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ABSTRACT

Television journalism has long been the object of study by scholars of news media ethics. A study examined the reasoning process and the criteria for judgment used by viewers when evaluating possibly problematic television (TV) news content, and analyzed these criteria as they are applied to ethical issues and problems in TV newscasts. Thirty-four television viewers participated in semi-structured depth interviews on issues related to TV ethics. Results indicated that viewers employed specific criteria and reasons (e.g., viewer harms or benefits, remaining within the law, avoiding gratuitous sensationalism, freedom of speech, etc.) as they evaluated ethical issues in TV news. People used similar criteria, however, in different ways to justify different positions. (Two tables of data are included; 18 references are attached.) (Author/PRA)

Audience Evaluations of Ethical Issues in Television Journalism: An Analysis of the Criteria Used for Judgment

International Communication Association
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Abstract

Little has been done to discover the reasoning process used by viewers to evaluate TV news. What standards and criteria for judgment do people use when evaluating possibly problematic TV news content? This paper attempts to discover and analyze these criteria as they are applied to ethical issues and problems in TV newscasts. We conducted semi-structured depth interviews of 34 television viewers, and found our sample to be adept at discussing issues related to TV ethics. Overall, we found that viewers do employ specific criteria and reasons (e.g., viewer harms or benefits, remaining within the law, avoiding gratuitous sensationalism, freedom of speech, etc.) as they evaluate ethical issues in TV news. However, different people used similar criteria in different ways to justify different positions.

Audience Evaluations of Ethical Issues in Television Journalism: An Analysis of the Criteria Used for Judgment

Television journalism has long been the object of study by scholars of mass media ethics. However, most of the ethical analysis uses traditional ethical models based in philosophy and/or case studies of journalists to investigate the issues. (see Christians, et. al., 1987, and Fink, 1988). These investigations focus on reporters, editors and other news workers who must balance often conflicting pressures and values as they make difficult news decisions. There is a growing body of empirical research on how participants in the news process see ethical issues. Many of these studies use questionnaires and interviews to assess news workers' perceptions of ethical problems and how they might resolve them. (see Meyer, 1987; Hadley, 1989; Stoner, 1990) Other studies of TV newsworkers analyze how organizational and time pressures, work routines, and resources affect the final product. (see Bantz et al., 1980; Cohen, 1987; Powers, 1977). However, there have been far fewer empirical studies of the audience attitudes towards ethical issues in TV news. A complete understanding of the sources, content, and effects of ethical problems in TV news is not possible without study of the news organizations, the news media, the news content, and the audience. This study explores the reasoning process and criteria for judgment used by 34 TV viewers to evaluate ethical issues in TV news. Rather than using a highly structured questionnaire, we chose to interview the viewers in some detail to understand differences in how they evaluate various ethical issues, and to discover the kinds of criteria they apply when making evaluations of ethical issues.

Literature Review

Empirical studies on audience reactions to ethical issues in TV news are somewhat rare, except for general surveys of viewer reactions to the quality or credibility of TV news. The most complete surveys of TV audience attitudes were done in a series of studies in 1960, 1970, and 1980 (see Steiner, 1963, Bower, 1973, 1985). Over the twenty year period the studies found increasing use of TV, but declining levels of satisfaction with programs and increased concerns over violence and adult themes. However, TV news was seen as getting better over the period, and viewers wanted more news and educational programs. Rarick and Lind (1990) found high viewer concern over violence and adult themes, but rather less concern over problems in TV news. They found viewers to be more concerned about ethical breaches in entertainment programs than in TV news broadcasts. Other surveys by Roper over the years have consistently found TV to be the most credible and most frequently used source of news (see Roper, 1985), although the Roper findings have been criticized on methodological grounds since the polls have been published. Additional questions about credibility surveys grew from an apparent contradiction that newspapers provide more

detailed and precise reporting than TV, yet TV outscores newspapers in credibility. This and an increased public concern about the appropriate role of the press, and perceived news bias during the 1970s, led to further studies of media credibility in the 1980s. Most notable were four surveys done in 1985 which found the public has favorable impressions of the media, especially as watchdogs over government (see Gaziano, 1988). However, there is concern over media bias, too much dramatic sensational news, and invasion of privacy. These studies disagreed with one another in certain of their findings, due possibly to use of different methods of measurement. In fact, recent studies have found that how credibility is measured can affect the results significantly. For example, Newhagen and Nass (1989) found that people judge the credibility of newspapers on their performance as institutions, but evaluate TV news largely on the performance of on-camera personalities.

Most of these studies have used standard questionnaires to assess viewer attitudes toward general issues of credibility, bias, problematic content, and press roles. Little has been done to discover the reasoning process viewers use to make their evaluations of TV news. What standards and criteria for judgment do people use when evaluating possibly problematic TV news content? Depth interviews have been useful in discovering the reasoning process in moral judgments in other contexts, so we explored the moral development literature for ideas on how the reasoning process might be investigated. Kohlberg (1981) and Rest (1979) have used moral dilemmas and depth interview procedures, as well as standard questionnaire and content analysis techniques to trace the moral development of children. Depth interviews have been used to assess how viewers process TV news stories (see Graber, 1988), but we were unable to find comparable open ended studies of how TV news viewers evaluate ethical issues. Exploratory studies of the TV viewers reasoning process and criteria used to evaluate ethical issues might lead to more precise and detailed questionnaires or surveys concerning credibility, preferences, and values that persons attach to TV news.

Research Questions

Our major purpose was to discover the criteria used by TV viewers to evaluate ethical issues and problems in TV newscasts. Our study looked at two dimensions of response to our interview questions: first, the ability of viewers to discuss and analyze their response to ethical issues in TV news, and secondly (and most importantly) the actual content of those verbalizations. We hoped to identify common themes or criteria that persons use to talk about ethical issues in TV news, and to discover the variability in response that persons bring to their evaluations of ethical problems. Thus, our four research questions were:

1. What are viewer attitudes toward selected ethical issues in TV news reporting, and how do viewers differ in their attitudes?

2. What criteria, reasons, and justifications do viewers use to support their attitudes on ethical issues in TV news, and how do persons differ in criteria used to judge ethical issues?
3. How do viewers react to ethical dilemmas in TV news reporting, and how do viewers differ in their evaluations of these dilemmas?
4. What criteria and justifications do viewers give for their evaluations of ethical dilemmas in TV news reporting, and how do viewers differ in their use of ethical criteria for judgment of dilemmas?

This study was limited to viewer responses to regularly scheduled TV newscasts, at the local or network level. It did not include genres such as documentaries, news magazines, news interview programs, or information/entertainment programs. Since the study was intended to discover patterns of response and to identify general areas of agreement and disagreement in application of criteria, the findings are not intended to be generalized beyond our small sample.

Method

A quota sample of 34 TV news viewers was interviewed using a semi-structured interview which assessed their attitudes toward selected ethical issues in TV news, and their responses to ethical dilemmas facing TV news reporters. Extensive probing was used to discover the criteria and reasoning the viewers used in reacting to these ethical issues. In developing the instrument, we were aware that studies of ethics are susceptible to possible social desirability bias, in that persons may attempt to present their best face to the interviewer in reacting to sensitive issues. Additionally, as previously cited studies have found, question wording and instructions can also influence the results. We decided to use a mix of highly structured, specific attitude questions and scenarios depicting ethical issues along with intensive probe questions. The structured attitude questions and brief dilemma scenarios helped assure that all respondents were reacting to similar concepts. Probe questions were given standard wording as well, but interviewers were instructed to probe as much as necessary beyond those standard probes to elicit criteria and reasons for evaluations.

Thus, our interview schedule began with questions about what TV news programs were viewed, and reasons for viewing. The next section presented persons with six statements based on common ethical issues and criticisms of TV news, such as " Most TV reporters are so concerned about getting a good story that they don't worry about invading peoples' privacy." Viewers were asked if they agreed or disagreed, and then were asked standard probe questions. First, they were asked why they answered as they did. Then, if they agreed, they were asked, "Having said you agree, can you think of any positive things about reporters being so concerned with getting a good story that they don't worry about invading peoples privacy?" If persons disagreed, they were asked an opposing probe. These probes were designed to

discover their reasoning process, and elicit criteria for judgment. Probes got at persons' ability to see both sides of the ethical issues and to discuss them from many points of view. The six statements tested views on concern for ratings, objectivity, sensationalism, privacy, watchdog role over government, and sponsor pressures. In the last part of the interview, viewers were presented with three scenarios depicting ethical dilemmas faced by TV news workers. One read: "A TV reporter pretends to be a customer and uses a hidden camera to expose a dishonest insurance salesman--would you run this story or not run the story?" Having answered run or not run, the viewer was asked the reasons for the choice, and then those reasons were further probed. The three scenarios covered invasion of privacy, disclosure of government secrets, and use of hidden cameras. In each, a possible ethical breach was balanced by a positive social outcome--thus, we reasoned, creating an ethical dilemma.

Sample- A quota sample designed to represent gender, age, education, and occupation groups was selected by trained interviewers from a college interviewing class. The interviewers selected 34 TV news viewers who represented roughly equal gender (15 male, 18 female) and age (18 were 18-34, and 15 were 35 and over) and political (10 liberal, 6 conservative, 14 middle of road, 3 unaffiliated). The sample was evenly divided between students and non-students (17 students, 16 workers). (Note: One of the 34 persons did not provide demographic data, so above is based on 33 who did.) However, the sample was skewed in favor of higher education (32 of 33 had attended or graduated from college). All interviews were taped and transcribed, and most lasted 15 to 30 minutes. The interview transcripts were subjected to thematic analysis, with two independent coders noting all themes and criteria persons used to discuss the issues and dilemmas. Each coder then created thematic categories for half of the interviews, and the coders compared categories, noted all identified categories, and assigned each response or comment to each category. No formal counting or content analysis was done on the categories and themes, but it was very clear that two or three major themes and criteria (along with two or more minor themes)were used consistently by viewers for each of the question areas. Demographic data and categorical answers to attitude questions (agree/disagree; run/don't run) were tabulated. A final closed question revealed that most respondents found the interview to be easy to do and allowed them to express their views (25 said interviews were easy to do; 7 said it was somewhat difficult, but could express their views; one found it very difficult to express views). The detail and elaboration in our results tend to confirm that respondents found the interview a useful way to structure their thinking about ethical issues in TV news.

TV News Viewing: Persons in our sample tend to be light to moderate viewers of TV news, with 10 persons viewing network news at least three times a week, and 19 persons viewing local news at least three times per week. The most commonly-cited reasons for viewing TV news was for "hard news," while significant numbers also tuned in for weather or sports. It was clear our respondents had adequate experience with TV news to be able to discuss the ethical issues in some detail and with considerable use of examples.

Results

Research Question 1. "What are viewers attitudes toward selected issues in TV news reporting, and how do viewers differ in their attitudes?" We asked viewers to respond to a series of six commonly-discussed ethical issues in television news. These issues ranged from the impact of "light entertaining stories" on overall journalistic quality to the influence of business and sponsor pressures on televised news content. We first asked viewers whether they agreed or disagreed with each of the statements, and then we asked them to elaborate on their responses. Such elaborations will be discussed below, under Research Question 2, but Table 1 contains the raw frequencies of those who agreed or disagreed with each of the statements. Four out of the six issues were met with overwhelming agreement, and indicated a mix of both positive and negative perceptions about television news. Respondents seemed to have strongly held opinions about a perceived loss of journalistic quality due to an emphasis on light entertaining stories, a lack of news about certain important issues due to an emphasis on dramatic visual or sensational stories, and journalists' lack of concern about people's privacy due to an emphasis on "getting a good story." However, not all the responses were negative. Viewers also exhibited a high level of agreement that it is important for TV news to perform what is commonly referred to as "the watchdog function" of the press, although they were not so confident that reporters are very careful to remain objective. On the other hand, respondents exhibited much disagreement about whether or not TV news is affected by business and/or sponsor pressures. Overall, viewers seemed to find the specific question about business pressures fairly difficult to respond to, and this will be discussed under Research Question 2, below.

Table 1: Reported perceptions of various ethical issues in television news.

ISSUE	AGREE	DISAGREE	UNSURE	MISSING
1) "Some people say that the journalistic quality of TV news has suffered because newscasts do too many light entertaining stories in order to get high ratings."	27	7		
2) "TV News reporters are usually very careful to remain neutral and keep their opinions out of stories--so the stories are objective."	21	13		
3) "TV newscasts too often emphasize dramatic visual or sensational stories at the expense of news about important issues."	29			
4) "Most TV reporters are so concerned about getting a good story that they don't worry about invading peoples' privacy."	30	3	1	

(Continued on next page)

5) "An important role of TV news is to investigate and criticize government actions--making sure government officials are accountable to the public."	29	5		
6) "TV news fails to cover some important stories because of pressure from sponsors or from big business interests --this shows TV news is more concerned with profits than the interests of the public."	16	12	5	1

Research Question 2. "What criteria, reasons and justifications do viewers use to support their attitudes on ethical issues in TV news, and how do persons differ in criteria used to judge ethical issues?" Having received the responses to the ethical issues as outlined in Table 1, we wanted to uncover the underlying reasoning used by individuals in responding to such questions. We attempted to do this by using a series of questions designed not only to make clear the reasons for each response, but also to ascertain the degree to which a respondent could see "the other side" of the issue. This strategy generated some very "rich" data that inform us not only about the respondents' reasoning processes, but also about their openness to opposing points of view, their ability to discuss ethical issues, and, importantly, about their media literacy. In the space of a single report we will be unable to discuss all that these data have begun to tell us. In this section of the paper, we will address the criteria, reasons, and justifications used by viewers in their support of a particular ethical position. This analysis will be arranged by ethical issue, presented in the same order as these issues were laid out in Table 1. Note that we have not performed an actual content analysis; rather, we have investigated the responses in an attempt to discern patterns. In the following discussions of such patterns or trends, we use broad strokes to provide a rough illustration of viewer responses to these questions. By so doing, much detail will of necessity be lost, as will some of the intricacies of some responses.

TOO MANY LIGHT ENTERTAINING STORIES: Those who agree that there are too many light entertaining stories on television news appear to have three basic things to say. First, that this is due to pressures of "competition," "hype," "ratings," and a need to "appeal to many viewers." Second, there is concern about the perceived negative results of this practice, that it is "trivial," "there is a loss of information and analysis," it is "fluffy," "non-significant," and "cheap." The third response pattern centers around the perception that news contains a blend of light and hard news content, which is not negative in and of itself, but the blend often is unbalanced, and contains "too much light content."

These same people, when asked if there were any positive aspects of airing light entertaining stories, also generated three main response patterns. First, this type of story "satisfies the audience," "is a nice change" or "relief," "makes people happy," and "alleviates some of the horrible things this

world has to offer." The second main response pattern is that light entertaining content is good for the station because people view this material and the station increases its ratings, thereby making more money. Third, respondents said these stories provide at least some information, although perhaps not as much as preferred.

Those who disagree that there are too many light entertaining stories on television news, (a much smaller number, as Table 1 indicates), had reasons that both resembled and differed from those mentioned above. Some remarked on the blend of light and hard news, saying that it is fine as it is and is not unbalanced, e.g., "the presence of light stories doesn't mean other news is omitted"; others said that the desire for increased ratings and reaching a larger audience is good an therefore does not present a problem. A third type of reasoning was more pragmatic, and posited that journalists need to be able to handle both types of stories, e.g., "journalists need both skills."

When asked if there might be some negative aspects to running light entertaining news stories, the issue of the blend of light and hard news surfaced again, with the acknowledgment that it may become skewed in the direction of light content, for example, "it wastes TV time if they run light news"; and there was also concern that the journalists' "credibility may suffer" and that such stories are often "unbelievable."

Overall, most people were able to see both good and bad in running light entertaining stories on TV news. Interestingly, both groups were concerned with the blend of stories. Those who agreed that there are too many light entertaining stories on TV news saw these stories coming at the expense of other more important news, while those who disagreed said that the blend is fine though the potential exists for unbalance. Here people are actually exhibiting agreement: those who saw light entertaining stories as negative, and those who did not but were asked if they could think of any possible negatives to such stories, both came up with the same basic reasons. Similarly, those who saw light entertaining stories as negative expressed a need for relieving the horrors or pessimism they saw as inherent within the news. They just did not want to see too much of this relief, at the expense of news. Therefore, the difference here seems to be due to differing interpretations of what constitutes an acceptable blend of light and hard news stories.

REPORTERS REMAIN NEUTRAL, OBJECTIVE: Table 1 shows that while many people report perceiving journalists as remaining objective, a significant number believes that is not the case. Of those who agreed that reporters remain objective, there were three basic types of responses. Many felt that reporters did, indeed, "try" to remain objective, but that they meet with various degrees of success. Some of these individuals cited business, editor, or writer pressures as factors impinging upon reporters' objectivity. A second group of responses centered around the belief that objectivity was something that was "required" of the journalists, either by law, by standards of professionalism, e.g., "they have to be," and "it's their job," or even because of ratings pressures. Finally, a third group of people based their responses on their own observations, and offered no other evidence than something like, "I've never

noticed reporters showing their opinions."

When asked if there were any negative aspects to remaining neutral, two main categories of responses emerged. A variety of responses echoed the theme that the completely neutral reporter might become "cold," "uncompassionate," "desensitized," or "antiseptic," and that some issues required the expression of emotion or feelings. The second large group of responses was the firm conviction that, "No, there are no negative aspects to remaining neutral or objective."

Of those who disagreed, there were two basic response types. Interestingly, these types very closely resemble the responses of those who agreed. The first type of response held that reporters were not objective, nor could they be, because objectivity was not possible. Though they might try, there are human factors, business pressures, and other pressures from within the television organization itself that make complete neutrality impossible, e.g., "it's a human condition," "it's not possible," and even "the TV station tells them what to say--it's not their fault." The second group of responses were based on individual observations, such as an description of the cues alerting the audience to a reporter's bias, an acknowledgement that the viewer agrees with the bias, a feeling that the bias "adds flavor" to the news, and the belief that although newscasters have opinions, people perceive them as a great deal more objective than they really are: "The American public is a lot more propagandized that it thinks it is."

When these individuals who indicated that reporters were not objective were asked if there were any positive aspects to objectivity, responses appeared to become polarized. One group said, that yes, objectivity is good in and of itself (even if only to "help keep the audience and increase ratings"), while another group said no, there are no positive aspects to remaining completely neutral.

TOO MANY DRAMATIC/SENSATIONAL STORIES: Table 1 indicates the extent to which respondents reported agreeing with the statement that TV news too often emphasizes dramatic visual or sensational stories at the expense of news about important issues. Of those who agreed, four different types of response patterns seemed to emerge. The first focused on the viewer, and the perceived "need to get the viewer's attention," or even the viewers' desires for "a thrill." This was perceived to be "what the people want," and several respondents also qualified their response to make clear that they did not necessarily see this use of dramatic or sensational stories as "bad" or "wrong." The other response patterns focused on perceptions about the broadcasters themselves. The second main type of response was based on the viewers' perceptions of media content, and generally relied on examples as evidence: "We see it all the time," "flashy disasters," and "some images are exploited" (e.g., focusing on a pool of blood after a shooting). A related but different type of response expressed concern about active, purposeful manipulation of the media by certain parties (e.g., politicians). Such groups and individuals were accused of creating "pseudo-events," "image-making," and "staging events." The fourth response pattern noted the adverse effects of the perceived emphasis on dramatic visual or sensational stories on news content. These individuals felt that the broadcasters "don't get at the whole story" and "try to make a story more than it

is," and that as a result viewers "don't get all the facts".

When these individuals were asked if they could think of anything positive about running many dramatic visual or sensational stories, four main patterns emerged. The first was clearly summed up by one of the respondents: "A picture is worth 1000 words." These people said that such stories allow viewers "to come in direct contact with reality," and allowed people to "really see the effects" of such things as drunk driving, pollution, etc. A second trend was related to viewership; that is, such stories "keep viewers," "provide excitement," "hold people's attention so they'll also get some important information," etc. Third, such stories are entertaining (thereby allowing people to "fill their lives or kill time"), provide a lighter side to the news, and show that the station cares or is concerned about things of interest to the community. Finally, a good sized group of respondents said simply that there were no positive aspects to running many dramatic visual or sensational stories on television news.

The very few individuals in our sample who disagreed that TV news contains many dramatic visual or sensational stories tended not to be particularly elaborate in their responses. For example, one individual said merely that "Television is sensitive in its use of pictures," and another reported "enjoying" the visual stories.

However, when these people were asked if they could think of any potential negative aspects to running this type of story, their responses seemed to fit right in with the responses of those who had agreed that TV news ran too many dramatic visual/sensational stories. They acknowledged that the use of such stories "can be overdone," "can exploit the situation or image," and "doesn't show the real issue."

Again, an interesting overall pattern has emerged, in that the same "negative" aspects have been associated with a particular newscasting technique by both those who perceive that technique as potentially problematic and those who do not. Where the two groups differ is in their interpretation of the situation as it currently exists: one group thinks we are currently seeing those negative effects, while the other sees the possibility for negative effects but does not acknowledge them in the current newscasting climate. Similar criteria seem to be applied by both groups, but the ultimate judgments coming out of the application of such criteria differ.

REPORTERS INVADE PRIVACY TO GET A GOOD STORY: Of the many individuals who said they agreed that reporters' concern for getting the good story results in an invasion of people's privacy, five basic types of responses emerged. The first group reflected concern that "reporters don't act as human beings," "can be relentless," "violate courtesy," "hurt innocent people," etc. Some respondents found such behavior to be "disgusting." The second group of responses provided an interesting contrast, indicating that reporters should get the story at all costs: "in a way, it's their job," and they should "sacrifice the few for the many." However, this second group is not solely altruistic. Reporters are perceived by some to invade people's privacy "to get a raise," or because "television stations want to be in there first" because of competition. A third category of responses distinguishes between private citizens and people in

the public eye who are seen by some to "give up their rights." These individuals made statements such as, "TV has the freedom to report on government, but not private people," and reporters "can go too far, when the people are not in the public eye." The final two types of responses are related in that they are both based solely on viewer observation of television without further judgment, but as will be clear, they represent very different perceptions. The fourth type of response is simple, based on viewer experience. These responses are typified by statements such as"I have seen it a lot," often accompanied by examples of what the respondents have seen. The fifth type of response differs in that, while it is based solely on viewer experience and applies no further judgment, it assumes that the viewer has no way of knowing whether a reporter invaded a person's privacy, unless one has first-hand knowledge of the situation. These respondents seem to perceive that the televised content does not contain enough information about the reporters' information-gathering process to enable judgments about possible invasion of privacy. Yet these individuals also acknowledged that such invasions probably do occur, "I can only imagine they might go too far." Therefore, these individuals do agree in principle that invasions of privacy occur, though they are unsure whether or not they have actually witnessed any.

When asked if there might be any <u>positive</u> aspects to getting a good story, even if it means invading someone's privacy, respondents were very clear. People seemed to find it easy to see the other side of the issue. Here, three main response patterns emerged. The first revolved around the "public's right to know," First Amendment issues, and the "need to uncover government actions." Respondents further distinguished between public and private figures, indicating that a loss of privacy is the "price to pay" for being in the public eye. The second pattern resembles the first in that it is also concerned with uncovering an important story, but it differs in that it very clearly weighs the perceived harms against the potential good, "It's OK if it prevents a greater danger," "based on the number of people it effects," etc. A third group of respondents reported benefits accruing to the news organization itself. These centered on the ratings and viewership figures for this type of story, and also acknowledged that "it sells; people make a living off it." Finally, a few individuals said either that there were no positives associated with getting a good story even if it means invading people's privacy, or that they were not sure if there were any positives.

There were far fewer respondents who <u>disagreed</u> that reporters are concerned with getting a good story even if it means invading people's privacy. Of these, responses contained two main themes: first, that those being interviewed can always ask the media to stop; and second, that if such behavior is exhibited it is "only because it is needed," or "only in extreme cases."

When asked if there might be <u>negatives</u> associated with getting the story at all costs, response themes included both the acknowledgement that reporters may indeed "go too far" and should "leave their private life alone" as well as a fairly bold assertion that "if you're too timid, you won't get any stories."

TV NEWS SHOULD BE "WATCHDOG" OF GOVERNMENT: Responses of those who agree with this statement appear to represent two main types, which actually seem to be fairly closely related. The overwhelming theme of the responses to the statement that "An important role of TV news is to investigate and criticize government actions, making sure government officials are accountable to the public" was that the public should be aware of the actions of its government. The differences between response types revolved around the distinction between "the government needing watching" and "the press' role as watchdog." For example, in the first response type would be found such statements as "It's a further check and balance of our government," "keep government honest," and "The government needs watching." The second response type would include such statements about journalists such as "If they don't, who will?," "It's their job," "people need to know," and "It's a time-honored tradition of the press."

However, even though there was a single over-arching theme among those who agreed that TV news should investigate and criticize government actions, no such unity was found when respondents were asked if there were any negative things about reporters' investigating and criticizing the government. Three main types of response patterns emerged. First, there was the perception that reporters can become overzealous and "go too far." Typical responses included "They can ruin a person's life," "Don't hurt innocent people, making a story out of nothing," "Don't go on a witch hunt," and "Don't jump on a story too soon, without all the facts." A subset of this first response pattern includes statements about reporters' handling of such content: "Reporters can criticize too much--let us decide," "Don't be biased," and "Be fair and intelligent." The second pattern of responses is related to the first, but differs in that it is specifically related to content: reporters "can get into some personal things that don't matter," and they should "make sure the information is relevant to the job." Here respondents are differentiating between information that has a perceived impact on possible job performance and information that may be an exciting story but does not affect job performance. The third type of response centered on issues of government and national security. Responses included statements specifically relating to national security issues, such as "Some things we're not supposed to know," as well as statements acknowledging the government's responsibility to withhold some information, "The government has reasons for security." Finally, a few individuals reported that there were no negative aspects associated with TV news investigating and criticizing the government.

Those who disagreed that TV news should investigate and criticize the government (a small number, as shown in Table 1) basically cited three main reasons for their belief. The first two of these are directly related to some of the reasons discussed above. First, several respondents said quite firmly that "it is not their job" to investigate and criticize the government. Second, some indicated that the "checks are already built in" or that "other organizations check the government." Note that these people are considering some of the same underlying issues as those who agree with this role of the press, but that they are coming up with the opposite conclusion. The third reason is somewhat cynical, and reflects a belief in what one respondent called the "benign nature" of news: "News is only entertainment, it doesn't

hold anyone accountable for anything."

When asked if there were any positive things about TV news investigating and criticizing government, two main response types emerged; again, these responses will be familiar. First, the people's "need to know" was mentioned, acknowledging that "we should have a say in our country's government." Second, the possibility for "keeping the government in check" was cited, but with the admonition "don't go too far."

BUSINESS/SPONSOR PRESSURES AFFECT NEWS COVERAGE: The responses to this question are particularly interesting, because they appear to distinguish varying amounts of media literacy. This question was clearly the most difficult to answer (note the relatively high number who were unsure or felt unable to answer, as shown in Table 1. One individual who felt unable to respond said, "I don't know what stories were pulled." This seems to indicate a high level of media sophistication.) Even among those who agreed, the two main response patterns seemed to indicate the relative sophistication of many respondents. The first response pattern focuses on a relatively clear understanding of the various forces impinging on broadcasters, e.g., "the marketplace calls the shots," "advertisers control more than we think," as well as an acknowledgment of the profit motives of broadcast organizations, e.g., "Bottom line: it's a business," and "making money is good--it's necessary for survival." The other response pattern was based on personal experience and observation, and contained evidence rooted in examples of perceived business impacts, e.g., "You can tell from the newscasts sponsors." One respondent said that the public has no way of knowing what business pressures have been applied without first-hand knowledge of a situation. She cited an example of two "mysterious murders" that she said were never reported in the media due to business interests.

Respondents also found it somewhat difficult to see the potential positive results from a sensitivity to pressure from business/sponsors. Many people did clearly state that there were no positives. Several people tried to respond but were unable to address the exact question at hand. An interesting finding is that of those people who were able to consider positive results from sponsor pressure, all of them cast those positive results from the sponsor's perspective. "It increases their business," "the piper calls the tune," etc. This pattern of response is markedly different from patterns found in response to other questions, which all considered positives or negatives from the viewer's or broadcaster's perspective, not the sponsor or business interest. Perhaps this points up the fact that there are no perceived positive results from sponsor pressure for viewers or broadcasters.

Those respondents who disagreed that business or sponsor pressures affect news content seemed to come up with two main types of response. As we have seen in some of the earlier cases, one type of response appears to be more analytical or cognitively-based, while the other is rooted in simple direct experience or observation. The first main response pattern discusses the reporter's "role" as "getting the story across without influence," "covering the story regardless of the pressures," and opinions that "they

have to be concerned with the public interest" even if for no reason more noble than that they will get more viewers and therefore more revenue. The second main pattern is based on reported observations of TV news and contains simple, surface level responses: "I see no impact," or "it happens sometimes but not often."

When these people were asked if there were any negative results from sponsor or business pressure, several people said quite simply, "No, there are no negatives." The remaining responses, however, are widely varied and do not seem to be able to be categorized. These ranged from "It's a form of censorship" to "It results in some news not being told fairly," to "It's a sacrifice of integrity." Several people were unable to respond in a manner that specifically addressed the question at hand. Again, the relative level of difficulty of this question is seen in the response patterns.

Research Question 3. "How do viewers react to ethical dilemmas in TV news reporting, and how do viewers differ in their evaluations of ethical dilemmas in TV news?" We presented respondents with a set of three different TV news scenarios, each containing a combination of a possibly objectionable news-gathering technique and some positive outcome resulting from the airing of the story. For example, one scenario was as follows: "A TV news reporter reveals classified secret Army files that prove a missile won't work. This shows flaws in our national defense that must be taken care of." In each case, respondents were asked, "Should the TV news run this story or not?" Table 2 contains the frequencies of responses. The prevailing attitude appears to be one of leniency. A majority of respondents said, yes, the station should run the story. This was especially so in the scenario just mentioned, which pitted government secrets against the public's "right to know." The hidden camera/insurance fraud scenario was met with a more mixed reaction, although approximately two-thirds of respondents still agreed that it should be run. Notice that each of the scenarios was unresolvable to at least one respondent; that is, some individuals were apparently unable to determine whether or not the ends justified the means.

Table 2: Reported reactions to various ethical dilemmas in television news.

ISSUE	RUN	DON'T RUN	UNSURE
1) "A child is killed in a fire. The TV news interviews her crying parents soon after the fire. The parents ask for better fire safety."	23	9	2
2) "A TV news reporter pretends to be a customer and uses a hidden camera to expose a dishonest insurance salesman."	20	11	3
3) "A TV news reporter reveals classified secret Army files that prove a missile won't work. This shows flaws in our national defense that must be taken care of."	27	6	1

Research Question 4. "What criteria and justifications do viewers give for their evaluations of ethical dilemmas in TV news reporting, and how do viewers differ in their use of ethical criteria for judgment of dilemmas?" Table 2 shows how many respondents reported that a particular story should or should not be broadcast. Just as with the perceptions about ethical issues, we wanted to learn more about why people responded as they did. We followed up the scenarios with a question asking, quite simply, "why" or "why not". Again, the data generated by this series of questions are particularly "rich," and this section of the paper will focus on making clear some of the reasons generated. The analysis of scenarios will proceed in the order of listing in Table 2.

CHILD KILLED IN FIRE/FIRE SAFETY: Table 2 shows that most of the respondents reported that this scenario should be run. There are four main response patterns among these individuals. First, the benefits to the larger population are considered, in that the story "prevents future harms," "saves lives," and "shocks people into safety." A second group of responses centers on the interview with the parents. One subset of this group says that if the parents are willing to talk, or if the story is "done with taste," then the story should be run. Another subset says that the treatment of the story is at issue, and that the story should "not focus on anguish," not "interview them if they're hysterical," and should "be sure they're aware of what's going on." These subsets both center on aspects of the interview itself, but differ in whether it is the parent's willingness to talk or the actual treatment of the interview (perhaps assuming the appropriateness of the interview in the first place) that is being considered. A third group of responses speak to the legitimate news value of this as a news item, saying "it is newsworthy." A fourth group of responses is somewhat less sympathetic, and includes reasoning such as, "the people, by speaking, have given consent," or "reporters are professionals, so they didn't mistreat the people."

The people who said this story should not be run seemed to express two main types of response. The first response type agrees that the story is important, but that the treatment is not appropriate. The story should either run without the footage of the crying parents, or arrangements should be made to interview the parents at a later date, when they have had a chance to deal with their grief. The second set of responses revolves around the perceived news value of the story. Some said that a fire, even one resulting in death, is simply not newsworthy. Others indicated that this is exploitation rather than news, and that the piece should not be run.

HIDDEN CAMERA/DISHONEST SALESMAN: Respondents who said this story should be run seemed to exhibit one of three main response patterns. First, there is a need to run this type of story because of its public service value or benefit to the consumer, a protective or preventative factor, and a belief that a "time-honored tradition of TV news is to expose fraud." Second, respondents placed conditions upon reporters--to be "very thorough," only air the piece "if he's really dishonest," "withhold his name until

he's prosecuted," "don't go interview and embarrass his family," "give him a chance to respond," etc. A third set of respondents seemed to judge the insurance salesman and find him guilty, thereby deserving of this "punishment." "He's clearly a crook," "all insurance salesmen are slime," "Marion Barry is guilty too." These respondents also justify the method: "It's not entrapment."

Respondents who said this story should not be run seemed to find two basic problems with the story. First, on principle, "It's entrapment, regardless of people's right to know," "Two wrongs don't make a right," "be up front with the coverage," and "he's innocent until proven guilty." The other type of reason given was a strong sense that this was a matter for law enforcement officials, not reporters. "TV isn't police," "This is not TV's job," "police or others should handle this, not TV news."

Several respondents were unable to say whether or not the story should be run because they did not know if the method was legal or not. This implies that if the method is legal, the story should be run. These individuals appear to be applying a absolutist, law-bound criterion to this decision, rather than using a more situation- or context-oriented perspective.

CLASSIFIED DOCUMENTS/FLAWS IN DEFENSE: Again, Table 2 shows that most of the respondents indicated that this story should be run. There appear to be four main response patterns among this group of people. First, there are the responses centering around the relative costs and benefits of running the story. Respondents said things such as, "Uncover the problems even if it creates some chaos," "the people's right to know is more important than national security," etc. The second type of response indicated that this piece should be run, period, without further consideration: "we depend on journalists to find out," "we need to know," "the government is accountable to the people," "there should be no censorship," etc. The third type of response contains conditions under which the story should be run; specifically, that it should be shown to a government official first, and only aired if that prior tactic fails to resolve the problem. The fourth response type represents a more cynical point of view, believing that the secret will get out anyway. As one respondent put it, "I always assumed, having worked in the computer industry for many years, that whatever anybody wants, they probably already have, in the way of security secrets."

Those who said that this story should not be run provided two basic types of reasons. First, these people said that we should "not jeopardize national security," "not let our enemies see this," or that there are "greater ramifications than public awareness." Second, a group of people held that "there are other means to solve the problem," and that the reporter should "do other things with the information" such as bringing it to the government first and airing it "only after the problem is fixed."

Several respondents were unable to respond to this question, because, as they explicitly stated, they could not choose between the public's right to know and the national defense.

Discussion and Conclusions

In this study we used semi-structured interviews with 34 TV news viewers to discover their attitudes toward ethical issues in TV news, and most importantly, to discover what criteria and reasons they use to evaluate those ethical issues. Prior research has used relatively general, but highly structured questionnaires to test viewer reactions to issues in TV news, and we sought to gain more detailed information on the reasoning process persons use to decide whether or not certain TV news content is ethical. Six attitude statements on issues ranging from privacy to ratings pressures were investigated, and three scenarios relating to ethical dilemmas in TV news were also evaluated. Based on transcripts of the interviews, we found that viewers were able to verbalize their reasons and criteria for judgment as they reacted to ethical issues in TV news. Two coders analyzed the transcripts into key themes and then identified similarities and differences in criteria and reasons respondents used to justify their views. Consistent with the rich data these interviews yielded, 33 of our 34 respondents said the interview was a useful way to tap their views, and said they were able to express their views adequately. Fully 25 of the persons found the interviews "easy" to do.

The study found three patterns in the results: 1) these TV news viewers were capable of analyzing ethical issues in TV news, and were able to verbalize at some length their reasons for those views; 2) Viewers differed from one another in their specific views on ethical issues in TV news. While many viewers used similar criteria for evaluating ethical issues, persons often used the same criteria in different ways or to support opposing attitudes; and 3) We identified four basic categories of criteria used by viewers to discuss and evaluate ethical issues in TV news. We can now discuss the general implications of our results.

Our respondents were quite capable of discussing ethical issues in TV news, and were able to back their opinions up with specific examples from news stories, with their personal ethical criteria, or with their understandings of how TV news works. These viewers were able to see both sides of ethical issues. Our interview guide required them to agree or disagree with ethical issue statements, and then having taken a position, to give reasons for their positions, and then to indicate arguments for the opposing viewpoint. We found persons capable of seeing both negative and positive outcomes for many ethical problems in TV news, and noted their ability to think of possible reasons why certain ethical problems might exist. Our sample did have strong opinions, but was anything but dogmatic and simplistic. Most could see that the issues are complex and open to many interpretations. An unexpected finding was that many (over half) of our sample demonstrated awareness of how TV news operates, in terms of its basic organization (with editors, reporters, anchors, then TV networks, stations, sponsors), and in terms of business pressures from sponsors and ratings, and of governmental and pressure group influences. All of our respondents could discuss TV news ethics in terms of basic ideas of freedom of speech, public right to know, and the watchdog function of the press. We do not conclude that these viewers are experts, but they

demonstrate considerable awareness of the structure, problems and principles on which TV news is based.

Our finding that viewers differ in their opinions on ethical issues in TV news is consistent with prior studies (see Gaziano, 1988; Newhagen and Nass, 1989). However, our semi-structured interviews revealed more detail in the reasons given for those attitudes than has been possible in prior studies. In terms of attitudes on the six issue statements, our viewers differ greatly on whether reporters are objective; the degree to which light stories interfere with serious news; and the influence of sponsors on news content. On the other issues of privacy, sensationalism, and the watchdog function there was more consensus (that these are problems), but overall our viewers see problems in all of the six areas, and feel TV news too often caters to the lowest common denominator to get ratings, but doing its best to maintain professional standards of objectivity, and feel that its watchdog role should be protected.

In deciding whether to run problematic stories presenting ethical dilemmas, our viewers support freedom of speech, and by margins of two or three to one would run possibly harmful stories-but only if a greater social good could be achieved. They tend to appreciate the pressures faced by TV news workers-from sponsors, editors, and viewers, and feel overall that TV news workers try to do the best they can, but could improve significantly in many areas.

Finally, our thematic analysis of the reasons and criteria used by viewers to justify and explain their positions on ethical issues in TV news reveals four broad areas for analysis. One criteria used to evaluate TV news ethics employs a consideration of news job roles and organizational forces that affect news decisions. Viewers used two subcategories here: they expressed the need for TV news to attract viewers and build ratings in a competitive environment. Then they noted the organizational forces that shape the news: editors select stories, sponsors might apply pressures, certain stories are tough to visualize. These criteria were used by some viewers to explain why there are ethical problems, and by others to rationalize or mitigate possible ethical breaches in TV news. Secondly, our viewers used their observations of newscasts to justify and explain their positions on ethical issues. Many supported their contentions of ethical problems by citing specific instances of problems they had seen in TV newscasts. Others used such evidence to argue that there was no ethical problem in that area, since they had never seen an instance of it. Many were able to cite negative consequences of poor reporting, in stories about their friends and neighbors who were adversely affected by news problems. Third, our viewers relied on their own ethical principles and values to explain their views on TV ethics. Included here were appeals to legal or philosophical principles like freedom of speech, watchdog function of the press, and public's right to know. Other criteria referred to professional codes or to indications there are laws against certain TV news actions. Viewers citing principles tended to express their view in a rather absolutist manner, indicating "the action must be wrong, since it's illegal. . . .or it violates privacy laws, etc." Fourth, all of our viewers were able to engage in some kind of ethical analysis of these issues by balancing conflicting pressures, needs and values. Most persons cited the negative consequence of an action by TV news as a

reason for calling the action unethical. Some viewers, however, used a social consequence as a justification for some action by TV news. Many viewers cited conditional reasons for making judgments as they did. For example, noting " it's OK , if you don't show the person's face... or it's OK if it doesn't break a law.." Our viewers were able to see both positive and negative consequences for most of our TV news issues, and were able to reach a decision based on a reasoned analysis of many factors.

Overall, we found that viewers do employ specific criteria and reasons as they evaluate ethical issues in TV news. However, similar criteria can be used in different ways to justify different positions by different persons. We were impressed by the ability of these viewers to take into account many factors in making their evaluations of the ethical performance of TV news. We noted in several cases that persons appeared to be noting various options and trade-offs involved in certain ethical choices. There was evidence of cycling through possible outcomes and effects, and then deciding on an evaluation (positive or negative)of the action of the TV news organization. Of course, some of this reasoning ability is explained by the relatively high education levels in our sample. Further studies should test the reasoning abilities of other groups. Additionally, more issues and problem scenarios need to be tested to discover the various effects of story treatment, social outcome, and viewer reasoning process on ethical evaluations of TV news. In the future, some of the types of criteria found in this study may be used in large sample surveys to further clarify audience perceptions of credibility, information value, and ethical standards in TV news. These studies may be of use to TV news organizations who wish to be more sensitive to the needs and interests of their viewers. This is not to say that TV news should make ethical decisions based entirely upon polls or surveys, but some data on audience reactions to TV news treatment of difficult ethical issues should be of use to the responsible journalist as she or he balances many factors in making story decisions.

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