



Media Group Pulls Nightline

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By The NorthStar News Staff

Media Group Pre-empt's Nightline Broadcast

Ted Koppel, award-winning anchor of ABC News' Nightline, solemnly read the names of American military personnel killed in Iraq on the show's Friday broadcast. The starkness of the roll call and accompanying photographs of the dead young men and women belied the Bush administration's portrayals of a conflict near resolution. The Nightline broadcast took place on the eve of the one-year anniversary of President Bush's speech aboard the USS Abraham Lincoln declaring the U.S. invasion of Iraq "Mission Accomplished." The decision by Koppel to honor the war dead by devoting an entire installment of his groundbreaking program to their memory was actually in keeping with the program's historical roots. Nightline began as a special ABC News update of the Iranian hostage crisis during the Carter presidency so it was only appropriate for the program to again focus on the human aspect of an international conflict.

The airing of the names of deceased soldiers was not without criticism. Sinclair Broadcasting Group, an owner of dozens of local television stations, pulled the program from its stations in several markets, including St. Louis, Mobile, and Columbus, Ohio. The Baltimore based media concern claimed its decision to pre-empt the program was rooted in its belief that Koppel was making a political statement by reading the names and displaying the photographs of soldiers killed in Iraq.

In part, Sinclair declared:

"The ABC Television Network announced on Tuesday that the Friday, April 30 edition of "Nightline" will consist entirely of Ted Koppel reading aloud the names of U.S. servicemen and women killed in action in Iraq. Despite the denials by a spokeswoman for the show, the action appears to be motivated by a political agenda designed to undermine the efforts of the United States in Iraq.

There is no organization that holds the members of our military and those soldiers who have sacrificed their lives in service of our country in higher regard than Sinclair Broadcast Group. While Sinclair would support an honest effort to honor the memory of these brave soldiers, we do not believe that is what "Nightline" is doing. Rather, Mr. Koppel and "Nightline" are hiding behind this so-called tribute in an effort to highlight only one aspect of the war effort and in doing so to influence public opinion against the military action in Iraq. Based on published reports, we are aware of the spouse of one soldier who died in Iraq who opposes the reading of her husband's name to oppose our military action. We suspect she is not alone in this viewpoint. As a result, we have decided to preempt the broadcast of "Nightline" this Friday on each of our stations which air ABC programming."

The ABC Network responded by securing alternate broadcast channels in the markets affected. Sinclair's actions were widely condemned by media watchdog groups and Republican Arizona Sen. John McCain, a decorated Vietnam War veteran and former prisoner of war.

Sinclair Broadcasting Group is one of the nation's largest media holding companies, unbeknownst to the public. It owns some 64 local television stations across the country, covering about a quarter of the national television audience. Sinclair's identity is often masked because its stations carry the names of the networks whose programs they broadcast. The company has also pioneered the use of a central newsroom model that enables it to produce programming in Baltimore that is farmed out to its network of local stations but presented as if its originated locally. Viewers are unaware that certain news and editorial content, though appearing as though it comes from their community, is being piped in from a studio miles away. Thus, this powerful media company extends its influence in a stealth-like manner, as viewers have no clue as to the corporate parent of their favorite local station.

What makes Sinclair's blackout of Nightline so significant is that its corporate persona is somewhere to the right of Rupert

Murdoch's News Corporation. In fact, the conservative tilt of Rupert's Fox News Channel is less pronounced than what viewers of Sinclair stations are subjected. The company's executives are unabashed supporters of Republican politicians and Sinclair stations have provided favorable coverage and editorial support of the Iraq War. While accusing Koppel and Nightline of playing politics, Sinclair itself jumped neck deep in the political waters by its thinly veiled suppression of a program it viewed as shining an unfavorable light upon a military occupation it supports.

Sinclair's ability to control the flow of news into households comes courtesy of the lax regulation of media by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) and the byproduct of the Telecommunications Act of 1996. The Act, signed into law by President Bill Clinton, dissolved traditional barriers to the consolidation of media and enabled companies to begin amassing properties. Similar to the over-consumption of radio stations by Texas based Clear Channel, Sinclair went on a feeding frenzy and transformed itself from a bit player in a midsize market to a media behemoth that now has control over a substantial portion of the local television news market. Its growth is representative of the corporate consolidation of media that now limits the sources from which television viewers receive news and information. By doing so, the very notion of "freedom of the press" appears compromised as the censure of opposing views threatens to stifle dissent.

For its part ABC News stood by Nightline's decision to broadcast the honor roll, remarkable considering the fact that over a year ago the network was threatening to pull the plug on the stellar news program. At the time executives at ABC were intent on securing a late night talk show that could compete with offerings on rivals NBC and CBS. It backed off after it was clear that it would lose the battle in the court of public opinion if it sent Koppel and company out to pasture. The dignity of Koppel's Friday telecast confirms the correctness of ABC News' reconsideration of the value of Nightline.

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