Journalistic Truth, Source Safety,

And CNN

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JOU 4380: Law & Ethics of Journalism

April 30, 2022

War is hard to cover for news organizations. Whether it is in Korea, Vietnam, Iraq, or today in Ukraine, war has always been a threat to those covering it. There is much physical evidence of this fact: bombings at sites where journalists are, instances of intimidation, serial torturing and killings of journalists, and worse. However, rarely in these occurrences is there a true ethical dilemma. That was not the case in April of 2003. Former CNN chief news executive Eason Jordan shocked the world when he came forward and revealed the network's coverage of Saddam Hussein's regime had not been entirely truthful. The news covering the Iraqi regime was sugarcoated for the sake of its sources. Immediately, there was immense public outcry. Jordan came forward and explained that the softened coverage was for the safety of his employees and sources over in Baghdad. If they delved too deep into their journalistic duty, their sources would be threatened, tortured or killed. However, not utilizing their resources for revelation of the full truth is in violation of what it means to be a journalist. Thus, an ethical dilemma is unveiled in the midst of modern warfare in the Middle East.

Saddam Hussein and his regime rose to power in Iraq in July 1979. His reign was terrible, he killed and demonstrated no mercy to his opposition. In August 1990, Hussein's army invaded Kuwait, and in January of 1991, the Persian Gulf War to liberate Kuwait began. Thanks to CNN's televised broadcast of the military operation, the attention of millions of Americans was seized by the armed conflict. Headquartered in Baghdad, CNN captured the action in the city. It was unprecedented. Smart bombs–bombs with video devices within them–permitted audiences at home to watch a bomb decimate its target live. This kind of graphic, raw coverage caused Americans to slow their shopping. Spending contracted and consumer confidence plummeted over the next year. People feared Operation Desert Storm would result in high oil prices and a

greater recession. This consequence from the televised coverage would be known as the CNN effect (Hastings, 2003).

That was how popular CNN's presence in Iraq was. They garnered enough attention to indirectly affect the American consumer's spending habits. If it wasn't for the credit boom, the CNN effect would have repeated itself in Operation Iraqi Freedom. The coverage of the media titan was not limited to bombings and footage of marching soldiers, but they were able to speak with Iraqi officials beneath Saddam Hussein. The access they had in this conflict was incredible. With this access, though, came caution. The Iraqi government believed many CNN journalists were CIA operatives, using the news organization as a cover (CNN, 2003). There was even an assassination attempt by Iraqi intelligence when employees of CNN entered a hotel in Kurdish controlled territory. There were several other instances acknowledged by Eason Jordan of Iraq intimidating, torturing, killing, and even dismembering CNN employees, journalists and sources (CNN, 2003). All these instances weren't reported at the time.

When 2003 rolled around, the U.S. was gearing up for Operation Iraqi Freedom. So was CNN. They trained nearly 500 employees for coverage, and the Iraqi government had practically declared war on the Baghdad bureau of the network. Despite this, Jordan told reporters, "We're committed to owning the story." (Collins, 2003). CNN let the world know they were ready for round two. What Jordan didn't tell reporters though, was what CNN wasn't ready to own up to. After Saddam Hussein was finally captured in Operation Red Dawn and his regime was dispersed, chief news executive Eason Jordan was ready to approach *The New York Times.* He had a figurative bombshell in his pocket.

In an op-ed he wrote in the *Times*, titled "The News We Kept to Ourselves", Jordan revealed he had withheld information on how CNN's Iraqi sources were intimidated, tortured

and killed. The story he wrote describes his experience in 13 trips to Baghdad to lobby for the CNN bureau. While there, he arranged interviews with Iraqi leaders. On each trip, the chief news executive saw awful things. However, they couldn't be reported because he couldn't jeopardize the lives of the Iraqis, those on the Baghdad staff in particular. He felt horrible keeping these memories and stories hidden for so long (Jordan, 2003). The way Jordan saw it at the time, he had three viable courses of action. One, to never repeat the horrors he saw and heard. Two, to tell the stories as soon as possible and see innocent people killed by the regime. Or three, to tell the stories *after* Saddam's regime topples. He chose the third option, because in his eyes, it was the most humane way to go about coverage (Nieman Reports, 2014).

There was an immediate reaction from the public, as many felt this information should have been released when the atrocities happened. It is, after all, the journalistic duty of a news organization to tell the full truth. By harboring the horrors of the region, Eason Jordan kept part of that truth from CNN's audience. Which, by the way, is enormous. After the success in their coverage of the Persian Gulf War, CNN's audience had only grown. This meant that Jordan kept the full truth from an unprecedented number of people. His actions prompted an intense ethical debate amongst journalists. Some criticized Jordan, saying his silence caused a great deal of harm to CNN's reputation, that it was strictly a business decision so they could maintain exclusive coverage, or even that CNN could have left Baghdad altogether (Nieman Reports, 2014). If one conducted a Google search of this case, the majority of opinions on the circumstance would be negative.

Others understand his actions, or at the bare minimum, the difficulty in his position (Nieman Reports, 2014). A Washington Post editorial called "Truth-Telling" published just a few days after Jordan's article. It reads, "Every news organization, and every reporter, makes

difficult, morally ambiguous decisions when working in a totalitarian state. There are no hard and fast rules about where to draw the line between legitimate cooperation with authorities and outright collaboration." (WP Company, 2003).

Then there were those who did not believe Jordan was confronted with a multiple choice-scenario. Scott Simon at NPR deduced positives and negatives, recognizing the dilemma facing Jordan and formulating his own opinion. Simon claims closing the bureau and sacrificing CNN visibility in Iraq is the right thing to do. He ends his brief segment with, "Eason Jordan says he's happy to get the stories of Iraqi tortures off of his chest. But are they also on his conscience?" (NPR, 2003). In this debate, it is undeniable that there is a lot of moral ambiguity in this ethics case.

In forming a true review of this case, recognition of the factors at hand is indispensable. CNN must function as a business. It would be bad business if the Baghdad bureau closed, as the exclusivity in reporting the location offers is invaluable in that context. The political landscape, on the other hand, is extremely hostile and dangerous. They must somewhat cooperate with war criminals suspecting the network of being a cover for American intelligence. CNN is constantly under the threat of abduction, torture, and bombings so cooperation is a must. However, there is also the public service provided by the network. Looking at the context through the perspective of a business, it's clear they make significant profits through their exclusive existence in Iraq. Alternatively, this exclusivity means they are the only network available to provide news from that area. Thus, CNN is the only news organization capable of operating there around the clock.

But who are the stakeholders in question for this case? One is certainly Jordan's sources and employees in Baghdad and at the bureau. If coverage compromises somebody, these people face swift and immediate violence. Another is CNN's massive and growing audience. Each day,

they tune in to the network to catch up on what is happening in the conflict on the other side of the world. These people trust the information shown to them is true and factual, and nothing less. Keep in mind that this was before the media frenzy polluting broadcast stations today; this was the 1990's and early 2000's. There was a stronger sentiment of trust between audience and network.

CNN had an obligation to its sources to keep them safe, but also an obligation to its audience to tell a complete truth. This is a problematic scenario because the two are at odds when timeliness is a factor. Timeliness is one of the most important news values, so its incorporation is vital. The addition of this critical element of news production muddies a clear, correct answer to CNN's predicament. However, that is only natural in wartime coverage.

In the past, media professionals at CNN had been compromising its ethics for coverage. One clear example is Afghanistan in 2001. CNN struck deals to get exclusive war zone pictures and interviews. They even agreed to share a satellite dish with Al-Jazeera, a program who aired Taliban-sanctioned presence in the region. In exchange, they would get a correspondent based in Khadar, a huge advantage for CNN. Other media companies accused the network of making unethical dealings so they could attain dedicated coverage (The Quill, 2001). This instance communicates CNN's will to compromise in order to attain elusive sole coverage. Is it far-fetched to think they did the same in Iraq?

On the other hand, it is well documented that news and media outlets have exhibited strong interest in securing employee and source safety. In Papua New Guinea, Indonesia, Iraq and many other foreign countries, journalists and their sources are actively sought after and killed. West Papua Media, a media outlet founded more recently and one smaller than CNN, understands this. They emphasize the importance of the lives of their sources and prioritize them

if need be. Nick Chesterfield, the founding editor, says, “A lot of people balk at how stringent our conditions are, and don’t get back to us, and quite frankly, if they don’t understand the need for safe journalism practices, we don’t want to work with them anyway–we owe that to our crew.” (Kayt Davies, 2012). This viewpoint was popularized and backed years after CNN’s ethics case was introduced. Was this ethics case the first globally publicized instance of a network sticking by its sources in a hostile environment?

Analyzing the history of the issue was ineffective. Instead of surging toward a conclusion, it prompted only new questions. This makes sense, considering CNN’s quandary in Iraq was a new issue in the journalistic sphere. Instead of unearthing a deduction, the search for one continues. This will be done through utilization of accepted tools that evaluate journalism ethics. The tools employed will be the Potter Box, which uses four different dimensions of moral evaluation, and Bok’s Model, a philosophical tool emphasizing self-reflection, expert consultation and appraisal of the affected.

In Potter’s Box, the situation has already been thoroughly defined. CNN employees and sources in Iraq were intimidated, tortured and killed by Saddam Hussein’s regime. Eason Jordan, the CNN chief news executive, took 13 trips to Iraq while their bureau operated in Hussein’s presence. On those trips, he had seen and heard some of these horrors. CNN could tell the full truth about Hussein’s regime when the atrocities happened, they could never report the tragedies at all, or they could wait until the downfall of the regime to tell the stories. At the time, they were the only network or news source to have a bureau in Baghdad, or all of Iraq for that matter.

This case is intertwined with moral values, while attracting some sociocultural value as well. The issue of the case is primarily with the moral element, as honesty and nonviolence are brought to the forefront. Examining the topic through an honest lens suggests CNN should tell

the entire journalistic truth. Rarely is a moral value so easily and directly applied, but the instinctual and most direct answer is to release the information to the public. On the other hand, the second piece of moral value contradicts this response. Nonviolence suggests withholding the information for the protection of those at risk. This way, their safety is not at risk because of Jordan and the network. Two sides of the same coin are competing in this case, evidence for the difficulty to find retrospective ethical conclusion. This is, likely, why Jordan decided to wait, but still release the evidence. It is the best combination of the two elements he could devise. He is still being honest, down to about retaining the information until after the war. In that, he also protected his sources and employees the best he could. He felt he needed to honor the sociocultural principle of hard work. In his stance, his people are industrious and deserve respect and safety.

Philosophy runs thick through this case. It appears Jordan implemented John Rawls' veil of ignorance in making his decision. He set aside his position as an executive of the network and placed himself on the ground in Baghdad. The agape principle may have lent itself to Jordan, as he may have felt genuine love and attachment for his employees. Maybe he simply couldn't deliberately put them at risk? Drawing from John Stewart Mill's principle of utility, Jordan chose the option producing the most collective happiness and the least amount of pain. The audience will still receive the information, and his people in Baghdad will still be alive.

Eason Jordan's loyalties are no secret. He is loyal to his network, his employees and sources and his audience. Protection of his employees is of his highest moral interest, and his job as chief news executive for CNN is to provide his audience with the news. The journalistic value of truth isn't disregarded by Jordan, it is something he is passionate for. The mission statement of CNN is something he dearly believes in, it reads, "To inform, engage and empower the world"

(CNN, 2019). After running Jordan's dilemma through the Potter Box, it's clear he acted through compassion while keeping his passion in mind.

Bok's model examines the case differently, while mildly retreading the first step. The self must first be examined. Instincts first say Jordan kept the truth from his audience. That's what most headlines say, anyway. However, it is deeper than that. His employees and colleagues were in danger. Transcending that, people he knows and cares for are in danger. The compromise he made sacrificing timeliness and initial truth for the safety of those he knew in Baghdad is entirely understandable.

The executive should have spoken with more experts before making his decision though. There are higher-ups at other networks like ABC who have seen violence dealt by the iron fist of Saddam Hussein. Consulting them before jumping into action may have benefitted Jordan. Perhaps another avenue of reaction could have opened. Assuming he spoke with those at CNN's offices, employees at the Baghdad bureau and expert journalists he knows, those are the only irregular experts he likely should have considered.

In talking with the Baghdad bureau, there are already steps taken into the third tier of Bok's model: the perspective of the affected. He should have brought potential release of the stories to them, or at least considered what their feelings might be if he released them. There is no real way of gauging the audience's preference on the release of the stories at the compromise of welfare. A direct poll or something measuring audience input would induce panic and confusion. Jordan must instead think how his audience would. Assuming he believed they want the whole truth, scale probably won out here. The audience's lives weren't at immediate risk, but his colleagues' lives were.

From the two ethical evaluations, it is evident Jordan's actions were justified and under good intention. He had to deal with two sides of moral principle competing, and he chose compromise. The truth was told while exempting timeliness, and he sought to do as little harm as possible to those in Baghdad. Scale favored his compassion, but he still adhered to honesty.

However, there are still unanswered questions, even after conducting rigorous ethical examination. To have these questions answered, I was able to talk over the phone with Roy Gutterman. Gutterman is the director of the Tully Center for Free Speech at Syracuse, serving as an associate professor for magazine, news and digital journalism. He is an expert on media, communications and journalism ethics. Below, I will show the questions and responses that affected my understanding this case.

SW: Being someone with an illustrious career as a reporter, who teaches journalism, and is so involved in the world of journalism, what do your journalistic instincts tell you about this situation?

RG: Well, I think CNN was really making a clear effort to stick right by their sources. They understand where their people are operating and didn't want to see anyone hurt or killed. I don't have any real experience in a field where my mortality is at risk. I mean, I wrote for the Boston Globe. Those reporters and sources were dealing with existential evisceration every day. In the SPJ Code of Ethics (Society of Professional Journalists), it says to back your sources. I think that was what they were trying to do.

SW: A common criticism for CNN's former chief executive, Eason Jordan, was that he only saw three courses of action. Do you believe those were his only options?

RG: Clearly those weren't the only courses of action, but I do think those were the only processes he could think of. I can't think of another way to go about it at the moment, and given he was under a tremendous amount of stress, I doubt he could either.

SW: CNN chose to back its employees by keeping quiet at the time, but they kept their bureau open in Baghdad. That bureau is the only news organization bureau in Iraq, offering CNN exclusive coverage. Do you think there was a business motivation to keep the bureau open and how do you think this factored into CNN's decision as a whole?

RG: Well, the network does need to make money, but I'm not sure if leaving their bureau open is a business-motivated choice. They have a function, and leaving the bureau is unlikely to be a viable option. If you're looking at the spot they're in from a cold, cutthroat business angle, releasing the news is not beneficial. Those sources getting killed is going to cost you some money through the information they could have given. I believe there was an element of human concern here, and that strongly motivated their decision. But as a pure business move, releasing the news is flawed.

SW: Do you find any severe ethical violation in Jordan's case?

RG: No, not really. I think he did what he thought was right.

SW: CNN's mission statement proudly reads on their website: "To Inform, Engage and Empower the World". Do you think the network maintained this mission statement in this situation?

RG: Yeah, I think they did. They were thrown into a tough situation here, and they still reported the best they could without compromising their sources. Their humane concerns didn't really disrupt their jobs as journalists, and they were still able to provide important information on a developing situation where they were.

SW: For media outlets reporting in totalitarian states, or nations where there is a real threat of violence and safety is a legitimate concern, how should they operate?

RG: I think that is still being figured out today. As you outlined in the background you wrote, this was one of the first real ethical issues where reporter and source safety was an arguable thing. In Ukraine, journalists are being killed. God knows how many were killed over the years in the Middle East and Russia. So, I can't say it has been figured out yet. All anyone can do is their best and act professionally.

Gutterman brought up several interesting points in our interview, but perhaps the most intriguing was his point about leaving the bureau open. This is the most common thing critics point to supporting the business motive suspicion. Showing the loss of sources as also being financially problematic deconstructs the argument that Jordan was quiet for the interest of profit. The chief concern was human life through and through. Gutterman's citing of the SPJ Code of Ethics compelled me to consult the rulebook, and the first two principles are particularly relevant: seeking truth, reporting it and minimizing harm. Even the SPJ is at odds with itself in this case. This goes back to Gutterman's statements at the end of the interview, where he says media operation in places where sources are threatened is still being figured out today. Maybe one day the SPJ will be updated and there will be a specific entry acknowledging source safety and the truth.

The case of Eason Jordan's decision to withhold the full truth to protect his employees and sources in Iraq needs revisiting. At the time of his op-ed, he was lambasted by other publications and journalists. They simply saw the situation from their journalistic duty, not as human beings. Jordan tried to protect his people while doing his best to provide a truth, and that's what this case's legacy should be.

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