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Attila J. Hertelendy MS, MHSM, NREMT-P, CCEMT-P, ACP
University of Mississippi Medical Center

George Vanderslice MS, RT (R) (M)
University of Mississippi Medical Center

Danett A. Dillon BS
University of Mississippi Medical Center

Brenda Jefferson-Nash BS
University of Mississippi Medical Center

Debbie Treolar, RN, MSN, CFNP
Holmes Community College

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Attila J. Hertelendy, MS, MHSM, NREMT-P, CCEMT-P, ACP

Instructor, Department of General Health Sciences
University of Mississippi Medical Center

George Vanderslice, MS, RT (R) (M)

Instructor, Department of Radiology
University of Mississippi Medical Center

Danett A. Dillon, BS

Graduate Student, School of Health Related Professions
University of Mississippi Medical Center

Brenda Jefferson-Nash, BS

Graduate Student, School of Health Related Professions
University of Mississippi Medical Center

Debbie Treolar, RN, MSN, CFNP

Instructor, Associate Degree Nursing Program
Holmes Community College

Abstract

Hurricane Katrina was one of the most devastating natural disasters to occur in United States history. Within months, both the domestic and international news media has moved on to more lucrative stories that inspire higher ratings. The international media, has been criticized for failing to provide balanced and ethical coverage of international disasters, and has focused only on reporting those news items that can be measured in their ratings and has a positive impact on the financial bottom line.

Keywords:

Disasters, Hurricane Katrina, Non-Consequentialism, Impartiality, International Media

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INTRODUCTION

"It has often been said that journalism's role is to afflict the comfortable and comfort the afflicted. Sadly, too many media owners (many of whom have great power) see the role of the media differently: they believe the role of the media is to comfort the comfortable and ignore the afflicted. In World Bank circles our immediate concern may be to find fault with the media of developing countries, but we also need to look at the growing ailments of our media here in the United States." Frank Vogl

Diverse media coverage is one of the most critical aspects of a functioning democracy, without it people will not be able to make well-informed decisions or be able to participate effectively in the democracy. The United States media has been accused of engaging in the mass production of social ignorance. This is well expressed in the title of Danny Schechter's *"The More You Watch the Less You Know (1998)."* It has been proven through research time and time again that people's perceptions and beliefs are closely tied and in some ways formed and influenced by the mainstream media. It is therefore pertinent to address the issues within the media itself.

This paper will focus on whether or not the media has a duty to cover all international tragedies, even if such reporting cannot be measured in their ratings and potentially inhibits their respective financial status. It will also propose recommendations for solutions with application of ethical principle (WADEM 2002).

BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE

Someone once said that a nation's perception of reality is reflected in its media's range of coverage. This would imply that nations which focus on local and only those issues which impact their society are actually seeing reality through a pinhole, while nations which focus both on local and foreign issues that do not have direct impact on their nations have a greater sense of *"true reality."*

By many outside nations the U.S. media has been known for its distortions, omissions, inaccuracy and bias when it comes to portraying other nations (Allison 1986). One journalist, Professor Greg Philo commented, "News reporters were effectively told not to

focus on explanation, but to go for eye-catching events like fighting, shooting or riots. We have been stopped from doing 'explainers' now it's "all bang, bang stuff."

This idea of media distortion has slowly come to the forefront for those who call America home. However, because these biased views are delivered to the American citizen by the U.S. mainstream media, it has become difficult to obtain an open and objective view of many issues that involve the United States. In a democracy one of the key elements is the ability to maintain a free and impartial media, so that the functioning democracy can educate citizens with well-informed views and opinions. Yet this very task becomes impractical when the media becomes plagued with various prejudices and inaccuracies (Birkhead 1986).

News coverage of Australia is an important case study of the news selection, bias, or gatekeeping processes at work in U.S. network TV newscasts. The great distance from the U.S. and network budget cuts regarding foreign bureaus (Sanit 1992) work against routine coverage using the network's own resources. As with all international coverage on U.S. networks, stories must get past a "gatekeeper", (typically a producer or assignment editor); mindset that stories must have a strong visual element, universal appeal and/or an obvious U.S. connection to make it onto the newscast. Of course, one of the best ways to see the effect of gatekeeping is to note what happens in its absence, such as in a program like Cable News Network's *World Report*. CNN's unusual arrangement with international producers allows each contributor who submits one news package per month to make use of all transmitted programming for the entire month in his or her own domestic news programming. Occasionally producers of other CNN news programs use *World Report* packages within those programs. The CNN *World Report* Television Archive, partially funded by CNN, is maintained at Texas Tech University for academic research purposes.

Another important television news archive is the Vanderbilt Television News Archive and Index. It has taped and logged all U.S. network television evening newscasts (ABC, CBS, and NBC) since October 1968. Both have online indices. Thus, the CNN *World Report* can be combined with the Vanderbilt Index to examine news selection in very different news environments; and, indirectly, to see the effect of those environments on news selection.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature is extensive in describing ethical journalism but very little study has been made into the link between ethical media coverage of international tragedies and the corollary to financial gain (Eth 1992).

ETHICAL JOURNALISM

Journalism is a cutthroat business, the unsavory practicalities of which do not lend themselves to academic study. (Blackhurst 1997, p.23) Much of the mainstream media in search of high ratings portray graphic scenes of human suffering. Research has indicated that blood shown on television makes a difference in the perceived emotional impact of the story (Wilkinson 1995; Belsey 1992). Norris (2002) argues that ethics are questionable in disaster reporting, especially in developing countries which may be more psychologically affected by disasters than those in developed countries.

GATEKEEPING

Most news agencies are for profit companies. Based on a study by Harmon (1998), U.S. media outlet covering Australian news, it is reasonable to conclude that "gatekeepers" would not permit the coverage of international tragedies if the story does not impact positively on ratings. The term "gatekeeper" was used by David Manning White to describe the news selection processes of a wire editor at a newspaper. When White (1950) asked that editor to write on copy why he selected or rejected the stories, White got answers that mirrored traditional news principles: significant, controversial, unusual, and interesting to the audience. Harmon (1989) conducted a similar gatekeeping participant observation and content analysis study using Cincinnati television news producers. He found that traditional news principles made up roughly half the stated reasons, but that the remaining gatekeeper choices revolved around three questions: (1) Will this story interest all or most of my viewers? (2) Can this story be shown to my viewers? (3) How will this story fit with the rhythm, flow, and content of the rest of the newscast? Berkowitz (1990) extended Harmon's work, and found a significant amount of gatekeeping by assignment editors as well as producers. He also found in an Indianapolis case study and participant observation that news selection decisions were based on several considerations in addition to news values, such as ratings impact. News content seemed to be built from information that was easy to explain, that would

provide a good audience draw and that could be assembled with efficiency of effort (p. 66).

Regarding U.S. network TV newscasts, the findings from this analysis neatly parallel the Breen (1996) and Larson (1982) observations. Australian stories rarely appear on U.S. network TV newscasts. Network crews infrequently venture to Australia to create reporter packages since there is no financial gain. Instead, news is gathered from wire services and the video of others. This leads to brief accounts of brush fires, sailing races, tennis matches, and amusing features frequently highlighting unusual animals.

The highly competitive gatekeeping process in U.S. network TV news means that all stories selected must interest all or most of the audience. Evaluation of literature based on Australian gatekeeping merits extrapolation when considered with international disaster reporting in countries far removed from mainstream America (Dilawari 1991).

DISCUSSION/ CRITIQUE OF DILEMMA

The media has a duty to cover all international and national tragedies, even if such reporting cannot be measured financially or in their ratings. Only through thorough, comprehensive, and ongoing analysis based on quantitative and qualitative research can liberal bias in the media be documented. Some critical factors for the media to consider include: rational awareness; critical thought and compassion; decreased greed, hatred and ignorance.

Rational awareness is the conviction that mainstream newspapers and broadcasters should not provide a profoundly distorted picture of our world based on bias. The increasingly centralized, corporate nature of the media means that they act as a de facto propaganda system for corporate and other establishment interests. The costs incurred as a result of this propaganda, in terms of human suffering and environmental degradation are incalculable. We all have a tendency to believe what best suits our purpose and highly paid, highly privileged editors and journalists are no exception. But the inevitably corrupting effects of free market forces operating on and through media corporations seek profit in a society dominated by corporate power.

Critical thought and compassion is dependent upon the idea that journalists are generally guilty of self-censorship and conscious lying. It developed because of our frustration with the unwillingness or inability of the mainstream media to tell the truth

about the real causes and extent of many of the problems facing us. Such issues include human rights abuse, poverty, pollution, etc.

A genuine tragedy is that society has for so long been forced to rely on the corporate media for "accurate" information. It seems clear to us that quite obvious conflicts of interest mean it is all but impossible for the media to provide this information. We did not expect the Soviet Communist Party's newspaper Pravda to tell the truth about the Communist Party, why should we expect the corporate press to tell the truth about corporate power?

The belief is that media "neutrality" is a deception that often serves to hide systematic pro-corporate bias. "Neutrality" most often involves "impartiality". Reporting dominant establishment views, while ignoring all non-establishment views, in reality is not possible for journalists. Therefore neutrality cannot be maintained. Regardless of whether we do or do not overtly give our personal opinion, that opinion is always reflected in the facts we chooses to highlight or ignore. Seeking to correct corporate distortions as honestly as possible is a concern that affects "objectivity".

Decreased greed, hatred and ignorance are predicated upon the fact that much suffering is ingrained in the unlimited insatiability of corporate profit-maximizing. The world should be engaged to do whatever possible to reduce human suffering and to resist the forces that seek to lessen human well-being. And we do rely on the media for accurate reporting of this information. Passively observing human misery without attempting to intervene constitutes "neutrality" and this could be deemed more important than doing all in our power to help others. There are appalling crimes against humanity that remain unreported, especially on the international level, and the media has a duty to report them (Belsey 1992; Norris 2002).

RECOMMENDATION/ ETHICAL THEORY

"We live in a dirty and dangerous world. There are some things the general public does not need to know about and shouldn't. I believe democracy flourishes when the government can take legitimate steps to keep secrets and when the press can decide whether to print what it knows." Katherine Graham

This statement made by the Washington Post owner is in complete opposition to what a democratic society should encompass. Democracy is defined as a philosophy which

insists on the right and the capacity of people, acting either directly or through representatives, to control their institutions for their own purposes. Such a philosophy places a high degree of value on the equality of individuals and would free people as far as possible from restraints not self-imposed. It insists that necessary restraints be imposed only by the consent of the majority and that they conform to the principle of equality. Since, the U.S. considers itself such a society, how could it uphold such a statement by doing nothing about the media's manipulation of local and international issues? As a democracy, we are supposed to be a nation which prides itself on morality and equality.

It would seem because of this, the United States would take on the view of

Non-consequentialism, which, also places high values on equality and morality. In doing so, it would be mandatory that the U.S. media inform its citizens with accurate, unbiased information regarding local and international affairs, not only because it is the moral thing to do, but because of its moral obligation to other nations to portray true and untainted issues which do not demean their nations' integrity without warrant.

The most elementary parts of our U.S. democracy, freedom of speech, of press, and of human rights must not be violated by our manipulative media. However, since the media is controlled by corporate executives, who are more concerned with financial advancement rather than real, unbiased reporting of international news, they are in fact restricting the journalist's freedom of speech and thus also violating the viewer's freedom to be educated accurately by the press. These elementary violations of the constitution must not continue to dominate our society if we are to remain a democracy. A nation which violates its most fundamental principles is a nation that does not portray strength.

The First amendment says, "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people to peaceably assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances," our nation at the very least must uphold these fundamental principles of its government (Hodges 1998).

Since journalists have an immense power of influence, perhaps the change should start with them. Journalists can organize groups which speak out about their restrictions in writing the "plain truth." They can find organizations and write publications which

educate Americans on the "how and why" certain news topics receive so much more publicity and attention than others (Hodges 1998). They can forewarn citizens that the truth is not always accurately portrayed in the news, which so many relies on for developing political views and opinions. I also challenge journalists to invent a language or writing that lacks the ability to influence people with writing style when it comes to news. News should be written in a different type of English than editorials which often slant news to a particular view. Very strict rules should be placed on the use of all parts of speech, especially adjectives, which tend to lead to a positive or negative tone. This "news writing" should be particularly dry and contain virtually no expression from the author, giving Americans the chance to be able to form their own views and opinions without influence or interference from the media. We as citizens need to help support journalists by joining them in rallies of freedom of speech and by demanding that the truth on political and international issues be portrayed.

CONCLUSION

The press like any other profession has ethical and unethical representatives. In a review of literature addressing the duty of the media in reporting about international tragedies, controversy abounds. Increasingly reporters are pressured to find sensational stories and to avoid casting news that might displease advertisers or financial backers (Davis 1995). Reporting accurately and fairly requires a delicate balance. Decisions not just on what needs to be reported but also how it is going to be reported is crucial. There is a sense of duty to the public to report international tragedies, but there is the moral code that governs the possible exploitation of innocent victims (Eth 1992; Wilkinson 1995). Reporters should be held accountable for the protection and safety of all victims of tragedy. In a free press society, the balancing of public interest and privacy is always a difficult one (Blum, 1993).

In a world in which globalization continues to increase, the media has an enormous role in increasing public awareness. It possesses the ability to spread critical and important information to areas which in the past were not open to receiving diverse views. It also has the great potential to contribute to the democratic process and influence other countries and regimes which are not democratic. However, if the mainstream media continues to view other countries in such a demeaning way in which it uses its ability to push ideas and cultures of its more dominant interest, the media's power will surely diminish and only function as a narrow viewed filter for the citizens of its own nation. If

international news continues to decline at this time of world globalization, American journalists will face threats of censorship, beatings and even death for reporting issues that may be controversial due to the lack of objective reporting that is influenced and to a great degree controlled by corporate institutions which place emphasis on their financial advancement. Former journalist, Frank Vogl, summed up the impact the media will have on our nation in the following statement, "We have more TV channels than ever before, but they do little to bring us the fair, objective, tough reporting that we need to strengthen our society."

AUTHORS' CONTACT INFORMATION

Attila J. Hertelendy, MS, MHSM, NREMT-P, CCEMT-P, ACP

Instructor

Department of General Health Sciences, School of Health Related Professions,

University of Mississippi Medical Center

Jackson, Mississippi

George Vanderslice, MS, RT (R) (M)

Instructor, Department of Radiology

University of Mississippi Medical Center

Jackson, Mississippi

Danett A. Dillon, BS

Medical Technologist, St. Dominic's Hospital

Graduate Student, University of Mississippi Medical Center

Jackson, Mississippi

Brenda Nash - Jefferson, BS

Graduate Student, School of Health Related Professions

University of Mississippi Medical Center

Jackson, Mississippi

Debbie Treolar, RN, MSN, CFNP

Instructor, Associate Degree Nursing Program

Holmes Community College

Ridgeland, Mississippi

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