

CBS Is Divided Over the Use Of False Images In Broadcasts

By Bill Carter

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Dan Rather, the CBS News anchor, called the decision to superimpose a digitally created CBS logo to block out an NBC-sponsored sign in Times Square during CBS's news coverage of New Year's Eve celebrations "a mistake" that he regrets.

"There is no excuse for it," Mr. Rather said in a telephone interview today. "I did not grasp the possible ethical implications of this and that was wrong on my part."

While he questioned whether CBS should have acted at all to alter the reality of a scene in this way, he said, "At the very least we should have pointed out to viewers that we were doing it."

The CBS decision to use a new form of technology that allows electronically created images to replace actual structures had stirred a debate inside CBS News and today -- at news conference attended by Andrew Heyward, the president of CBS News, and Leslie Moonves, the president of CBS Television -- it was clear the debate was not over.

Mr. Heyward, responding to questions about an article on the topic in The New York Times on Wednesday, defended CBS's use of the technology, developed by a firm called Princeton Video Image. The network has regularly used it on its morning news program, "The Early Show," to display a CBS promotion on everything from the back of horse carriages to a side of the General Motors building, where the program originates.

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Mr. Heyward said he believed the transmission of the digital images during the morning program was "a whimsical and creative way to display our logo in various and unlikely places." The use during Mr. Rather's coverage in Times Square was, he said, "a closer call," which was made based on his conviction that "on New Year's Eve with confetti in Dan's hair, I saw this as an extension of our graphics, a change in this very festive, in effect, set."

He added that Mr. Rather had not been part of the "internal discussion" about using the technique and that "reasonable people could disagree on whether this was an appropriate use of digital technology."

Mr. Moonves supported Mr. Heyward. "Anytime there's an NBC logo up on our network we'll block it again," he said.

But Mr. Rather, in the phone interview, was steadfast. "This is a new tool, and we're responsible for how we use it," he said. "I'm not satisfied with how we met our ethical responsibility to viewers."

He added, "I'm troubled that this was done."

Mr. Heyward said there had been "vigorous debate" on the use of the technology inside CBS News.

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"I'm certain we're not going to make blanket use of this technology," he said, but added that the network would definitely continue to use it on its morning news program.

CBS recently poured more than \$30 million into remaking that program, but it still lags badly behind in ratings. Mr. Heyward is also dealing with a ratings falloff for Mr. Rather's newscast.

Neither of the other network morning news programs use the Princeton Video Image technology. Jeff Zucker, the executive producer of the "Today" program on NBC, said, "We were offered the same technology and we passed because we didn't think it was appropriate." Eileen Murphy, a spokeswoman for ABC News said: "It's been discussed at length. We wouldn't use it here."

Still, Mr. Heyward said that on "The Early Show," the anchor Bryant Gumbel had on occasions noted on the air that the digital logo was being superimposed when he thought it was being done in a particularly creative spot.

"If somebody comes to New York and is surprised that it doesn't say 'The Early Show' in the middle of Fifth Avenue, I don't think we've committed a journalism sin," Mr. Heyward said. "I don't want to apologize for being aggressive in exploiting this."

He said that he understood the argument against the use of the technology -- which is widely employed in sports and some entertainment shows -- on news programs. The danger is "that it looks too real and therefore it's wrong or potentially wrong," he said. "I certainly agree it's potentially subject to abuse."

He noted that advances in computer-generated techniques had made things like missiles hitting Baghdad and airplanes crashing look so real that it was incumbent on networks to underscore that these were not real images.

"We're not sitting here rubbing our hands, saying how can we use this again," Mr. Heyward said. "We are not in the deception business, We're in the reality business; we're in the accuracy business. To the extent that this technology interferes with that core belief we're not going to do it. We will absolutely take seriously the use of this tool."

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