

FAKE NEWS? A SURVEY ON VIDEO NEWS RELEASES AND THEIR  
IMPLICATIONS ON JOURNALISTIC ETHICS, INTEGRITY,  
INDEPENDENCE, PROFESSIONALISM, CREDIBILITY,  
AND COMMERCIALIZATION OF BROADCAST NEWS

by

CHANDRA SMALLWOOD CLARK

A DISSERTATION

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## ABSTRACT

Public relations practitioners have a very influential role on the content consumers see every day in newspapers and on news broadcasts. The traditional lines between journalism and public relations are now intertwined. This survey looked at video news releases and their implications about journalists' ethics, integrity, professionalism, independence, credibility, and commercialization. 533 participants from three different populations (average viewers, communication college students, and journalists) responded to a 54-question survey that employed two predictors 1) level of experience and 2) years of journalism experience. The results indicated that average viewers found the use of VNRs more unethical than journalists and communication college students. Although, experienced journalists indicated that they believe VNR use is having an impact on journalistic independence and illustrating commercialization in news. This study shows that most people turn to television and the Internet for their main source of news information, but they do not watch local, network, or cable news more than an average of three days a week and for less than 30 minutes a day. The impact of VNRs on news content is becoming an important issue to study as news managers face layoffs and try to figure out how to supplement content at a low cost. VNRs can be downloaded from satellite services for free, but possibly at a cost to traditional journalistic practices.

## DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to all the professors, friends, and family who supported and guided me while I wrote this dissertation. I hope you are proud of the final product that you helped me complete.

## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND SYMBOLS

- M Mean: the sum of a set of measurements divided by the number of measurements in the set
- p Probability associated with the occurrence under the null hypothesis of a value as extreme or as more extreme than the observed value
- < Less than
- = Equal to
- F Variance between subjects
- $\epsilon^2$  Power
- VNR Video news release: a video produced by a public relations or marketing organization for the purpose of a broadcast news station to air it during a newscast.
- JN Journalist
- STU College communication student
- AV Average viewer

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## CHAPTER 1

### Introduction

The influence of public relations on the function of the news media is one that merits further research than what has already been conducted. People talk about the “spin” that the presidential administration and corporations put on certain situations, and it is becoming even more important to examine who is providing this “spin” and how they are doing it. Video news releases are just one of the many media tools that public relations professionals are using to get their message included in newscasts.

In January 2004, video news releases produced by government agencies during the Bush Administration received a lot of attention from *The New York Times* and other media organizations. The media’s focus on their own practices prompted the Federal Communications Commission, the government agency that oversees broadcasters, to start investigating how these video sources of information can be treated as a legal matter rather than as an ethical one (Pear, 2004).

The issue came to a head for the FCC after a video news release paid for by the Bush Administration in January 2004 aired in totality or at least a portion of a VNR on 40 local television stations in 33 markets around the country (Uebelherr, 2004). The video news release featured people paid to pose as journalists praising the benefits of the 2003 White House-backed Medicare law, which offered to help elderly Americans pay for their prescription medicines. The videos were intended for use on local news broadcasts

and were offered to air “as is” on local television stations. The videos ended with the voice of a woman saying, “In Washington, I’m Karen Ryan reporting.”

The production company, Home Front Communications, said it hired Karen Ryan to read a script prepared by the government (Pear, 2004). After an investigation, the Government Accountability Office deemed the Medicare video news release as propaganda. Then in April 2005, the FCC called for a review of the use of video news releases over the issue of the nondisclosure of attribution. Commissioners unanimously clarified rules applying to broadcasters, saying they must disclose to the viewer “the nature, source, and sponsorship” of video news releases, but they did not specify what form the disclosure must take (Ahrens, 2005; Hughes, 2006). In a public notice to broadcasters, the FCC also reminded station owners that the maximum fine for each violation of nondisclosure of sponsored items was \$32,500.

As the FCC looked into the issue, commissioners and the public also got a better idea of how much money is spent on VNRs. *Harper’s* (2005) reported that the Bush Administration spent \$62 million per year just on contracts with public relations firms. That compares to the Clinton administration that spent \$32 million per year. McFarland (2005) reported that the Bush Administration spent \$254 million in its first term and used pre-packaged news reports, which are video news releases. Hundreds of VNRs were made and distributed by at least 20 federal agencies including the Defense Department. Some of the material was produced to support the administration’s policy objectives, while often featuring interviews with senior administration officials who gave rehearsed answers to scripted questions. The Government Accountability Office has banned pre-packaged news “for purposes of publicity or propaganda” since 1951 (Mitchell, 2005).

However, it was the Bush Administration's Justice Department who gave the okay for the practice and the White House defended their use (McFarland, 2005).

It did not take long for media watchdog groups to start their own queries into the practice of VNR use. "Fake TV News: Widespread and Undisclosed" is a report released April 6, 2006 by the Center for Media and Democracy. In this multi-media report, a ten-month investigation illustrated how big influence PR experts can have on the content of TV news. The report found that 77 television stations aired 36 video news releases. It also identified 98 separate instances where VNRs or related satellite interviews were aired without disclosure to viewers that the footage shown by the station was provided by third parties (Farsetta & Price, 2006). Collectively, those stations reach more than half of the U.S. population. In each case, the stations did not disclose the sponsored content, and it appeared to be generated as the product of the station's own staff reporting with local anchors and reporters reading directly from the script supplied with the VNR. Following this report, the Center for Media and Democracy and the media reform group Free Press simultaneously filed a formal complaint with the Federal Communications Commission requesting a crack down on TV news and calling for mandatory on-screen labeling of all phony news stories so that TV viewers know which reports are real.

The probe soon landed those 77 local stations in hot water when they received a letter from the Federal Communications Commission which accused them of using packaged news stories that usually employed actors to portray reporters who were paid by commercial or government groups. Huntsville, Alabama's WHNT-19 was one of those stations. WHNT's General Manager, Craig Mars, said his television station used video news releases twice. The CBS affiliate owned by *The New York Times Company*

was one of the 77 stations across the country that received letters alleging that they aired videos without telling viewers who paid for them. "Channel 19 regrettably did air video news releases in the past," Mars said. "Since then, we've clarified our policy and taken the extreme measure that we are not to use any video news releases" (Hughes, 2006).

Other stations around the country have also refined their video news release policies for fear of fines and public humiliation when labeled as using fake news (Shory, 2007). The FCC is out to make sure that broadcasters are taking notice of its interest in disclosing the source of a video news source that airs to the public. In September 2007, the FCC set a record precedent when it fined Comcast \$4,000 for airing a VNR without disclosure. DS Simon Productions produced the footage in question on a sleep aid called Nelson's Rescue Sleep that aired in September 2006 on CN8, a Comcast cable station (Garcia, 2007).

To some audience members, the linking of public relations with journalists may have no effect one way or the other, or it may even produce favorable associations (Keenan, 1996). This does not mean that audience members should like the process. On the other hand, news consumers should be made aware of who is providing the credible journalist with the information they are providing to the viewer or reader. The news consumer should also be made to realize that even though the media does have a public role in society, there are other influences, such as public relations, to take into account.

The influence of public relations on the media comes in many forms: presidential speeches, lobbyists, health agencies, minority groups, politicians, educators, and events. This influence by public relations experts and institutions impacts the agenda setting function of the press by establishing relationships with reporters, sending press releases,

and giving them what reporters may view as “insider” information. When these stories eventually appear on television or in print, there is little consideration given to the origin of the information and what, if any, motivation the public relations practitioner has in helping the topic get media coverage.

One way for public relations professionals to get their message across is the VNR. With the increasing use of television in American homes, broadcast news provides much of the background for the public’s political judgments, consumer perceptions, and overall attitudes about crime, education, and health issues. “Making the news” can therefore prove to be either a critical asset or a major liability for public relations practitioners, public officials, and politicians.

This media game has been called “Darwinism in action” (Ansolabehere et al., 1993). Those who learn to play the game survive; those who cannot, become extinct. For politicians, public relations along with their personality skills have become more important to electoral success than policy expertise, problem-solving skills, and objectivity. If public relations practitioners do not keep their issue in the spotlight, they may lose some of the crucial support that keeps them in business or in the public’s eye.

It is believed that the media, and in particular the broadcast media, have a significant impact on the public agenda. The news perspective incorporates the idea that certain public issues will persist in mass media coverage over relatively long periods of time whether the message is given by journalists and/or non-journalistic actors (Rogers et al., 1991). With the increasing need by the media to rely on public relations practitioners to supply video, provide information, and provide sources, etc., it will become more of an issue for the newsreader and the viewer to consider.



If they do not realize that there is a public relations influence or “spin” on a story, the viewers are still missing out on part of the story. Communication college students are in the process of learning how the public relations and journalism industries work together, but it is the professionals with years of experience who know how to identify the different “spins” and influences on a story. The time considerations and technology the professionals use may continue to be a major factor in the newsgathering process, but research and education can enlighten the viewer to this outside factor that is impacting the news they watch and read.

An impressive body of research has shown that the news often does designate for people what is happening in the world, what is important, and how events and issues should be understood (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; Shaw & McCombs, 1977). While the media may not succeed in imposing preferred meanings on individual consciousness, the news does provide cues that guide the construction of private understandings of the world. Since journalists are keenly aware of their influences, PR firms try to come up with various ways to make issues and events newsworthy.

At the same time, the media can bring issues and events to the forefront of public attention, compelling politicians to respond to them. These two facets of the power of the news media—marginalization and agenda setting—are central concerns not only of media scholars but also of most competitors in the political process as well (Lawrence, 2000). On a daily basis, the news helps and hinders different groups that wish to construct or to get rid of particular public problems. The news both reflects the groups who struggle to shape it and constitutes one aspect of their power (Lawrence, 2000).

The questions in this survey include an assessment of how a station's credibility with its viewers is affected by the attribution or non-attribution of video supplied for a broadcast story.

The review of material for this study includes historical and empirical research in journalism that analyzes ethics, independence, professionalism, integrity, and commercial pressures. A focus on the current journalistic practice of visual and auditory attribution of sources is necessary to further understand if broadcast content suppliers are enforcing the basic fundamentals of journalism that enhance credibility. Advocates for media literacy say strides are being made, but non-attribution in print and broadcast still exist. To what extent communications sources outside the newsroom influence the news making process remains an important question within our changing media environment. Now with the government and the broadcast industry under fire for their use of video news releases, the results of this study will take a look at how three different populations think the news industry is doing when it comes to the use of VNRs and how their use impacts how we feel about them.

## CHAPTER 2

### Literature Review

#### *VNR Defined*

A video news release is a client-sponsored video that presents a controlled message using a news angle, broadcast style writing, and production practices (Aronson, Spetner, & Ames, 2007). A VNR is also referred to as an electronic press release or an electronic press kit (EPK), and it is generally regarded as the television form of the printed press release. Generally a VNR runs between ninety seconds and two minutes, which is the normal length for a reporter package in television news. The VNR is designed as a public relations tool that provides information and footage that broadcasters can easily use in the format of the entire package, a portion of the video, or a taped interview segment. VNRs are distributed via satellite to television. Harmon and White (2001) found that VNRs promoting health and safety topics were aired the most by local broadcast stations and that VNRs are commonly used unedited by small understaffed regional television stations that have limited budgets for news production.

Some broadcast stations have policies of not using VNRs. Public relations practitioners commonly cater to this by providing a series of video clips designed for use as stock footage or b-roll for a focused story. These video clips can be stored in a station's video library for use at a later time when the story is more relevant. Even though some stations have policies against using them, marketing and public relations

companies, such as Medialink, continue to make profits by producing what it describes on its website, [www.medialink.com](http://www.medialink.com), as “videos and rich imagery that inform, create, and motivate.” The founder and President of Medialink Worldwide, Larry Moscovitz, candidly said in an October 2003 discussion panel that “...every television station in America with a newscast has used and probably uses regularly this material from corporations and organizations that we provide as VNRs or B-roll or other terminology we may use” (Sourcewatch, 2008).

All participants except the viewing public benefit from the use of a produced VNR. Local broadcast affiliates are spared the expense of digging up original material. Public relations firms secure government production contracts worth millions of dollars. The major networks, which help distribute the releases, collect fees from the government agencies that produce segments and the affiliates that show them (Barstow & Stein, 2005). PR firms and the administration get out an unfiltered message, delivered in disguise as traditional reporting.

### *The VNR Controversy*

The practice by public relations practitioners, government, pharmaceutical companies, corporations, educational institutions, etc., of providing video news releases is not a new one in the public relations field. This modern public information tool has been in practice since the late 1980’s (Turk, 1986). Besides various highlights in magazines, articles, and a few research studies by the media and interested watchdog groups about their own practices, there has not been much focus put on the practice.

In a February 1992 cover article titled “Fake News” in *TV Guide*, David Leiberman took the media and the PR industry to task over the use of VNRs. His

argument was that footage from outside sources should be labeled as such so that viewers were aware of its origin. Lieberman believed as many media watchdog groups believe today; media outlets risk undermining their own credibility if they pretend what they broadcast is real news and do not label it for what is (Lieberman, 1992).

The problem for the TV news industry is not that these video news stories are supplied for them. Stations can legitimately use all or portions of the video for free, but they are bound only by their journalistic codes of ethics to disclose if they got it from a source other than their employees. The other current problem is that because of station's shrinking budgets and bigger news holes, producers are confusing the audience when they air produced video news releases within the normal news content and do not attribute who supplied the content (Ahrens, 2005; McFarland, 2005). In turn, this allows the viewer to believe that the station originated the material and not a public relations company who was paid to promote a product, enhance an image, or influence customer-buying power. This controversy over the disclosure of outside information sources is a serious issue not only being confronted by the government but broadcast news stations and networks around the country.

Fake news is not limited exclusively to broadcast television. Internet websites are the new home for these specifically targeted audio and video messages that are paid for by corporate clients. They are targeted to a variety of audiences through web syndication, YouTube, strategic placements in broadcast, cable, and site-based media in retail outlets, hospitals, and airplanes. Some clients even opt for "guaranteed placement," in which PR firms and production houses pay media channels outright to carry what they call "branded journalism" (Sourcewatch, 2008).

### *VNR Producers*

Jill Geisler, former news director at WITI-TV in Milwaukee and now a faculty member at the Poynter Institute for journalists, said video news releases have become more of an issue since they have gone from a tape that arrived in the mail to something that comes in on the satellite feed (Uebelherr, 2004). After the Medicare VNR incident, CNN Newsource decided to no longer add to the confusion. The cable network now labels video news releases as such on their Pathfire satellite feed system, which is distributed to 750 stations in the United States and Canada. Station affiliates around the country use Pathfire to search and supply material for their newscasts. Some stations cited CNN's failure to label video news releases as such coupled with the inclusion of VNRs with actual news content was not distinct enough for producers to always determine (Brooks, 2007).

CNN is not the only major television network that plays a crucial role in the business. Fox, for example, has an arrangement with Medialink to distribute video news releases to 130 affiliates through its video feed service, Fox News Edge. Associated Press Television News does the same thing worldwide with its Global Video Wire (Barstow & Stein, 2005).

Production of VNRs is a sizable industry. One of its largest players, Medialink Worldwide Inc., has about 200 employees, with offices in New York and London. It produces and distributes about 1,000 video news releases a year, most commissioned by major corporations (Barstow & Stein, 2005). The list of other major corporations that distribute VNRs worldwide is fairly lengthy and it includes the giants such as WestGlen Communications, DWJ, D S Simon Productions, KEF Media Associates, Multivu, etc.

There are also hundreds of VNRs released each year by smaller companies, educational institutions like colleges, political groups, and non-profit organizations who have a message that they want to share with a targeted audience. Public Relations and video distribution companies such as Medialink and DS Simon Productions are just two that lay out how their companies can help you get your message heard in front of a “captive” audience because of the production they put into their videos. They even have electronic coding for tracking where the videos air so they can make sure the client is getting its money’s worth.

The Defense Department also produces and distributes its own news segments for television audiences in the United States. Until 2004, The Pentagon Channel was only available inside the Defense Department. It is now offered to every cable and satellite operator in the United States. Army public affairs specialists, equipped with portable satellite transmitters, roam war zones in Afghanistan and Iraq, beaming news reports, raw video and interviews to TV stations in the United States. A local news director can log on to a military-financed Web site, [www.dvidshub.net](http://www.dvidshub.net), browse a menu of segments and request a free satellite feed.

The Army and Air Force Hometown News Service is a unit of approximately 40 reporters and producers set up to send local stations news segments highlighting military members and their accomplishments. Each year, the unit films thousands of soldiers sending holiday greetings to their hometowns. Increasingly, the unit also produces news reports that reach large audiences. The 50 stories it filed in 2004 were broadcast 236 times in all, reaching 41 million households in the United States (Barstow & Stein, 2005). The Air Force website, [www.usaf.com](http://www.usaf.com), reports that more than 14,000 newspapers, radio

and television stations subscribe to the hometown news service. Together they receive more than one million print and photo stories, radio and television interviews annually.

The Hometown News Service is just one detachment of the Air Force News Agency. Approximately 521 Air Force, Army, Navy, Marine military and civilian personnel are assigned to more than 29 locations worldwide. Their mission is to gather print and electronic news reports, feature stories, and audiovisual products to support major military operations or humanitarian relief efforts (USAF, 2009). The hometown service says it tailors the video releases to each broadcast outlet's tape format requirements, and includes font information, a suggested anchor introduction and a script.

It is not hard to find help on how a VNR should be produced in hopes of getting airtime. Government agencies, such as the Consumer Product Safety Commission, issue guidelines for producing video news releases, as well as advocating how effective and inexpensive they are. On its website, [www.cpsc.gov](http://www.cpsc.gov), it calls VNRs “essential staples for any public relations campaign”. Content suggestions, satellite distribution information, production tips, and publicity advice are also included on the website. The CPSC even uses tracking methods to make sure that their VNRs do get attention. On its website, it also claims a VNR released on August 12, 1994, about the recall of flammable skirts reached over 100 million viewers. Additionally, a VNR on the suffocation hazard posed by bean bag chairs released on March 16, 1995 reached well over 43 million viewers.

#### *VNR Usage and Production*

The rate of VNR usage by news producers has been steadily increasing. In a 1992 survey, 100% of television stations responding reported using VNRs in their newscasts. Usages rates in 1990 were at 86% and 83% in 1988. In the mid 1980's, approximately



500 VNRs were produced annually; whereas, in 1993 over 4,500 were produced (Owen & Karrh, 1996). Though those numbers show that VNRs are in use, some television news directors would rather admit to insider trading than to extensive use of VNRs. Several news executives reportedly refuse to use VNRs, presumably because they feel their news organization's credibility may diminish. Whether they admit it or not, television stations do air VNRs in one form or another (Owen & Karrh, 1996).

The most specific data seem to come from the Project for Excellence in Journalism, a nonpartisan media research group that asked 103 TV news directors about VNRs in 2002. Sixty-six percent said they never use them. Of the other 34 percent, 10 percent said they always label VNRs, but the remaining 24 percent said they labeled them either "occasionally," "rarely," or "never" (Baker, 2005).

Medialink is one of the many production companies around the country that produces video news releases for the web, television, and radio. Medialink's web site proudly proclaims, "For more than 20 years, Medialink has brought newsrooms scores of fully-identified video and audio on behalf of corporations, not-for-profit organizations and associations. We have communicated breaking news, including historic business mergers, medical breakthroughs and FDA approvals, and product recalls. We have helped thousands of clients bring the world its first views of new car unveilings, seasonal movie releases and consumer product launches" (Medialink, 2009).

While such a statement may be viewed as mere advertising, the truth is that Medialink produces and distributes about a thousand VNRs each year, some of which it disseminates to networks, such as FOX, and 130 of its affiliates through a video feed service (Barstow & Stein, 2005). Cable operator CNN has a similar feed service, which it

uses to distribute releases to 750 stations in the United States and Canada. In a 2003 National Public Radio panel discussion on the use of video news releases, co-host Bob Garfield reported that Nielson Media Research revealed that 100% of television stations were using VNRs by 1994, and 80% were using them several times a month (“Nightly News Sells,” 2003).

### *VNR Typology*

It is important to understand that when VNRs are mentioned in this study, they include a variety of forms such as video, video with soundbites, and full reporter stories with multiple sources. The terms “vo or b-roll”, “soundbites or sound on tape (sot),” “and “package” are the standard terms used in the broadcast news industry. “VO or B-roll” is defined as video that is shot by a videographer to illustrate the recorded narration. Soundbites or “sound on tape” are interviews with a subject who may be an expert on a particular topic, a person who has experience with the topic, or someone who has an opinion. Packages are the typical term given to produced stories in a newsroom where a reporter presents all the information in a minute and 30 second or two minute form. Appendix B illustrates the various forms of video news releases that are distributed by for-profit and nonprofit organizations.

### *Average TV Viewing Habits*

To understand why the study of VNRs is so important, it is essential to also look at the current amount of time the average person spends in front of a television set and with technology in general. If people are watching television, they are likely to be influenced by VNRs or the people who finance them. According to the AC Nielsen Company (2008), 99% of households in America have at least one television, and the

screen time of the average American continues to increase with more users watching more TV than ever before -- 127 hours and 15 minutes per month. They are also spending more time on the internet -- 26 hours and 26 minutes per month. Two hours and 19 minutes of that time is spent watching videos online. Watching videos on cell phones is also on the rise by an average of 3 hours and 15 minutes per month. Also, as of May 2008, more than 65% of U.S. homes received digital cable and satellite combined; meaning these homes receive nearly 160 channels. In addition to that television exposure, 25% and 35% of U.S. homes have DVR and Video on Demand, respectively. This means that the average American watches more than 4 hours of TV every day, which is the equivalent of 2 months of nonstop TV watching per year. In a 65-year life span, the average viewer will have spent 9 years glued to the tube. The average viewer is watching a lot of television and has many influences coming into his home via video sources.

#### *Average TV Median Age*

The potential age of the audience for broadcast news is also important in understanding why VNR producers and the people who pay for the public relations material want to make sure their message is included in the newscast. Advertisers typically target viewer demographics in the age range of 18-49 year olds, but that may soon have to change. A report from media buying firm Magna Global's Steve Sternberg, published in *Broadcasting & Cable Magazine* ("Study: Live TV Viewers," 2008) said the average media age for viewers of the five networks hit the age of 50 for the first time in 2008. That is the oldest since Sternberg started analyzing median ages more than 10 years ago. Now the average viewer may be considered to be too old when it comes to who advertisers want to reach--the standard 18-49 year old demographic (Schneider, 2008).

MAGNA's report said, "Not long ago, CBS was by far the oldest network, with a median age above 50. But ABC and NBC have gradually gotten older and are approaching 50 themselves" (Learmonth, 2008). This older audience for broadcast news means that more VNRs may focus on issues geared toward an audience past the standard demographics.

#### *Average Education Level*

To understand journalistic practices, we must also look at how important the education demographic is to differences in the population samples. Rest, J., Barnett, R., Bebeau, M., Deemer, D., Getz, I., Moon, Y., Spickelmeier, J. Thomas, S. & Volker, J. (1986) said that education is a primary predictor of moral development and understanding, with more highly educated individuals yielding higher scores. Rest et al (1986) also found that moral development stops improving after formal education ends. In the United States, that development may end for most people after high school and for an increasing number after the completion of a college degree. The U.S. Census Bureau (2004) reported that in 2003, an all-time high of 85% of adults age 25 and over had at least completed high school. Another record was the fact that 27% of adults age 25 and over had a college degree.

New highs were also reported when it came to the number of graduates based on race. In that same census, 89% of non-Hispanic whites and 80% of blacks had a high school diploma or higher. Asians composed the highest proportion of college graduates at 50%. About 30% of non-Hispanic whites and 17% of blacks at least had a bachelor's degree. In 1993, 24% of non-Hispanic whites and 12% of blacks were college graduates.

When it comes to gender, it is the women leading the pack in earning degrees. In 2003, women had a higher proportion of high school graduates (85%) than men (84%),

and the number of women earning college degrees jumped from 19% to 26%, and the number of men also increased from 25% to 29%.

### *Journalistic Concepts*

To assess the impact that video news releases and other public relations material have on journalists, it is important to understand the ideal view most people have of a person who works in the profession. A journalist is not only a public figure because his or her name is attached to an article or his face is shown when he reports an on-air story; he is also a resident in our community and is supposed to represent it. In general, viewers and readers expect a journalist to report the truth, but certain concepts associated with being a journalist must be explored in detail.

The issue of journalistic ethics is at the heart of the VNR debate. A journalist's ethical background and training helps him make judgments about particular situations that can impact many people. For example, he must weigh many news-making decisions on a daily basis that could mean the difference in how a person's reputation is reported. For example, a reporter's investigative story could possibly result in someone being arrested, or the way a suspected rapist is described may cast suspicion on several innocent individuals. His personal decisions are made based upon how his parents reared him, religion, socio-economic status, and other demographic factors. As important as these factors are, it is truly the training a journalist receives in college and by his hands-on experience in a newsroom that helped him make the right decisions to keep him out of legal trouble when ethical issues arise. By dealing with similar situations daily and realizing the impact each decision has on a station and journalist's reputation, the ethical choices one makes on a consistent basis plays a key role in how the public views him.

Viewers and readers alike want to know that they get their news information from a source that has a certain level of integrity. Not every news organization is believed to be honest all the time for a variety of reasons. Some people may perceive a loss of integrity if a station gives too much time to a certain politician or to an issue that is not treated objectively. When several high-profile reporting mistakes occur that bring embarrassment to one media organization, it can affect the integrity of all media whether they are associated with what happened or not. In recent years, several media organizations and several projects initiated by members of various types of media have made a move to build integrity back into the profession on the individual and the professional level.

It is hard for any broadcast or newspaper outlet to be independent of economic restraints. One reason is the ever-changing rise and fall of newsroom resources. In the 1980s, broadcast managers learned how TV news could turn a huge profit and so newsrooms started adding longer newscasts and more staff to produce more news (Dominick, Sherman, & Copeland, 1993). Now in the current market, we are seeing layoffs, furloughs and stations combining news sources to still produce the same amount of newscast time effectively and efficiently with fewer people (Gold & James, 2008). This decline in manpower also means an increase in the material used from sources other than a station's own generated material. Those outside sources usually come in the form of VNRs supplied by public relations professionals, advertisers, and politicians who have a vested interest in spreading their message through the media. If there are fewer journalists to evaluate the influence of public relations, those who influence can use that to their advantage and impact journalistic independence.

Professional journalism is still a fairly young concept that did not start evolving until the early 1900's. The innovative views on objective reporting and the stand for independence from partisan interests or from the publisher regarding content led to the idea of journalism becoming a calling for those who wanted to be a government watchdog for the public and write stories in the public's best interest. The concept of professionalism gained even more momentum with the development of formal journalism schools. Out of the schools grew professional codes of conduct, not only for journalists but also for those public relations practitioners who provide content to shape what the journalists report. Those codes are still promoted today, but, unfortunately, they are not always enforced. Hence, part of the controversy over VNRs is that there are professional codes addressing how you can and cannot use them, but there is no major legal retribution from the FCC or any other form of government if a station abuses these guidelines.

The credibility of a journalist basically means how much someone trusts in his reporting skills and his ability to gather all the right information to give a full sense of the story. Certain names of media organizations bring to mind different levels of credibility based on their past reporting practices -- objective versus subjective reporting -- and accuracy ratings. Sometimes, the popularity of a news product may mean that it is more credible, but that is not always the case. People may turn to different types of credible media for different types of information. Any type of report that is deemed credible has to be free from inaccuracies, include expert sources, and have proper attribution to contributing sources.

The commercialization of news is what some journalism veterans fear will kill it.

Many worry that the lines between entertainment and news are becoming blurred in the effort to attract more viewers and keep people entertained so they will come back for more. In an effort to keep an audience and to keep the media organization in the black, owners vow to protect journalistic practices while keeping advertisers and sponsors pleased. The problem is that the gap between integrity and the pocketbook is closing. Many media organizations fear they may have to “give in” or “close shop.” VNR producers promote their products as part of the commercial piece of the economic puzzle to help broadcasters fill their ever-growing news holes vacated by fewer employees in the newsroom. Advertisers also see the VNR as a low-cost alternative compared to an expensive 30-second advertisement that does not carry as much credibility as a VNR that airs within a newscast.

To get a full understanding of how the general public views journalists, the concepts of ethics, integrity, independence, professionalism, credibility, and commercialization of broadcast news is necessary. These concepts are the foundation of the profession and what its founders, watchdog groups, and aspiring journalists purport it to be. The VNR as a public relations tool has and will continue to make an impact on the practice of broadcast news. It is up to seasoned broadcasters in television stations to account for how they are used and the amount of influence they allow VNRs to make on news content.

### *Journalistic Ethics*

#### *Ethics vs. Law*

The definition of ethics can be derived from its roots in the Greek and Latin languages. The Greek word for ethics is “ethos” which means character and the Latin



word “mores” which means customs. Therefore, ethics is a system of beliefs that people have to guide them to make choices based on individual characteristics and traditions and how they should interact with one another (Hosmer, 1996). This means an individual decides for himself and others what is right and wrong based on the situation, expected outcome, and implication for those involved.

Some people interchange the words “ethics” and “morality,” but there is a difference between the two. Morality generally refers to the standards of behavior by which individuals are judged in society and how people are judged in their relationships with others. As an example, when some people think of the word "morality," their first thought often relates to sexual activity of some type. Whereas; ethics includes the formal study of the system of beliefs that supports a particular view of morality (Anstead, 1999). One might even say that morality is ethics in action. An ethical or moral person is one who struggles with her or his decision, trying to decide if his or her actions will have a negative effect on others. According to Timm (2000), when we make ethically sound decisions we have everything to gain.

Many laws often include ethical principles, but the two do not always co-exist. When someone thinks of the definition of a law, he likely defines it as a consistent set of universal rules that are widely published, generally accepted, and usually enforced (Anstead, 1999). The set of rules known as laws describes the way people are required to act as they interact with other people in society. They are requirements, not suggestions or expectations of how we should act in certain situations. It is then up to the government to enforce the legal requirements since legislators are the ones who establish the laws.

Voakes (1997) says that the main difference between the two systems of law and

ethics is that people consider the law to be obligatory and a requirement and ethics to be aspirational --“ a system of conduct we emulate only when we feel inclined to.” In other words to a journalist, the law is logical and objective and ethics are intuitive and subjective. Violations of the law can mean penalties from external forces and violations of ethics can mean social or group disapproval.

Ethical obligations typically exceed legal duties even though they are closely related. The law does not prohibit actions, such as a lying to a spouse or a friend, but it would be widely condemned as unethical. The reverse of that may also be true. For instance, speeding is illegal, but most people do not have an ethical issue with exceeding the speed limit. Examples of the application of law or policy to ethics include employment law, federal regulations, and codes of ethics. Some of these are referred to as professional codes of conduct or legal ethics which have been incorporated into public law. Generally, failure to comply with a code of professional ethics may result in expulsion from a particular profession, a firing, or some lesser penalty from an employer (“Nurses Fired,” 2009).

The exploration of journalistic biases is essential for this study because each individual has his own ethical background. Each person’s set of characteristics is developed by his gender, education, family, personal and social experience, and religious background. By evaluating the perceptions that the average person, the student journalist, and the journalist have of the ethical decisions journalists make, we can learn how people’s differing levels of exposure correlate with how and if they would use a video news release in a local news broadcast.

The average viewer’s ethical backgrounds may be diverse just like journalists, but

he is exempt from the training that a student journalist receives in college through ethics classes and hands-on experience. A college student has an added level of exposure over the average viewer because the student is being prepared for the reality and expectations of facing the daily decisions made in newsrooms that impact the public. In the traditional college classroom, a journalist is trained how to communicate with the public through writing, how to select and say the right words to keep a viewer watching, and how to think through daily ethical dilemmas. Once a student journalist graduates and works in the field for several years, he develops a higher awareness of the internal and external influences that impact news content.

The seasoned journalist has an even bigger advantage in evaluating how his individual decision about what to write, broadcast, or shoot can have an impact on others. He has made those decisions daily with every story that he is assigned for print or broadcast. For example, someone without an adequate amount of experience or training may think he would know what to do if faced with the issue of whether to release the name of an 11-year old accused of killing his father. It is not until a person has actually been in that profession that he can realize the level of ethical and moral debate that goes into a daily newscast.

### *Ethical Development*

To determine how a journalist develops ethical judgment, it is also important to analyze what researchers say about how most people develop from early childhood through adulthood stages of moral development. Kohlberg (1981) presented six stages of moral development in a person's lifetime. The first and second are referred to as "pre-conventional." Kohlberg found that these "pre-conventional" stages are common in

children and refers to the punishment and reward system. In the first stage, a person is only concerned with himself and his actions are only wrong if he is punished for it. Stage two reasoning is the “what’s in it for me” behavior where a person has a limited interest in what someone else needs or wants.

Kohlberg’s “conventional” level is referred to as stage three and four where adolescents and adults start judging their actions by what society thinks and expects. Stage three is when individuals want approval or disapproval from others and have a need to maintain rules and authority as they relate to society. Kohlberg’s level three is the one which average viewers reach because many never go farther in their moral development to realize that there may be ethical issues involved outside of what impacts them. Lind, Swenson-Lepper, and Rarick’s (1998) research on ethical sensitivity to controversial television news stories emphasized level three as the drop off point for moral development. They found that at this stage some viewers can identify problematic aspects of news stories, but they doubt or even overtly reject the idea that ethics are involved.

Stage four of Kohlberg’s moral development study goes deeper into the belief that it is important to obey laws, social conventions, and professional codes. According to Kohlberg, it is at level five and six that we realize that individuals have their own perspectives regardless of society’s view. In stage five, democratic ideals of decisions dictated by the majority and promoting the general welfare are viewed as the result of people holding differing opinions and values. Stage six involves putting yourself in another’s shoes before you make a final decision regardless of laws or societal implications. These are the most morally advanced people.

Kohlberg’s stages four and five are the levels that most journalists, even with

differing levels of experience, should be in their ethical judgment. After two to three years in his career, a maturing professional has faced the internal and external pressures of laws, professional codes, the general welfare of the public's interest, and the implications of his decisions on others. Poynter Institute faculty member Kelly McBride (2004) backs up that notion saying that journalism frequently operates at stage four and sometimes at stage five:

“In most decisions, we base our values on the current community standards. (We usually don't show images of dead Americans because our audience considers it disrespectful.) But on some stories journalists have managed to move up to stage five, as many newsrooms did in the course of covering Civil Rights and the Vietnam War.”

In a sample of 249 reporters from print and broadcast newsrooms, Wilkins and Coleman (2004) also found that journalists fare pretty well when it comes to Kohlberg's moral development scale despite which media outlet in which they work. Journalists ranked fourth behind seminarians, physicians, and medical students.

Kohlberg's (1981) six levels of moral development research have had a major impact on research in the development of journalistic ethics. Black, Barney, and Van Tubergen (1979) used Kohlberg's test when they tested younger, inexperienced journalists. They found that budding journalists are more likely to make hasty decisions when evaluating ethical dilemmas. Similar to those conclusions, Berkowitz and Limor (2003) found that journalistic confidence and length of job experience affects ethical decisions.

### *Population Differences*

#### *Average Individual*

One's gender, education, family, social and personal experiences, and religious

background may provide some type of ethical guidelines, but there is little chance of knowing whether everyone grows up with the same ideas when it comes to ethical decision making. In spite of what type of profession or occupation one has, ethical instruction of any kind provides a foundation that guides individuals to make sound moral decisions.

Voakes (1997) built on Shoemaker & Reese's (1991) findings by concluding that seven levels of influences exist when one encounters ethical dilemmas, but an individual's characteristics rank as the weakest of the seven. Those attributes include personal values, parental upbringing, and demographics, but external influences such as competition, organization, occupation, law, or extramedia influences have a bigger influence on the decisions any person makes when it comes to ethical scenarios. Those extramedia influences include political, public relations, and medical sources because they have the ability to manipulate journalists through the information they share as well as the context that surrounds that information.

Others believe that ethical principles are laid out in a religious context and that there are concrete divisions between right and wrong. Underwood (2001) suggested that American journalistic values are rooted in the Judeo-Christian tradition such as the Ten Commandments, which are present in the Bible. Harless (1990) based his findings on the perspective of the "Left" versus the "Right." He said that the Right values achievement and embraces authority while the Left values individualism, freedom, and happiness.

The average individual is impacted by all these influences when he is exposed to hundreds of hours of television that enter his living room without the knowledge or interest of all the ethical influences on the viewing content. Kohlberg (1981) and Lind,

Swensen-Lepper, and Rarick (1998) found the average viewer may recognize the complications involved in some news stories, but he does not acknowledge that any ethics are involved outside of the realm of how it impacts him. This is important to note because a majority of the population that watches television on a daily basis may not realize how they are being influenced by other's ethical decisions.

### *Student Journalist*

In part, journalists learn how to make decisions between right and wrong when they go through ethics and journalism classes in college. Regardless of where a student decides to get his training in journalism, an ethics course is generally required because of the amount and type of decisions he faces on a daily basis. Evidence of the need for ethical training comes from Hanson's (2002) survey that resulted in responses from 60 news directors and 166 students enrolled in ethics courses from Kent State University, The University of Nebraska at Lincoln, and the University of Nevada at Reno. The majority of students who responded expected ethical dilemmas in the classroom to include conflict of interest, the relationship between sources and reporters, live coverage of breaking news, accuracy issues, juvenile coverage, and influence from the advertising and sales departments. Most of their expectations about ethical issues were not different than what the news directors said they actually faced. The news directors said in the six months prior to the study, they experienced the following ethical issues: accuracy, live coverage of breaking events, juvenile coverage, and influence from the advertising and sales departments. The study found that there is a disconnect between television news directors' and journalism students' perceptions of issues in media ethics. Both groups agreed that ethics is best learned on the job.

Perhaps that is because the younger the college student, the less they may understand what influences arise in the newsroom. Kostyu (1990) asked communication students to evaluate what a reporter should do if various ethical issues arise. He found a difference in scores across grade levels. Freshman participants were less likely to consider issues to be ethical violations as compared to more advanced students. Weaver and Wilhoit (1996) found that more educated journalists are less likely to be influenced by the newsroom. They also found that journalists who were younger and had more schooling were more likely to approve of controversial reporting methods.

An advanced education might be important for helping journalists to recognize ethical issues when they arise. Less educated journalists might fail to recognize the ethical implications of having a social dinner with an important source, such as a crime reporter dating a police officer. Less educated journalists might also struggle to find a balance between ethical technique, public good, and controversial reporting. For instance, consider a reporter who finds out that an American corporation is secretly running a sweatshop. The only way for the reporter to expose the corporation's behavior is by using some sort of controversial reporting method, such as undercover reporting or a hidden camera. A less educated reporter might fail to see the importance in weighing the public good against a potential legal issue. For the less educated reporter, this issue might be more about legalities than it is about ethics and public good.

Veteran journalist Deborah Potter (2008) has argued for years that journalism students need ethics training to prepare them for the tough calls they will have to make on the job. She applauds schools like the University of Nevada, Reno which require their students to take a journalism ethics course and a First Amendment class that covers



ethics. After studying the Society of Professional Journalist and Radio Television Code of Ethics, some of the students in those classes came up with their own ethical pledge that the school's Journalism Student Advisory Board is now asking all its graduates to sign:

As a graduate of the Reynolds School of Journalism, I will uphold and apply the highest standards of integrity and ethics. This includes helping others by minimizing harm and showing compassion. As a graduate of the Reynolds School of Journalism, I will act independently and be accountable for my actions.

Potter (2008) says she believes that sense of responsibility and accountability is crucial for the beginning journalist. Potter is the executive director of the non-profit journalism resource in Washington, DC called the NewsLab. She says she hopes graduates will sign the pledge on the back of their new business cards and let it serve as a reminder to them and the people they deal with about their commitment to ethical journalism (Potter, 2008).

### *The Journalist*

A traditional journalist is trained in a college classroom on how to communicate with the public through writing, how to select and say the right words to keep a viewer watching, and how to think through daily ethical dilemmas when he gets to a newsroom. Once a journalist works in the field for several years, he has a much higher awareness of the internal and external influences that impact news content. That level of experience in evaluating how an individual's decision can have an impact on others is much greater than that of the average viewer. The average viewer may not be aware of the amount of thought and ethical analysis that goes into those final decisions.

A journalist who has grown up in the United States has already been exposed to thousands of hours of media and has been surrounded by cultural values all his life.

Those traditions can be so engrained that he may not be able to separate his personal values from the collective norm. Those individual characteristics and morals of a journalist are present regardless of the broadcast station or media organization they work for.

### *Professional Codes of Ethics*

Once a journalist graduates, he is not on his own when it comes to ethical decision making. Many are encouraged to become members of the Society of Professional Journalists or the Radio and Television News Directors Association, which both share a dedication to ethical behavior and have their own Code of Ethics (Appendix D & E) that they encourage their members to adhere to throughout their career. Both organizations acknowledge that their codes are not a set of rules, but they are used as a resource. The two organizations also hold workshops every year and conduct lectures in the community and on college campuses to share examples with inexperienced and veteran journalists to enforce their codes and to try to maintain media credibility for the profession.

Even though members pay to belong, SPJ and RTNDA do set the high standards for all American journalists to follow. Since 1909, SPJ has promoted the free practice of journalism and high ethical standards through its 10,000 members who work at newspapers, radio, and television stations around the country. The four tenets that the organizations promote are to: 1) seek truth and report it, 2) minimize harm 3) act independently and 4) be accountable (Rosenauer, 2004).

RTNDA claims to be the world's largest and only professional organization serving the electronic news profession. It is made up of more than 3,000 news directors, news associates, educators and students involved in the production of news for all media.

The organization's purpose is to set standards of news gathering and reporting.

### *Journalistic Ethics on the Frontline*

Ethics in a television newsroom is generally an everyday dilemma. Similar circumstances occur in every workplace, but journalists face unique ethical circumstances that challenge them to test their personal morals against their professional ethics. So much information feeds into an assignment desk and to reporters through email, satellite feeds, news services, and phone calls that ethical decisions start the minute journalists start reading their daily email, answering phone calls, and doing interviews. How they handle those decisions depends on their training, gender, education, personal experiences, social status, religious, and family backgrounds.

The perception of the situation must also be considered since the journalist may not realize there is an ethical decision to be made. For example, when a reporter or videographer is forced to make instant decisions in the field, he may not have time to consider the different ethical codes or seek the advice of an experienced colleague. He must rely on his own upbringing and trained decision-making.

Photojournalists and reporters also make ethical decisions while they are on the scene of an incident without any input from an assignment editor or a news director. A videographer may decide in the field to not shoot the bloody sheet of a murder victim so that the station does not even have the footage so the producer would be tempted to air the video. A reporter may forego an interview with the family who just lost a child in a drunk driving car accident because he feels it is not the right time to talk to them about the circumstances.

Those are decisions that they make as individuals, but they may base those decisions on training they received from a journalism school or moral values they learned from their family (McKay, 2008).

Most researchers agree that ethical behavior begins from the time a child is able to determine the difference between what is right and wrong. By the time most people graduate from high school, possibly attend college and work in different professions, there is no doubt that we all have faced some ethical or moral decisions. There are only a select few professions in which ethics play a bigger role than in the medical and journalism field.

One major ethical decision broadcast newsroom employees have been faced with since the late 1980's is whether or not to use video news releases in their daily newscasts. Once the public information tool turned from the print form into the video form, broadcasters have been tempted to use it as a resource. VNRs come free via satellite, the mail, or even delivered by hand, and so they are an easily accessible resource to fill a news hole. The problem for the TV news industry is not that these video news stories are supplied for them. Stations can legitimately use all or portions of the video for free, but they are bound by their journalistic ethics to disclose if they got the stories or footage from someone other than their own employees.

The Society of Professional Journalists and the Radio and Television News Directors Association address the issue of VNRs in their code of ethics and in frequent updates to their members when issues regarding their use arise.

SPJ and RTNDA both lashed out against the Bush administration's use of fake television news reports and the professional laziness of the news organizations that use the video press releases without traditional journalistic editing and responsibility (Hill, 2004; Cochran, 2005).

The RTNDA has a longstanding policy of identifying outside material (Code of Ethics Appendix D). The organization's code of ethics states "Professional electronic journalists must clearly disclose the origin of information and label all material provided by outsiders." Since the Medicare VNRs and the Center for Democracy and Media study in 2005, RTNDA amplified its guidelines to its members reiterating that the commitment to providing accurate and credible news stories also includes appropriate identification of materials from third-party sources. In the CDM study, the authors claim that 77 stations used VNR material in newscasts without identifying the original material. The RTNDA disputed the study saying the conclusions were embellished and the facts were inconsistent. The RTNDA found more than 20 instances where stations did make appropriate disclosures and the number of instances the CMD study cited represented only 10.3 percent of all television stations (RTNDA, 2006).

The Radio-Television News Directors Association wants the Federal Communications Commission to stop its inquiry of VNRs because it believes broadcasters know how to properly use them. In an October 5<sup>th</sup>, 2006, letter to the FCC, the RTNDA stated:

Determining the content of a newscast, including when and how to identify sources, is at the very heart of the responsibilities of electronic journalists, and these decisions must remain far removed from government involvement or supervision.

The government would not dream of inserting itself into a print newsroom to dictate or otherwise oversee how newspaper editors utilize press releases (RTNDA, 2006).

Until the Medicare video news releases made the headlines in 2004, FCC commissioners did not investigate the source and sponsorship of VNR messages as a legal matter, only as an ethical one (Pear, 2004). In April 2005, the FCC published a public notice on VNRs saying current regulations mandated that viewers be told the source of a VNR only when stations are paid to air it or when the VNR deals with a political matter or controversial issue (Farsetta, 2005). That public notice got plenty of attention, and it put the spotlight on broadcast stations that received the VNRs. Some stations dispute their use, and others say they use them only if they are identified orally or graphically (Croft, 2008). Representatives for the networks insist that government-produced reports are clearly labeled when they are distributed to affiliates (Barstow & Stein, 2005). Nevertheless, most do acknowledge that a confusion problem can occur when video news releases bounce from satellite to satellite and from one news organization to another.

VNRs are viewed as a growing ethical problem because stations' shrinking budgets and bigger news holes are making the use of VNRs more attractive to newsroom executives. Further, producers are confusing the audience when they air video news releases as part of the normal news program content and fail to disclose who supplied the content (Ahrens, 2005). This failure to attribute where the story originated allows the viewer to believe that the station originated the material and not a public relations or health company who was paid to promote a product, enhance an image, or influence customer buying power. The controversy over the disclosure of outside information sources is a serious ethical issue being confronted by the government and broadcast news

stations and networks around the country. Ken Foley, President of the National Association of Broadcast Communicators said in an emailed statement to PRWeek: “even though VNRs are free, broadcasters and cable programmers are totally free, in their editorial discretion, to decide whether or not to use them in whole or in part” (Garcia, 2007)

The more experience an individual has with public relations generated material; the more likely he is to identify it as such. Most people have seen VNRs, but they may not recognize them as prepackaged material produced by public relations professionals. The reason is because it has the same production values as a typical broadcast news package that airs within the boundaries of a 30-minute daily newscast. The vast amount of exposure to this type of media is typically limited to broadcast professionals who receive the content via mailed tapes, satellite feeds, video downloads, and sponsorship pitches from hospitals and medical companies. When the newsroom personnel receive the VNR, it should be clearly labeled as to its origin and the suggestions on how to use it. Next, it is up to the broadcast personnel to decide how and whether they will use it. They have several questions facing them at this point: 1) Will it help us fill a time slot? 2) Is it newsworthy? 3) Do we use it in the exact same form they provided it to us? 4) Do we graphically or orally attribute the source? 5) Do viewers care if we give them the same information, and so do we revoice and repackage it and take credit for someone else’s work?

In spite of the ethical training available to journalists in college, media organizations, and professional development, they are also influenced by their religious and family backgrounds and this impacts how they act in particular news situations. In a

2-month participant-observation study, Steele (1987) found that photojournalists indicated their ethical decisions were influenced by their religious and family backgrounds. They had different motivations for their ethical decisions, but said they were concerned about journalistic ethics. In a different ethics experiment, Williams (1997) found that the more experienced journalist is more likely to seek advice from his peers than a less experienced journalist. The last thing that a respected journalist wants to do is to embarrass his profession by doing something that he believes is unethical.

For individual broadcast journalists to do their jobs accurately and ethically, public relations practitioners need to be proactive in their disclosure by making the source of the information clear. Sponsorship information and its source should be clearly stated in any email, phone call, or packaged material that is delivered to a newsroom. If these steps are taken, the public relations employee feels like he has fulfilled his ethical obligation and adhered to the standards set forth by his profession. Then it is up to the broadcaster to decide if he will continue this ethical practice of disclosure in the form of oral or graphic attribution.

The broadcast professional must then do what he has been trained to do: evaluate the usefulness of the VNR, how he will use it, and how he will attribute it. The more training and the more experience that an industry professional has with evaluating VNRs, the more he will be able to determine when they are being used unethically. If the individual newsroom employee knows the standards set forth by his professional organizations and its organization, he will know what action to take when the decision is made to use it in a newscast.



Hypothesis 1: The more industry experience a journalist has, the more likely the individual perceives VNR use to be unethical.

### *Journalistic Integrity*

#### *Individual Integrity*

Finding integrity in individuals may not be the easiest thing to label as a characteristic. The different temptations that exist in our society make it even harder for one to claim they have it. The word “integrity” seems to get only a passing mention in the obituaries or some tribute honoring the death of a famous personality. It is even a sadder event when someone returns a missing wallet with everything intact and the media makes it into a newsworthy event because it is now considered to be the unexpected thing for a person to do. One value of having integrity is that people know you abide by your own moral and/or professional code. Observers trust that a person of integrity be one that makes consistent decisions based on individual values and principles. Basically, he does not bow to the pressure of influences such as lying or blaming others to impact the decision that he knows to be the right one.

Killinger (2007) says integrity is an internal state of being that guides us toward making morally wise choices. That is in contrast to ethics and morality which are internal values recognized by society’s standards for the common good. People with integrity have a desire to build a career by dealing with situations honestly and truthfully. Instead of sitting on a pedestal ready for someone to push them down, they build up walls of integrity with a hard work ethic and perseverance. Integrity is also developed when people deal with adversity, and a lack of it is often a sign of someone who would rather find the easy way than the right way. Vanier (2001) advises that our lives and identities

are shaped by the important choices we make. If we choose to work for society and act for the good of others, we will reject corruption, power at any price, and all forms of injustice.

The topic of integrity is something we all seem to be in favor of for our politicians, journalists, and sports heroes, but no one seems to know how to make sure people get it. Everyone promises to deliver it, but many times those promises go unfulfilled. So we may only hear the words when the loss of integrity makes big news. We have seen this in celebrity and political mishaps such as eight-time Olympic star Michael Phelps who lost a multi-million dollar endorsement deal with Kellogg's after he was caught smoking a bong at a party (Snead, 2009). Another example is when the governor of Illinois, Rod R. Blagojevich, was charged by federal prosecutors for putting President Barack Obama's Senate seat up for sale (Davey & Healey, 2008).

Carter (1996) said there are three factors involved in leading a life with integrity: discern what is right and wrong, act on what you have discerned, even at personal cost, and state openly the motivations behind your behavior. He argued "we have a general duty to the right rather than wrong, a duty as absolute as the duty to follow God's will." Carter says he believes that there is a current lack of integrity in American politics and that our trust in elected officials is drastically low. Polls back up his argument: a 2005 *Washington Post*-ABC News Poll (Morin & Balz, 2005) showed that for the first time in Bush's presidency, 58% of Americans questioned his integrity. New Jersey Governor Jon Corzine may have won his race by using integrity as an issue, but when his relationship with ousted state-worker union leader Carla Katz was reported, 58% of respondents in an opinion poll questioned his integrity (Margolin, 2008).

### *Professional Integrity*

The preamble to the Society of Professional Journalists' Code of Ethics states, "Professional integrity is the cornerstone of a journalist's credibility." Thousands of paying members of the society share this dedication to ethical behavior and they adopt this code as part of their commitment to the Society's principles and standards of practice. These journalistic codes are designed as guides through numerous difficulties to assist journalists in dealing with ethical dilemmas so they can maintain a sense of professional integrity. The code gives journalists a framework for self-monitoring and self-correction as they pursue professional assignments. The core commitment to SPJ is to seek the truth and report it by making sure all information is accurate and identified from proper sources (Society of Professional Journalists, 2009).

The Project for Excellence in Journalism is an initiative started in 1997 with a double mission to evaluate the press and help journalists clarify their professional principles to restore integrity in the profession. It was originally affiliated with the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism, but since July 1, 2006, it joined the Pew Research Center in Washington, D.C. and expanded its research activities. The innovative idea was to bring together professionals with years of experience and expertise to identify models of quality in local television news. The original Committee of Concerned Journalists who worked on the PEJ was made up of reporters, editors, producers, publishers, owners and academics that were worried about the future of the profession. They felt that to secure the future of journalism that journalists from all media, geography, rank and generation had to be clear about what sets this profession apart from other endeavors. At this time, many felt it was crucial to clarify and raise the

standards of American journalism. Journalists themselves were found to be losing confidence in their professionalism and purpose (Baird, Loges, & Rosenbaum, 1999).

In the late nineties, the manner in which reporters around the country covered the Clinton-Lewinsky sexual controversy, as well as, the actions of the prosecutor are one major incident in journalism history when journalists themselves felt it was time to restore integrity in their career of choice. As we have learned, the press generally loses when it comes to the court of public opinion, and that truly showed during the President Bill Clinton, Monica Lewinsky, and Kenneth Starr coverage. In a Pew Research Center poll of 844 people taken from January 30<sup>th</sup> to February 2, 1998, nearly two thirds said the media had done only a fair or poor job of carefully checking the facts before reporting the story; 60% said the media had done only a fair or poor job of being objective on the story, and 54% thought the press put in a fair or poor performance in providing the right amount of coverage (“Clinton Moral,” 1998). Following this trouble at the White House in the late 1990’s, there never was a better time to start examining what journalists can do to improve and to recapture public respect.

News organizations as a whole face an uphill battle in regaining the public’s trust (Juhre, 2003). Skepticism over the media and what they report is not necessarily a new concept, but the damage to the press’ reputation created by the 2003 *New York Times* Jayson Blair scandal has led to much discussion of how news organizations can do a better job of policing themselves and rebuilding public trust. Blair’s discrepancies in reporting inaccuracies and plagiarizing launched a massive internal review of *The New York Times*’ hiring, management and reporting practices. It also resulted in Blair’s resignation as well as a staff-shakeup ending with the resignation of two of the paper’s

top editors, Howell Raines and Gerald Boyd. While leaving a scar on the reputation of one of the country's most influential newspapers, *Times* publisher Arthur Sulzberger Jr. called the Blair scandal "a low point" in the paper's 152-year history ("Jayson Blair," 2004).

Building professional integrity back into print and broadcast journalism is a work in progress, and there are sometimes public accolades for those who make a stand. *The New York Times* (Joachim, 2007) gave a nod to journalistic integrity when it reported that PC World reinstated its top editor, Harry McCracken, who had quit days earlier over the executive's decision to not run an article critical of an advertiser. Readers praised McCracken on message boards and blogs for sacrificing himself in the name of journalistic integrity to publish the article "10 Things We Hate About Apple" on the magazine's website.

The heads of major multimedia organizations use the term journalistic integrity in their mission statements and as a means to try to entice others to believe their intentions. Time Inc. claims on its company website, [www.timewarner.com](http://www.timewarner.com), that it has had a long tradition of journalistic integrity dating back to its founding in 1923, and that it strives to maintain those stringent standards of journalistic integrity (Time Warner, 2009). In an effort to buy the *Wall Street Journal* and its parent company Dow Jones, Rupert Murdoch, the chairman of News Corp., promised the owners that he would retain the journalistic integrity of the newspaper (Mills, 2007). These promises are based on convincing people that they will stay true to the core foundation of journalism, which includes integrity in the search for reporting the truth.

As part of earning back integrity, all journalists must prove that they pay attention

to detail on every story regardless of how insignificant it may be. The description of “lazy” is attached to journalists when they do not perform the job to its full potential which includes getting the facts right and making the story objective by making sure the viewer gets the entire story. As a person who gets interviewed a lot by the media, Jack White believes he knows why people do not think journalists have integrity. White is the lead man of the band White Stripes, and he says “Journalists are inherently the laziest people on earth. Even in the age of Google, they don’t do any work to check what they’re writing about... I’d say 90% of what they get is from the press release.” (“Jack White Brands,” 2007). His point is that not only do they have so much information at their fingertips that they can use to check facts, it just takes one lazy journalist to detract from the integrity of the entire profession and make people question what they read or hear on the news.

#### *Perception Levels of Integrity*

As long as we continue to have accounting scandals and widespread corporate fraud, professional ethics and integrity will remain a hot topic because the public continues to be greatly alarmed about the absence of responsible truth telling. Journalists with years of experience in the field know this better than anyone. When it comes to making decisions that will bring into question their individual integrity and possibly the professional integrity of their news organization, journalists should be very aware that their actions would be scrutinized if they violate the public’s trust.

Since they have not experienced it, average viewers and college students learning about the profession are not aware of how many ways a viewer can be manipulated by sources. They do not realize the pressures of daily competition and the influence it can

have on the order and choice of stories. Without a full understanding of how detailed every aspect of the job is, they do not realize how easy it could be to make a mistake that can haunt you for the rest of your career.

Journalists must have the courage to stand up to their editors and news directors and other bosses when the need arises and refuse to take a story beyond where sound journalistic principles allow (Baird, Loges, & Rosenbaum, 1999). Thomas E. Patterson of Harvard's John F. Kennedy School of Government said, "journalists have to say, 'Here's the example of the kinds of things we won't do'—and then don't do it. And if journalists do it, someone must tell them, 'You're violating the standards of your profession. Stop it' (Patterson, 1994)."

Those tempted to cheat or lie to colleagues, bosses, or the public are far less likely to do so if they have to face these people daily (Killinger, 2007). When a journalist is faced with the decision of trying to claim another's work as his own, he is less likely to do so if he knows it can damage his individual and professional integrity if his colleagues find out. That is where the issue of how broadcasters use VNRs comes into play in the newsroom. The news gatherers in a television newsroom understand the difference in a video produced by their co-workers and one that is provided by an outside source.

Broadcast news employees are aware of the guidelines for attributing video news releases and other public relations material supplied by outside sources. They not only learned about it in college, but in hands-on training, legal seminars, and in the ethical codes enforced by their organization and profession.

If they choose not to abide by them, they are knowingly deceiving the public when they use any part of the supplied visuals or script without giving the production company credit orally or graphically for supplying the content.

Newsroom employees are knowledgeable about how they should treat public relations material. They are aware of all the outside influences because they are aware of all the different forms available for them to use. Whether it is a press release or a video news release, journalists are charged with checking the facts and labeling their sources be it orally or graphically. It is the veteran journalist who knows that if he does not face every story with the knowledge that he will stay true to the core mission of the basis of journalism and its professional codes, there will be a loss of journalistic integrity that so many organizations are trying to restore.

Hypothesis 2: As an individual's industry experience increases, the more likely the individual believes that VNR use will negatively affect journalistic integrity.

### *Journalistic Independence*

When teenagers think of being independent, making one's own decisions without being influenced by parents is what comes to mind. For journalists, the term independence means being free from obligation to any interest other than the public's right to know. A journalist is unparalleled to other occupations in his responsibility to gather information and present it to the public, to seek out the truth and report it as fully as possible.

As we have seen in recent years, politicians who take bribes, corporate executives who take from their own company, and investors who bilk their clients out of thousands of dollars have left people doubting that they can trust almost anyone. Those types of



situations also make one believe that someone is always “in” with someone else to get what they want. To battle that distrust, members of The Society for Professional Journalists emphasize the following as points to remember when it comes to maintaining independence:

- Avoid conflicts of interest, real or perceived.
- Remain free of associations and activities that may compromise integrity or damage credibility.
- Refuse gifts, favors, fees, free travel and special treatment.
- Shun secondary employment, political involvement, public office and service in community organizations if they compromise journalistic integrity.
- Disclose unavoidable conflicts, and be vigilant and courageous about holding those with power accountable.
- Deny favored treatment to advertisers and special interests and resist their pressure to influence news coverage.
- Be wary of sources offering information for favors or money; avoid bidding for news.

While journalistic independence may be one of the guiding principles at the heart of the role as truth seekers, it also serves as an ethical compass (Steele, 1987). The concept can tell us where we can find some balance when it comes to the influences of our own self interest, internal and external competition, and deadline pressures. The principle of independence can also guide journalists in their responsibility to the public.

Clark (1994) says he believes the continual fight to be independent of corporate pressures can be a good thing because it reminds journalists that they are supposed to be connected to the public and serve their interest rather than a client's.

While some may question independence as a proper principle for ethical guidance, others say journalists can not be too detached from the people they serve. Public journalism is about connectedness, bringing journalism and the public together to better serves community, to provide for civic good, and to accomplish democratic goals. Eisner (1994) says being independent also means that you give up some things personally and collectively as a media organization to maintain a certain amount of distance to preserve integrity. The role of a journalist is truly unique.

At least one media organization is trying to be an example of an operation that acts independently of outside influences. The online television and documentary news network, "The Real News Network," launched in 1997 with the promise to focus on providing independent and uncompromising journalism. On its web site, the network claims its producers and journalists will not blindly follow wire services or official press releases that attempt to set the news agenda ([www.therealnews.com](http://www.therealnews.com), 2009). To further its goals to be an independent network, The Real News is financially supported exclusively by donations, and refuses funding from advertising, government, and corporations. In today's economic times, that is a network truly trying to take a stand in the name of independent journalism.

While they may know what they are supposed to do, journalists are still as subject to influence as any other individual. This allows public relations practitioners for politicians, institutions, corporations, health agencies, and non-profit organizations to

come into the picture. For example, the public relations advocate plays a major role in getting the message out about his particular interest. This means that the people who want to get their message across know that they have to get that message delivered to the mass audience through reputable journalists who work for television stations, newspapers, and internet media agencies.

If public relations specialists do not use the broadcast or major newspaper source, their message may be ignored. Therefore, an experienced public relations person knows the immediacy and pressure that a journalist is under to make his deadline. They know how to help a reporter make a story happen. This relationship between journalists and public relations personnel is becoming a growing one because of three reasons: station budget and staff cuts, an increase in the news hole, and an increase in media competition (Owen & Karrh, 1996).

It is public relations practitioners who provide the numerous video news releases (VNRs) and press releases that flood a newsroom via fax machines, emails, radio actuality lines, and regional and national satellite news feeds. For many journalists, the amount of information provided is overwhelming. The average broadcast news viewer does not realize and would have a hard time conceptualizing the entire gate keeping process that a news organization goes through in a day. A good public relations practitioner who knows these constraints and knows how the “media game” works can turn this competitive pressure into an advantage for him and his organization.

Health VNRs and sponsorships are two of the ways that major hospitals, medical companies, and pharmaceutical companies have learned to work around the independence game and make sure good information gets out regardless of the source.

This type of public relations material is not going away anytime soon because of the market value it adds for the hospital or company. For example, a story called “Same Day Teeth” about a quicker way of doing lower-jaw dental implants was put out by the Mayo Clinic news service. The news service was started in 2000, and its weekly Medical Edge stories go out to 130 TV stations in the U.S. and Canada. That one story resulted in 175 calls, 23 scheduled appointments, and downstream revenue estimated at \$345,000. The Mayo Clinic’s media relations manager, Lee Aase, noted that 8.6 million people watched the December 2001 Medical Edge stories. The value was greater than ten times the cost of producing the shows (Lieberman, 2007).

President of the Carnegie Corporation, Vartan Gregorian, may have summed up the independence debate over unidentified VNRs and the relationships between journalists and public relations professionals best. Gregorian said, “Choice can be manipulated. Choice without knowledge is no choice at all” (Lieberman, 2007). Such statements are what critics of VNR use in broadcast news believe is the heart of this issue -- the public needs to know who the reporters’ source of information is. They need to understand up front if it the information provided, whether legitimate or not, is part of a sponsored business deal with a hospital or other corporation.

On May 12, 2005, PRSA’s President and CEO, Judith T. Phair testified before the U.S. Senate Committee on Commerce, where she supported legislation requiring full disclosure of the sources of government VNRs. She stated that disclosure to the public of sources could come in many forms, but the decision as to how it should be revealed should ultimately be the responsibility of the broadcaster.

“We believe public relations professionals involved in producing video news releases should provide broadcasters with all the information they need in order to decide the best way to use the information contained in the releases.” –Judith T. Phair (PRSA, May 12, 2005)

Professionals in the broadcast industry have their own opinions related to the use of VNRs, but with ever-tightening budgets and bigger news holes to fill, they say they do not always have a choice except to use the material they have. It is the same economic situation with hospitals and medical companies who are dealing with cost cutting by healthcare firms. Consequently, the relationship is viewed as a symbiotic one where the news staff deems they are doing viewers a service by providing them medical information from respected health care providers. The problem arises in the situations where broadcasters treat the information as their own work and do not identify graphically or orally that the hospital provided the medical information.

News Director Regent Ducas of KCTV in Kansas City said he does not sense there is a need for a full-time health reporter (Lieberman, 2007). Since his station had a lucrative partnership with the HCA hospital system until the end of 2006. Other news directors such as Sam Rosenwasser, president and General Manager of WTSP-TV in St. Petersburg said his station has not pursued one, but would “entertain anything it if it makes sense” (Lieberman, 2007). These experienced news professionals are just a couple of many around the country who are approached daily by outside companies trying to air their message anyway they can. Professionals or companies also know that these types of pitches by health care companies, corporations, and government entities are just one way they can supplement their local station’s income. While, they are aware of what giving in to the influence of others means, broadcasters also know it infringes on their effort to be an independent media organization.

Hypothesis 3: As an individual's industry experience increases, the more likely the individual believes that VNR use lowers journalistic independence.

### *Professionalism*

To some, it may come as a surprise that the concepts of objectivity and professional journalism are recent developments in the United States. Within the first one hundred-plus years of the republic, journalism was regarded as highly opinionated and partisan (McChesney & Nichols, 2005). The first generations of U.S. journalists did not have a commitment to neutral, value-free news reporting. Opinions on slavery, the dangers of imperialism, and the need for providing common welfare were the topics of scores of articles written by many journalists who could not claim that their writing was free of bias.

It was not until the nineteenth century that a range of newspapers and magazines turned into a lucrative publishing venture. At this time, the goal became to generate as many readers as possible which led to the rise of sensationalism, blatant fabrication of stories, widespread bribing of journalists, and other sorts of deceptive practices that undermined the legitimate function of journalism (McChesney & Nichols, 2005). During the 1912 presidential race, all three challengers to President William Howard Taft -- Democrat Woodrow Wilson, Progressive Theodore Roosevelt, and Socialist Eugene Debs -- publicly criticized the corruption of the press. The challengers had reason to argue because Taft's family owned the *Cincinnati Times-Star*. Journalism historians view the time period from 1908 until 1912 as the birth of professional journalism since publishers finally realized that partisan and sensationalistic journalism were undermining their business model (Winfield, 2008).

The revolutionary idea that partisan interests would no longer shape the news content and there would now be a wall between the publisher and the editor of a newspaper also sparked interest in training professional journalists in colleges around the country. No schools focusing on training nonpartisan professionals existed in 1900. That changed by the end of World War I, around 1920, when all the major schools such as Columbia, Northwestern, Missouri, and Indiana established formal schools of journalism to train professional editors and reporters (McChesney, 2004). Professionalism meant that the news would appear the same whether a Republican or a Democrat owned the paper. Professionalism also meant that there was no longer any concern about the power of monopolies in the newspaper industry because most papers would run basically the same professionally driven content (McChesney & Nichols, 2005).

Throughout the early 1900's, journalism as a field started growing in status and became recognized as a respectable calling. A university education helped the image of a journalist and it helped promote professional standards. A formal education illustrated that a student had been certified as having superior knowledge about journalism skills and concepts (Winfield, 2008). Curricula in journalism schools focused on the principles that professional journalists were to be watchdogs over government, as well as critics and advocates for citizens. Courses warned of the dangers to the community, the duty to discuss government affairs, and to report its errors as well as its triumphs. Winfield (2008) said the "public's right to know" became the mantra for professional journalists in the 1950s. For many journalists, it is still their accepted mission statement for the profession.

It took decades for the major journalistic media to adopt the professional system.

The concept of professional journalism was not perfect, but it was regarded as better compared to what it replaced (McChesney, 2004). The renewed emphasis on accuracy, the model of separation of church and state, and the discrediting of sensationalism was and is hailed by a majority as the solution for journalism.

### *Professional Codes*

Out of professional schools of journalism grew networks of alumni who wanted to make sure that the profession maintained its credibility and held to their ideals. One of the first and most accepted professional codes was developed by the Society of Professional Journalists in 1909 and has been revised several times over the last 100 years. The current code (Society of Professional Journalists, 2009) charges journalists to be professional in a variety of ways. A few of those include:

- Test the accuracy of information from all sources and exercise care to avoid inadvertent error. Deliberate distortion is never permissible.
- Diligently seek out subjects of news stories to give them the opportunity to respond to allegations of wrongdoing.
- Identify sources whenever feasible. The public is entitled to as much information as possible on sources' reliability.
- Always question sources' motives before promising anonymity. Clarify conditions attached to any promise made in exchange for information. Keep promises.
- Make certain that headlines, news teases and promotional material, photos, video, audio, graphics, sound bites and quotations do not misrepresent. They should not oversimplify or highlight incidents out of context.



- Never distort the content of news photos or video. Image enhancement for technical clarity is always permissible. Label montages and photo illustrations.

The image of the journalist as a neutral professional who conveys information without slant or bias is a powerful ideal in American culture. It is one ideal that the general public often thinks the media fails to achieve (Lawrence, 2000). Today's professional journalists are often quite willing to admit that the ideal of objectivity is difficult if not impossible to attain. Even though trying to maintain that image seems to get harder, objectivity remains the primary goal in the profession's code of ethics. The role of objectivity is and remains the favored self-image since at least the 1970s (Ansolabehere et al., 1993).

The meaning of objectivity tells reporters that in a world of competing sources making competing claims, it is best to report information that can be officially verified and make less use of sources and claims that are most likely to invite charges of bias. Objectivity then turns into reporting what happened in a way that is least likely to be criticized by those in power (Tuchman, 1978). This norm of media professionalism also makes journalists think twice before they amplify social conflicts or try to independently set the political agenda.

The concept of professionalism also includes one of the media's biggest suppliers of news content--public relations practitioners. The organization Public Relations Society of America has more than 20,000 members engaged in the production of VNRs and other prepackaged materials distributed to the media. This group, along with its 8,000-member student organization, the Public Relations Student Society of America, has a longstanding commitment to preserve and improve ethical practices in all aspects of the public

profession (Alexander & Hanson, 2000). All members must sign the PRSA's code of ethics, which stresses core values of the profession and sets high ethical standards for professional practice.

In recent years, the PRSA has been forced to defend the practices of its members to the FCC since the issue of unattributed VNRs has come into question (PRSA, 2005). The organization says that most of those involved in the production and distribution of VNRs adhere to the standards of complete disclosure including the sources of information, and financial sponsorship of those materials. It believes VNRs help advance communication between corporations, nonprofit organizations, and other entities in communicating vital and important information, but it also acknowledges that effective communication tools carry with them some significant responsibility.

The group's current code of ethics (Appendix C) addresses the use of pre-packaged news. A statement issued in 2004 to its members reinforced that organizations that produce VNRs should clearly identify them as such and fully disclose who paid for them at the time they are provided to TV stations. It even went further saying that VNRs should not use the word "reporting" if the narrator is not a reporter. Furthermore, the statement reminded broadcasters that use of any VNR material should call for identifying the source (PRSA, 2005). The PRSA says the use of VNRs or footage provided by sources other than the station or network should be identified by the media outlet when it is aired (Aronson, Spetner, & Ames, 2007).

The Radio and Television News Directors Association, or RTNDA, is the other organization that says newsrooms should be held responsible on their end for upholding ethical standards and disclosing the sources of VNRs they broadcast. RTNDA is the

world's largest professional organization devoted exclusively to electronic journalism representing local and network news executives in broadcasting, cable, and other electronic media in more than 30 countries. SPJ, PRSA, and RTNDA claim they do not want the public to be confused or deceived about the source of information and video.

Many television reporters and news directors say they use a VNR only if it covers a subject they are interested in and there is absolutely no way they can shoot it themselves (Aronson, Spetner, & Ames, 2007). Those two reasons are addressed in the revised guidelines that the RTNDA sent out to its members in 2004. The guidelines stated that the failure of broadcasters to clearly label and identify their widespread use of video news releases and audio news releases violates both the letter and spirit of the RTNDA's Code of Ethics. The following six points issued to members on whether to use VNR material address the same topics that the PRSA gives to reporters to follow ethical standards.

1. Could the station obtain the video or audio itself or through established editorial outlets, like network affiliate feeds?
2. If video/audio comes from a non-editorial source, its source is to be clearly identified in the newscast with graphics or voice-overs
3. Are any interviews in the video or audio footage up to newsroom standards?
4. Before airing the story, the station should consider if it is in line with newsroom standards. Suggested questions include "whether more than one side is included; if there is a financial agenda to releasing the story; and if the viewers/listeners would believe the work done locally by your team?"

5. Station producers should question the source of the video if it comes from another news source, like network feeds.

All three professional organizations (SPJ, PRSA, and RTNDA) may have codes and directives that lay out what newsrooms should do when faced with material provided by public relations sources from the government or corporate entities, but that does not mean its members will follow them. Without proper training that can only be provided by hands-on learning in the classroom and on the job, there will continue to be questions about a journalist's professionalism. For over a century now, journalists who believe in the practices supported by these groups have fought the battle to rid the biases associated with their profession. So, unless the process of continues of learning from the mistakes of the past, the overall concept of professionalism will revert to past perceptions of journalists as being partisan and only loyal to the person who puts money in their wallet.

#### *Training Professionals*

The students graduating from the class of 2008 and beyond are being taught to adjust to the fast pace required for real-world reporting. Not only do they see live reports from scenes on almost every newscast, they are already accustomed to turning directly to the web for breaking news. The 2008 election served as a great example of how reporters not only have a deadline immediately after a candidate's speech, but sometimes they are posting items to their news organization's website during an event or speech. Reporters are not only trafficking in the written word, but manning digital cameras and audio recorders (Washkuch, 2008).

That lightning fast pace of a broadcast newsroom can sometimes add to a professional organization making a very public mistake if its employees are not trained how to properly handle certain situations. Training producers and viewers about the difference in a video news release produced by a public relations practitioner and a journalist at a broadcast news station is part of the VNR issue that cannot be ignored. Through the multiple airings of the Medicare video news release, we learned that mistakes happen in a newsroom when attempting to get news on the air. The *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* reported that a producer at WTVQ-TV in Lexington, Kentucky, accidentally ran the spot while scrambling to fill airtime for its noon newscast on January 23, 2004. A producer at WTVC-TV, the ABC affiliate in Chattanooga, Tennessee, made a similar mistake, the *Journal-Constitution* reported (Uebelherr, 2004). A producer at WVUA 7 in Tuscaloosa, a commercial television station owned by the University of Alabama, made the same mistake by taking the Medicare VNR from the CNN Newsource satellite feed and airing it February 4<sup>th</sup>, 2004 (Thompson, 2004).

Even though respected long-time journalists know from training and experience that there is a huge difference in an objective story and a VNR, a few have learned from personal experience that merely being associated with a company that produces VNRs can damage your professional reputation. Former CBS news anchor Walter Cronkite has filed a lawsuit against WJMK, which is a video production company in Florida. His suit for \$25 million dollars in damages says the company misled him and tarnished his reputation by persuading him to host a series of videos that promoted prescription drugs and other products (“Cronkite Responds,” 2003). CNN anchor Aaron Brown also decided to not go forward with similar plans to host a series of corporate sponsored videos that

look like news produced by the same company, WJMK. The company wanted Brown and Cronkite to host the American Medical Review, which is paid for by drug companies and products. The companies reportedly pay about \$15,000 to have their companies or products featured in the two to five minute long videos that run between regular public television programming (Petersen, 2003b). The practice of expanding the marketing tactic to include celebrity journalists adds to the video's credibility. Critics of the news media say the videos mislead viewers by packaging promotional material to look like the news (Petersen, 2003a).

### *Practicing Professionalism*

The value of professionalism is hard to estimate, but it is possible to estimate where a journalist would rank in the eyes of a consumer without it. A professional organization gives the appearance that editors and reporters have a measure of independence from the owners' politics and from commercial pressures to determine what is news and from the need to satisfy the bottom line. A professional individual places a premium cost on treating sources fairly, being accurate, not accepting bribes or fabricating stories. Without the attributes of professionalism attached to your name, there is very little hope for a rising career in any field, especially journalism.

Many Americans may think that the problem with journalism in the United States is that there is not enough objectivity in reporting anymore. As we have learned from the history of the beginning of the term "professional journalism", objectivity includes fairness, accuracy, and balance. The strongest advocates of neutral journalism also recognize that values play a crucial role in story selection, deciding what gets covered and what does not, and how the coverage is framed. Unlike a number of mathematicians

who can come up with the same answer for a problem, there is no one way a journalist can cover a story. They can follow the general guidelines, practices, and codes set aside by their profession, but each story will be influenced by the sources the reporter interviews, how much airtime they devote to it, and the amount of time allowed to produce the story.

What seasoned journalists can do to increase their level of professionalism is to focus on legitimate stories regardless of what people in power say and do. Successful politicians learn to exploit journalists' dependence upon official sources to their advantage. Successful public relations professionals also know how to provide the right kind of stories at the right time to make sure they get airtime for their clients. That need for official sourcing and the need for news hooks helped stimulate the birth and rapid rise of the public relations industry (McChesney, 2004). By providing well-marketed press and video news releases, paid-for experts, citizen groups, and canned news events, crafty PR agents can shape the news to suit their clientele. These powerful corporate interests and government regulators, spend a fortune to ensure that their version of the truth gets very visible play in the news as objective truth.

Surveys show that PR accounts for anywhere from 40 to 70% of what appears as news. Because of its success, the identity of the most successful campaigns is usually hidden from the general public (McChesney, 2004). It is the journalist regarded as a professional who knows who is behind these hidden messages that appear in the form of a VNR or a printed press release. A professional journalist is traditionally one who has multiple years of experience and does not force his own views or those with corporate interests into the news. He only reports what he knows, he attributes his sources

accurately, treats his sources fairly, and he does not let people with financial power influence what he reports. If journalists fail to do all these in relation to material provided by public relations professionals, their professional career will be tarnished.

Hypothesis 4: The more industry experience an individual has, the more likely the individual believes that improper VNR use will negatively affect perceived professionalism.

### *Credibility*

Credibility basically means how much a consumer believes and trusts in what a journalist reports. If viewers do not think what a reporter is saying is the truth, they will change channels and go watch someone else who they believe to be telling the truth and can provide the expert sources to back up the perceived truth. That is the hardest component of trying to describe credibility. Researchers boil it down to trustworthiness and expertise of the source (Metzger et al, 2003; Jacobson, 1969).

Those two elements of credibility can also have objective and subjective elements of believability. Trustworthiness is more subjective but it carries an objective measure of established reliability. Expertise can be perceived as subjective, but includes objective characteristics of the source or message such as a person's credentials, education, or experience with subject matter (Metzger et al, 2003; Jacobson, 1969).

People considered to be of an elite status are in the best position to create verifiable claims and activities for reporters to report (Molotch & Lester, 1974). Elites have been known to create "flak" when news organizations stray too far from neutrally reporting those claims and activities. Sometimes, the neutral accounts journalists construct can be biased in favor of official voices and views (Herman & Chomsky, 1988).



Indeed, for reporters, the most credible information or the hardest data are accounts which come from the most competent news sources who, in turn, are the bureaucrats and officials recognized as having jurisdiction over the events in question (Fishman, 1980).

It may be easy for some people to automatically have a perceived level of credibility based on who is providing the information whether it is on television, in the newspaper, or on the World Wide Web. When people see the name CNN, BBC, *Time*, *The New York Times*, *Fortune 500*, *Forbes*, or *Newsweek*, they normally associate a certain level of credibility with those different media organizations. Businesses who have a high level of credibility reap the benefits of good business and respect among the masses. The journalists who work for them also carry around a “credit card of credibility” that they can ring up when they need a certain interview or favor to make a story happen. Bogart (1989) reported that as early as 1966, people were already turning to different media to find out information about different kind of stories. So, you can suppose that viewers or readers will refer to whichever news source they believe provides the most credible information about a particular type of news.

Given the documented dominance of TV as the most popular source of news (McQuail, 1992; Robinson & Kohut, 1988; Bogart, 1989), the question obviously arises whether popularity is synonymous with credibility. If it is, then it might be expected that TV news sources are perceived as more credible by the public than other news sources, e.g., newspapers, magazines, radio. Since news sources transmit information, it might also be expected that the kind of information they transmit and the expertise with which they do it, should have some influence on a source's perceived credibility.

One is more likely, for example, to turn to the industry newspaper, *Daily Variety*,

to get accurate information about the entertainment industry than to a paper such as the *New York Daily News*. The same could be said about a person who will likely turn to the *Wall Street Journal* to get information about international business conglomerates than one is to turn to the *National Enquirer* for such information. Moreover, a viewer is more likely to turn to television shows such as Entertainment Tonight to get news about stars and their private business than turn to PBS's Jim Lehrer News Hour.

Since the mid 1990's, the topic of credibility for journalists has been a big one; not only because of the popularity of television, but, also due to the increased use of the Internet as an information source. The Internet and its accessibility to information has opened up plenty of discussion concerning the sources of a story and the credibility of the experts people are quoting. What has made it easier for television stations, newspapers, and magazines to leave attribution non-disclosed and generic by saying "sources close to the situation tell us that..." Many times this non-specific attribution may happen more as a story is developing, but the problem arises when reporters start accepting this practice as a norm and also expect the viewers or readers to do the same. Overholser (2004) said each time we report from anonymous sources, it seems like gossip and it is inexcusable. She believes if reporting is not clear about the possible motivations of sources, each one costs a station and its reporters' credibility.

### *Credibility Studies*

The amount of believability people put into a media organization has changed since the 1950's. Two Roper surveys (Robinson & Kohut, 1988) conducted by the Times-Mirror Company, one in 1959 and one 1986, compared conflicting reports of the same story. In the 1959 survey, 32% said they would believe the newspaper while 29%

chose television. In 1986, credibility ratings showed dramatic reversals. Only 21% chose newspapers while 55% chose television.

That same survey found that a person's level of education may make a difference in how credible he views a media organization. It found that newspaper credibility dropped the most for high school educated respondents (from 62 to 29%); while the drop for the college educated was far less dramatic (from 69% to 41%). The fact that the less educated watch more TV and read fewer newspapers suggests that people rate more credible the media they watch or read the most (Robinson & Kohut, 1988; Fischhoff, Lotto & Agamyan, 1994).

Fischhoff (1996) found evidence to support that no communications medium has an advantage over another when it comes to news source credibility. However, his results showed that the degree of credibility does depend significantly on the nature of the news focus. Though his results may conflict with some researchers such as Roper (1986) who have supported the notion that electronic communications media has become the most credible source for people when it comes to sorting out conflicting stories, Fischhoff (1996) found that the credibility of a news source does not necessarily correspond to the popularity of a news source. People may view CNN or *The New York Times* as highly credible, but on a daily basis, they may turn to a less credible source that they find to be more entertaining for news and information.

To some, a 2007 marketing study about McDonald's wrappers may not seem like a credibility test, but it actually says a lot about how thoroughly we develop a sense of credibility with a company or product at a young age. The study (Tanner, 2007) had preschoolers sample carrots, milk, and apple juice. The same foods were wrapped in

McDonald's packaging and then some were wrapped in unmarked wrappers. The unmarked wrappers lost out every time to the McDonald's packaging. Despite the fact that the survey studied the influence on marketing on children, it still gives credence to the actuality that even at a young age, society gives more credibility to the more recognized and notable than to the unknown. Just as Robinson and Kohut (1988) and Fischhoff, Lotto, and Agamyan (1994) concluded, people give more credibility to that which they are more familiar.

#### *The Weight of a Journalist's Credibility*

With the airing of any type of news content comes responsibility. Thus broadcasting anything that is questionable without accuracy, expert sources, or proper attribution to contributing sources can detract from a journalist's credibility. With the speed of publishing and getting items to air, there is an increasing pressure to get the story out quickly while also making sure it is correct. Professor Barry Hollander (Washkuch, 2008) from the University of Georgia said with so many bloggers as part of the electronic communication field now, there are plenty of bloggers willing and able to point out a careless error as a sign of incompetence or bias. As a result, it is now even more crucial to make sure you get the story right. If not, you could take a credibility hit within hours as opposed to days considering the speed of news on the internet.

The decision to air a video news release can be a big decision these days for news directors because of all the attention it has brought to the credibility of news stations that use them without attribution or run them "as is." Following the Karen Ryan Medicare incident and the attention the *New York Times* brought to VNRs, now numerous bloggers, websites, and watchdog groups assess their own media colleagues and rate how

journalists are impacting the credibility factor for viewers and readers. The Center for Media and Democracy jumped into the forefront of the VNR controversy with its own study that tracked the use of 36 VNRs over a ten-month period in 2006. The CMD identified 77 television stations ranging from small to large markets, that aired in part or whole at least one of the 36 VNRs or related satellite media tours in 98 separate instances without telling the viewer who provided the material (Farsetta & Price, 2006). Due to the size of some of the television markets included, those 77 television stations reach more than half of the U.S. population.

The Center for Media and Democracy's Executive Director John Stauber calls the use of VNRs "a systematic deception of viewers, both by the hidden interested parties behind them, and by news organizations with impure motives themselves" (Sourcewatch, 2008). Former CBS correspondent and director of the nonprofit News Lab, Deborah Potter said stations are tempted to use VNRs because they make it easy to fill program time slots. "They allow newsrooms to do less of their work without fear of running out of material before the end of the hour. It's a concern for viewers if much of the material they're starting to get on the news isn't news" ("Nightly News Sells," 2003).

News directors at affiliates around the country echo Potter's reasoning for their use. Senior Executive Producer Catherine Snyder-Charlit of WUSA-TV, the CBS affiliate in Washington, D.C. says the use of tape sources from outside the newsroom can offer obvious benefits at a time when her newsroom is trying to stretch resources with ever-tightening budgets and profit pressures. "It allows us to bring our viewers pictures of things beyond our local area. It helps broaden our horizons. Washington is a great local news town, but our audience also cares about the world" (Adrine, 2002).

The Karen Ryan Medicare VNR and the Center for Media and Democracy study sparked much criticism from the RTNDA and its leadership who said that the use of VNRs is left up to each broadcaster. RTNDA President Barbara Cochran said that the use of VNR material is permitted under the RTNDA code (Appendix D) as long as it was "included in something that is reported and originated by the journalists at that station. I think that this is something that stations need to solve for themselves. It's in the station's interest to protect its credibility" (Baker, 2005; RTNDA, 2006). Cochran argued to the FCC against mandatory on-screen source identification of video news releases so the viewer was informed of the origin of the material. While acknowledging that VNR material "is now flooding into stations from all different directions", Cochran downplayed the extent of its use:

"I don't think we really know how prevalent that [use of VNRs] is. You know, I think, again, the number of instances in which this material has actually been used are so few, relatively speaking, compared to all the information that goes out over the air all the time on so many local television stations" (Baker, 2005).

The Federal Communications Commission also takes the concept of keeping stations credible seriously when it comes to VNRs. In 2005 following the publicized issues with VNRs, it sent out reminders to broadcast licensees and cable operators to ensure disclosure to viewers of who sponsored the VNRs they air. The FCC fined Comcast \$20,000 for VNRS that aired on its network news channel. Further, the FCC is still deciding on cases where more than 100 television stations drew complaints over unattributed VNRS. The RTNDA and a coalition of approximately 70 state broadcast associations and broadcast group owners opposed the fines and complaints.

In their filing opposing the FCC's action, they say the government is getting involved in regulating newsgathering and editorial activities to an unprecedented and inappropriate degree (Eggerton, 2007).

While there may be a great debate over its use and how it can impact a station's credibility, there are some obvious benefits for the producer and sponsor of the VNR when it comes to different forms of credibility. Instead of a corporation paying for advertising to air as commercials in the middle of a newscast, a significant amount of credibility comes from a trusted news anchor—a seemingly disinterested third party normally seen as a viewer's advocate—reporting positively on the organization's product, service, or message. The VNR provides “the ability to deliver a targeted message to the public through the false veneer of professional journalism. Written press releases are primarily a tool to entice favorable attention from reporters, VNRs are designed to replace the reporter entirely” (Alania, 2006). When we assume that even the most experienced journalist can vouch for the accuracy of images that neither he nor his staff produced, it becomes a path of assumption that can threaten professional credibility with colleagues, peers, and the audience (Adrine, 2002).

Credibility is a major factor public relations professionals have to ensure that journalists will buy into the stories they pitch. Journalists are aware of the public relations agenda, but if they know the public relations practitioners and trust them with the information they are given, journalists are more likely to do a story on the topic. This credibility is also something that most news directors are not willing to sacrifice or to admit that they have sacrificed. As already stated, the rate of VNR usage by news producers has risen steadily. In a 1992 survey, 100% of television stations responding

reported using VNRS in their newscasts, and in 1993, over 4,500 were produced for use on television and the Internet (Owen & Karrh, 1996). Several news executives reportedly refuse to use VNRs presumably, because they feel their news organization's credibility may diminish. Whether they admit it or not, television stations do air VNRs in one form or another (Owen & Karrh, 1996). It is how the experienced professionals decide to air it that makes a difference in their credibility rankings with the public and their peers.

Hypothesis 5: The more industry experience an individual has, the more likely that individual believes that VNR use affects a station's credibility.

### *Commercialization*

Commercialization has different meanings for different fields, but in the media world, it refers to the process by which news values are defined to include the concern for the bottom line and to the evolution of news as a commodity to be shaped and marketed with an eye for profit (Baldasty, 1992). This may seem to demean the value of news, but just like any other profession, newspapers and television stations have to make money to pay the people who organize it and put it together. If the news content of a newspaper or television station does not turn a profit, it will not be around for very long.

As discussed in this study, the birth of the concept of professionalism was determined to be in the early 1900s and grew out of the Presidential race (Winfield, 2008). The term commercialization was already in full swing at this time because political parties and advertisers were already instrumental in deciding what was "news." They used the power of print and radio to reflect their own needs and interests.



So, out of professionalism, grew a sense of how you can still have an accurate and respectable media organization, while at the same time turn it into a lucrative business if you avoid corporate influences on news content.

One of the main concerns regarding the commercialization of broadcast news is that there seems to be an ever-changing nature to television news. Former CNN Senior White House Correspondent Charles Bierbauer has been very outspoken on his thoughts of what news is turning into following his 30 years of experience covering the Pentagon, Presidents, and wars. Bierbauer (Ward, 2002) fears that the increased importance of making money is having a negative effect on network news. He believes that the networks are more interested in entertainment programming and the public could soon lose substantial news programs (Bomzer, 2002). “Viewer beware” is what he warns in this increasingly entertainment and profit-margin-minded media. Bierbauer emphasizes what media watchdog groups are also saying as far as there being more illusions in television, both in front and behind the camera, than viewers have ever seen before (Sourcewatch, 2008).

Journalists normally avoid talking about the business side of the operations and try to stay away from the profitability of the operations so that there does not appear to be a tie to advertisers and their influence. Part of this avoidance has to do with the “church/state wall,” traditionally seen as protecting journalism from commercial pressures (Overholser, 2004). In the 1980’s, editors may not have even wanted to know their profit margin. Now a news director may be laying off 20-30 people within days if he is not fully aware of his company’s financial situation on a daily basis. During these economic times, everyone wants to know where the company stands, fiscally.

### *VNRs are a Commercial Venture*

One reason VNRs are so well liked by their sponsors is cost. The main advantage of the video news release to corporations, organizations, and governmental agencies is it is basically, free advertising. A high-quality VNR can be produced and disseminated for less than \$30,000, “and could score a comparative ad value in the six-figure range if it gets airtime in metropolitan markets” (Farsetta & Price, 2006). Many VNR production companies also offer additional public relations services with their VNR packages. TVA Productions, for example, offers in its “National PDM” package a media advisory, supplemental fax and email advisories of the story, individualized “pitching” to producers in the top twenty-five markets, follow-up phone calls and fielding of media inquiries, and other PR services. They also guarantee “nationwide placement” on FOX, MSNBC, or CNBC, and all for the low, low price of \$15,000. Comparatively, a thirty-second advertising buy on any one of the networks could easily cost ten times as much (McClellan, 2005).

Some VNRs are more popular than others at getting airtime. Mark Harmon and Candace White found that corporate VNRs promoting products were used the least, but VNRs promoting health and safety topics were aired the most by local broadcast stations (Harmon & White, 2001). They found that VNRs are commonly used unedited by small understaffed regional television stations that have limited budgets for news production.

VNRs are part of the democratic media system. They are part of the partnership that journalists for decades have allowed to be part of the news process. In the “you scratch my back, I’ll scratch yours” mentality, it has become just one way of doing business. Even though public relations professionals and the materials they produce are

part of it, it is still rather unique in its tendency—and its capacity—to manipulate social standards in the pursuit of its commercial interest (Baird, Loges, & Rosenbaum, 1999). The attempt to capture larger audiences and fill more news holes with less people has motivated the press broadcast news professionals to press farther and farther against currently acceptable boundaries of propriety.

As the president of the Freedom Forum, Peter Prichard, stated, we can “Never let hyper-competition take precedence over good news judgment” (Freedom Forum, 2009). What he means is that everyone must be alert to the possibility that at any time reporters can be manipulated. The speed of news has changed, the business of news has changed, and to stay in the black media organizations have to turn a profit. The hope is that profitability is not sacrificed at the cost of the integrity, credibility, independence, and professionalism of seasoned journalists. By using VNRs with attribution, not only can a news station supplement their news content for free, but they can also maintain the reputation they want to keep to earn future dollars.

Hypothesis 6: As an individual’s industry experience increases, the more likely the individual believes that VNR use increases the commercialization of news.

## CHAPTER 3

### Method

This study employed a survey (Appendix A) to assess how viewers feel about the perception of video news releases and how they are used in local news broadcasts. The 54-question survey was administered through the web-based survey research engine Survey Monkey to collect data. The survey included an explanation of a VNR along with a website link to an example on [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com) so a participant could view one in its entirety. Besides demographic data, the survey questions focused on journalists and their ethics, integrity, professionalism, independence, credibility, commercialization, and the use of oral and words on the screen as attribution in broadcasts.

#### *Procedures & Materials*

The participants were emailed an invitation as part of the Survey Monkey software that included the link to the survey and asked to willingly participate. Researchers had access to the project data in real-time while it was collected through a secure, password-protected reporting site. Survey Monkey is regarded as a reliable research tool for gathering data. Since the questions for this study were primarily based on a Likert scale and have definitive answers, Survey Monkey is sufficient because open-ended coding tools are not necessary.

#### *Sample*

For the survey, 584 people from three different populations were recruited

through directed emails and invitations. The three populations are communication students, news professionals, and average news viewers. The populations were not limited to residents of the state of Alabama; however, communication college students were recruited from four universities in Alabama. No credit for participation in the study was promised. Participants who were considered average viewers were recruited through churches in north, central, and south Alabama. Professional broadcasters were recruited by the principal investigator through a list of active media at television stations in Alabama as well as professional media organizations. No students recruited were below 19 years of age. All participants were told that the survey would take approximately 5-7 minutes.

The focus on the three different populations was to illustrate the difference in levels of exposure and understanding of the concepts that have an impact on journalists. For example, the average viewer may watch television for hours daily but may never think of the implications of the many issues such as ethics, integrity, independence, professionalism, credibility, and commercialization pressures that a journalist deals with daily. The communication student may be more aware of those same issues because of the in-class training, courses, and internships he may take, but is more likely to believe that the news professional who deals with decisions each day will have the most experience in evaluating how the use of video news releases can have an impact on one's career.

### *Measurement*

In relation to the use of video news releases and their impact on journalistic ethics, integrity, independence, professionalism, credibility, and commercialization, at

least four statements on a five-point Likert scale were designed to measure each concept. The number 5 indicated that they “strongly agree” and the number 1 indicated that they “strongly disagree.” The scale was designed by the researcher to measure the perceptions an individual has of the impact of VNR use on the six journalistic concepts analyzed in this study.

To measure journalistic ethics, five statements were designed to measure respondents’ agreement on a 5-point Likert scale. These questions included “It is unethical for video news releases to be included in news content,” “It is acceptable for commercial messages to be included in news content if they are labeled with words on the television screen,” “It is unethical for a television news organization to air video news releases without them being labeled as such,” “It is unethical for a television news organization to air video news releases without oral attribution,” and “Television stations are sacrificing their ethics by using video news releases.” Reliability tests indicated a Cronbach’s alpha of .754. The five items were therefore summed, and an index was created for analysis.

To measure journalistic integrity, six statements were designed to measure respondents’ agreement on a 5-point Likert scale. These questions included: “Broadcasters jeopardize their individual integrity if they use any form of a video news release,” “Broadcasters are running the chance of damaging the integrity of their profession by using video news releases,” “Local television stations may use portions of a video news release to help tell a story,” “Broadcasters are being lazy if they use a video news release to supplement the content in their newscast,” “Broadcasters are deceiving the audience when they pass off video news releases as their own,” and “A VNR is okay

to use if the narration is replaced by a tv station reporter.” Reliability tests indicated a Cronbach’s alpha of .790. The six items were therefore summed, and an index was created for analysis.

To measure journalistic independence, five statements included: “Journalists who use video news releases may be sacrificing their independence for corporate interests,” “By using video news releases, journalists allow others to make content decisions for them,” “I believe if a video news release provides information that helps solve a problem, it does not jeopardize the station’s independence,” “I believe local television stations are under a lot of pressure to put out video content supplied by the government,” and “The use of video news releases can serve the viewers’ interests.” Reliability tests indicated a Cronbach’s alpha of .711. The five items were therefore summed, and an index was created for analysis.

To measure professionalism, five statements were designed to measure respondents’ agreement on a 5-point Likert scale. These questions included: “When local television stations use video news releases, they are changing the traditional role of journalism,” “Using video news releases every once in a while, does not damage a journalist professionally,” “As professionals, television anchors and reporters should be responsible for their own news content,” “Using video news releases every once in a while, does not damage a journalist professionally,” and “Professional journalists would never use any type of video news release.” Reliability tests indicated a Cronbach’s alpha of .768. The five items were therefore summed, and an index was created for analysis.

To measure credibility, four statements were designed to measure respondents’ agreement on a 5-point Likert scale. These questions included: “If a television news

program includes a story with footage not produced by the news organization, it should be labeled with words on the television screen,” If a television news program includes a story with footage not produced by the news organization, it should be attributed to orally by the anchors and news reporters,” “I would trust a local television station more if producers used words on the television screen to label video not produced by the news organization,” and “I would trust a local television station more if anchors and reporters used oral attribution to bring attention to stories not produced by the news organization.” Reliability tests indicated a Cronbach’s alpha of .745. The four items were therefore summed, and an index was created for analysis. The original scale had more items, but after running reliability tests, a few items were eliminated to achieve higher reliability.

To measure commercialization, five statements were designed to measure respondents’ agreement on a 5-point Likert scale. These questions included: “ I believe that advertisements are embedded within local broadcast news programming,” “The line between news and advertising is blurred,” “The line between entertainment and news is blurred,” “News is too commercialized,” and “Local television stations should not give in to any commercial pressures when it comes to running a video news release.” Factor analysis indicated one item (commercial pressure) did not load on the sole factor. Reliability tests indicated a Cronbach’s alpha of .713. The four items were therefore summed, and an index was created for analysis.



## CHAPTER 4

### Results

#### *Participants*

A total of 584 journalists, communication college students, and average viewers were recruited to form the population sample. A total of 51 surveys were excluded from the sample because at least 10 items for two dependent variables were not answered resulting in 91% of participants who completed the survey. All statements in the survey not asked in the same direction were reverse coded. Included in the analysis were a total of 114 journalists, 108 college students, and 311 average viewers willingly participated in the study.

More females (60%) than males (40%) took part in the survey. Participants' ages were reported as ages 19-25 (39%), 26-35 (18%), 36-50 (27%), 51-60 (12%), and 61 and over (3%). 71% of the participants were residents of the State of Alabama. 29% were from outside Alabama. The sample of journalists included 51 who had 1-5 years of experience, 85 who had six years of experience or more, and 397 who had no experience. Some of the 108 college students who completed the study described themselves as journalists because they are likely working for a campus newspaper, campus television or radio station, or interning at a commercial news operation. So, it is assumed that a portion of the 51 participants who reported 1-5 years of experience also included college students.

In terms of ethnicity, the majority of the participants were White/Caucasian (88.7%), with Black/African-American (8.3%) being the second largest group, and Asian, Asian-American (.9%), Hispanic or Latino (.6%), and Other (1.5%) made up the rest of the sample.

In terms of education, most of the participants were well educated, with 40.7% of them having a four-year college degree, 19.7% a graduate degree, 34.9% having some college, 4.3% having high School/GED (4.3%), and only a few (.4%) having less than high school education.

In terms of income, more than a quarter of participants self-reported a household income of \$100,000 or more (25.5%), 8.1% between \$90-99,999; 24.2% reported \$60-89,999; 21% at \$30-59,999; and 21.2% were under \$30,000.

In terms of political views, participants indicated they were very conservative (14.6%); moderately conservative (40.9%); middle of the road (24.6%); moderately liberal (15.6%); and very liberal (4.3%)

Clearly, the Internet and television news are the main sources that people turn to for news. 36.6% said they turned to the Internet as the source they rely on the most for news and information. 36.8 % said they turned to television news the most for news and information. The other three choices of local newspaper, news magazines, and radio stations logged less than 7 percent each.

When it comes to watching local television news, participants said they watch news, but not much per week or per day as shown in Table 3. In terms of news consumption, participants watched local newscasts an average of 3 days a week, but only 12.8% watched daily: 0 days (12.9%); 1 day (16.9%); 2 days (13.9%); 3 days (10.7%); 4

days (8.8%); 5 days (15.2%); 6 days (8.8%); 7 days (12.8%). When it comes to watching local television news, participants said they watch very little per day: 0 minutes (13.7%); 1-15 minutes (34%); 16-30 minutes (25.7%); 31-45 minutes (9.2%); 46-60 minutes (6.4%); 1-2 hours (7.3 %); 3-5 hours (3.4%); 6 hours or more (.4%).

In terms of their news consumption, participants watched network newscasts an average of two days a week, and only 2.1% watched daily. 0 days (23.8%); 1 day (17.8%); 2 days (15.9%); 3 days (11.8%); 4 days (7.5%); 5 days (11.4%); 6 days (9.6%); 7 days (2.1%). When it comes to watching network television news, participants said they watched even less per day than local news: 0 minutes (23.8%); 1-15 minutes (29.5%); 16-30 minutes (27.8%); 31-45 minutes (8.4%); 46-60 minutes (5.3%); 1-2 hours (3.0%); 3-5 hours (1.7%); 6 hours or more (.6%).

In terms of their news consumption, participants watched cable newscasts an average of two days a week, and only (.2%) watched daily. 0 days (28.9%); 1 day (18.4%); 2 days (13.5%); 3 days (10.5%); 4 days (7.7%); 5 days (9.8%); 6 days (11.1%); 7 days (.2%). When it comes to watching cable television news, participants said they watched even less per day than local and network news: 0 minutes (28.5%); 1-15 minutes (21.8%); 16-30 minutes (22.3%); 31-45 minutes (7.5%); 46-60 minutes (10.3%); 1-2 hours (6.0%); 3-5 hours (3.4%); 6 hours or more (.2%).

### *Operationalization*

Industry experience was operationalized and analyzed in two ways. First, participants' level of experience was used as a predictor variable to categorize industry experience, with journalists assumed to have the most experience, communication students to have some rudimentary experience and the general public to have no

experience. A second operational definition was based on their self-reported years of experience in journalism. Therefore, each hypothesis was tested using these two predictors. The results for the population subsamples' level of experience predictor are shown in Table 1, and results for the experience predictor are displayed in Table 2.

Hypothesis 1 predicted that the more industry experience an individual has, the more likely the individual perceives VNR use to be unethical. A between-subjects test was run for each hypothesis to indicate the variance between the subjects. First, with the level of experience as a predictor, results indicated a person's level of industry experience had a significant effect on ethics,  $F(2, 530) = 4.90, p < .01, \epsilon^2 = .02$ . Post hoc Bonferroni tests indicated that the subsample average viewers ( $M = 3.37, SD = 0.66$ ) perceived VNR use to be more unethical than students ( $M = 3.14, SD = 0.56$ ) do. However, there was no other group difference. Based on the number of self-reported years in journalism, there was no significant effect on ethics,  $F(2, 530) = .00, p < .904, \epsilon^2 = .00$ . Hence, H1 was not supported and partial results indicated an opposite direction of the prediction; whereas, average viewers perceive the use of VNRs to be more unethical than college students and journalists.

No support was found for hypothesis 2. It predicted that as an individual's industry experience increases, the more likely the individual believes that VNR use will negatively affect journalistic integrity. First, with the level of experience as a predictor, results indicated there was no significant impact on journalistic integrity,  $F(2, 530) = 1.76, p < .174, \epsilon^2 = .01$ . On the other hand, based on their number of years in journalism, a person's experience did not have a significant effect on integrity,  $F(2, 530) = .47, p < .628, \epsilon^2 = .002$ . There was no group difference with either predictor.

Hypothesis 3 predicted that the more industry experience an individual has, the more likely the individual believes that improper VNR use lowers journalistic independence. First, with the level of experience as a predictor, results indicated a significant effect on journalistic independence,  $F(2, 530) = 21.76, p < .001, \epsilon^2 = .08$ . Post hoc Bonferroni tests indicated that the subsamples communication college students ( $M = 3.08, SD = 0.51$ ) and average viewers ( $M = 3.19, SD = 0.57$ ) perceived VNR use to have more of an impact on journalist independence than journalists ( $M = 2.76, SD = 0.72$ ). For a person's self-reported journalism experience, results also indicated a significant effect on journalistic independence,  $F(2, 530) = 24.99, p < .001, \epsilon^2 = .09$ . Post hoc Bonferroni tests indicated that journalists ( $M = 3.17, SD = .55$ ) are more in favor of the belief that VNR use lowers journalistic independence than students ( $M = 2.93, SD = .55$ ) and average viewers ( $M = 2.69, SD = .76$ ). Hence, H3 was partially supported. While the journalists compared to the other populations in this study do not perceive VNR use to lower journalistic independence as much, when years of experience are added as a predictor, they do view it as a concern.

No support was found for hypothesis 4 which predicted that the more industry experience an individual has, the more likely the individual believes that improper VNR use negatively affects perceived professionalism. The first predictor of level of experience did not have a significant effect,  $F(2, 530) = 2.76, p < .06, \epsilon^2 = .01$ . The same was true for the second predictor of self-reported years in journalism. No significant effect was indicated,  $F(2, 530) = 2.62, p < .074, \epsilon^2 = .01$ . There was no group difference in the population subsamples.

Hypothesis 5 predicted that the more industry experience an individual has, the

more likely an individual believes that VNR use negatively affects a station's credibility. The first predictor of level of experience did not indicate a significant effect on a station's credibility,  $F(2, 530) = 1.59, p < .205, \varepsilon^2 = .01$ . With the predictor of a journalist's years of experience, there was also not a significant effect on credibility,  $F(2, 530) = .99, p < .373, \varepsilon^2 = .004$ . No group difference was reported in the population subsamples. Hence, no support was found for H5.

Hypothesis 6 resulted in mixed results for support. H6 predicted that as an individual's industry experience increases, the more likely the individual believes that VNR use increases the commercialization of news. For the level of experience predictor, results indicated a significant effect,  $F(2, 530) = 10.90, p < .001, \varepsilon^2 = .04$ . Post hoc Bonferroni tests indicated that journalists ( $M = 3.16, SD = 0.76$ ) do not perceive that VNR use adds to the commercialization of news as do college students ( $M = 3.54, SD = 0.63$ ) and average viewers ( $M = 3.48, SD = 0.69$ ). Although, the perception is different when it comes to the predictor of self-reported years of experience. Results also indicated a significant effect about the perception of commercialization,  $F(2, 530) = 8.8, p < .001, \varepsilon^2 = .032$ . Post hoc Bonferroni tests indicated that journalists ( $M = 3.50, SD = 0.67$ ) more strongly perceive VNR use to increase the commercialization of news than college students ( $M = 3.25, SD = 0.71$ ) and average viewers ( $M = 3.18, SD = 0.82$ ).

## CHAPTER 5

### Conclusions

The desire to learn more about how different people perceive the use of video news releases in broadcast news served as the motivation for this research. This study looked at video news releases and their implications on the concepts of journalists' ethics, integrity, professionalism, independence, credibility, and commercialization. Previous studies have looked at how VNRs should be attributed orally or with words on the television screen, but this study moved further by exploring the perceptions that journalists, communication college students, and average viewers have of the profession of journalism, its concepts, and its practices. The influence of the public relations tool, the VNR, is a constant resource for broadcast journalists as well as a print news release is for print journalists. Since they are not going away, it is important for journalists to understand how their use, whether attributed or not, may impact how the audience perceives their organization.

This study sampled a majority of average viewers along with a smaller sample of journalists and college students enrolled in communication courses at three different southeastern universities. Surprisingly, a high number of the population sample was college educated, and a majority of the journalists had six years of experience or more.

Evaluating the predictors based on level of experience and years of industry experience, indicated that the majority of the journalists included in the analysis at least understood or had been educated on most if not all of the founding concepts.

What came as no surprise is that television and the Internet are the main source everyone is turning to for their news. The biggest surprise is that few report that they watch local, network, and cable news more than an average of three days a week. Even more of an indicator is that between 22-27% of the 533 participants said they watch 30 minutes or less of local, network, or cable news a day. They may try to watch enough to stay informed in a week, but they are not making the effort to watch to see how news impacts them daily. Since so many viewers are watching few local newscasts, they are also not seeing the VNRs that are produced and are embedded in the content.

From the results of this study, we can conclude that people would be watching more news if they perceived the content of the newscasts to have more of an effect on their daily lives. One reason they may feel this way is that viewers have the ability to be more selective because of all the choices available on television and the Internet. Whether they watch local, national, or cable news, viewers may not realize that the majority of stories are produced with the intention of prompting them to action, emotion, or thought. By the age of 19, most individuals have seen so much news in their lifespan that it is possibly regarded as something that is always present, but they do not necessarily want or feel compelled to be involved in the process. Therefore, the level of interest in actively learning what goes on in our community, nation, and world could be on the decline more than ever.

In general, the differing levels of experience for this study indicated that average



viewers do not have differing views from college students and journalists when it comes to the founding concepts they believe journalists should have. In analyzing the concepts of integrity, professionalism, and credibility, no significant difference was found in the groups. However, when it comes to ethics, journalistic independence, and commercialization, there are some significant differences in how the different populations perceive the concepts.

Since the results showed that average viewers perceive VNR use to be more unethical than college students and journalists, we can conclude that more ethical training may be necessary in our college journalism programs. Journalists may not understand until after multiple years of experience truly what a VNR is, and how it can influence the content of the station's news content. In addition, the amount of VNRs that are available to a newsroom through satellite feeds, network affiliations, and Internet downloads may be such a common influence that without proper training by the stations, journalists may not view them as a different form than other local, network, or cable news stories. Communication colleges across the country admit they can only teach students so much in the classroom about the journalism field, it is only through on-the-job and life experiences that you learn what is considered right and wrong by your profession or your code of ethics. Only through those types of experiences coupled with education can someone earn the true respect of the title "journalist."

The results could also indicate that journalists feel they attribute VNRs the way they were trained whether in the classroom or on-the-job. Therefore, they may feel they have no ethical dilemmas to consider.

This could also illustrate that the ethics of a VNR is not something journalists consider to be one of their biggest challenges in competing in today's market.

For the concepts of journalistic independence and commercialization, the level of experience and years of experience predictors proved to be interesting. When analyzing both, the average viewers and college students viewed VNR use to have a greater effect on journalistic independence and commercialization of news. Then when a journalists' years of experience were analyzed, it was the journalists who felt that VNRs were having an impact. From these results, we can conclude that journalists who had dealt with these situations more and understood the implications more had stronger perceptions than students and average viewers of how government and corporations can impact a newsroom's content.

We expect the more experienced journalists to understand the market forces that drive the news. Whether a story appears in print, on television, or on the Internet depends on its value to advertisers, the costs of gathering the stories, and the competitors' products. Many of the complaints about journalism – media bias, soft news, corporate influence – are generated because of the economic influences of running a media operation. News managers may not like it, but it is a reality of their industry.

From this study, it is evident that individuals have opinions when it comes to the main issues included in the VNR debate – ethics, independence, and commercialization. Although, no matter what level of experience a person has, the idea that every day a television's news content can be entirely objective, independent, and free of the influence of advertisers is not achievable.

News managers may try their best on a daily basis, but the decision makers know it is not always possible while average viewers may not realize how hard the goal is to reach.

To try to get the VNR debate settled, media advocates are calling for legal action when it comes to VNR use, and media organizations argue that they should regulate themselves. For now, the FCC has agreed with the RTNDA that it will continue to be an ethical debate and not a legal one unless a broadcaster blatantly tries to deceive the audience (Eggerton, 2007). As long as the decisions to attribute orally or with graphical words on the screen remain in the newsroom, it is up to managers to train, set, and enforce the policies that will ensure those concepts are valued on a daily basis when each employee produces any type of report.

There were obvious limitations in this study. The researcher did not account for the understanding of the concepts of integrity, professionalism, and credibility to possibly be considered the same. Future studies should look into more direct measures for each concept to ensure that participants generally understand the difference in hopes of providing significant findings in the future that will add to the argument that journalists value both. Trying to differentiate the definitions from ethics may have proven to be confusing for participants where the tendency closer to the end of the survey was to answer “neutral”.

Other limitations include the need to assess other predictors of the dependent variables that were gathered and not gathered in the survey data. Future studies can look at how an individual’s political preferences and level of education influence the perceptions they have of VNR use on the journalistic concepts studied here.

Also, more predictors not included in this study can be analyzed that might give a better assessment of why average viewers, communication college students, and journalists perceive journalists the way they do. Exposure to other forms of media such as the Internet, newspapers, magazines, etc., might also reveal how or if greater exposure to news, in general, influences perceptions of VNR usage. In general, an analysis including more variables and additional statistical tests might reveal why the hypotheses proposed here were not supported and had some mixed results.

Future research may need to look more at the influence of VNRs on the commercialization of news. The term “commercialization” and “commercials” may confuse participants because they do not understand that under basic journalistic concepts, commercials are to be shown outside the news content. By resorting to using a single item for measurement, future studies may show to what extent viewers perceive pressure from corporate interests. Other suggestions are to develop a measurement of management attitudes toward VNRs, and there can be many more studies that explore the relationship that exists between public relations practitioners and the media.

Until now, the majority of research relating to the impact of public relations on news content (Turk, 1986; Shoemaker & Reese, 1991; Harmon & White, 2001; Lieberman, 2007; Sourcewatch, 2008) discusses how many times stories written and produced by public relations specialists appear in newspapers or in a television newscast. The survey employed in this study attempted to analyze how people perceive the impact of VNR use on the concepts of journalistic ethics, integrity, professionalism, independence, credibility, and commercialization.

While there was no support for three hypotheses and mixed support for the other three hypotheses, the results give researchers a jumping point to study more about the attitudes and perceptions that viewers have of VNRs.

Now that we have asked the viewers what they think about the influence government and corporate entities have in the news they watch, we can start exploring other reasons why people are reducing the amount of news they see on a daily basis. If viewers do not care who is providing the content they watch, the producers of the news programs will not care if they attribute information from an outside source. If viewers do show they care when VNRs and other such material are included in newscasts without attribution, then news stations will start to change their practices before the government gets involved. We have already seen media corporations such as Gannett (Shory, 2007), and media organizations such as the RTNDA (Cochran, 2005) and Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ, 2009) re-introduce guidelines on the use of VNRs to their affiliates and members. Much of the attention followed the criticism of the Bush administration and its use of the public relations tool. It is likely that every media organization that wants to keep viewers watching their newscasts and readers subscribing to newspapers will listen to the opinions of the people who keep them in business.

This study was an initial step to spur more interest into this area of research and to add to our understanding of what people think of the impact of VNRs on the concepts journalists are believed to possess. As our media world continues to expand, the extent of the influence of a press release, a VNR, and a PR specialist can be viewed as limitless. Hence, this is an area of study that merits further research to study the impact of how it impacts young and veteran journalists.

Tables

Table 1.

*Level of Experience: Means and Standard Deviations for the Dependent Variables*

	Level of Experience			F	p	$\epsilon^2$
	JN	STU	AV			
Ethics	3.32 (.71)	3.14 (.56)	3.37 (.66)	4.90	.01	.02
Integrity	3.04 (.76)	3.00 (.57)	3.12 (.60)	1.76	.174	.01
Independence	2.76 (.72)	3.08 (.51)	3.19 (.57)	21.76	.001	.08
Professionalism	3.05 (.76)	3.07 (.56)	3.19 (.61)	2.76	.06	.01
Credibility	3.38 (.77)	3.50 (.63)	3.50 (.60)	1.59	.205	.01
Commercialization	3.16 (.76)	3.54 (.63)	3.48 (.69)	10.90	.001	.04

*Note.* JN=Journalist, STU=College Communication Student, AV=Average Viewer, F=Variance between subjects, p=significance  $p < .01$ ,  $\epsilon^2$ = power, Numbers in parentheses are standard deviations.

Table 2.

*Years of Experience: Means and Standard Deviations for the Dependent Variables*

	Years of Experience			F	p	$\epsilon^2$
	JN	STU	AV			
Ethics	3.31 (.67)	3.29 (.63)	3.33 (.72)	.00	.904	.00
Integrity	3.09 (.60)	3.06 (.60)	3.02 (.79)	.47	.628	.002
Independence	3.17 (.55)	2.93 (.55)	2.69 (.76)	24.99	.001	.09
Professionalism	3.17 (.60)	3.09 (.63)	3.00 (.80)	2.62	.074	.01
Credibility	3.50 (.61)	3.36 (.69)	3.46 (.78)	.99	.373	.004
Commercialization	3.50 (.67)	3.25 (.71)	3.18 (.82)	8.8	.001	.032

*Note.* JN=Journalist, STU=College Communication Student, AV=Average Viewer, F=Variance between subjects, p=significance  $p < .01$ ,  $\epsilon^2$ = power, Numbers in parentheses are standard deviations.

Table 3.  
*TV Viewership for Local, Network, and Cable News*

Local News

Days		Time	
0	12.9%	0 min	13.7%
1	16.9%	1-15 min	34%
2	13.9%	16-30 min	25.7%
3	10.7%	31-45 min	9.2%
4	8.8%	46-60 min	6.4%
5	15.2%	1-2 hrs	7.3%
6	8.8%	3-5 hrs	3.4%
7	12.8%	6 hrs/more	4%

Network News

Days		Time	
0	23.8%	0 min	23.8%
1	17.8%	1-15 min	29.5%
2	15.9%	16-30 min	27.8%
3	11.8%	31-45 min	8.4%
4	7.5%	46-60 min	5.3%
5	11.4%	1-2 hrs	3.0%
6	9.6%	3-5 hrs	1.7%
7	2.1%	6 hrs/more	.6%

Cable News

Days		Time	
0	28.9%	0 min	28.5%
1	18.4%	1-15 min	21.8%
2	13.5%	16-30 min	22.3%
3	10.5%	31-45 min	7.5%
4	7.7%	46-60 min	10.3%
5	9.8%	1-2 hrs	6.0%
6	11.1%	3-5 hrs	3.4%
7	.2%	6 hrs/more	.2%

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n=533 participants



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Appendix A

Broadcast News Content

Survey Questions

1. Gender:

Male \_\_\_\_\_ Female \_\_\_\_\_

2. Ethnic Origin

\_\_\_\_\_ White/Caucasian, not Hispanic

\_\_\_\_\_ Black or African-American

\_\_\_\_\_ Asian, Asian-American, Oriental

\_\_\_\_\_ Hispanic or Latino

\_\_\_\_\_ Other (please write in)

3. How old were you on your last birthday?

\_\_\_\_\_ 19-25

\_\_\_\_\_ 26-35

\_\_\_\_\_ 36-50

\_\_\_\_\_ 51-60

\_\_\_\_\_ 61 or over

4. What is the highest level of education you have completed?

\_\_\_\_\_ Less than High School

\_\_\_\_\_ High School/GED

\_\_\_\_\_ Some College

\_\_\_\_\_ 4 Year College Degree (BA, BS)

\_\_\_\_\_ Graduate Degree

5. Which of the following categories best describes your annual household income?

\_\_\_\_\_ Under \$30,000

\_\_\_\_\_ \$30,000-\$59,999

\_\_\_\_\_ \$60,000-\$89,999

\_\_\_\_\_ \$90,000-\$99,999

\_\_\_\_\_ \$100,000 or more

6. Generally speaking, I consider myself to be:

- Very conservative
- Moderately conservative
- Middle of the road
- Moderately Liberal
- Very liberal

7. Please indicate which of the following best describe you:

- journalist
- communication student
- neither

8. If you are a journalist, how many years have you worked in the industry?

- 1-5
- 6-10
- 11-20
- 21 and above
- Doesn't apply

9. Are you a resident of Alabama?

- Yes
- No

10. Which source do you rely on the most for news and information?

- Local Newspaper  
(examples: Tuscaloosa News, Birmingham News, Mobile Press Register, etc.)
- News Magazines  
(examples: Newsweek, US News & World Report, Time, etc.)
- Internet  
(examples: any website news search)
- Television News  
(examples: ABC 33/40, Fox 6, NBC 13, CBS 42, ABC, NBC, CBS, CNN, FOX, MSNBC, etc.)
- Radio Stations  
(examples: National Public Radio, ESPN radio, local radio stations, etc.)

11. On average, how many days per week do you watch local TV news?

- (examples: ABC 33/40, Fox 6, NBC 13, CBS 42, WVUA 7)
- (please put a number-0, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, or 7)

12. On average, how much time per day do you watch local TV news?

- 0 minute
- 1-15 minutes
- 16-30 minutes
- 31-45 minutes
- 46-60 minutes
- 1-2 hours
- 3-5 hours
- 6 hours or more

13. On average, how many days per week do you watch network TV news?  
(examples: ABC, NBC, CBS)

\_\_\_\_\_ (please put a number-0, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, or 7)

14. On average, how much time per day do you watch network TV news?

- 0 minute
- 1-15 minutes
- 16-30 minutes
- 31-45 minutes
- 46-60 minutes
- 1-2 hours
- 3-5 hours
- 6 hours or more

15. On average, how many days per week do you watch 24-hour cable TV news?  
(examples: CNN, MSNBC, FOX, etc.)

\_\_\_\_\_ (please put a number-0, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, or 7)

16. On average, how much time do you watch 24-hour cable TV news?

- 0 minute
- 1-15 minutes
- 16-30 minutes
- 31-45 minutes
- 46-60 minutes
- 1-2 hours
- 3-5 hours
- 6 hours or more

\*Please put an "x" by only one answer to the following statements with "1" indicating that you strongly agree, "2" agree, "3" neutral, "4" disagree, and "5" strongly disagree.

17. I believe information provided by the media is accurate.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1	2	3	4	5

18. I believe the news media do not give viewers the complete story.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1	2	3	4	5

19. I believe that advertisements are embedded within local broadcast news programming.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1	2	3	4	5

20. The line between news and advertising is blurred.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1	2	3	4	5

21. The line between entertainment and news is blurred.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1	2	3	4	5

22. News is too commercialized.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1	2	3	4	5

23. If a television news program includes a story with footage not produced by the news organization, it should be labeled with words on the television screen.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1	2	3	4	5

24. If a television news program includes a story with footage not produced by the news organization, it should be attributed to orally by the anchors and news reporters..

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
----------------	-------	---------	----------	-------------------

1                      2                      3                      4                      5

25. I would trust a local television station more if producers used words on the television screen to label video not produced by the news organization.

Strongly Agree      Agree                  Neutral                  Disagree      Strongly Disagree

1                      2                      3                      4                      5

26. I would trust a local television station more if anchors and news reporters used oral attribution to bring attention to stories not produced by the news organization.

Strongly Agree      Agree                  Neutral                  Disagree      Strongly Disagree

1                      2                      3                      4                      5

27. Local television news is a credible source for information on health.  
(examples: ABC 33/40, Fox 6, NBC 13, CBS 42, WVUA 7)

Strongly Agree      Agree                  Neutral                  Disagree      Strongly Disagree

1                      2                      3                      4                      5

The following questions pertain to video news releases and how you perceive their use by broadcast journalists. We are interested in your opinion of how these videos are used in local broadcast news content. Video news releases are client-sponsored videos that present a controlled message using a news angle, broadcast style writing, and production practices.

Video news releases are distributed to local, network, and 24-hour cable television organizations to use as they wish at no cost to journalists or a news organization. They are commonly referred to as VNRs. These are generally paid for by commercial entities and the government. If you want to see an example of a VNR, [click here](#).

28. It is unethical for video news releases to be included in news content.

Strongly Agree      Agree                  Neutral                  Disagree      Strongly Disagree

1                      2                      3                      4                      5

29. It is acceptable for commercial messages to be included in news content. .

Strongly Agree      Agree                  Neutral                  Disagree      Strongly Disagree

1                      2                      3                      4                      5



30. It is acceptable for commercial messages to be included in news content if they are labeled with words on the television screen.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1	2	3	4	5

31. It is unethical for a television news organization to air video news releases without them being labeled as such.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1	2	3	4	5

32. It is unethical for a television news organization to air video news releases without oral attribution.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1	2	3	4	5

33. Television stations are sacrificing their ethics by using video news releases.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1	2	3	4	5

34. Journalists who use video news releases may be sacrificing their independence for corporate interests.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1	2	3	4	5

35. By using video news releases, journalists allow others to make content decisions for them.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1	2	3	4	5

36. I believe if a video news release provides information that helps solve a problem, it does not jeopardize the station's independence.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1	2	3	4	5

37. I believe local television stations are under a lot of pressure to put out video content supplied by the government.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1	2	3	4	5

38. The use of video news releases can serve the viewers' interests.  
Strongly Agree      Agree      Neutral      Disagree      Strongly Disagree

1                      2                      3                      4                      5

39. When local television stations use video news releases, they are changing the traditional role of journalism.  
Strongly Agree      Agree      Neutral      Disagree      Strongly Disagree

1                      2                      3                      4                      5

40. By using video news releases, journalists are compromising their own professional codes.  
Strongly Agree      Agree      Neutral      Disagree      Strongly Disagree

1                      2                      3                      4                      5

41. As professionals, television anchors and reports should be responsible for their own news content.  
Strongly Agree      Agree      Neutral      Disagree      Strongly Disagree

1                      2                      3                      4                      5

42. Using video news releases every once in a while, does not damage a journalist professionally.  
Strongly Agree      Agree      Neutral      Disagree      Strongly Disagree

1                      2                      3                      4                      5

43. Professional journalists would never use any type of video news release.  
Strongly Agree      Agree      Neutral      Disagree      Strongly Disagree

1                      2                      3                      4                      5

44. Broadcasters jeopardize their individual integrity if they use any form of a video news release.  
Strongly Agree      Agree      Neutral      Disagree      Strongly Disagree

1                      2                      3                      4                      5

45. Broadcasters are running the chance of damaging the integrity of their profession by using video news releases.  
Strongly Agree      Agree      Neutral      Disagree      Strongly Disagree

1                      2                      3                      4                      5

46. Local television stations may use portions of a video news release to help tell a story.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1	2	3	4	5

47. Broadcasters are being lazy if they use a video news release to supplement the content in their newscast.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1	2	3	4	5

48. Broadcasters are deceiving the audience when they pass off video news releases as their own.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1	2	3	4	5

49. A VNR is okay to use if the narration is replaced by a tv station reporter.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1	2	3	4	5

50. It is acceptable for local television stations to use video news releases, as long as they do not accept money for their use.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1	2	3	4	5

51. It is acceptable for local television stations to purchase content that airs in a newscast.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1	2	3	4	5

52. The use of a VNR is a way to promote a product or service.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1	2	3	4	5

53. Local television stations are under a lot of pressure to put out video content supplied by corporations about products or services.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1	2	3	4	5

54. Local television stations should not give in to any commercial pressures when it comes to running a video news release.

Strongly Agree      Agree      Neutral      Disagree      Strongly Disagree

1

2

3

4

5

## Appendix B

### Typology of Video News Releases

1. Full narrated package-includes reporter narration, sound bites, graphics identifying subjects and/or provider of video, b-roll, and natural sound.
2. Natural sound package-includes sound bites, b-roll, and natural sound. It excludes reporter narration, and graphics identifying subjects for the purpose of a reporter adding his/her own narration.
3. B-roll only
4. Sound bites only
5. B-roll and sound bites
6. Graphics only
7. Graphics with b-roll
8. Graphics with sound bites

#### Explanations:

\*Some companies will provide news stations/web providers with a variation of the eight types so producers can choose how they want to use the content.

\*\*Packages are the typical term given to produced stories in a newsroom where all the information is presented in 1:30 or 2 minute form by a reporter.

\*\*\*B-roll is defined as video that is shot by a videographer to illustrate the recorded narration.

\*\*\*\*Sound bites are interviews with a subject who may be an expert on a particular topic, a person who has experience with the topic, or someone who has an opinion.

\*\*\*\*\*The news station uses graphics to illustrate information that may or may not be re-used. Producers can use this information to decide how they want to illustrate the story. Very rarely would they use the pre-produced graphic provided by the video news release because it would not fall into the same format or style used by the station. Producers have the option of displaying the information in another manner on the station's custom-made graphics.

## Appendix C

### PRSA VNR Guidelines

The Public Relations Society of America has clear ethical standards for the creation of VNRs:

1. Organizations that produce VNRs should clearly identify the VNR as such and fully disclose who produced and paid for it at the time the VNR is provided to TV stations.
2. PRSA recommends that organizations that prepare VNRs should not use the word “reporting” if the narrator is not a reporter. Use of VNRs or footage provided by sources other than the station or network should be identified as the source by the media outlet when it is aired.

(Aronson, Spetner & Ames, 2007)

## Appendix D

### RTNDA Code of Ethics

The following six questions are issued to members on whether to use VNR material.

1. Can the station obtain the video or audio itself or through editorial channels, such as a network news feed service?
2. Is the video or audio essential to telling the story?
3. If the video or audio is used, is its origin clearly identified?
4. Did interviews in the release come from independent voices, or from employees of the source of the release? Were challenging questions asked?
5. Are there other points of view that need to be included? Have the facts in the material been independently verified?
6. Does this material add valuable insight or useful information for our audience?

(Cochran, 2005).

## Appendix E

### Society of Professional Journalists

#### Code of Ethics

Journalists should:

- Test the accuracy of information from all sources and exercise care to avoid inadvertent error. Deliberate distortion is never permissible.
- Identify sources whenever feasible. The public is entitled to as much information as possible on sources' reliability.
- Make certain that headlines, news teases and promotional material, photos, video, audio, graphics, sound bites and quotations do not misrepresent. They should not oversimplify or highlight incidents out of context.
- Never distort the content of news photos or video. Image enhancement for technical clarity is always permissible. Label montages and photo illustrations.
- Distinguish news from advertising and shun hybrids that blur the lines between the two.
- Avoid conflicts of interest, real or perceived.
- Remain free of associations and activities that may compromise integrity or damage credibility.



- Refuse gifts, favors, fees, free travel and special treatment, and shun secondary employment, political involvement, public office and service in community organizations if they compromise journalistic integrity.
- Deny favored treatment to advertisers and special interests and resist their pressure to influence news coverage.
- Be wary of sources offering information for favors or money; avoid bidding for news.