

FIRST AMENDMENT TELEVISION LLC

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WHAT CBS NEWS SAID IT WAS

The Standards, the Record, and the Question

A Position Paper from First Amendment Television LLC

“Our job is to contribute to that process and not to make up for them the minds of those who listen to and watch us.”

— Richard S. Salant, President, CBS News, April 14, 1976

I. THE DOCUMENTS

This paper is based upon internal CBS News standards memoranda and policy documents distributed to CBS News Division personnel over multiple decades.

They include guidance and directives issued under the leadership of William S. Paley, Richard S. Salant, John A. Schneider, Eric Ober, and others responsible for the management of CBS News. Taken together, these documents describe not merely a collection of newsroom procedures but a coherent philosophy of journalism.

They address advertiser influence, fairness, objectivity, analysis and commentary, investigative reporting, corrections, interviews, staging, civil disturbances, anonymous sources, and the obligations of journalists in a democratic society.

The significance of these documents is not that they were written. The significance is that they were operational.

They were the standards by which CBS News personnel were expected to conduct themselves. They were distributed. They were enforced. They were the measure of professional conduct inside one of the most consequential news organizations in the history of American broadcasting. The standards reproduced in this paper span multiple administrations of CBS News leadership and more than three decades of institutional development. They represent not one executive's convictions but a consistent philosophy carried forward through successive leadership.

The author spent twenty-five years as a cameraman for CBS News and worked under many of the standards discussed in this paper. The purpose of this paper is not to settle historical arguments but to place the standards themselves into the public record and invite comparison between those standards and contemporary practice.

II. THE RECORD

What follows are the standards as written. The language belongs to CBS News. The emphasis is in the originals.

Richard S. Salant, President, CBS News — Preface to the CBS News Standards — April 14, 1976

“it is particularly important that we recognize that we are not in show business and should not use any of the dramatic licenses, the ‘fiction-which-represents-truth’ rationales, or the underscoring and the punctuations which entertainment and fiction may, and do, properly use.”

Richard S. Salant, President, CBS News — Preface to the CBS News Standards — April 14, 1976

“our news judgments must turn on the best professional judgments that we can come to on what is important, rather than what is merely interesting.”

Richard S. Salant, President, CBS News — Preface to the CBS News Standards — April 14, 1976

“our paramount responsibility at CBS News is to present all significant facts, all significant viewpoints so that this democracy will work in the way it should work — by the individual citizen's making up his own mind on an informed basis. Our job is to contribute to that process and not to make up for them the minds of those who listen to and watch us.”

Richard S. Salant, President, CBS News — Preface to the CBS News Standards — April 14, 1976

“a significant viewpoint does not become less significant just because we personally disagree with it, nor does a significant and relevant fact become less relevant or significant just because we find it unpalatable and wish it weren't so.”

Richard S. Salant, President, CBS News — Preface to the CBS News Standards — April 14, 1976

“we in broadcast journalism cannot, should not, and will not base our judgments on what we think the viewers and listeners are ‘most interested’ in, or hinge our news judgment and our news treatment on our guesses (or somebody else’s surveys) as to what news the people want to see, and in what form. The judgments must be professional news judgments — nothing more, nothing less.”

William S. Paley, Chairman, CBS — Speech on CBS News Policies — May 25, 1954

“An advertiser who sponsors any type of information program produced by us does not thereby purchase, or in any way gain, any rights to control the contents of the program.”

CBS News Production Standards — Advertisers and Commercial Messages — January 12, 1979

“CND retains sole control over the content of its broadcasts. They are not tailored in any way to the desires or requirements of advertisers. Requests by advertisers for script approval or any other form of content control have been, and must be, rejected.”

William S. Paley, Chairman, CBS — Testimony before the Senate Committee on Interstate Commerce — June 16, 1941

“What news analysts are entitled to do and should do is to elucidate and illuminate the news out of common knowledge or special knowledge possessed by them or made available to them by this organization through its news sources. They should point out the facts on both sides, show contradictions with the known record, and so on. Fairness and temperateness are of its essence.”

CBS News Production Standards — Analysis and Commentary — CBS Policy Statement, April 14, 1967

“Among features that distinguish editorials from analysis are that an editorial recommends a course of action, makes a normative judgment or states a personal preference, while an analysis, on the other hand, interprets the meaning of events and seeks to answer such questions as what has caused the event and what its consequences may be.”

CBS News Production Standards — Correction of Errors in CND Broadcasts — Internal Standard

“Significant errors in material facts must be corrected, clearly and promptly, in appropriate broadcasts. It is not sufficient merely to report that the statement included in the original broadcast has been denied. The accuracy of the denial must be specifically confirmed.”

CBS News Production Standards — Demonstrations, Riots and Other Civil Disturbances — Internal Standard

“it is essential that we do so as reporters, not as participants; with complete objectivity, accuracy and restraint; and as inconspicuously and unobtrusively as the circumstances permit.”

CBS News Production Standards — Staging — Internal Standard

“Staging is prohibited. CND broadcasts must be just what they purport to be. We report facts exactly as they occur. We do not create or change them.”

CBS News Production Standards — Identification of News Sources — October 15, 1981

“Anonymous sources should be used only when it is determined (1) that there is no other practicable way to obtain and report the information; (2) that the information is factual and of sufficient newsworthiness to warrant its use despite the fact that we cannot disclose the source; and (3) that the source and his information are highly reliable in the particular instance.”

III. THE QUESTION

CBS News created these standards. CBS News distributed them. CBS News trained its personnel under them.

Richard Salant framed the question at the center of all of them in his 1976 preface, and it has not become less important in the decades since:

Should journalism be guided by professional judgment about what is important — or by what audiences are most interested in?

Everything in the CBS News Production Standards flows from that question.

The advertiser wall. The prohibition on staging. The requirements for correction. The rules governing anonymous sources. The distinction between analysis and editorializing. The standard for covering civil disturbances.

All of it rests on a single premise: that journalism in a democratic society has an obligation that supersedes entertainment, commerce, and audience appetite.

The standards do not answer what CBS News is today. That answer belongs to CBS News, and to those who watch it.

But the standards make the question impossible to avoid.

IV. WHY THIS MATTERS

The value of these standards does not depend upon whether CBS News continues to follow them. Their value lies in what they represent: a major American institution committing, in writing, to a coherent philosophy of democratic journalism.

That commitment was not made in the abstract. It was made in operational documents distributed to correspondents, producers, cameramen, and editors. In standards that governed what could be broadcast and what could not.

In an era of information abundance and declining public trust in journalism, the principles those documents articulate are not historical curiosities. They are the operating requirements of journalism in a democratic society.

They were right when Richard Salant wrote them. They were right when William S. Paley stated them before the United States Senate. They are right now.

Whether any institution still practices them is a question every citizen is entitled to ask.

First Amendment Television believes the question deserves to be asked, and that the record deserves to be in front of the people who ask it.

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