

# Ethics for media commentators

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

**T**HE WORLD HAS a new monster, 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 disaster.

It is possible to define the general responsibilities of 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 compilation of bulletin to the rolling vista of 24-hour newsgathering and delivery.

## Extended commentary

Before this became the norm, extended commentary was mainly the province of newspapers, because they alone had the capacity to carry the weight of words. This was set in the context of a rhythmic delivery of news to its audiences, based around broadcast bulletins and newspaper editions.

Within this older, more measured context, the role of the expert was generally to offer a

retrospective view at length, or to provide quotes that could be selected or edited. This offered a considered view of facts and context which had emerged over time. It was possible, if not easy, to discern the interactions of a connected world.

Today, 24-hour broadcast news takes us to the physical or metaphorical cordon around an unfolding dramatic event, complete with a stream of vivid snapshots, bereft of context and time for analysis. And 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 the all of the actors 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, discontinuity, and the potential to trigger unforeseen and unthinkable effects. Therefore the role of the expert has changed, with much less emphasis on historical comparisons, and much more on the explanation of new phenomena. New oceans of ignorance and extremely unstable

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contexts amplify the risk of words causing disruption, collapse of morale, loss of control and even death; and

- 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 boundary of the event, while mobile phones have raised their expectation of instant contact with loved ones, wherever they might be.

## Great expectations

Consider the families of the three million people who travel into London to work every day. Fifteen years ago, before the widespread use of the mobile phone, news of multiple terrorist attacks certainly gave rise to anxiety among those families. However, it was tempered by the fact that it would probably take some time for a commuter to reach his or her place of work, and make contact to say they were safe.

However, on July 7, 2005, those millions of people faced two very changed effects – instant, continuous broadcast coverage, coupled with the expectation of instant mobile telephone contact.

But the GSM mobile system simply could not meet the demand for calls, and blocked access to huge swathes of London workers for the crucial early period after the bombings. Relatives suffered a level of frustration, worry and stress on an unprecedented scale. All of this then adds to the burden of the expert commentator.

The inevitable information void between the impact of a disaster or crisis and the point at which good data is flowing is therefore of even greater significance. Filling that post-impact information void is an intensely competitive period for broadcasters, and a time of real challenge for an expert called to support them.

## Rolling news

Rolling news programmes now make extensive use of the ‘presenter’s friend’, an expert who sits with the newsreaders or joins the reporter in the field. As news flows in, often disjointed and partial, the presenter’s friend is asked to comment on its significance within seconds, long before there has been any time to consider it at any more than face value.

This problem used to be the sole province of

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photos: Mike Granatt

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 rumours 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. These are not exhaustive or structured, but are intended to provide the initial material for the debate which will lead to this increasingly necessary consensus.

- **First do no harm:** Do nothing knowingly 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.
- **Comment proportionately and with balance:** Ensure that the context is clear, and that snapshots do not build a false picture.

- **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 this course 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.
- **Strengthen resolve and discuss difficulties frankly:** Give praise where it is due, and even in the direst circumstances explain how recovery or protection can be achieved.
- **Serve all the audience:** As far as practicable, commentary must be accessible to the largest number of people, while retaining integrity and accuracy.
- **Encourage learning, self-help and community action:** Self-help is an acknowledged therapy, and the provision of

useful information is a key component of risk-communication.

- **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:** Where information is scarce, ensure the audience understands the consequent imprecision of conclusions and analysis.

- **Attribute assertions and identify uncertainty:** The expert’s role is the creation of certainty and confidence, even about uncertainty and lack of confidence. Help the audience to understand the boundaries of knowledge, to separate mere belief from solid fact, and to judge the speed and likelihood of progress.

## Prepare for extremes

Last but not least, the expert must prepare for the extreme. As emerging crises appear within the new, global, instant information context, he 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; and
- The ethical code, guiding the standards, responses and behaviour of the network and those who seek to use its members.



## Authors

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