Rolling news programmes make extensive use of experts who are asked to comment upon news of a major event as information flows into the studio. This is a daunting responsibility, say Mike Granatt and Patrick Lagadec, who propose an ethical code to help protect live commentators, broadcasters, and the audience.

Do not exploit the difficulties or mistakes of others. To err is human, but to profit from mistakes is malign.

The world has a newvisor, or a new friend, depending on your viewpoint. Rolling 24-hour broadcast news is voracious for information and comment, and never more so on the eve or in the aftermath of a disaster.

It is possible to define the general responsibilities of all the expert commentator within the role created by broadcasting and the written media. This role itself has changed considerably over the last 15 years or so, as the backbone of broadcast news has moved from the crafted editions to the all of the actors involved in a disaster, the physical or metaphorical cordon around an unfolding dramatic event, complete with a stream of vivid snapshots, benefit of control and intimate interest. The world has become exceedingly complex, with countless interactions between behaviours and systems in a networked society. This has created a completely new balance among all the actions involved in a disaster, crisis or impending crisis and two dynamics in particular have considerably deepened the challenge of live commentary: 

- Crises appear to be more and more saturated with fuzziness, complexity, instability, and the potential to trigger discontinuity, and the potential to trigger uncertainty: the expert’s role is the creation of uncertainty.
- Crises set a dramatic stage, feeding on the real-time global effects facilitated by broadcasting, the internet, and mobile telephony. Millions of people can now observe from the very moment of a catastrophe, complete with a stream of vivid snapshots, benefit of control and intimate interest. The world has become exceedingly complex, with countless interactions between behaviours and systems in a networked society. This has created a completely new balance among all the actions involved in a disaster, crisis or impending crisis and two dynamics in particular have considerably deepened the challenge of live commentary.

The ethical code, guiding the standards, the professional observer rather than an analyst, and the news reporter, who is known to the public as a professional observer rather than an analyst, and whose lack of specific knowledge is recognised and tolerated.

However, the expert commentator has no such luxury, and indeed is often required to offer authoritative views on:

- Comparisons from history;
- Analysis of unfolding events;
- Breaking news;
- The quality of emergency response; and
- Political and personal implications.

This is a daunting responsibility. Given the capacity of rumour and misinformation to gain political and social traction, there is a clear need to discuss an ethical code to protect and guide the expert, the broadcaster, and all those who may be affected by broadcast commentary.

Below are some suggestions for the code:

- Do not exploit the difficulties or mistakes of others. To err is human, but to profit from mistakes is malign.
- Do not create a new paradigm from poor information. When information is scarce, the audience understands the subsequent consequences of conclusions and analyses.
- Avoid the temptation to缆itate: the expert’s role is the creation of uncertainty.
- Do not exploit the difficulties or mistakes of others. To err is human, but to profit from mistakes is malign.
- Do not create a new paradigm from poor information. When information is scarce, the audience understands the subsequent consequences of conclusions and analyses.
- Avoid the temptation to缆itate: the expert’s role is the creation of uncertainty.

Prepare for extremes

Last but not least, the expert must prepare for the extreme. An emerging crisis appears within the very, global, instant information context, or she will be increasingly confronted with situations for which no script has ever – or could ever have been written.

The only solution has three equally important components:

- In-depth preparation: testing capabilities on the most difficult scenarios;
- The ability to check and calibrate in real time using a large network of colleagues who share the same duty;
- The ethical code, guiding the standards, responses and behaviour of the network and those who seek to use its members.

The ethical code

The following components:

- First do no harm: Do nothing knowing that makes matters worse for victims, or which creates new victims through implication or action.
- Speak the truth: Never mislead on the facts or on the implications of the facts. Interpretation and speculation must always be based on realistic and considered assessment.
- Exercise compassion: Take care with comment and tone. Actors of every sort may be victims or may become victims.
- Warn or criticise with calculation and care: Consider the code only when you consider the facts are clear, that the net effect will drive improvement, and the need is pressing.
- Create understanding and reasonable expectations: Build the ability of your audience to make informed choices and to understand how the world has changed.
- Do not pursue irrelevant causes: Do not distract the audience or other actors from their task of understanding what is before them.

Authors

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