

## **Case study 4**

### **The video editor's dilemma—when to stop the action?**

Even though television news directors would claim they are showing less violence on news programs than perhaps in the latter part of the twentieth century, viewers are still being confronted with violence on a regular basis. During the production of this case study, one of the authors noted in one two-week period several TV news stories showed extreme violence. In one case it was against animals (horses and dogs, including one shot repeated often of a man attacked by a dog). A leading Indy car driver was shown from several angles, including slow motion, in a fatal accident, and yet another news story showed a stunt flier fatally crashing into the ground at an air show. Again the fatal crash was seen more than once. In addition, the fatal crashes were either shown in vision in the headlines of the program, or before an ad break, encouraging the audience to stay on for the story. So, in fact, the fatal crashes were shown over and over again in the same bulletin

Television news editors face decisions almost daily on how much of a particular story will be shown. They have to decide how much of a violent or fatal act needs to be shown to make the point to an audience and when it becomes gratuitous and ratings-driven. In recent times such decisions have involved the repetitive use of footage of the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center in New York, coverage of the Bali bombings, and the terrorists attacks in London in 2005. How much is too much? If you don't show it is it censorship, or de-sanitizing the event?

Two classic historic cases of this dilemma were the execution of a suspected Viet Cong prisoner by the chief of South Vietnam's National Police, Brigadier General Nguyen Ngoc Loan, during the Tet Offensive of 1968, and the suicide of the State Treasurer of Pennsylvania, Mr Budd Dwyer, in January 1987.

#### **The Tet Offensive**

The Tet Offensive of January–February of 1968 was a turning point in the Vietnam War (Lipski 1993). So too was General Nguyen's course of action. The suspected Viet Cong prisoner was brought to the police chief, and was summarily executed with a bullet to the side of the head. Australian television

journalist, the late Neil Davis, discussed the dilemma of how much violence to (film and) show on television in David Bradbury's video documentary on Davis, *Frontline* (circa 1980). In the film, Neil Davis says he met the police chief some time after the Tet Offensive and the Brigadier General made a pistol action with his fingers, pointed it at Davis and said 'too much violence'—meaning the world saw too much of the violence of war, including actions like his.

### **Budd Dwyer**

In the case of Budd Dwyer, the Pennsylvania Treasurer called a news conference on 22 January 1987, to supposedly explain the events leading to his conviction for mail fraud, conspiracy, and racketeering. He said he was innocent and appeared to grow agitated as he read from a long, prepared statement. At one point, when a TV cameraman began to pack up his equipment, he said: 'Don't put that camera away yet, there are many important things to come' (Rowe 1987). He then took a heavy-gauge revolver from a large manila envelope and pointed it at his head. Shocked reporters called on him to stop. Aides tried to move towards him. He placed the muzzle of the gun in his mouth and shot himself through the head as the TV cameras rolled on ('Budd Dwyer, the Man Who Killed Himself on Television', 1987).

The dilemma for TV news editors in both cases was when to stop the action? In both cases the cameras kept rolling, showing the fatal action, and the audio kept going, so you heard the sounds of death.

In the case of the South Vietnamese police chief killing a suspected Viet Cong, most Australian TV stations froze the action just before the gun was fired, but allowed the audio to continue so the sound of the gun was heard. (One of the authors had the job of editing that story for *ABC News*, Queensland, that day and that was his decision). At the disposal of editors was the complete action—seen uncut in Bradbury's *Frontline*—where the body falls to the ground as blood spurts in strong pulses from the fatal head wound. Editors at *NBC News* in the United States several times trimmed back the end of the footage, until the film was cut to only a few frames after the shooting, eliminating the most bloody scenes.

In the Budd Dwyer case, a leading public figure, now disgraced, taking his own life in front of TV cameras was news. But the decision was made that the audience didn't need to see the final seconds of his life to realise what had happened. In the United States, the public suicide took place late morning and was included in noon newscasts. Of the twenty stations with regular noon newscasts in Pennsylvania, only three showed the moment of death (Parsons & Smith 1987). One showed him shooting himself and slumping to the floor ('US Media Faced Dilemma on Coverage of Suicide', 1987). Most adopted the same practice as Australian stations did with the Saigon killing and again in this instance, they froze the action just before the shot, and allowed the audio track to continue through the gunshot.

These may be spectacular examples of the ethical dilemma facing a TV news director, but the ethics of the decision should be no different than those involved with the Indy 500 driver's fatal crash, or those of the stunt flier who got it so wrong.

#### **Issues and questions raised by case study 4**

- 1 Research some expert and lay-person's criticisms of violence on TV news and current affairs. What are the main issues?
- 2 Debate the issues from the point of view of the journalist in the field, the news editor back in the office, and the audience.
- 3 How much consideration should a TV news director give to the time of day that an item will be shown (prime time or late night, for instance) in deciding how much violent action an item could contain?
- 4 On most occasions, newsreaders will warn viewers that 'The following item contains images that may disturb some viewers'. Is that enough?
- 5 Is such a warning likely to be counter-productive to some elements of the audience?
- 6 What of the argument that the audience can 'vote with the remote' if they don't want to see violence in stories?
- 7 And the counter-argument that the audience is often exposed to the offending material before they have the chance to change channels?

8 Criticism of violence on TV news is not new. The BBC was criticised for the 'graphic nature' of its coverage of the Lockerbie plane disaster in Scotland in 1988. What guidelines do the main networks have in place regarding violence in news and current affairs?

9 Is violence on news broadcasts more or less acceptable than realistic violence in films or TV dramas?

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