

OMG! He Said What? (A&E'S Duck Dynasty Situation)

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The Interview

Phil Robertson, patriarch on A&E's *Duck Dynasty* reality show, did an interview with GQ magazine in 2013. Sitting in his house, Phil begins the interview with:

Everything is blurred on what's right and what's wrong," [Phil] says, "Sin becomes fine." ... "Start with homosexual behavior and just morph out from there. Bestiality, sleeping around with this woman and that woman and that woman and those men.

He then paraphrases 1 Corinthians [5:11 perhaps?] about adulterers, homosexuals and drunkards, among others, not inheriting God's Kingdom. He also commented about African-Americans being happy before the Civil Rights era. Then he said:

It seems like, to me, a vagina—as a man—would be more desirable than a man's anus. We never, ever judge someone on who's going to heaven, hell. That's the Almighty's job. We just love 'em, give them the good news about Jesus—whether they're homosexuals, drunks, terrorists. We let God sort 'em out later, you see what I'm saying? (Magary, 2013).

The "foo" hit the fan and A&E had to deal with a public relations crisis.

Background

How in the world did a family of squirrel-eating, Bible-thumping, catchphrase-sprouting duck hunters [from Louisiana] become the biggest TV stars in America?" (Magary, 2013) "The massively popular reality show, which follows the quirky Robertson family running a duck call business in [West Monroe] Louisiana, shattered cable ratings records (Yahr, 2013, p. D1; see timeline on page 2).

Family members end each show with a meal and prayer.

The Reactions

The story went viral, the remarks left people outraged and a stunned cable network suddenly had a major public relations crisis surrounding its most important show” (seasonal premiere of 12 million viewers in 2013). “The NAACP expressed outrage. Gay-rights groups called for A&E to condemn their star for his ‘vile’ comments (Yahr, 2013, p. D5).

A&E executives announced later that day to indefinitely suspend Phil from the series (Yahr, 2013). The family issued a statement, “We cannot imagine the show going forward without our patriarch at the helm” (Elber, 2013a).

Defenders became vocal. Louisiana Governor Bobby Jindal and former Alaska Governor Sarah Palin asserted that A&E had violated Robertson’s First Amendment rights (Gill, 2013). Right-wing conservatives Glenn Beck and Sean Hannity were supportive of Phil while actor Charlie Sheen criticized his comments (Sacks, 2013). A website, www.IStandWithPhil.com, was established and had accumulated 195,000 signatures for a petition in support of Phil. Cracker Barrel stores/restaurants pulled “Duck Dynasty” products off its shelves on December 21st but bowed to the pressure and restocked the items on the 22nd (Durand Streisand, 2013).

Dr. Jonathan Tinkel, a retired professor, wrote that

Phil Robertson’s suspension from A&E is not an abrogation of any First Amendment rights. . . . [He] got to say what he wanted in his GQ interview. Subsequently, his employer made a business decision to remove [him] from the [show]. [There was] no government interference (Your Opinions, 2013).

Columnist Harrop pointed out,

As far as freedom of speech, A&E hasn’t taken anyone’s away. Its executives have every right to suspend Robertson from its programming for violating its code of conduct ... (Harrop, 2013).

The Reversal

After Christmas, just over a week after the controversy began, A&E reversed their decision and reinstated Phil Robertson. The network had held meetings with Phil, his family and various advocacy groups. The network, in suspending Phil, had based its decision on following its core values of inclusiveness and respect. Now A&E said, in their press statement, “Duck Dynasty is not a show about one man’s views. It resonates with a large audience because it is a show about family ... a family that America has come to love... they come together to reflect and pray for unity, tolerance, and forgiveness” [which we also value] (Gilman, 2013). Also the network announced “it intended to launch a national public service campaign ‘promoting unity, tolerance and acceptance among all people’” (Elber, 2013b & 2013c). “The channel’s interest is in ratings and revenues, not refereeing social discord.” Its ratings may have been affected by the brouhaha as it averaged 1.5 million viewers over December 16-22, versus 2 million viewers the week before (Elber, 2013c). Evaluate how A&E handled this public relations brouhaha. How should a company handle an outspoken celebrity better?

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