

Case 13

In 1999, five California TV news helicopters broadcast live the fatal shooting by police of a man who had led authorities on a three-hour freeway chase. The episode occurred the day after Thanksgiving and dominated morning TV when many children were home and tuning in to watch cartoons. The chase was aired to its conclusion (the shooting), though no close-up images were aired. With thousands of strangers, the dead man's mother, ex-wife, and adult daughter watched as he was shot.

In 1998 TV stations had aired live telecasts of a bank robber killing himself and a man shooting himself in the head on a freeway exchange after a lengthy standoff with police. Critics of live TV expressed horror at exposing children (or adults) to graphic violence. If coverage is live, outcomes cannot be predicted, so viewers cannot be warned about upcoming violence. Following strong, negative public reaction, TV stations promised to reevaluate their policies for live coverage and consider instituting delaying mechanisms that permit interruption of transmission should events turn tragic (or ugly).

Critics questioned whether such coverage has any value to viewers. TV spokespersons retorted that persons in urban areas need to know when commuter routes are closed, or when for safety's sake they should avoid particular streets or intersections. They further claim that such incidents are news, the coverage of which is their *raison d'etre*, and that the public has an interest in and a right to know about such incidents. (Some viewers called TV stations to complain that close-in shots of the killing should have been provided.) Opponents charge that the motivation for live coverage is not a commitment to professional reporting but to garnering the best ratings.

The Society of Professional Journalists recognizes commitments both to making news stories available to an interested public and to avoiding harm. The Society further recognizes the importance of independent action; i.e., avoiding conflicts of interests, and pressure to cover news so as to promote goals other than providing truthful information.

Whatever the motivation, live coverage of potentially violent events is on the rise. Mediascope, a non-profit public policy research group working to improve the ways social issues are covered by the media, reports that crime constitutes the content of 30.2% of local TV news broadcasts across the country.