other civilian I cared about. Could I really sit there and say that it was all right to edit it that way? 'It was okay, Mom, I swear I was fair.' "

"When doing cutaway shots, reporters should not nod, smile or express visual agreement or disagreement. A nod of the head or a smile implies agreement with the thoughts being expressed in the interview. Reporters neither agree nor disagree, they simply report."

Best practices

- When interviews are recorded simultaneously with two cameras, the reporter may register appropriate visual expressions, such as smiling at a joke.
- Insist as much as possible on a complete answer, not a half-answer. Make sure the edit doesn't take place at a point where something is missing, where the inflection is wrong. Complete the thought.
- In cases where television news stories are produced by one reporter and one camera, interviews are edited to include "cutaways" or "reverses" of the reporter listening to the interviewee or asking the questions. Be sure in incorporating reverse questions that the chronology of the questions and answers is

maintained. Also, do not use a reverse to add drama or to sharpen up a poorly phrased question.

- Because of many news sources' limited availability, reverse questions are often recorded after the source has left. Some newsrooms require the reporter to ask the reverse questions after listening to an audiotape made during the interview as the preferred way to be accurate and to recapture the tone and context of the original question.
- Questions and answers may be presented in a sequence that differs from the order in which such questions and answers were recorded, provided that in so doing, the spirit of the interview is preserved. A producer can take question and answer sequences from the beginning of an interview, for example, and use them at the end of a piece because they refer more specifically to subject matter being handled at that point in the broadcast.
- What is not permitted is separating questions from answers. A producer must not couple Question 7 in an interview with Answer 10. Equally distorting and equally unacceptable would be to take Answer 7 and tack it onto Question 10 because it seemed to make the reporter's or producer's editorial point clearer.

Interviewing the bereaved

Coverage of tragedies is now standard fare on local news programs and the networks. Both are certainly all over a story when a plane crashes, a mass shooting occurs at a high school, or a hurricane sweeps houses into the sea. It might be argued that no interviews with survivors or suffering victims should be done at all, but in the real world of television news, there is no question that they will be assigned.

Sound bites

"In small markets, the staff is overwhelmingly young people. When you're 24, it's a matter of life experience. You haven't lived enough life to understand how to be compassionate or to understand how to address a delicate issue. You have no idea how to walk up to somebody and say to him or her in a sensitive way, 'I really identify with what you're going through.' You're dealing with youth and inexperience and insensitivity — and you're dealing with a deadline. That combination is deadly."

"There was a mass suicide in a cult in San Diego. I was assigned to contact families of the cult members. …When the list of the [victims] came out, I knew [a certain individual] was dead and I figured [his mother] knew. … Well, I was wrong. When I called this woman … I basically said, 'Now that he's confirmed dead, will you talk to us?' And she's freaking out on me: 'Do you know something I don't know? Have you gotten a list?' At that point I backpedaled because I shouldn't know that her son was dead before she did. So I said, 'Why don't I call you back in half an hour?' And I hung up. I had to go back a half-hour later because the people I worked for were jumping up and down to find out if she would talk to us. … Do you know what? When she said 'yes,' I was just as excited. So, what does that say?"

“Pretend that your neighbors, your family members, your teacher, your cousins, the merchant, the guy who runs the cleaners — pretend that those are the victims on that plane. That's how you conduct yourselves in the coverage of this

Best practices

story.”

- When making assignments, try to send somebody who has had some life experience. It will help them to relate to the survivors' pain and suffering.
- Cameras are automatically perceived as invasive. When visiting the home of someone who has lost a loved one, don't drag out the camera immediately. Park the car down the road. Let one person approach the home, walking up slowly and with great deference. Don't make it harder on people who are in mourning.
- It doesn't hurt if reporters have rehearsed what they would say when making an initial approach. "I am so sorry to bother you. I can't imagine what you are going through right now. But if there is anything that you would like to tell us

It doesn't hurt if reporters have rehearsed what they would say when making an initial approach.

about your son/mother/wife/daughter, we would like to hear it. Perhaps it will help you."
- The magazine *Brill's Content* has proposed guidelines for dealing with the bereaved in the aftermath of a tragedy. To some journalists, they may seem impractical. They are published here to encourage staff discussion about local best practices in covering tragedy: "To protect the privacy of grieving families, our news organizations will not publish photographs or show current video images of family members who have lost a loved one within one week following the death of that loved one, nor will we post reporters or photographers outside their home, at the funeral, or in other places where we can accost them for interviews or photographs without their permission."

Chapter 7

The line between fair and unfair, legal and illegal

Playing it straight

Reporters and researchers assigned to dig out facts before actually going into the field are frequently confronted with people who may be reluctant to talk to them. There are steady complaints from the public about being misled by reporters, producers or researchers.

Sound bites

"If we're expecting somebody to tell us the truth, then we damn well better be telling them the truth."

"On the other hand, there is omission. That's my understanding of what is acceptable as opposed to downright lying."

Best practice

- Establish a policy that all personnel clearly identify themselves in the course of their work. They should be told to be as truthful as possible if asked what the story is going to be about.

Trespass

Journalists are generally free to report and to show what can be seen in public places and in semi-public areas like hotel lobbies or the public areas of stores. However, the First Amendment is not a license to go anywhere. Even in privately owned places, which are generally open to the public, journalists can be barred or required by the proprietor or owner to leave.

Privacy

Invasion of privacy through the use of hidden cameras is one of the most frequent complaints against television news producers. More specifically, public responses to polls about the fairness of TV news demonstrate that viewers question whether broadcast journalists have been prying into relatively unimportant, private matters.

An increasing number of lawsuits have been filed against broadcasters involving alleged invasion of privacy.

There are four categories of privacy claims. To be sure, they overlap, but the courts have identified them as:

1. False light: In a "false light" claim, it must be established that the disputed broadcast damaged the claimant's reputation by containing information that would be highly offensive to a person of ordinary sensibilities.
2. Private facts: "Private facts" cases involve material that, though truthful, may be embarrassing or highly offensive and not of legitimate concern to the public.
3. Misappropriation: "Misappropriation" is sometimes referred to as the "right of publicity," which generally prohibits the use of the name or picture of any individual without his or her prior written consent.
4. Intrusion: "Intrusion" is defined as "the intentional intrusion, physically or otherwise, upon the solitude or seclusion of another or his private affairs if the intrusion would be highly offensive to a reasonable person."

Sound bites

"Unlike libel which requires a false statement, the whole premise of privacy is that it is true — embarrassingly, excruciatingly, intrusively true."

"There's a case, believe it or not, that arose from a TV story about love. Two people were videotaped while walking in the park on a beautiful day. It illustrated that love blooms in the spring. Unfortunately, it happened that they were having an affair, and obviously they didn't want to be seen on a broadcast. They sued. The courts said that's the price of being in an open society. If we took their picture in a bedroom in a hotel, that would be viewed as an unacceptable intrusion."

Best practices

- The first question to be asked and answered by the reporter and producer is, "Is there an 'expectation' of privacy?"
- Remember that judges and juries ultimately can decide whether journalistic activity constitutes intrusion and is subject to sanction.
- Stay in close touch with your company's lawyer. You and your staff are probably not up to the minute on libel laws and invasion-of-privacy lawsuits. Nonetheless, be familiar with some of the legal underbrush.

The first question to be asked and answered by the reporter and producer is, "Is there an 'expectation' of privacy?"

‘Ride alongs’

Since the 1990s, a love/hate relationship has developed between the police and television. Federal and local authorities have become much more accommodating to news organizations. Law-enforcement officials want the coverage, and some even invite news camera teams to go along on police raids — “ride alongs,” as they are called. In the real world of providing competitive coverage on daily newscasts, it is a simple fact of life that news directors cannot overlook opportunities to gain unique access to stories by cooperating with the authorities. The police get their man; the television stations get the pictures or the inside story.

This hand-in-glove relationship has raised questions of fairness and in particular questions about invasion of privacy. Once a technique becomes commonplace, it is not long before someone goes to court to challenge it.

Best practices

- As in cases involving hidden cameras, be sure the “ride along” is authorized by news executives — and in this case, by police authorities, too.
- Be aware that courts have held that the presence of television cameras during police “ride along” operations was unrelated to any legitimate law-enforcement purpose. In other words, the TV unit had no right to be there in the first place.
- Be aware that courts have increasingly found “ride along” material to have invaded the suspect’s privacy.
- Consider whether the entire “ride along” exercise is in the pursuit of good journalism or whether it is designed for promotion and ratings. What does it do to your standards for fairness and accuracy?

Writing the letter

It’s never over until it’s broadcast. There is always time to add a statement of someone’s position. As a last resort, it can be included in the studio introduction or “tag” to a report.

Sound bites

“Sometimes people just say, ‘Nope, we’re not talking to you, we’re not responding to you, no comment.’ Faxing or FedEx-ing a letter usually gets their attention. A letter gets worked around the company, and it reaches the lawyer or someone who is more likely to listen and respond.”

“It is essential that these letters be labeled as allegations and do not claim that you’ve found the Holy Grail and know they’re committing a crime. You must show that you’re still pursuing the truth and that you haven’t reached a predisposed, preconceived view of the case.”

“The job is to be fair and balanced. Do not get ticked off at the XYZ Company, especially when they say something like, ‘The president is never going to call. Get lost!’ A producer, especially after spending a lot of time trying to get their side on camera, does tend to get upset. Put that aside and treat [company offi-

cials] the way you would if they hadn't blown you off. Maybe it solidifies an opinion that they're up to no good, but you shouldn't write the script that day. Cool it."

Best practice

- There are several levels of confirmation. First, there's on the record. That means a reporter is free to use all material from an interview including quotes and the name of the source. Second, there is not for attribution. It can also be referred to as on background. It means reporters can use the information and the quotations but cannot identify the source or even give an indication of whom the source is. Off the record means the name or position cannot be used under any circumstances. Reporters should discuss ground rules in advance, spelling out precisely how the source will be identified or concealed.

Staging

The story has been researched and reported. Missing is historical context, the telling of events that occurred in the past. The need to bring them into the script in a visually interesting way can be challenging to the accuracy and credibility of the story. Again and again, viewers express concern over scenes built on staged video.

Competitive pressures that raise the demand for sensational video have led to staging in which both perspective is lost and the truth is stretched, resulting in a violation of basic journalistic ethics.

Many in television journalism justify staging scenes this way: Old newsreels contained staged events, and the public is accustomed to the fictional sequences in Hollywood films. Early television news relied on film and was managed by men who had little experience with journalistic ethics. Video creation quickly evolved as a means of doing what was necessary to illustrate news reports. It led to distortion and excess.

Competitive pressures that raise the demand for sensational video have led to staging in which both perspective is lost and the truth is stretched, resulting in a violation of basic journalistic ethics.

The top executives — general managers, news directors and executive producers — must be alert to the possibilities that corners will be cut to meet competitive pressures, pursue career ambitions and satisfy the lust for journalism awards.

Best practices

- After a CBS station in Chicago staged a pot party on the Northwestern University campus in 1967, the network established a policy on staging and recreation. It was further amplified in 1971 and again in the current CBS News

Standards guide: “Nothing must be done, in either gathering or the broadcast of news material, that would give the slightest impression that an event took place differently from the way it actually occurred, with regard to time, place, circumstances or content.”

- Editorial oversight based on skepticism is the only sure line of defense against staging and other unethical practices. Every reporter needs a skeptical, challenging supervising producer or editor willing to ask tough questions.
- Peer review is another important instrument of self-protection in the newsroom.
- The lines of accountability should be clearly drawn: Producers and reporters working with camera crews are responsible for the actions of the crews.
- General managers, news directors and executive producers have to stay alert to the possibility of a breakdown in ethical practices, especially in light of competitive pressures, individual career goals and the potential for “award winning” journalism.

Re-creation, re-enactment, illustration

A re-creation sets the scene, evoking the atmosphere at the time of the event. No person is seen. The camera plays the role of witness.

In a re-enactment, individuals who were involved in the story repeat for the camera what they were doing while the events were unfolding.

Illustration provides generic video of streets or highways, or interiors of an empty courtroom or jury boxes.

Sound bites

“I remember one case where the issue was whether someone had heard a gunshot. … In putting this story together, the producer and the editor had fired a gun and recorded the sound and had put it in their re-enactment. …But the sound they used was very loud. That would actually have been a critical element in the case, because it suggested that this person was lying when he said didn’t hear it. In our review, we dealt with that; we didn’t include the sound.”

“It’s very common practice for somebody to read a quote in a newspaper or on the wires and say, ‘We want the guy to say this in these words; he said it in the paper, you make him say that.’ ”

“Don’t tell people to do things they don’t normally do. If someone says, ‘Every morning I get up and I walk to school,’ you cannot say, ‘It would be better if you rode your bike.’ ”

“In the event you have the misfortune to end up in litigation, invariably the plaintiff is going to get access to all the outtakes. You look at the outtakes and you see people being told to stop: ‘Let us move the camera. Walk this way again. Let’s get you from the back.’ There are some risks in that. We have to be careful about how we do it.”

“If it looks too much like the real thing or you would have to explain it carefully to a relative, you did it wrong.”

Best practices

- Viewers should never be confused about what is real and what isn't. The re-enactment must be a faithful reproduction of the original event.
- Federal Communication Commission guidelines urge keeping viewers informed if material shown is a re-enactment. The FCC frowns on the use of staged video but permits it as long as it does not affect the basic accuracy of the events being portrayed. Full disclosure must be in the narration or with superimposed text.
- In a moment of candor, one field producer tossed out an off-the-cuff observation of how things really happen in the field. “Make sure the camera is not rolling when you're asking the subject to do something. Then roll tape. Anyone who sees the outtakes later will never hear your voice giving direction.” That is what happens in the real world of TV news, but it is wrong and legally dangerous. It must be discouraged.
- Actors should never be used to create video for a news broadcast.
- When working with news sources to re-enact a story, don't ask them to do things they don't normally do. This will help ensure the authenticity of the re-enactment.
- When asking subjects to do what they normally do, you may reposition cameras to shoot the scene from a different angle.
- It is easy to cross the line by directing subjects to behave differently than they normally do — for example, asking them to smile or look more determined. This results in a staged re-enactment rather than an accurate re-enactment.
- Be honest with the audience about how the re-enactment was done. If you have asked someone to visit a cemetery and lay flowers on the grave of a family member so you can get video, explain that. If the family typically goes to the cemetery every week and you go along to shoot the scene, explain that.
- The further you go in directing people, having them do things specifically for the camera, the more you have to tell the audience.
- To assure that the audience is not misled by video of, say, a generic airplane to illustrate the crash of an airliner, it is important to describe accurately what is being shown: “An airplane like this one crashed into the ocean this morning.” The illustration is made more accurate if video shows the same model as the one that crashed. The explanation that this wasn't the actual plane must be precise.

Point-of-view footage

Point-of-view footage can serve an important constructive function, clarifying a sequence of events or providing a physical context for the details of a story. POV material can make a television report more interesting, but it may also distort the truth, and its use requires special handling.

Sound bites

“Where possible, label it on screen. Where not possible, indicate clearly in the script, ‘This is what she recollected that it looked like that night,’ or ‘Later, this is what the police believe she saw.’ ”

“When presenting one side of a dispute, it takes on greater weight when presented as a POV. Simple narration can be neutral. For example, if the narration said, ‘The defendant claims that he walked straight, while the plaintiffs say he turned left,’ that’s evenhanded. But if the POV shows the defendant walking straight, it is, in effect, siding with one side in a very dramatic and powerful way.”

Best practices

- It’s important that producers, in doing a POV, illustrate only events that are known to be true and probably not in dispute.
- Put a visual effect over the point-of-view footage: sepia tone, black-and-white image or a grainy effect. By changing the video, by making a dramatic difference, it is a signal to the audience that this is not the actuality.

Chapter 8

The lawyers get involved

This handbook of best practices should not be regarded in any way as the definitive answer to legal questions that arise in producing television news broadcasts. It goes without saying that when there are questions about the law, about potential libel, about First Amendment protections and the rights of journalists to pursue stories with hidden cameras, the best practice is to consult your company's lawyer.

In many newsrooms, lawyers are regarded with hostility. In an increasingly litigious society, it is important to change that point of view. Responsibility for conveying to the news staff the critical role of the lawyers falls to the news executives and to the lawyers themselves.

Sound bites

"[Senior news executives at one network newsmagazine] have abdicated their role in terms of screening for fairness, accuracy and balance. They assume that's the job done by others — the lawyers and the reporter. I don't think I've ever been really questioned in a screening with executive producers about, 'Is that really fair to say that? How do you know that.' It's just assumed that it's there or that others will catch it. The lawyers became the enforcers and the bad guys."

"There was a kind of 'hide-the-ball' mentality. It was a question of getting it past the lawyers. It was a real problem among a few people. We started talking to some of the veterans. They had always done it their way. It was not easy trying to convince them that this legal and standards review is part of the culture, and they have got to go through it."

"We (lawyers) do not dictate how the stories are going to be done. The ultimate decision in all of this is editorial. It's not legal."

"People (on the news staff) have to understand that we (lawyers) are on their side, and we're trying to help them get the best possible journalism on the air while keeping them out of court."

Best practices

- NBC News revamped its entire review process for dealing with material broadcast on its programs. A dual system of legal review and standards review is in place, requiring a double "vetting" of all pieces. It is no longer solely the job of the lawyer to catch errors in fact or editorial judgment. Legal issues are addressed in tandem with a senior management review of the techniques being employed to gather material.
- Lawyers have to make it clear that their job is to help journalists get the best possible product on the air while avoiding legal trouble. One general counsel asks producers to provide sufficient proof of a story's allegations in advance so that if sued, he will have ready access to the weapons to meet and beat the suit. His questions always go to that point: "Tell me how you can prove that allegation and I'll defend it all the way."

Lawyers should be invited to participate in the news-gathering process very early.

- It's important to develop a relationship with the station's counsel. If he or she trusts you, you can develop a rapport and learn one another's interests and concerns. A kind of shorthand develops that might help you be a better reporter in terms of legal pitfalls. Give counsel a heads-up early in the day if you feel there is going to be a problem.
- Journalists dealing with controversial subjects must make sure that contrasting viewpoints are included.
- Lawyers should be invited to participate in the news-gathering process very early. In an early discussion, problems that are likely to arise can be spotted. Where "legal" really has an ability to make a difference is by exercising skepticism — stepping back to say, "Wait a second, I have a question about that," or, "That doesn't seem right," or, "Is that the best way to make the case?"
- Producers of longer pieces should allocate enough time for the screening process.

Legal advice

Sound bites

"Ambiguity is your enemy. Subtlety is an enemy, because it doesn't really translate well. You really want to say exactly what you mean; no more and no less."

"The way you get in the most trouble, particularly in the libel area, is by unintended innuendo or generic defamation. For example, a very interesting topic might be alcoholism among young executives. That's what the script is all about, but suppose the video shows the guy who works next door to my office in the

bar. He's not an alcoholic — and in fact, he's drinking ginger ale. The red flag should go up. If you ask libel lawyers where the libel suits come from, it is rarely the person on whom you're focusing in the story. It's usually some peripheral person that got swept up in some larger story that was not vetted properly."

"In television, you frequently have one person editing, another person writing the script and another person doing the public relations. Somebody at the end of the day has to be responsible for looking at the whole package."

"Build in enough time — three, four or five days — to accomplish the screening processes. In our real world, there's going to be a screening, and then there are going to be re-dos and then there is going to be another screening."

Best practices

- News staffers have to step back and ask, "What are you saying about everybody in this video? Are they identifiable? If they are, does the narration say anything about them that you don't intend?" It's irresponsible to have individuals' faces associated with a defamatory statement by the anchor or reporter that wasn't intended to be about them.

> **Most journalists don't realize that you can be sued for libel even if you never broadcast the story.**

- Reporters need to know they can be sued and have legal risk in connection with news gathering as much they do in connection with broadcasting. So, the same care and balance that are put into the broadcast have to be present in anything that is done in news gathering. Most journalists don't realize that you can be sued for libel even if you never broadcast the story.
- Keep in mind that if you repeat or republish an item that somebody else has broadcast, and it turns out to be defamatory, you can be sued as well. Do your own independent check and then make an independent judgment whether it is defamatory.

Chapter 9

The newscast

First, understand the challenges involved in getting a single evening news program on the air, and the even more brutal test faced by "24/7" news channels. There are no absolutes, and in the competitive and bottom-line-oriented environment of TV news, goals collide with extremely harsh reality. Practical solutions are seized upon simply to get the broadcast on the air.

The evening news is a combination of the news of the day and features stories, which in some newsrooms are called "takeouts" — reports that merit more in-depth time or explanation. They play off recent news stories but not necessarily the news of that day. They are stories that producers think people are interested in and that can explain something.

The governing criterion is "elimination rather than inclusion." And the decision-making is done under almost unfathomable time pressures. Material is coming in from all over, pushing against deadlines that are the fixed, scheduled air times for the newscasts. Unlike a newspaper, which can "hold the presses!" if there is a major late-breaking story, TV news programs have to begin on the hour or half-hour. Maintaining editorial equilibrium under those conditions takes years of experience.

In the case of the "24/7" news operations, ratings pressure sets the tone. Story selection is determined by whom the audience is and what executives think is going to attract viewers. Breaking news drives the audience. The only time people watch in great numbers is when there's breaking news. They turn off the second it's over.

Sound bites

"The first criterion should be: 'What's important, what should people know? What should we be telling them with our valuable time?' "

"The evening news is no longer the only window that the audience has; '24/7,' for example, gives us more freedom to select what to put in, because it increases the choices and the judgments that we can make."

"When you come in the morning (at a 24/7 news operation), what do you face? What you face is a chart that says if it's not hard news, we're in for a rough day. This isn't the ideal world. Ratings pressure sets a tone of what you select to put

on and what you stay with. Who's our audience during the day? Whoever is at home watching television creates the natural line for a lot of stories. There's nothing wrong with that. A lot of tricks go back to tabloid journalism. I don't necessarily consider 'tabloid' a nasty word if it sells papers or sells soaps or sells us, and we get them in the tent. We're looking for the top stories of the day and the stories that are going to attract and hold an audience and keep people coming back to this network, so that when something big breaks, which is our meat and potatoes, they will remember us and they will come here."

Best practices

- The news director and the executive producers should have criteria for a broadcast's content. This vision must be shared with everyone on the staff in order to maximize their editorial and production expertise.
- There are no absolutes, but there are a few axioms, including: What's important? What should people know?
- Some newsrooms ask three questions in assigning background reports and deciding whether to include material: 1. Is my world safe? 2. Are my home and family safe? 3. If they are, what else has happened in the world that affects them?
- As opposed to specifically dealing with what is happening, try to answer the question, "Why are things happening?" Viewers can find out what happened in a thousand different places. But why they happened, what it looked like, when it happened and what it means to the audience are areas that can be even more useful.
- Decision-makers need to be open to different ideas. News directors and executive producers should be willing to accept arguments made by smart people to do something they think is right.

Sound bites

"As a reporter, you tried to come back with as good a story as you could get, but also you knew that you had to be ready so you could get on the air. Content would be compromised at times. News value would be compromised just so you could make the slot."

"You do the best you can in editing scripts and trying to catch mistakes. It's not always easy. Things do slip and get on the air. More people are free-lancers and part-timers with less experience. Trying to make sure that inaccurate things don't get on the air is even more of a challenge."

Picking stories

Sound bite

"I remember a time when a producer was literally charging around the newsroom at 9 o'clock at night, because we hadn't gotten a lead story for the 11. At 9 o'clock, when the police wire [reported] a triple homicide, he was dancing around the newsroom, 'Thank God, we have a big lead story now!' "

Best practices

- In deciding what to include in the newscast, ask: Does it pass the common-sense test? Does it sound right? Also weigh each story on the basis of the two I's: interest and impact. How much interest is there, and how much impact would the story have on people?
- Create a consistent tone of quality for the newscast. Diminish the use of the police scanner as the principal source for a broadcast's content. Encourage the staff to connect with the community, giving people information that affects their quality of life.

Script review policies

Sound bites

"Pieces air on local television now that haven't even been screened by an executive. Now it just gets on the air. There are no checks and balances. In this market [New York], there are O&O's (network-owned-and-operated stations) where nothing gets screened before (going on the) air."

"Everybody's got to see the script. It sounds so basic. You just can't have a discussion about a story. You have to be looking at words on paper."

"The field producers will tell you that 'the rim' (ABC News' editorial control center) bugs the hell out of them because we see every script now. We revise them and we check them because we have people here who are reading the wires. You have to make sure that you're not putting words in the reporters' mouths, but you want to be sure they're covering all the bases."

"The producer had written something at 4 a.m., after having been awake for 36 hours. In half the script the name was right for this person, in the other half it was wrong. All of the senior producers, the editors and the support people in the field had signed off on it. When it got to New York, somebody pointed out the inconsistency. It's simple: The more eyes that look at it, the more of a chance you have to catch something."

Best practices

- Even under deadline pressure, every script should go through a rigorous approval process not only to ensure accuracy but also clarity. Sometimes fairness and sometimes balance are in question, as an unintended consequence of lack of clarity.
- Producers and editors should read scripts and view the completed tape spots before they are broadcast to check for accuracy but also to be sure "hot" adjectives or "cheap shots" are edited out.
- Try to devise a review system with enough time built in to go through every line and ask, "How do you know this? Who said that? How do you know it?"
- To meet deadline pressures for script approval, designate two or three people

in the newsroom who are authorized to approve a story. As a final "firewall," give the anchor the responsibility to at least read the script and raise questions before it is broadcast.

- Ask "What pictures do you intend to use on this? Why are you going to use those? Are they current or are they from the files? Are they germane?"
- Be careful using video of a murder or a crime scene. Insist that editors ask, "Can I use this?" If there's any doubt, leave it out.
- Designate one person to be the editorial resource for ongoing controversial stories with many "moving parts." When reporters are assigned to cover the story, they know they can check with a specific editorial supervisor to determine if that day's developments are new and what is a fair and balanced interpretation of the events.

Being fair

In emotion-filled social issues, one side is usually advocating change while the other is defending the status quo. Often the advocates of change are given the first opportunity in a report to present their ideas. Producers or reporters put the dramatic pictures suggesting change up front, establishing a mood for the remainder of the piece. The "other side," those resisting change, can find itself having to defend, react and answer. The rebuttal frequently fails to achieve enough emotional or factual punch to overcome the initial advantage. Hence the reports are unbalanced.

Sound bites

"You listen to your instincts and you listen to your own sense of fairness. I'm always playing devil's advocate with myself and asking myself, what would somebody else say to this?"

"Occasionally, I will assign somebody to do a piece from the unpopular point of view, and it's amazing how often the reporters will resist that. They say, 'You're making me be biased. I can do an evenhanded piece with this guy's point of view and that guy's point of view. Why are you making me take a biased point of view?' My answer is, I don't think we represented that point of view enough, so let's go to the other extreme."

Best practices

- "Reverse perspective" breaks the formula, deliberately giving the "antis" a chance to go first and making the "pros" respond. It does not matter what the reporter feels is the better argument. What is essential is that "reverse perspective," when applied, is a way to ensure that the continuing coverage of a debate is fair and balanced.
- Producers and reporters should always ask themselves how the "other side" would perceive what is being reported. They may not like it, but they should be able to acknowledge that the presentation is fair and accurate.

The ‘out there’ syndrome

In television, on-air credibility begins with accurate reporting. Accurate reporting begins with accurate news gathering. It’s obvious. Getting the facts and getting them corroborated is the bedrock of journalism. In the real world of getting on the air, it is disingenuous to say that at any given hour on any day, night or weekend, television producers are able to exercise all the editorial restraint that they should.

A considerable amount of current television reporting is based on what somebody else, and often somebody else at another news organization, says are the facts.

It may be due to “24/7,” or simply to competitive juices, but the “out there” syndrome has become a fact of modern-day broadcasting. It means that when a competing news organization has reported something, putting the story “out there,” another news organization feels free to go with the story by citing the first organization as the source. As a result, a considerable amount of television reporting is based on what somebody else, and often somebody else at another news organization, says are the facts.

Sound bites

“It’s probably one of the most significant changes since we first started as journalists. Now there’s a greater propensity to use what someone else has reported, even though you haven’t checked it out yourself. You don’t know who the sources are. If someone’s reported it, I’ll report that someone has reported it and I’m off the hook. It’s terrible. I can’t say that we’ve never done it.”

“It’ll start as rumor in the morning, and by 11 o’clock the talk shows are fighting for a guest for that night to react to the story. By the time the guest goes on the air, the story may even have been knocked down, but you still have him or her talking about it. The guest is not questioning if it was true. The guest is going on the assumption that it is true, making statements even when we’ve already proven that the so-called facts were not true before they went on. It’s totally muddied the water for the viewers.”

Best practices

- Attribute every story to a source: a newspaper, a wire-service report or a competing station.
- Consider whom the source is and then try, if possible, to confirm independently what that source says. If it’s a local story and in a local newspaper, don’t just take it from the newspaper. Try to verify whether it’s true using your own resources.

- Involve senior management. If somebody else's story is going to be carried without your independent confirmation, set up a system requiring it to be approved by two senior executives. When reporting on a sensitive or controversial story, particularly one involving private lives of public figures, two senior executives should approve it.

Chapter 10

'Sweeps' and ratings

Little else produced at local stations gets as much attention from station management and from news department executives as "sweeps." The intensity of ratings competition during the sweeps periods frequently colors the judgment of assignment editors at local stations. Producers save high-profile pieces and high-impact pieces to run then. In some markets, they go strictly tabloid. Sex, murder, child abuse and celebrity-driven subjects are at the top of the list, even though the choices are not necessarily limited to tabloid-type material.

As an industry-wide attitude, there is a growing belief among many news executives that sweeps madness needs to be curtailed. Standing on a soapbox and preaching has little practical value. Nonetheless, as a best practice, it is going to take some station or some group of stations to announce that they are not going to continue to concentrate so many resources in such a narrow time frame. News is a daily, changing process, and journalistic efforts can and should be spread throughout the year.

'Sweeps'

Sound bites

"Clearly, 'sweeps' have one purpose, and that is to get ratings and advertising dollars."

"Most of our investigative stories — the best investigative stories — can be held for two months so we can run [them] at 'sweeps.' We live for sweeps because, one, sweeps count the most; and, two, because [station executives] spend more on investigative stories. People like to watch the stuff. A lot more people are going to watch them, so [executives] want to spend their money in sweeps."

"In some cases you do some of your best work in 'sweeps.' You plan projects for sweeps periods. Some of our very good reporting takes place in sweeps — some really heavy-duty investigative reporting."

Ratings

Sound bites

“We have surveys commissioned and we listen to these surveys constantly. The surveys tell us what the people like — and we go along with what they like.”

“Sometimes minute-by-minute ratings help me understand when I'm not teasing something well enough. Sometimes it helps me understand when commercials seem to drive people away. You can see the audience reacting to what you're doing. You get the sense of an answer to the question, 'Is the program delivering something I want?' ”

“Ratings and research information that was never shared beneath a certain level started being shared. Producers started worrying to a great degree about ratings and promotion. Now, when you walk into some newsrooms, producers are talking about their 'quarter-hour strategy,' how they're going to 'get the meter.' They are not holding discussions about, 'Should we be covering that? Why are we covering it? What's our story?' ”

“I'd be lying to you if I said that [ratings] have no influence. [They have] some influence in terms of what we select. For example, we have found that at certain times of the year people seem to be much more interested in weather stories than they are in another budget story or a tax-cut story or what's happening with price supports. In fact, during periods of severe weather, our ratings tend to go up when we put a little more weather on the air.”

Audience research

Sound bite

“I knew a news director who fired a couple of reporters because they 'got bad research.' I remember saying, 'They're two of the best reporters on the street. Why would you fire your two best reporters?' And he said, 'Because the research shows that they're not charismatic enough.' I said you can't measure charisma for a couple of reporters who have 10 seconds of face time on a two- or three-minute piece. Anybody who is not on the air enough is not going to get good research. It doesn't make them a bad reporter. The backbone of your news operation is the reporting staff.' ”

Best practices

- Look at the “sweeps” news reports in an overall context. Make sure they provide solid reporting that gives useful information to the public.
- Plan carefully. Involve the entire staff, perhaps by asking each reporter to come up with a piece aimed at a specific audience.
- Appropriate the proper amount of resources. Give reporters ample time for information gathering. Use good production techniques.

Chapter 11

‘Live shots’ and extended live coverage

If you are a news director or executive producer, you already know that every day there are decisions to be made in less-than-ideal circumstances. You may still be striving to read each script before it is broadcast, and to be sure that each story has two sources to back up the facts and that “the other side” in controversial stories is always given an opportunity to make its views known. Those are your goals, but you know they are absolutely impossible to achieve.

In an ideal world, a script or anchor copy would go through a couple of levels of editing. First, it would be read by the producer of the newscast and then edited and approved by an executive producer. But, in the real world, sometimes it’s very difficult to get it all done. With more news being added to the schedule and fewer people doing it, which means even greater time pressures, wrong things do get on the air.

“If it bleeds, it leads” is an accurate description of many news judgments in local TV markets. Reporters and producers look for just those kinds of stories to inject excitement into the show. Stressed-out producers can be highly intolerant of people who miss deadlines. Sourcing may be spelled out in the standards and practices guide, but when a deadline looms, well, things happen.

Sound bites

“There’s such a fear of losing audience that you can’t take the time. You have to just jump in there and simply report who’s saying what and where your reporters are working as they deliver enough information to hold the audience.”

“My personal checklist is, ‘Can I do this and wake up in the morning and look in the mirror?’ ”

“As a reporter, you tried to come back with as good a story as you could get, but also you knew that you had to be ready so you could get on the air. Content would be compromised just so you could make the slot. It could have been a better story the next day, but it had to run that day.”

“At our station, we have all these graphics that say ‘Breaking News.’ We put a lot of emphasis on it because it’s new, it’s happening now, and we feel that you need to know about it and you need to know about it now. This is the station that you are going to see it on. We understand that we need to distinguish ourselves somehow from the competition, otherwise people won’t watch us. There’s no reason for them to watch us unless we bring something to the table that our competition doesn’t.”

“You see crisis on the face of the producer. The phone call comes in from the reporter, and clearly the producer is hearing the reporter say, ‘I don’t have it.’ Or, ‘This isn’t a story; we shouldn’t be doing it.’ You see that look of panic: ‘What am I going to fill that minute-thirty with if you don’t have something to give me?’ ”

“Out of necessity, this business has become more and more about time-sensitive ambulance chasing.”

Sources

Sound bites

“It was amazing, looking back, how much misinformation we got away with and were never called on. It wasn’t because we willingly ran stories that were improperly checked. There was only so much time during a day. You had to come back with something. You’re frantic, at the last minute, to squeeze it all down and hope you don’t have a lawsuit at the same time.”

“In a breaking news situation, a murder uptown, it’s ‘Go, go, go, go, go! Your crew is outside, what are you still standing here for? Why are you talking to me?’ My boss has shouted at me, ‘Why am I seeing your face? You’re still talking to me. That means you’re not doing your job.’ Whoever you find first is your best friend. Is what they’re giving you necessarily accurate information? You don’t have the time to get three sources to document what this person is saying. You just hope that the man with the big hat at a fire or the guy with the most stripes is going to be accurate.”

“The idea of two sources these days in breaking news of national significance is often a luxury that you can’t afford. It’s disingenuous to say that at any given hour on any day, night or weekend that we exercise all the restraint we should.”

“When you get back to the office, do they ask you if you have three sources? No. What they ask is, ‘Do you have the interview? Do you have this footage? Can you do a minute-and-a-half?’ And if the answers to all three of those questions are ‘yes,’ you’re golden. You just hope and pray that the newspaper doesn’t come out the next morning and disprove everything in your piece. If you need three sources, the best practice is: Do not lead the 5 o’clock, lead the 11. But does

that mean that your competition also is going to wait? No. If you don't have the story at 5, *Variety* next week says you dropped the ball. You weren't there for the big fire. You didn't have it until the 11 o'clock news."

"When we bought a station two years ago, I did a seminar for our newly acquired staff, and we were talking about sourcing. One of the reporters asked, 'Would you actually get two sources?' Another reporter, visiting from our Detroit station, had been working the police beat for 10 years and he answered, 'Yeah, I even get two sources when it's the police chief.' [He cited an instance when he was going to conduct a live interview with the chief], and it just didn't smell right to him. Sure enough, the police chief was working off 23-minute-old information. The reporter, about three minutes before 5, used his cell phone and called a lieutenant that he knew was slightly closer to the investigation than the police chief was. He got the right information. Even when it's something as straightforward as doing a live interview with the police chief, get two sources."

Best practices

- Establish clear rules about sources and try to stick to them under deadline pressure. Guidelines can govern the use of anonymous sources, establishing when they are prohibited or under what circumstances they will be allowed. Guidelines can set the minimum number of sources required in the different categories of stories.
- If your requisite number of sources in not provided by the reporter in time for the 5 p.m. news, then hold the story for the 6 or the 11 newscast. It takes courage because there is no guarantee the competition will be exercising the same journalistic restraint.
- As a reporter watching a story develop, do not blindly accommodate the desires of the people back in the studio for hyperbole or exaggeration. Report only what you know to be hard facts.
- Acknowledge the darker side of the business in order to deal with the compromises that real-time operations require. Whenever management holds seminars dedicated to the ethics and standards of journalism, bring up some of the more difficult situations you have encountered. By sharing concerns with management above and staff members below, you may discover practical solutions to real-world challenges.

'Live shots'

With the extraordinary increase in technical capability to feed material from almost anywhere, the "live shot" is now a staple of news coverage. Take as visual proof

Who is on the air first with live coverage has become a major consideration affecting the reputation of news organizations all over the country.

the vast number of local news programs whose opening video highlights the station's remote truck racing through the streets. In the often cutthroat arena of local news (particularly the 11 p.m. program), a news director likes to demonstrate that the station is all over the community by "going live" to cover news as it breaks. Who is on the air first with live coverage has become a major consideration affecting the reputation of news organizations all over the country.

Technical capability to "go live" is one thing; exercising editorial control over reports from the field is another. The filter of a news editor looking at copy or a producer looking at an edited piece of videotape is removed when there is a direct switch to the field. A reporter may check in to say, "This is the gist of what I'm reporting," but there's no copy to read, no script to approve.

Sound bites

"I remember one live shot where our reporter was literally getting out of the car and putting a microphone on as the [newscast opened]. We had been gathering information back here (at the station) and feeding it to her in the car when she was on her way. She was merely the [voice] at the scene."

"As the 11 o'clock producer, it happened almost every night. We were always there to get breaking news; that was our job. Sometimes something would happen and we knew more than the reporter did, and I would be on the IFB ('interruptible feedback,' a communications link between a reporter in the field and the producer in the control room) telling the reporter, 'This is what we know, write it down, here we go.' "

"Too often, in the live situation, ad-libbing without a script, reporters resort to cliches and to shorthand. In a carefully written script, you are forced to construct your thoughts and put them together in an organized way."

"We tell everybody, 'Get in front of the camera, tell precisely what you know, admit what you don't know, and say we'll get back (with further information).' I think that there's reluctance to admit that we don't know something."

"You're sort of surfing this information wave and you may be dead wrong, but you have to stay with the pack. It is sort of a herd mentality. It is very, very difficult to hold your own, maintaining your personal standards."

"I find that I am much more conservative in the field than producers back in the studio. I try to act as the brake on something that I see going too fast back in-house. It's because of the competition. People are always trying to get on first with the information."

"It's a simple test to determine whether you're breaking into regular programming and putting it on live because it's news — or because it's ratings show biz. If you didn't have pictures, would you still break into afternoon programming? It's probably a question some of today's producers and news directors can't even understand. They've always had the pictures. And that's the problem."

Best practices

- Many news departments now instruct crews and reporters to stay on the perimeter of the activity. Reporters and producers wait for people involved in the news event to come to them.
- Do everything you can to avoid influencing the outcome of a live event.
- Start with the need for accuracy. Use the reporter on the scene of a breaking story to determine its importance and scope. The first reporter on the scene of a major story may have to go on the air immediately, but once the initial piece is broadcast, he or she should play a role in evaluating the story to determine the scope of ongoing coverage.
- When a reporter gets in front of the camera without adequate time to ascertain the facts, he or she should say precisely what is known. It's okay to say that much is not yet known, but tell the viewer, "Here's what I see, and here's what I'm going to go find out for you." The psychology of the newsroom should permit reporters to admit that they do not know something.
- Review the communications within your newsroom. Many news executives have discovered to their dismay that their ability to communicate with the control room, the assignment desk and/or with personnel in the field is virtually impossible because there is no adequate telephone, cell phone or IFB (interruptible feedback) capability in place. The lead decision-maker should have instant communication with the control room from anywhere in the office.

When a reporter gets in front of the camera without adequate time to ascertain the facts, he or she should say precisely what is known.

- Engage in news gathering from the home office. Get as much information as possible from experts familiar with the intricacies of the breaking story. Feed that to the reporter in the field.
- Be cautious about broadcasting information from police scanners. Scanner information is typically unreliable. It changes rapidly and comes from a faceless voice that may or may not be close enough to a scene to know what is going on.
- There is a tug of war between people in the field and people in the office in terms of how far to go in saying something. Experience in countless newsrooms has demonstrated that the assignment desk and the producers in the studio are usually pushing to say more than reporters know for certain.

News management routinely faces this dilemma: "We have to get the story on. We have to break in, and when do we do it, what do we put on the air?"

Sound bite

"In a live continuous story, your own air is the latest information. You aren't getting information off the wires; you are the wires. You don't even have a two-

minute break to sit down and think about what the hell you're doing and what's missing. The control room gets terribly noisy. You're being drawn by many voices asking you where to go and what to do next. You're not only juggling the video because you're part director, you're also disseminating information and you're trying to listen. It's an almost unrealistic challenge. You're really relying on an anchor who has an ability to continue to recap what little you know or what more you're learning. You're at the mercy of an assignment desk that's gathering information by making phone calls, not always knowing whether they checked out who's on that telephone and whether they are legitimately who they say they are. Somebody can be giving you information under false pretenses, and you don't know it until some time later. The biggest problem for the producer is to listen to all of this."

Best practices

- Have a crisis-management plan in place that everyone knows about. Establish an editorial command-and-control routine involving the assignment desk, the producer in the control room and the anchor in the studio.
- Consider in advance how you and your staff will cover certain situations. Will you put victims on the air live? Will you air unedited, raw video live? How will you use your helicopter?
- Take key people in the newsroom and go into a different part of the television station, away from the hubbub. Ask for everyone's assessment of what steps should be taken to cover a big story comprehensively. To ascertain what's going on, try to conduct a conference call that includes the reporter on the scene. Then make decisions about staffing, editorial flow and the scope of coverage.
- When staff levels permit, position an editorial control manager in the newsroom or control room, through whom information is funneled. Nothing goes on the air unless that "point person" has cleared it. This second producer also can relay information to the team in the field about coverage plans from the perspective of the control room and of news management.
- As video of the coverage is fed into the station, tape editors and producers should review each piece for potentially grisly, offensive or otherwise shocking content before it goes on the air.
- Fairness involves covering a story without bias and with an even hand. Another element requires being fair to the people involved in the story. Avoiding close-ups eschews the sensationalism that could dominate the images on the screen.

Cell phones and 911 calls

Sound bite

"Police released the tape of a 911 call. We put it on the air without hearing it. The story was about a father who came home to find that his wife had killed his two children. He called 911. The police released it about two minutes to 5 (p.m.), and every station in town turned around and put it on the air. There were definitely portions of it that were extremely emotional. This man was experiencing unbelievable depths of despair. We had a newsroom meeting afterward

to discuss … whether it had been too emotional to put on the air. At that point we decided that in the future, 911 calls would not go on the air without us hearing them.”

Best practices

- As part of a staff-awareness policy, develop specific guidelines for handling unsolicited cell-phone calls that come in during live coverage from people claiming to be eyewitnesses. What is needed is a form of editorial filter to assess authenticity and relevance. Fake calls have been put on the air in many instances because no screening was in place. There is no reason to feed a call directly to air without a delay that would enable an editor to listen to the call and decide if it was worth airing.
- When police release audiotapes of 911 calls recorded during an incident, be wary of the content, which could be offensive. Several stations have a mandatory review policy to determine the significance and tastefulness of the material.

There is no reason to feed a call directly to air without a delay that would enable an editor to listen to the call and decide if it was worth airing.

The anchors

The immediacy that distinguishes TV news also makes it dangerously vulnerable to mistakes on the air. Coverage takes on a life of its own, developing momentum and drive, which forces reporters to race, rather than walk, from one story element to another. The anchors become, in effect, editors and reporters. They evaluate, summarize and amplify the material coming in from the field under time pressures and in the midst of near chaos.

Sound bites

“Anchors are the eyes and ears, and if something isn’t clear to them they need to say it.”

“A good anchor helps summarize, clarify or asks the reporter to review points that may have come up a half an hour earlier.”

Best practices

- If there is a contradiction between information supplied by different reporters on the scene, the anchor should point out the conflict. It becomes the anchor’s job to clarify why one reporter is saying one thing and a second reporter is reporting something else.

- Be candid with the audience. When necessary, the anchor should say, “Right now we’re reporting a (certain) casualty count because that’s what our reporter on the scene says it is. Other sources have a lower number.”
- Train the anchors to automatically source material: “the AP is saying,” or “affiliate KUSA is reporting.”
- Communicate with the anchors constantly, directing them by speaking slowly and without ambiguity. It takes practice to filter out the tension and excitement that typically are generated in the control room, but doing so is the cleanest way to ensure that you are in control of the editorial flow of the broadcast.
- If possible, install a computer/video screen system at the anchor’s desk to provide ready access to a hot file of late information and corrections.
- Stations with two anchors find that a best practice is to use both of them to handle the flow of information. During dry times when little is happening, having two people on the set provides some variety. During times when things are moving fast, one of the anchors can take notes while the other steers the flow of the coverage.
- When live interviews are conducted with guests during coverage of a controversial story, it is up to the anchors to maintain editorial balance.

Researching for breaking news coverage

A steady flow of information during continuous live coverage of a breaking story is at the heart of the on-air performance of the anchors and of the people in the field. To provide perspective, they need background, historical references, statistics and a wider sweep of information.

Best practices

- Always challenge your own perceptions. Make sure you talk to enough people who can help give you more understanding about what you don’t know.
- Keep checking out information right up until air time.
- Talk to people who may not have a vested interest in the story or the issue. Professors and recognized experts often can be good. Be careful, because even they may not be neutral observers and can turn out to be advocates for one side or the other.
- Always back up your source. Don’t have just one. Do your best, whether it’s one more phone call, two phone calls or whatever you can fit in.

The Internet

Sound bite

“For every issue, there are 15 points of view. Everybody has got a Web site. Everybody is dropping you an electronic message. The Web site is not the Gospel according to Luke, so to speak. It does not have to be truthful. It’s just information out there.”

Best practices

- Conduct a training course on searching the Internet. It enables the staff to get up to speed quickly on complex questions.
- When using the Web as a research tool, keep in mind that the information you find there may or may not be accurate, and it may lack a factual context. Learn to recognize sources of information that are authoritative and can be presented as such on the broadcast.
- Look for official Web sites. The information is likely to be more accurate, although it can be self-serving. Double-check everything, just to be sure of accuracy and balance.

Chapter 12

Helicopter coverage

The use of helicopters to cover breaking news has been accelerating. Recent events have altered the perception that helicopter coverage is simply a benign tool providing pictures for newscasts.

In 1998 in Los Angeles, a distraught man stopped his pickup truck on a freeway and, after holding police at bay, set fire to his truck and shot himself in the head. It was broadcast live, covered from TV helicopters hovering overhead. One chopper took particularly close shots of the tragedy. There was a public outcry.

The questions raised were: “How could the people at the station allow this sort of coverage to go on the air, unedited? Shouldn’t the director in the control room have cut away from the threatening scene before it reached its tragic climax? Aren’t there procedures to handle this sort of situation?”

Sound bites

“We have done a lot of live breaking coverage and especially with our chopper pilots. We are very, very careful that we have discussions with them before we ever put anything on the air.”

“[Use of a helicopter breeds] accuracy concerns more than anything else. Obviously, the people in the chopper are going to have a real hard time getting hard, factual information about exactly what it is they’re looking at.”

“Shoot everything you can with the helicopter — roll tape and decide how to use it later. You have a chance to think about what video is going out to your viewing public. And your viewers have to be uppermost in mind.”

Best practices

- Off-the-shelf equipment makes it possible to install a 10-second electronic delay. That interval can allow the director to cut away from particularly offensive material. It enables the anchor to explain why the live coverage has been suspended.
- Consider making arrangements with other stations and with the local police to control helicopter coverage of incidents where video could reveal the location of police officers or police tactics. Some stations have voluntarily agreed to keep

their helicopters at a distance from an incident and to refrain from broadcasting any video of police operations while the story is unfolding.

- Take steps to include the helicopter pilot in the editorial-gathering loop. He or she is not just a mechanic keeping the chopper steady overhead, and in those cases where the pilot also operates or aims the camera, it is important that he or she understand the policy for coverage of potentially shocking material.
- Develop well-understood criteria for interrupting regular programming or even a scheduled newscast to show helicopter footage.

Some stations have voluntarily agreed to keep their helicopters at a distance from an incident and to refrain from broadcasting any video of police operations while the story is unfolding.

Chapter 13

Working with police, covering demonstrations

With helicopters overhead and camera crews on the ground, police have ratcheted up their controls at the scene of breaking stories. There is reason for this: Increasingly smaller and more flexible equipment carried by reporters and camera crews enables them to get closer to the action, resulting in a harsh set of lessons. On several occasions news coverage directly affected the efforts of the authorities to bring dangerous situations to a swift and safe conclusion.

Sound bites

"As a rookie 'photog,' I was going live from a hostage situation. Without thinking, I fired up a 10-k light to show the viewers the house of the disgruntled man. It also illuminated the SWAT team. I was immediately ordered to shut off the light and move farther away from the house. By lighting up potential targets for the gunman, I didn't realize that I was jeopardizing the lives of the police — or the reporter's and mine as well."

"You want to do everything you can to avoid influencing the outcome of a live event. It doesn't matter if it's a SWAT team situation, some sort of disaster, a tornado or a major fire, your first priority is to make sure you don't hinder the emergency workers on the scene."

Best practices

- Make contact with the police command post. For your safety, the police need to know you're there. And to protect yourself, you need to know about any extraordinary circumstances.
- In some cities, television stations have voluntarily agreed with one another and with the local police to control helicopter and live coverage of events where video could reveal the location of police officers or police tactics. Under such agreements, helicopters are kept at a distance from an event, and no video of police operations will be broadcast while they are unfolding. Despite the fact that coverage can be limited by these arrangements, even to the point of giving police control over access to a story, the justification is predicated on the fact

that journalists must not interfere in any way with ongoing law-enforcement activities.

- If some orders seem designed to suppress or manage news coverage, field teams should protest and notify senior news executives, presumably so they can take appropriate legal action to protect access to the news.
- Instruct the first crew on the scene to get as close as possible to the focal point without entering a restricted area. Then send a second crew to the designated command post. If staff levels permit, station a field producer at the command post to get more information to feed to the crew on the scene.
- Recognize that situations involving hostages, barricaded armed assailants or explosive devices require special care in live broadcasts.
- Advise your producers and camera crews that they may videotape anything they deem newsworthy including SWAT team activities, but the tape is not to be released for broadcast until the incident is over.
- Do not try to telephone those who may be holding hostages. Such a call could directly impede negotiations between police and captors.

The 'perp walk'

Police want to maximize their image as crime fighters. A graphic way to accomplish this is to show the public that police work has resulted in the capture of a suspect. The device used for this demonstration is the "perp walk." The alleged perpetrator, or "perp," is walked in front of reporters and photographers who get a chance to see the individual and take photographs. Police routinely notify television assignment desks when a "perp walk" is scheduled, particularly if the suspect is involved in a high-profile case. The location and time are generally provided. The use of "perp walk" video varies from station to station.

Sound bites

"When I worked nightside, I would go to precincts and ask to shoot the suspects in time for the 11 p.m. news. The cops would parade the guy down a hall for me, whether or not they'd already walked him or were even planning to."

"It's kind of a double-edged sword. You feel you're being used because they want to publicize the case. On the other hand, the public has a right to know and see these individuals."

"The essential source on identification and the status of the criminal or 'perp' is the court system or law enforcement. When the police have arrested someone and they've taken [him] in, and [the suspect has been processed and charged], we can say, 'Police arrested John Doe today in connection with the XYZ case.' "

Best practices

- Use "perp walk" video only when the police have arrested, processed and formally charged someone.
- Do not name a person in reporting a story until he or she has been formally charged.

- Be precise with the language used in reporting the story. If an individual is merely a suspect, make that clear in the copy. Make sure the essential source on identification and the status of the criminal or "perp" is the court system or law enforcement, not some supposedly informed individual.

> Use 'perp walk' video only when the police have arrested, processed and formally charged someone.

Street demonstrations

News about demonstrations should be telecast in such a manner as to avoid panic and unnecessary alarm.

Sound bite

"We found that when we sent our photographers in and they turned their lights on, it's like [moths] coming to a hot light. People would come in front of us and start fighting and doing their thing."

Best practices

- Neither the police nor demonstration leaders should be a reporter's sole source for accurate reporting of causes, issues or casualties.
- Take extra care to keep stories in perspective so that a scuffle doesn't become a riot in reporting or that a whole city is aflame just because someone has started a bonfire.
- Vans and station wagons with the broadcaster's logo displayed on the side or with rotating red "gumball" lights can be provocative. Consider using unmarked cars to carry personnel and equipment to the scene.
- Keep in mind that cameras, lights and microphones cause relatively passive bystanders to "put on a show." Dedicated and street-trained demonstrators frequently seize on minor occurrences to publicize their views before the cameras. Allow your field teams latitude to make on-the-spot judgments about the cause and effect of television's presence on disturbances. If the camera crews believe they are influencing the situation, they should turn off their lights and even pull out.

Chapter 14

Corrections

There is a perception on the part of viewers that television news organizations are consistently arrogant, insensitive and cavalier about correcting mistakes. Sadly, this perception stems from reality. In the real world of television news, producers do not spend much time mulling over corrections for what they consider to be minor errors of fact.

Sound bites

"How do we know that anybody who saw it yesterday will see it today? There's no continuity between our audiences on a day-to-day basis."

"I think if we made an error and that person threatened to sue us, we probably would put in a correction."

"There are times I think we make corrections that are so trivial that they seem useless to do, but we bend over backwards and do it because the audience needs to know that [we're] at least contrite."

"We have a formal policy for corrections. We brought the attorneys in and had seminars with the people that gather and put our product on the air — reporters, cameramen, producers. It defined their responsibilities to deal with complaints. The worst thing you can do if you make a mistake is not to admit that you made a mistake. … 'Fess' up to it and correct it as quickly and in as best fashion as you can. I want our news department and our television station to understand that."

Best practices

- Establish a threshold for corrections based on your journalistic ethics and your sense of the scope of the error. If you are wrong and somebody points out that you are wrong, try to determine the weight of being incorrect. If the mistake is significant, air a correction.
- One method of correcting errors is to broadcast "follow ups": "Here's a follow-up on a story. We said so and so, and we should have said so and so. We identi-

fied this person as this; we should have said they were that."

- News management should hold training sessions to sensitize employees to the need to listen when viewers call in or write complaining about errors of fact.
- Station management should have a clear policy for handling complaints about fairness, accuracy and balance. This must include a response routine through which the complaining viewer gets a written answer and, if warranted, an on-air correction.

Significant errors in material facts must be corrected, clearly and promptly, in appropriate broadcasts.

In some cases, the correction policy is quite formal, codified in a standards-and-practices guide issued to all employees. Such a policy might state that:

- Significant errors in material facts must be corrected, clearly and promptly, in appropriate broadcasts.
- The broadcast that made the error should be responsible for broadcasting the correction.
- It must be clear that what is being broadcast is a correction. It is not sufficient merely to include the accurate information in a later broadcast; the fact that it is a correction must be specifically noted.
- It is not sufficient merely to broadcast a letter from a viewer or listener that asserts that a news report was in error. The accuracy of the assertion must be specifically acknowledged.

Chapter 15

Promos and teases

The same standards of quality — of fairness, accuracy and balance — that apply to news stories also pertain to promotions of news programming. The news department should have editorial control of promos and teases, even though they usually are not produced in the newsroom. Be aware that promotions can lead to lawsuits.

Sound bites

“You may have worked three months on a story that has all the nuances and subtleties built into it. Then they hype the story with the most dramatic allegation without any of the balance.”

“People see the promo, ‘The most shocking, the most amazing, you won’t believe!’ How many times in the last 24 hours have you heard that on broadcast television? The fact is it’s not the most shocking.”

“In the last four or five years, there has been a considerable increase in time devoted to promoting news stories. A lot of producers, especially younger producers, tend to rely more and more on wire-service stories, even when the content of the wire-service stories clashes with what we’re reporting from the field. So I take [the responsibility] in my role as a reporter to make sure that what’s being said, in terms of the teases and the leads to my story, is what I consider accurate and correct, based on my own reporting.”

Best practices

- Never box yourself in with a promotion of a story that hasn’t been finalized. Story content can change radically, and the promo or tease based on an earlier version may not be accurate.
- Require the producer of the story or someone else intimately involved with its content to review the promo or tease.

The news department should have editorial control of promos and teases, even though they usually are not produced in the newsroom.

- Include the promotion department when going through the legal-review process. Lawyers should read any press release about a story as carefully as they read the news copy itself.
- The promo — whether it's 30 seconds or 15 seconds — and the press release have to be fair and balanced.

Chapter 16

Video news releases, or 'pseudo-news'

A number of news directors have detailed the increasing practice of what a few call "pseudo-news." They define it as the inclusion in a news broadcast of a fully produced video, called a "VNR" or video news release, which the station has received as a free handout. A reporter or anchor is enlisted to provide a familiar voice for the prepared script that accompanies the VNR, and often nothing is said in the broadcast to distinguish the VNR segment from the station's own enterprise reporting. More often than not, these scripted handouts are part of a corporate public-relations agenda.

For example, the source of a VNR could be a pharmaceutical company. The video might contain shots of laboratory technicians conducting tests, pills being manufactured and a sound bite or two from the company's research director extolling a particular drug's virtue.

Local hospitals also have provided VNR segments devoted to medical breakthroughs, including an interview with a staff "expert." These VNRs typically emphasize the availability of treatments at the hospital, and the scripts present the hospital in a favorable light. This tactic has become particularly noticeable in local newscasts as a result of the ongoing debate over the roles of hospitals and HMOs in the delivery of health care.

Sound bites

"It is the next ethical battleground that we're all going to face as news directors. I think in some ways we've lost that battle already."

"There is a driving phenomenon that I'm just now encountering. I feel its pressure all the time. The sales department wants to create new [program elements] that can interest advertisers, and sometimes those products come uncomfortably close to determining what we put on our newscast."

Best practices

- Viewers should be made aware of the source and intent of the producer of video handouts. "Super" the information about the source so there is no doubt about what material is from a VNR handout.

Viewers should be made aware of the source and intent of the producer of video handouts.

- Do not broadcast a handout video release purporting to illustrate the benefits of a particular medical procedure or drug without first getting a second opinion from a recognized medical authority.
- Use a consultant from the local area for medical and scientific stories (unless your station is fortunate enough to have a physician on staff). If the consultant is uncomfortable with something or has a question and doesn't have time to check it out, do not use the piece.
- In the interdepartmental competition at many stations, it is not unusual for the sales department to exert strong pressure in favor of creating newscast segments that will interest advertisers. Without recommending that journalists draw a line in the sand, you should nonetheless be clear about what some have called "the bright line" between pragmatic story assignments and a corruption of news gathering and presentation.

Chapter 17

The FAB system

This chapter is devoted entirely to a best practice that is worth emulating.

In March 1997, the general managers and news directors of the NBC-owned-and-operated television stations received a research presentation on fairness, accuracy and balance in news reporting. The study indicated that local television fared better than many other institutions in terms of the public's trust. Nonetheless, the research indicated a decline in viewers' perception of local TV as a presenter of fair, accurate and balanced news coverage.

To remedy this downward trend, the stations as a group were assigned the task of improving their levels of **f**airness, **a**ccuracy and **b**alance — and measuring the process. The FAB system was the result.

The FAB system varied from station to station, but the procedures at KNSD in San Diego served as a model for the rest of the group. All Monday-through-Friday newscasts were monitored. Each was assigned a four-member FAB team: an on-air person, a manager, a photojournalist or editor, and an "at large" person who worked on the newscast. Often, the "at large" member was an associate producer/writer. Each team member was responsible for watching every newscast, either as it aired or on tape. One member was designated captain. The newscast producer was not on the team. The teams worked for three to four months. Each team member recorded errors in the three FAB areas. The teams met weekly to compare notes and to tally the results. The results went to the news director, managing editor and newscast producer, who met biweekly with the team captain.

The FAB process addressed both "micro" and "macro" issues. "Micro" issues involved basic problems, such as: Were the names right? Were the facts correct? "Macro" referred to broader problems, such as whether including comments only from people of one race presented a tainted picture, and whether "expert" sound bites were representative. In short, the "micro" issues tended to fall under accuracy, while the "macro" issues tended to fall under fairness and balance.

In New York, WNBC analyzed its own "FAB factor" and used the findings to improve fairness, accuracy and balance on its newscasts. WCAU in Philadelphia assigned an executive producer to go through a checklist for FAB prior to every newscast.

The research indicated a decline in viewers' perception of local TV as a presenter of fair, accurate and balanced news coverage.

An extension of the FAB system is in place at WJAR in Providence, R.I. The station has arranged for a lawyer who once was a reporter to act as an ombudsman for the audience. It is unusual for a station to use an outsider, a non-employee, as its ombudsman. Viewers are invited to call a special phone line with complaints. The ombudsman investigates, getting the viewer's point of view and interviewing everyone involved with the story including the reporter, writers, anchors and producer. If the complaint merits an on-air response, the ombudsman asks for air time on the 6 p.m. newscast to present a 60- to 90-second report in a segment called "The Viewers' Voice." This segment appears about once every five or six weeks. All other complaints are answered either by mail or by phone.

Chapter 18

Conflict of interest

Interviews with television reporters combined with observations and comments culled from trade journals and newspapers over two years provide clear examples of the many ways a conflict of interest undercuts fairness and balance.

Reporters are celebrities because of their regular appearances on the air. They are in great demand as after-dinner speakers for various organizations that gladly pay for the privilege of hearing them. Because many organizations have special-interest agendas, viewers and media critics frequently focus on such public appearances as evidence that TV correspondents are ideologically "in bed" with certain groups.

Another area of concern is the pressure that affiliates sometimes bring to bear on a network news department. In the past such pressure has resulted in a network's news management ordering a re-examination of a story that had been approved for broadcast. In this era of conglomerate ownership, high-level network news executives have shown concern about ruffling the feathers of the parent company.

In most cases, stations and networks have best practices in place to handle obvious conflicts of interest. In those overt cases, existing mechanisms are used to clean up the mess and to discipline the offender.

Where best practices do not exist is in those cases when the gatekeepers are the transgressors. It's the classic case of the fox watching the henhouse.

For example, nothing can be done when owners or managers cross the line between prudent review of proposed reportage and blatant interference with material that they deem to be injurious to their commercial or ideological interests. Station owners have used their own public-affairs programming to curry favor with municipal authorities. In addition, commercial considerations can override the journalism. News management can engage in self-censorship — ostensibly for journalistic reasons, but actually to protect corporate owners. It is a growing trend.

In short, all too often broadcast journalists or their bosses choose to ignore basic ethics.

Sound bites

"The owner of the station ... also was the chairman of the chamber of commerce. A new highway proposed to go to [a local] factory, and the chamber of commerce endorsed the project as great for the community. The highway would go

In short, all too often broadcast journalists or their bosses choose to ignore basic ethics.

through one particular neighborhood, and the station owner decreed that the local opposition to the project wasn't a news story. In local news in Iowa at that time, reporters covered what they wanted. We all covered it. That story ran on our station because I just put it on. And I was fired. I thought that it was a huge conflict of interest, but I lost my job.”

“I saw the power of what can happen when you have connections. It had nothing to do with news. It's the kind of thing that would never happen, really, unless somebody had an ‘in’ with the CEO.”

“All the newsmagazines at one network were undertaking an examination of various aspects of the automobile industry. One program was concentrating on car leasing, another was looking at car theft and a third was examining automobile financing. One of the reports dealt with the premise that though automakers could easily include more measures in the construction of cars to protect them from theft, they deliberately did not. It was a terrible idea from the point of view of the affiliates. When the word got out, they were really up in arms because these were their big local advertisers. [The network's president] told me he was involved in putting pressure on the [news division president] to stop that. The pieces had all been reviewed and were ready to go. Suddenly, there was a new wave of review. They really clamped down and took the teeth out of much of what had been produced. [The news division president] made it clear in a meeting he thought the story was a good one but it could not go on the air. It was one of the rare times where I've seen affiliate pressure on a network news division to alter or pull stories.”

“The media [are] running a risk of being not being believed 10 or 15 years from now based on actions taken today.”

Best practices

- Establish a policy that requires all journalists to discuss with the news editor any outside work that might pose an ethical conflict.
- Employees must not maintain directly or indirectly any outside business or financial interest or participate in outside activities that could interfere or even appear to interfere with their news assignments.
- Employees should not accept gifts or favors (other than tokens of nominal value) that give or have the appearance of influencing news judgment. Acceptance of cash or its equivalent in any amount is absolutely prohibited.
- Journalists should not speak for a fee before any group that they cover or might reasonably expect to cover in the normal course of their work.

- Employees should be prohibited from active participation in partisan political campaigns. Active participation means campaigning for a candidate or party, making a contribution to a candidate or party, or taking part in a political demonstration or rally. Employees must also refrain from wearing buttons or otherwise identifying themselves as partisans of one side or another.

Chapter 19

$$$$

Television news has changed. It has become a business. Business pays attention to the bottom line, to cost control, to profit margins, and to consumers' tastes and desires. That's what dominates decision-making in TV news today. It is no longer just the journalism. All the financial considerations are right there at the table when decisions are made every day about what to cover, how to cover it, what to include in newscasts, and how big a staff is needed and at what salary range.

Sound bites

"Competence requires experience in what you cover, and it's unfortunately true that in my newsroom reporters are not doing background reading. At $23,000 a year, I may not be able to get that kind of reporter."

"Our problem is that we sell, as our general sales manager fashionably puts it, 'eyeballs.' And the 'eyeballs' are fewer in number. So the expectation of revenue is going up while what we sell is going down. And as the general sales manager keeps telling me, it doesn't work that way. So what do you do? Well, as most other businesses would do, you look for other revenue sources."

"The first time a sales manager decided to try to sponsor a weather forecast or sports segment separately within a broadcast, a number of us tried to fight it. Then as the recession hit in the late '80s in many places around the country, it became a losing battle. In some ways what we're seeing now is just greater degrees of something that's already started."

"There used to be a budget for specialized reporters. There was a police beat reporter or a regional bureau reporter, people whose job it was to know the territory so that when a certain type of story broke, you could hand them the assignment. That's gone away, and people have become much more general assignment — which means they're less prepared."

"We're filling more air time — hours of news to fill, instead of a half-hour. You're responsible for more products on the air. There's very little increase in staff;

therefore, you have to maximize the productivity of the people. You're essentially saying, 'Just go out there and be the voice and do something.' When we had one 6 o'clock news show and 10 reporters, we could send them out and they could find stories and they could talk to people and really get a real sense of them. … Now we're telling reporters, 'This is what we want.' ”

Best practices

- Resources count in the pursuit of journalism.
- Develop a news department where reporters on certain beats may come back to a source and do additional reporting without a camera crew. Or use a crew to get just a sound bite, not B-roll footage as well.

Resources count in the pursuit of journalism.

- Devise a cost-effective safety net. Look around the newsroom and pinpoint a bright staff member who is not involved in daily news decisions. Designate him or her to stand back and look things over. This individual would have no authority except to raise a flag, "Are you sure that's what we want to be doing?" He or she may catch a few things.

Chapter 20

The general manager

Most general managers did not work in news departments. Most started in sales or programming, which means their experience in determining what is fair and accurate in news reports is limited. General managers who used to be sales executives may have a skewed interpretation of the proper response to pressure from special interests, including corporate management and advertisers. General managers need to understand what is at stake in terms of journalistic ethics and standards whenever they get involved in story selection and in decisions about broadcasting controversial subject matter.

News gathering costs money, and general managers' budgetary responsibilities put them in a critical position. When general managers decide to enhance the bottom line by indiscriminately cutting news department budgets, they are accelerating the potential for erosion of news standards. Less money means fewer or less competent reporters and copy editors, and that means compromising the fairness and accuracy of news programs' content.

Sound bites

"There was an era when no news director ever became a general manager. Then, I think, in probably the '70s and early '80s a great many news directors became GMs, and fortunately we had somebody who understood journalism versus making the bottom line. The large groups are back to very rarely promoting news directors. … Money is now so critical that they feel news directors are the wrong types to have running television stations because they believe it to be all about sales and marketing. And in fact, news departments all over the country, local and network, are being cut."

"I had been in this television station (as general manager) just a few months, and I watched one of our Saturday night [newscasts], and it was a litany of crime stories for two segments. I was so upset I called our news director at home and I said, 'Are you watching the 11 o'clock news?' And she said, 'Yes.' I said, 'Well, something else must have gone on in our coverage area besides what we have just depicted. We've got to tell people other things that go on in our society, besides the police blotter.' "

“It’s the general manager who sets the tone at those stations, more than the news director, more than the president of the company. Sure, the president picks the general manager, but the right general manager helps set that tone — even if that general manager never worked in journalism, even if they came out of sales.”

“I’ve actually heard a general manager say he toyed with having his finance guy run the news department because it was his biggest spending department; he thought that was a way to control costs.”

“The responsibility for this television station doesn’t rest with the department heads. It rests with the general manager. So, ultimately, if it’s something that’s big enough, you must get the general manager involved. If we’re involved in a controversial story that would put us at some legal risk, I think the GM should go to the attorney — find out what the risk/reward is and find out what the legal exposure is. If the attorney says, ‘We’re comfortable with this story in this form,’ then I think, as a GM, you have to say, ‘Okay, let’s go with it’.”

“I got a call from a general manager of one of the [network’s] affiliates, and he said, ‘Well, my group boss tells me I just better warn you we’re pre-empting [the network’s newsmagazine] tomorrow night because 80 percent of my advertising is automotive-related. (The broadcast had scheduled an investigative report on alleged unsavory practices of used-car dealers.) I can’t have a story like that airing on the station.’ And I said to him, ‘You’re out of your mind. You have a perfect right, as the general manager, to disagree with us. But how can you, in effect, censor a well-thought-out, well-produced broadcast that was just a show on the facts?’ They did pre-empt the show.”

Best practices

- A general manager can set a tone that is as important to the staff as the one set by the news director. Accordingly, the general manager needs to be involved at least to the extent of watching every newscast and letting people know what he or she regards as good or bad. What matters is: Is it a good newscast? Have we covered the news well and fairly?
- Like a good broadcast lawyer who dedicates his or her efforts toward helping get pieces on the air, a general manager should also back up his broadcast journalists when they are right, even in the face of controversy and potential loss of advertising revenue.

A general manager can set a tone that is as important to the staff as the one set by the news director.

- General managers who did not come up through the ranks of the news department should make an extra effort to sensitize themselves to journalistic ethics and best practices. There are rules to ensure fairness, accuracy and balance. They are not difficult to learn. Attending seminars (even reading handbooks such as this one) might help. General managers and in fact all broadcast executives owe it to themselves — and to the viewers who depend on them — to be sensitive to the traditions of good journalism and to safeguard those traditions in an environment of increasing litigiousness and special-interest advocacy.

Recommendations

Ratings and "business" considerations are the problem for TV news. That circumstance is not going to change.

For years, in speeches, in newspaper op-ed pieces and in various forums, news executives have decried the ratings competition that now dominates television news. "Exempt news programs from the ratings wars and allow journalism to be the only measure of excellence" has been a common theme. That standard, if ever achievable, has now faded from the realm of possibility. Networks now program their newsmagazines in prime time, watch the ratings and pocket reasonable profits from these programs' low production costs. Executives of network evening newscasts have been known to send bottles of champagne to the broadcast production unit when they win a weekly ratings war against the competition. Local television news always has been the primary revenue source for the station, and ratings and cost controls directly affect the bottom line. All of that means it is an exercise in futility and extreme naiveté to repeat the recommendation here that ratings be eliminated or even curtailed in the universe of television news.

Throughout this handbook there are best practices that provide guidance for dealing with the everyday problems of news gathering and presentation on television. In concluding the handbook, I offer some practical proposals that might make a difference in resolving some of the larger issues affecting TV news.

Technology

Every new device has potential problems attached to whatever increased flexibility it may bring. Smaller cameras can be more invasive. Cell phones can be used to transmit false information surrounded by an aura of plausibility. Helicopter coverage of a crime scene can inadvertently reveal critical information to the "bad guys."

Recommendation

News managers should have definitive plans in place — before a story breaks — on how to use technological wizardry appropriately. As a starting point, they can familiarize themselves with the equipment. Knowing how the "toys" work and how they can be used (or misused) is a good first step toward reducing the chances that offensive or erroneous video and audio will be aired.

Mentoring

There is a new wave of people coming into the business; they lack the experience, the judgment and the skills of the people being replaced. In the face of overwhelming competitive pressures for ratings, combined with technological advances that have shredded the editorial safety net, inexperience causes most of the mistakes that get on the air. It makes no sense to stand around and wring one's hands, saying, "The old days were so great, and we'll never recapture them."

Recommendation

Create a formal system of mentoring. People with the know-how should share it on an ongoing basis with the new people who write and produce the news. The old hands should be encouraged to find ways to apply their experiences to help put the newcomers through their reportorial paces. A mentor can make sure a young staff member knows the basics of reporting a story before setting out with the cameras. This sharing of knowledge might sensitize the new generation to concerns about fairness and accuracy and might help connect the dots between those concerns and the public's increasing disdain for First Amendment protection for journalists. Even if the mentoring involves no more than retaining gray-haired veterans on a part-time basis, do it.

Diversity in newsrooms

Coverage of minority issues by a predominantly white journalistic corps has been difficult historically. Equally difficult has been the question of how to increase the presence of people of color in the newsroom. In the search for a constructive solution, news managers must first face some unpleasant truths. Hiring based on "political correctness" or quotas may not be the best long-term approach to promoting newsroom diversity. The problem with hiring by ethnicity ahead of ability is that ultimately it can hurt the very community that should benefit. A talented journalist of color will serve as an inspirational role model for his or her ethnic group and may also help to change any prejudices among co-workers. A less-talented individual hired largely on a basis of race or ethnicity likely will not perform well enough to inspire anyone, will not do justice to the stories he or she produces, and may reinforce any prejudices held by co-workers.

Recommendation

Spend money on training programs to give minority high school students the skills to understand and meet journalistic standards. Build a talent bank for the future by recruiting and training minority students, giving them internships, guiding them in selection of college courses, and promising a good-paying job upon graduation. Explore offering contracts in the manner of the U.S. armed forces: Your organization might agree to pay for minority students' college education in exchange for three years of work after graduation. The result of this long-term approach will be an increase in the number of qualified and trained minority professionals.

The future

This could well be the last guidebook for television news as it is currently practiced. TV news is now part of the "old media" — in some minds eclipsed by the Internet and even newer broadband technologies that allow for transmission of unfettered (and often unedited) information. Some of what comes through on Internet Web sites is factual. Some is half-truth, and some is completely made up. All of it acquires equal weight when it shows up on computer monitors. Questions about the quality of that information apply even to some Web sites operated by TV stations. There is evidence that certain stations are streaming unedited "raw" material onto the Web. This is a situation that can and probably will backfire, damaging the credibility of the station whose logo is displayed at the top of the computer screen. Moreover, an error on the Internet can invite just as expensive a lawsuit as an error in the middle of a newscast. Providing editorial filtration is an evolving challenge for television/Internet communications.

Recommendation

Stations should establish a separate editorial oversight system for Web material before any line of text or streamed video wends its way into the dot-com world.

Appendix

List of participants

Many men and women contributed to this handbook. Some were interviewed individually, some engaged in roundtables that were recorded, and some provided guidance in the course of conversations about fairness, accuracy and balance. Some sent e-mail messages or letters raising questions, and some provided personal insights that proved extremely helpful. Others wrote memos, analyses and articles. We promised everyone anonymity in exchange for candor.

The following is a list of those who helped in one way or another:

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Christopher, Caroline
Cochran, Barbara
Cohen, Robert
Connor, Michael
Crystal, Les
Davis, Rick
Delaney, Jodi
Dembo, Joseph
Devlin, Mike
Diamond, Jeff
Doss, David
Doyle, Larry
Effron, Mark
Engel, Ilene
Epstein, Bob
Felling, Bill
Freed, Kaycee
Freed, Lisa
Freidman, Paul
Frye, Bob
Furnad, Bob
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Lehman, Tamara
Lesher, Stephen
Lipton, Marge
Lougee, Dave
MacFeaters, Cathy
Madison, Paula
Mason, Linda
McCormick, David
McGee, Mark
McQuade, Margaret Osmer
Melchiorre, Jim

Melisso, Bob
Miller, John
Moody John
Mulligan, Diane
Neufeld, Victor
Ober, Eric
Ortiz, Al
Page, David
Paist, Janet
Parker, Chuck
Perl, Maurie
Petner, Tom
Phillips, Stone
Pollack, Linda
Porges, Walter
Potter, Deborah
Quinn, Ed
Ramon, Christina
Read, Robert
Ridge, Steve
Rosen, Ira
Rosenwasser, Marc
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Schirling, Larry P.
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Schnee, Steve
Seigenthaler, John Michael
Shapiro, Neal
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Sheffler, Dawn
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Simpson, Jennifer
Smith, Terrence
Spicer, Marianne
Stanley, Deb
Stark, Erica
Sternlicht, David
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