

Review: Imagery used to promote The National's special report on brain research

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REVIEW

On October 4, 2011, CBC Television's The National promoted a [special report](#) on brain research, scheduled to be aired the next evening. The report was part of a series coinciding with the resumption of the National Hockey League regular season, with its focus on the impact of head injuries on athletes, particularly the new understanding of the damage to hockey players. Chief correspondent Peter Mansbridge reported the documentary, Inside The Brain Lab.

The promotional segment gave some understanding of the report's outline. Amid the segment was imagery of a human brain being handled by a scientist.

The complainant, Andrew Krystal, wrote later that night to say the imagery "displayed a dehumanizing, callous insensitivity," that "a morgue was forced into my living room," and that he did not understand why there would be a disclaimer preceding graphic war footage and not one preceding this.

The executive producer for The National, Mark Harrison, wrote back the next day to thank Krystal for writing and to note it had "prompted a considerable and worthwhile discussion" in the newsroom.

While noting the imagery was part of the segment, Harrison said: "I agree, however, that we could have -- and should have -- shown more sensitivity in the pictures used in the promo. The intent was not to sensationalize, but rather to illustrate the story. It certainly isn't in our interest to shock viewers as they would be less likely to keep watching."

He added: "In light of your email, we've taken another look at how we'll be using the pictures in tonight's program. The context provided by a full feature report will, I believe, make an important difference. While the brain images are graphic, we feel they are important to illustrate the damage that's being done. The medical researchers

and families of the athletes also feel it is critical they are seen and help inform the debate.”

Krystal wrote back that day to say he disagreed it was necessary to show such images in that way. A slide show or animation would have been sufficient to tell the story, he argued.

“You can make the point . . .without actually showing people holding dead brains in their hands,” Krystal wrote. He argued it was possible to show damaged brain tissue with more restraint. He asked for a review of the matter.

The programmers decided not to change any imagery in the documentary, which featured a scientist slicing open and handling the brain of a deceased boxer.

But they opted not to use the imagery in headlines and in-program promotion, acknowledging they might be “too abrupt and potentially shocking.”

[CBC Journalistic Standards and Practices](#) counsel restraint and an adherence to strong and sensitive values overall, in keeping with a general journalistic principle of minimizing harm.

The policy does not directly address a situation like this, but it deals with content that might prove difficult for the audience in advising: *“When it is necessary to present explicit content that some could find shocking, we provide an audience advisory.”*

Its policy on responsibility and accountability also does not deal with this situation directly, but it indicates the nature of CBC News’s dealings with its audience by requiring it to be *“aware of the impact of our journalism and . . .honest with our audiences. We do not hesitate to correct any mistake when necessary . . .”*

CONCLUSION

Television has for years depicted the imagery CBC News carried in the promotion of the special report and the documentary itself. Elsewhere on television there are programs dedicated to graphic presentations of invasive surgeries, for example.

But that programming makes clear from the outset what viewers can expect. As difficult and uncomfortable as those images might be for some viewers, they are clearly in store for them.

Images can be jarring if they're unexpected. It is helpful to warn viewers who can then choose to change channels. CBC policy alludes to that in its standards and practices on explicit content and its practice is often to do that when there are scenes of suffering and death. This is a responsible approach for newscasts.

CBC News acknowledged in correspondence it could have acted differently in its initial presentation of the imagery in the promotion inside its newscast. Its admission was a healthy, mature response, an acceptance of accountability, and a genuine sign of its willingness to reflect upon its journalism when public concerns are raised.

I accept CBC's view it had no interest in sensationalizing the topic or in alienating a portion of the audience, although the slicing open and handling of a human brain was bound to be a squeamish experience for some viewers.

Even though the depiction of the human brain in the promotion was illustrative of the pending documentary, I agree with CBC that something could have been done to more sensitively deal with the imagery. That would have braced the audience and fulfilled CBC Journalistic Standards and Practices.

It is worth noting that the imagery was limited in the documentary. It was also journalistically justified in demonstrating the impact of injury on brain tissue. While the report also featured a two-dimensional look at brain damage, the physical handling of the human brain by the scientist was extremely effective in identifying the impact on tissue of repeated trauma.

And it was responsibly done. Several scenes preceded the handling of the brain: images of Peter Mansbridge donning a lab coat, host Wendy Mesley noting that viewers were about to see an "actual brain," Mansbridge entering the lab and then discussing the issue about four minutes into the report with a Boston University scientist as a brain arrives in a box. There was nothing surprising about what was to be seen, and if viewers were not going to want to see it, they had plenty of time to turn away.

The episode offers a twofold message for programmers: first, to exercise continued reflection on imagery, even in this relatively graphic era, to guide an audience that will always have varying tastes and tolerances; and second, to adapt when the audience's concerns are reasonable, practical and seek to minimize harm without deterring from the journalism.

Kirk LaPointe
CBC Ombudsman