

COMPLAINTS ABOUT BROADCAST JOURNALISM

Background

The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) receives numerous consumer complaints about broadcast journalism (television and radio journalism). Consumers complain that networks, stations, news reporters and/or commentators have given inaccurate or one-sided news reports or comments, have either failed to cover certain events, or have covered them inadequately. Some consumers complain that the news has been staged or that news reports overemphasize or dramatize certain aspects of events. Other consumers object that broadcasters have announced an illness, accident, or a death of an individual before his or her family has been notified, or have in some way acted inappropriately toward the family. Consumers also complain to the FCC about the conduct (tone of voice, facial expressions, etc.) of some journalists while reporting or commenting on the news.

What Can the FCC Do?

The FCC is caught in a tug-of-war between two consumer factions: on one side, consumers have urged the FCC to set guidelines to prevent bias or distortion by networks and station licensees or to supervise the gathering, editing and airing of news and comments; on the other side, consumers fear possible government intimidation or censorship of broadcast news operations.

The Communications Act prohibits the FCC from censoring broadcast material, except when that material is obscene. Specifically, federal law does prohibit or limit obscene, indecent or profane language, but the FCC must be guided by decisions of the courts in determining whether specific material may be prohibited under this law.

Additionally, the Communications Act and the First Amendment to the Constitution prohibit any action by the FCC that would interfere with free speech in broadcasting. The FCC can not interfere with a broadcaster's selection and presentation of material for the news and/or its commentary.

What Are the Broadcasters' Responsibilities?

As public trustees, broadcasters may not intentionally distort the news. Broadcasters are responsible for deciding what their stations present to the public. The FCC has stated publicly that "rigging or slanting the news is a most heinous act against the public interest." The FCC does act to protect the public interest where it has received documented evidence of such rigging or slanting. This kind of evidence could include testimony, in writing or otherwise, from "insiders" or persons who have direct personal knowledge of an intentional falsification of the news. Of particular concern would be evidence about orders from station management to falsify the news. In the absence of such documented evidence, the FCC has stressed that it cannot intervene.



What if I Have Comments and/or Concerns about a Specific News Broadcast or Commentary?

All concerns and/or comments about a specific news broadcast or commentary should be directed, in writing, to the local station and network involved, so that the people responsible for making the programming decisions can become better informed about audience opinion.

Complaints regarding news distortion, rigging or slanting can be filed with the Federal Communications Commission, Enforcement Bureau, Investigations and Hearing Division, 445 12th Street, SW, Washington, DC 20554. Complaints must be in writing and contain documented evidence in support of the allegations. For example, it is not sufficient for a complaint to allege only that a broadcast station made a mistake in reporting a news event. The complaint must include documented evidence showing deliberate misrepresentation.

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