

CNN's Decision Sparks Media Debate

April 17, 2003

Chief News Executive Eason Jordan's admission that CNN withheld information about torture in the Iraqi regime to protect innocent people opens heated journalism ethics debate.

Cable News Network chief news executive Eason Jordan's recent admission that he withheld information about how Iraqi officials intimidated and tortured Iraqis who had helped CNN over the past decade has opened up a heated debate about journalism ethics.

Jordan wrote about the situation in an **op-ed**. In the article, Jordan said that he traveled to the Iraqi capital 13 times to talk government officials into keeping the CNN bureau there open and to arrange interviews with Iraqi leaders.

CNN withheld information about torture in Iraq regime

"Each time I visited, I became more distressed by what I saw and heard — awful things that could not be reported because doing so would have jeopardized the lives of Iraqis, particularly those on our Baghdad staff," he wrote.

In one example, CNN's Iraqi cameraman was abducted, beaten and subjected to electroshock torture in the basement of a secret police headquarters because he refused answer what Jordan called "ludicrous" questions. The CNN executive said that if his network reported on the cameraman's torture, Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein's henchmen would have killed the man and may have gone after his family and co-workers.

Jordan also wrote that Saddam's oldest son, Uday Hussein, told him in 1995 that he intended to assassinate King Hussein of Jordan and two brothers-in-law who had defected to Jordan. The CNN chief told the king, who dismissed the threat, but the two brothers-in-law returned to Iraq and were later assassinated.

The right decision?

Jordan's admissions drew criticism from commentators, both liberal and conservative.

On CNN's rival, the more conservative Fox News Channel, columnist Charles Krauthammer said, "It's a classic example of selling your soul for the story. He clearly gave up truth for access."

Franklin Foer, associate editor of the more liberal New Republic magazine, said he was suspicious of Jordan's "outbreak of honesty" and suggested he should apologize for

CNN's cooperation with Iraq's Information Ministry and admit "that CNN policy hinders truthful coverage of **dictatorships**."

Responding to critics, Jordan sent a memo to his staff defending his actions: "CNN kept pushing for access in Iraq, while never compromising its journalistic standards in doing so," he wrote. "Withholding information that would get innocent people killed was the right thing to do, not a journalistic sin."

Sympathy for CNN's dilemma

Some news directors are sympathetic to Jordan's dilemma. "If we thought that we were endangering somebody we had hired to help us to report, that would be something that we would weigh very heavily," Michele Grant, the British Broadcasting Company's director of development in the United States, said.

Alex S. Jones, director of Harvard University's Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy, said Jordan was not the only news chief to make such difficult decisions. "I think every news organization has to make those kinds of calls from time to time," he said.

Vocabulary:

Op-ed - (n.) short for *opposite editorial*, a page of special features usually opposite the editorial page of a newspaper and containing personal opinions and essays

Dictatorship - (n.) *autocratic rule, control, or leadership; a form of government in which absolute power is concentrated in a dictator or a small group.*