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Ethics in Local Television Newsrooms: A Comparison of Assignment Editors and Producers

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ETHICS IN LOCAL TELEVISION NEWSROOMS: A COMPARISON OF ASSIGNMENT EDITORS AND PRODUCERS

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Abstract

This paper examines the attitudes of local television news assignment editors toward ethics in the newsroom. A large majority of producers say newsrooms should have a code of ethics or discussions of ethics, that ethics should not change with the story, and that newsroom ethics are being eroded by pressure to get ratings. It goes on to compare these attitudes with those of news producers from an earlier survey. Assignment editors also ranked how often discussion of certain ethical situations take place in the newsroom.

Television has covered school shootings live, showing pictures of terrified, bloodied students fleeing buildings. Crime is the lead on many newscasts. Shrinking audiences make for increased competition among news stations, enlarging the temptation to sensationalize stories to attract a greater audience. These are huge ethical issues, but television news faces big and small ethical decisions every day. Large and small market television stations must deal with professional ethics in the context of their communities. The purpose of this paper is to explore attitudes toward ethics and ethical decision-making discussions in television newsrooms. This will be done by drawing a comparison between news producers and assignment editors, two influential positions in the local news room.

Ethics and TV News

It is not unusual that ethical lapses occur in television news. More than 500 local TV stations produce thousands of hours of news a day. Most of the stations are competing against at least one other TV newsroom in the city or area, raising the competitive pressure. There are pressures on TV journalists to get the story first. Their news directors, after watching the competition, may confront the reporter who gets beat on a story, and that reporter may have some explaining to do (Smith, 1999). The pressure to be first may force reporters to concentrate on the deadline, and leave little time to consider ethics in putting the story together.

Likewise, pressures to increase the audience, win the ratings race and increase revenue might force news directors and their newsrooms to take chances or do things they never would have otherwise. Add to this mix the fact that in a lot of newsrooms across the country, reporters with very little experience are being hired, and the potential for ethical lapses increases.

The pressure to be first at all costs and to win the ratings battle, combined with the relative inexperience of some reporters, is a dangerous mix. Brian Trauring, news director of WATE-TV in Knoxville, Tenn., and chair of the RTNDA Ethics Committee which recently revamped the association's code of ethics, says many rookie reporters come into the job with poor news judgment and decision-making skills. He says newsrooms have to do a better job of training the young reporters (Heyboer 1999). But Howard Rosenberg, TV columnist at the Los Angeles Times, disagrees. Rosenberg, who also teaches journalism ethics at the University of Southern California, says the difference between right and wrong is obvious. The problem, he says, is not the reporters, but the competition for ratings (Heyboer, 1999).

Ethics in Journalism Instruction

Most reporters do come to their jobs with some exposure to journalism ethics, either in the classroom or through a previous job. In 1994 about 60 percent of journalism schools had an ethics course. Most of the programs that do not have a separate-standing course teach ethics as a component of other courses. In a survey by Lambeth, Christians and Cole (1994), nearly all instructors said fostering moral reasoning skills was important. Ninety percent said surveying the current ethical practice of the profession was important, and 92 percent said preparing students for professional work was important (Lambeth, Christians & Cole 1994).

Ethics in the Field

Codes of ethics are important to journalists (Merrill, 1985; Mills, 1989; Weaver & Wilhoit 1991) but not universally. Just as important are the unwritten professional norms (Pritchard, 1989). Wulfemeyer (1990), Anderson and Leigh (1992) and Meyer (1987) all found support among newsroom managers for codes of ethics in the newsroom.

In most markets, three or more stations vie each evening for TV news viewers. No town but New York has more than two competing newspapers any more, and most have only one. The competition today is for the TV news audience, and it is a fierce battle. Newsrooms are one of a station's profit centers – often its main one. Moreover, this battle to take viewers away from the competition comes at a time when there are fewer viewers of TV newscasts. The huge variety of programs from cable and satellite systems has siphoned off a large segment of the potential viewing audience.

Yet the bottom line is that salespeople need ratings points to sell the product. While there is no study that shows TV newsrooms are coming under the influence of sales managers, the newsrooms are not isolated from the rest of the station. They do not operate in a vacuum.

Whether overt or implicit, do these messages trickle down to the newsroom? News managers may try to insulate the newsroom from outside pressures, but how effective are they?

Allen, Lipschultz, and Hilt (2001) replicated the Meyer (1987) study but questioned television newsroom managers rather than newspaper personnel. Questions were adapted to fit the broadcast environment, but otherwise were the same that Meyer asked. In that study, which questioned producers of late evening newscasts, they found more than 80 percent agreed or strongly agreed that ratings pressures were causing an erosion of ethical standards.

That being the case, it would seem all the more important for ethics to be discussed in the newsroom. If the culture of the newsroom has the largest impact on a journalist's ethics, then discussions of ethics within that culture should take place frequently. In this further replication of the Meyer and Allen et al. studies, assignment editors were surveyed. This provides a wider picture of attitudes among newsroom managers. Assignment editors have great influence over the news product. They decide which stories will be covered during the day (and thus which stories will be available to the producers), and which reporters will cover them.

Research Questions

Research Question #1: Do assignment editors feel that ratings pressures are eroding newsroom ethics?

Research Question #2: Is there a difference in ethical viewpoints between assignment editors, who work with reporters at the beginning of their stories, and producers, who work with reporters on the end product?

Methodology

A national mail survey of local television news assignment editors was conducted in Summer 1999. One station from each of the 211 television markets was randomly selected from the commercial stations listed in the 1999 Broadcasting & Cable Yearbook. The selected stations were called to identify the assignment editor. Those producers were mailed a copy of the survey (Dillman, 1979; Babbie, 1992; Lipschultz & Hilt, 1993; Wimmer & Dominick, 1997). A second mailing of the survey was sent ten days after the initial wave. Ethics questions were one section of a larger study on television news producers.

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

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

The television news producers also responded to a series of demographic questions.

Results

A total of 36 responses was received from the 211 questionnaires mailed, for a response rate of 17 percent. The typical assignment editor in 1999 was 37 years old, *

had graduated college with a degree in journalism or broadcasting, had been working in the media for about 12 years and for his or her current station for four and a half years. Nearly three-quarters (72.2 percent) were male, 97.2 percent were white and 55.6 percent were married. The plurality (44.4 percent) called themselves independent. Two-thirds (66.7 percent) earned between \$25,000 and \$50,000 a year. The three questions dealt with assignment editors' opinions about ethics in the newsroom (see Table 1). Question three gets to the heart of RQ 1. The vast majority, 77.8 percent, believe that pressure for ratings has caused an erosion of ethical standards in TV news. Only 8.3 percent disagree or strongly disagree.

Table 1
Adapted Meyer Questions concerning TV newsroom ethics among assignment editors

	Strongly Disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Neutral (3)	Agree (4)	Strongly Agree (5)
It is important for a TV newsroom to have a code or discussion of ethics.	2.8	5.6	11.1	36.1	44.4
A TV newsroom should adjust its ethics according to the story.	36.1	27.8	22.2	8.3	5.6
Pressure for ratings points is causing an erosion of ethical standards in TV news.	0.0	8.3	13.9	50.0	27.8

Although no causal link can be drawn, perhaps questions one and two reflect this concern. Most (80.5 percent) believe it is important for a television newsroom to have a code of ethics or at the very least a discussion of ethics among the news personnel. Again, only a small fraction (8.4 percent) disagree or strongly disagree. A majority (63.9 percent) disagree or strongly disagree that newsrooms should adjust their ethics according to a story.

Discussion

The results paint an uneasy picture of TV newsroom ethics. It becomes even more uneasy if the results of the 1998 study of news producers are included (see Table 2). Together, these positions more than any others shape the look of the daily newscasts. Stories selected for coverage by the assignment editors are put on the air in an order

and style set by the producers. It is, then, unsettling that nearly 80 percent of assignment editors and more than that many assignment editors feel pressure from ratings. It is evident from a comparison of Tables 1 and 2 that assignment editors and producers have very much the same opinions about ethics in the newsroom, and also feel the product is being threatened by competitive pressures. The answer to research question 3, then, is that there does not appear to be a difference in opinion about newsroom ethics.

Table 2: Adapted Meyer Questions concerning TV newsroom ethics among producers

	Strongly Disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Neutral (3)	Agree (4)	Strongly Agree (5)
It is important for a TV newsroom to have a code or discussion of ethics.	1.1	4.6	11.5	39.1	43.7
Pressure for ratings points is causing an erosion of ethical standards in TV news.	1.1	9.2	9.2	55.2	25.3
A TV newsroom should adjust its ethics according to the story.	23.0	37.9	12.6	17.2	8.0

It is sometimes said that all a newsroom has to sell is its reputation, but in a time of competition that is not always true. A newsroom has stories to sell to the audience. Sensationalizing, skewing and other techniques do often work to attract a larger viewership. It is not always the ethically solid newscast that wins the ratings battle, as evidenced by the recent experiment on WBBM-TV in Chicago. That newscast, which producers say they tried to base on solid journalistic principles, eschewing the pitfalls of glitzy competing newscasts, finished last in the head-to-head ratings. (Nickey, 2001). However, the ratings dropped even further after the experimental format was dropped (Feder, 2001).

The feeling that they are under pressure may be the reason for the results of question one. For whatever reason, news assignment editors felt the need for a written code of ethics in the newsroom, or at least a discussion. The earlier study of producers reveals nearly the same result. Most (82.9) percent of producers agreed or strongly agreed that a written code or discussion of ethics was important. Questions one and

three taken together indicate the people with the most influence over the nightly local newscasts still have a strong ethical drive, and a desire to have the entire newsroom engage in ethical news gathering and story telling, but are finding it more and more difficult.

When question two is thrown in, an even stronger picture of ethics emerges. Just under two thirds of assignment editors (63.9 percent) and producers (60.9 percent) disagree or strongly disagree that a newsroom should adjust its ethics according to a story. Although the numbers are lower here, it still indicates a strong ethical base among those who shape newscasts.

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