



Commercialism In TV Health News

BY GARY SCHWITZER · JULY 20, 2005



For more than 25 years, Minnesotans have turned on [WCCO-TV](#) and turned to [Don Shelby](#), anchor and investigative reporter. Off the air, locals know that Shelby is an active rock climber, canoeist and sports enthusiast. So [when Shelby was suddenly hit by two strokes in 2004](#), it was big local news.

Doctors discovered that Shelby had a hole between the upper chambers of his heart -- a hole that exists in infants, but which normally closes. Blood clots that normally are filtered by the lungs jumped through the hole in Shelby's heart and went to his brain, causing the strokes. So last summer Shelby began planning with his doctor a procedure to patch the hole with an experimental device. He reflected on these events in an in-depth interview with me.

Shelby said he saw better than ever before how commercial interests in the health care industry try to influence television news -- often

successfully. His doctor reported to Shelby, "You're causing quite a stir. I've heard from several companies and they all want their device in you." A number of companies eventually made offers to Shelby, clearly interested in promoting the fact that this well-known anchorman used their device. One offered a free device, another a discounted device, and a third offered a free trip to Europe to have the procedure done there if his insurance wouldn't pay for it here.

Shelby chose the device based on his doctor's advice. His insurance company held up payment because the patch is investigational. Shelby decided to pay for it himself and fight it out with his insurance company on the back end. He expects the bill to be around \$35,000.

"I came out of an era when you made a choice," Shelby told me. "If you chose journalism, it was forbidden ethically and sometimes corporately to have a conflict of interest. *And* you saw the reasoning for that."

Now let's look at another station in another market and a series of incidents -- none of which is viewed as a conflict of interest by the news director or corporate management.

A Nashville, Tenn. newspaper claims that WSMV, Channel 4, Nashville, "tore down the time-honored wall between sales and news." Among the practices [reported](#) by Matt Pulle of the *Nashville Scene*:

- Sports anchor Rudy Kalik received free Lasik surgery in return for letting his name be used in endorsements for the ophthalmologist who did the surgery.
- The news department has employed a freelancer, Mimi Bliss, who owns her own public relations company. On her company [website](#), Bliss's bio boasts: "During her tenure with Saint Thomas Hospital in Nashville, Mimi quadrupled positive media coverage of the hospital's nationally-recognized heart institute and other services." (When she reports news, how is the audience to judge which hat she's wearing?)

Indeed, much of the tone for local operations may be set by the [annual reports](#) of the parent corporation, the Meredith Corporation, which owns 13 television stations. On page 11 of its 2002 annual report, Meredith says: "We are developing a culture in which each employee is charged with generating revenues or supporting sales. Everyone from the news anchor to the general manager is expected to contribute to the sales effort by calling on clients." On page 11 of the 2003 annual report, the wording is more definitive: "Now everyone at each station, including news anchors and other on-air personalities *is playing a role* (emphasis added) in generating advertising revenues or supporting sales operations."

News director Andrew Finlayson told me in a telephone interview that the sports anchor didn't violate ethical guidelines of the [Society of Professional Journalists](#) nor of the [Radio-Television News Directors Association](#) because "he never did report and never will report on" the ophthalmologist who did the surgery. Finlayson says, "I think this drew so much attention because during commercial breaks in the newscast, there's a billboard that promotes an online 'Desktop 4 Weather Authority,' sponsored by the Wang Vision Institute." (Dr. Ming Wang is the ophthalmologist who did the anchor's surgery.)

So viewers of WSMV-Channel 4 in Nashville might see a sports anchor's name appears in ads for a doctor, then might see other ads within the newscast for the same surgeon sponsoring an online weather tool. That anchor sits alongside news people every night who do report on Dr. Wang. I found several stories on the Wang Institute on the WSMV website. One reads in part, "Dr. Wang offers the farsighted fix in his office on West End. For more information, call Dr. Ming Wang at (phone number provided)."

Regarding his use of a professional public relations person as a part-time freelance news reporter, Finlayson says, "In a smaller market, the pool you can draw on for casual workers is smaller." His definition of "smaller market" is peculiar. [Nielsen Media Research ranks Nashville as the 30th largest TV market in the country](#), with almost one million TV homes.

I asked him about the Meredith annual report. "You'll have to talk to corporate," he said. "I don't know what they intended by that."

Meredith Broadcast Group communications manager Jody Judge told me in a phone call, "Advertisers do not influence our news coverage." But he also said, "Our local on-air talent really are local celebrities. We want to do as much as we can to impress a client by bringing the weather guy or a reporter or anchor to a sales call so they can meet and 'wow' 'em a bit. If we can flatter a client, great. I don't see how this can be perceived as a conflict of interest."

Finlayson, like many TV news directors, feels financial pressure in the newsroom. "There is increasing revenue pressure on everyone as fractionalization continues, the audience splintering into smaller pieces," he says. "There are always new demands to increase efficiency while producing a competitive product."

Concerns about lack of transparency in commercial sponsorship of or influence on TV health news don't arise only at the local level.

In 2002, CNN made a formal [announcement](#) that it had just become aware that some of the celebrities interviewed on its news programs about their health problems were being paid by drug companies. The network announced a new policy to tell viewers about any celebrity's financial ties to drug companies.

But this year, shortly before the Super Bowl, CNN invited former pro football quarterback Joe Theismann on the air to talk about -- well, you be the judge. Before Theismann talked any football, he talked about the problem of what he called "EP in America." "EP" is the new marketing term for BPH, or benign prostatic hyperplasia, which causes urinary problems in many men as they age. (Medical marketing whizzes have created an alphabet soup of male health issues. They changed BPH to EP, turned impotence into ED for erectile dysfunction and now have PE for premature ejaculation.) Theismann promoted [a new website](#), but neither Theismann nor anyone at CNN ever mentioned that the site belonged to GlaxoSmithKline and promoted a GSK drug.

News consumers and health care consumers must realize how rampant these commercial influences have become in TV health news. They should ask themselves as they watch such news, "Is this story about a drug, device, doctor, hospital or even health awareness campaign the product of tough-minded, independent journalism? Or did someone buy their way onto the news?" If it sounds like a commercial, it often is.

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