

▶ **CASE 10-5**

The Online Birth and News Values

The Albright's wait was finally over! Having tried for seven years to conceive, Martha Albright had feasted on fertility drugs until her physician had confirmed the success of her medical therapy. Seven months later, with her bewildered husband in attendance in the delivery room, Albright gave birth to septuplets.

With the arrival of the three boys and four girls, all undersized but healthy, Albright also entered the history books as the first woman to have multiple births via the Internet. In the summer of 1998 thousands of cyberspace enthusiasts had looked on as a forty-year-old woman, known as "Elizabeth," went through labor on a Web site maintained by cable television's America's Health Network, but the appearance by the Albright septuplets had established a record that was unlikely to be shattered in the foreseeable future.

The couple, middle-class residents of the community of North Haven on the Atlantic seaboard, had declared their unorthodox intentions four weeks prior to the scheduled arrival date. Not surprisingly, the announcement in the *North Haven Sentinel* had ripened into a national media frenzy and was subjected to a thorough venting on the talk show circuit. In public opinion polls, some re-

spondents applauded the Albright's pioneering endeavor; others condemned what they believed was a grotesque depreciation of the miracle of birth.

But in addition to the spectacle of live multiple births on the Internet, the Albright's phenomenon differed from its 1998 predecessor in several important respects. It took place on the family's home page with a camera strategically placed to show the actual births. The father, Jack Albright, announced the predetermined names as the attending physician disclosed the sex of each septuplet upon its arrival into the world. In addition, a major manufacturer of baby formula had contracted with the Albrights for a commercial slot on the site in exchange for a year's supply of their product. For all visitors to the site, the company's commercial message remained visible for the first five seconds and then disappeared.

The Albright project differed from the earlier Web birth in another important respect. Whereas "Elizabeth" claimed that she had allowed cameras into the delivery room to educate women about childbirth,⁶⁷ Martha Albright professed no such pedagogical intentions. "Jack and I just want to share this miracle with our extended cyberspace family," declared Albright in a nationally televised interview, with obvious affection for all fellow travelers on the Web.

The Albright's "miracle" began on a Monday at 9:30 A.M. as she entered the delivery room and the cameras began transmitting her labor and the multiple births to the family's home page, whose Web site address had been widely publicized. During the five-hour ordeal, the Albright Web page recorded thousands of hits, but thousands of others were denied access because of the inability of the site to handle the extraordinary demand from well-wishers, the curious, and voyeurs alike.

Marvin Whitelaw was not among those denied access. As the producer of Channel 9's evening news, Whitelaw had recorded the entire episode, the excerpts of which might be worthy of a slot on his station's journalistic agenda. Despite the graphic and uninhibited public portrayal of an event traditionally regarded as among the most private, the media hype that had accompanied this forthcoming bizarre spectacle had propelled it into

the nation's collective consciousness. As the number one news station in the North Haven market, Whitelaw concluded, Channel 9 could not simply ignore the story, which was both local and national. The only question was how to integrate the Web site material with the narration for what was undeniably a visual story.

Lionel St. Clair did not have to view Whitelaw's tape in its entirety to recognize the ethical dimensions of the proposed story on the cyberspace drama surrounding the birth of the Albright septuplets. St. Clair was the senior anchor and managing editor of Channel 9's evening newscast. Although the producer was responsible for assembling the newscast and determining its content, St. Clair was the final gatekeeper in those cases that required the wisdom of a seasoned moral agent. Nevertheless, St. Clair made few decisions without the sane counsel of his coanchor and assistant managing editor, Cynthia Crabtree, whose conservative nature served to balance Whitelaw's more aggressive inclinations.

"Our reporters have put together a package on the local reaction to this event, particularly from those residents who are connected to the Web," noted St. Clair as he turned away from the monitor that had displayed the taped replay of the septuplets' cyberspace debut. "We have to decide how to use this material that we've downloaded from the Net. Should we run the raw footage, mask it, or not use it at all?" St. Clair then braced himself for Whitelaw's spirited defense of including the graphic footage in the station's report. He knew from experience that his producer held strong convictions concerning the role of visuals in television news and considered the reflection of reality to be a journalistic imperative, even at the risk of offending some viewers. He was curious as to his competitors' plans for covering this online production.

"This is pretty raw stuff," observed Crabtree correctly. "The use of the cliché 'the miracle of birth' shouldn't obscure the fact that a graphic portrayal of an actual birth is offensive to many people. I'm not so sure our audience is ready for this, particularly because children are likely to be in the audience."

"This isn't exactly precedent setting," responded Whitelaw. "Some of the network news magazine programs have included footage of actual births. Besides, I doubt that today's audiences

will object to this kind of content. They're more sophisticated."

"I'm not so sure," replied Crabtree. "The news media, including our station, still receive complaints when they cross the line. We must keep our local viewers in mind. It's true that this event has received a lot of publicity; it's newsworthy, even if it's rather bizarre. But the airing of these shots of the Albright septuplets' online birth is not essential to this story."

"But this story has generated a lot of public comment, much of it critical, and the crux of the debate cannot be fully appreciated without including some of this material in our report," reasoned Whitelaw. "This Web site was available to millions of people, although only a fraction of those who tried could get through. Let's face it! The Internet has added a new dimension to our news judgment. On a story like this, we're not necessarily the primary gatekeeper. The entire, unfiltered transmission is available to a vast audience. We're putting it into a news context, but the visuals are not really ours. I'm not suggesting that we should always take our moral cues from what's out there in cyberspace. But the fact is that the heart of this story is about an event that transpired on the Internet. And the visuals are as much the essence of this story as the incident itself. We're abdicating our journalistic responsibility if we omit or even alter the shots of these births."

"But I don't believe that we should allow the Internet to dictate our news values," said Crabtree, who resisted any suggestion that the public's unregulated access to the Web would eventually confine journalists to the role of cultural bystanders. "We should at least mask the most graphic shots. This story will be aired initially during the dinner hour. I think it's in poor taste to include these unaltered visuals with the story. It smacks of sensationalism. Let's face it. Martha Albright's decision to invite the entire universe to join her in the delivery room was bizarre to begin with. We don't need to be a party to this, even if some members of our audience were connected to this Web site during the actual event."

"But birth is no longer a mysterious or even a private event," replied Whitelaw with conviction.

"It's now commonplace for fathers to be present in the delivery room; many even videotape their wives' deliveries and perhaps display them for family and friends. And privacy is certainly no issue here because the Albrights arranged this entire event to begin with."

"We don't need to include the most graphic shots," insisted Crabtree. "If we must show any of the footage to add credibility to the story, we can still mask the most offensive scenes."

"But the most dramatic aspect of this story—and we really can't capture it effectively without using the actual, unaltered footage—is the birth of each septuplet with the physician identifying the sex and the father naming each one in sequence. Of course, for the sake of time we'll need to dissolve from one birth to the next but it loses some of its effectiveness if we mask these scenes. Sure, we may get some complaints, but this story is dramatic and it's newsworthy. The elimination or alteration of these visuals compromises both values."

St. Clair wasn't so sure. But what he was sure of was that North Haven was a very competitive market, and Channel 9 had secured its number one ranking through aggressive reporting and frequently dramatic video. Nevertheless, his daily scrutiny had, in his judgment, kept his station's news department within the bounds of journalistic propriety, which was no modest task in this era of sensationalism, titillation, and infotainment. St. Clair conceded the news value of the cyberspace deliveries, especially because they involved a local couple, but as the moment of decision approached he pondered the journalistic value of including the unaltered video as part of Channel 9's coverage of this unorthodox phenomenon.

THE CASE STUDY

This is a case of old wine in new bottles. The use of graphic photos and visuals is a perennial problem for reporters, photographers, and editors. But this case differs from the traditional moral dilemma surrounding the use of offensive visuals. Typically, a news organization is the primary gatekeeper for the dissemination of such content. But in the scenario

here, the news department is as much a bystander as a participant in this event. Because of the story's local origins (as well as its national exposure), the staff has conceded its news value, but many of the station's viewers have undoubtedly already witnessed this cyberspace phenomenon. Is this reality sufficient justification for absolving the station of moral responsibility for airing graphic visuals of a live birth that will offend some viewers and strike others as sensational?

Ethical dilemmas of this kind usually implicate the nature of the medium, the nature of the content, the audience, and even the historical time frame. Standards of decency and tastes do change; there is constant shifting and "line drawing," as noted in this observation from Professor Val Limburg:

As evasive as the ideal of decency is, most people accede to the idea that civilized society sets boundaries on acceptable conduct. We still do not see much public nudity or copulation out in the open, for example, despite relaxing standards of sexual mores. Everyone draws a line somewhere as to what is decent, although they may draw it in different places.⁶⁸

In this case, the assistant managing editor of the evening newscast, Cynthia Crabtree, is resisting moving the boundaries of propriety simply because this event occurred live on the unregulated Internet. In her judgment, this doesn't relieve her station of its responsibility as moral gatekeeper.

Producer Marvin Whitelaw doesn't disagree with this as a general proposition but believes that the news value of this event and the visuals themselves are inescapably linked. He also argues that the fact that thousands of viewers have already witnessed this spectacle, unedited, undermines Crabtree's morally conservative posture in withholding the visuals or at least masking them.

Assume the role of Channel 9's senior anchor and managing editor, and, using the SAD Formula for moral reasoning outlined in Chapter 3, defend your decision. As part of your analysis, you should focus, among other things, on the specific nature of this material. Are visuals of a live birth likely to be offensive to the average viewer? Or has the line

shifted so dramatically that such "natural" events can be displayed publicly without fear of objection?