

Cloning announcement spawns ethical debate

By Gary Schwitzer

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News coverage of the Dec. 27, 2002 announcement by the Clonaid company that a cloned human baby had been born raises important ethical questions. A former French journalist named Claude Vorilhon, who now calls himself Rael, founded Clonaid. He is the leader of a religious group that claims a human extraterrestrial race used DNA and genetic engineering to scientifically create all life on Earth.

Some ethical questions about the news coverage linger unanswered after the initial cacophony of stories has quieted. Many critics have focused their attention only on the question of individual journalistic ethics involving freelance journalist and former ABC News science editor Michael Guillen. Guillen made arrangements with Clonaid to handle a so-called “independent” investigation of the claims. He then attempted to sell his story to various news outlets. The code of ethics of the Society of Professional Journalists states: “Journalists should avoid conflicts of interest, real or perceived . . . (and) remain free of associations and activities that may compromise integrity or damage credibility.” But this story presents much broader ethical questions than those surrounding Guillen’s actions. This is an important media ethics case study because of the journalistic responsibilities that may have been overlooked or never considered by many journalists clamoring for the cloning news. One tenet of the code of ethics of the Society of Professional Journalists reads: “Test the accuracy of information from all sources and exercise care to avoid inadvertent error.” What test of the accuracy of the information was done before the live news conference or before stories were written based on that news conference?

On the CNN program, “Reliable Sources,” CNN’s medical correspondent Sanjay Gupta attempted to defend the live coverage. “We didn’t know what they were going to say,” explained Gupta. “They didn’t tell us. We didn’t know whether they were going to have any proof. We didn’t think they were.” Yet they chose to carry it live. “I think if we had known in hindsight that there was going to be no proof at this press conference,” said Gupta, “I think that we probably would have pulled the plug.” But the very risk of live coverage of such an event under such circumstances is that a network will broadcast a message that it will not be able to put into context for viewers. That is what happened. Unverifiable claims were broadcast to a worldwide audience, leaving viewers to figure out whether the claim had any meaning or not.

Gupta also defended five interviews CNN had aired with Rael or Clonaid CEO Brigitte Boisselier, in one of which Connie Chung addressed Rael as “Your Holiness.” Gupta said there was a lot of interest in the story and that it had “captured the public’s imagination.” Yet the code of ethics of the Radio-Television News Directors Association states, “Professional electronic journalists should guard against extended coverage of events or individuals that fails to significantly advance a story, place the event in context, or add to the public knowledge.” The repeated stories in many news outlets failed to significantly advance the story, put it into context, or add to public knowledge. Journalists were never able to conclude whether the claims they reported were true or not. So the story just hangs in the air – an empty, floating episode of minutiae – once worth lots of newsprint and airtime, but now a media-hyped unanswered question.

St. Paul Pioneer Press columnist Joe Soucheray criticized the cloning coverage early. “At best,” Soucheray wrote, “I leave the press conference with a closed notebook after she [Boisselier] refused to provide any evidence of her claim.” He concluded his column: “We are tumbling in the

same dryer – cable news, newspapers, talk shows, Web sites – with the end result that news and entertainment are so mixed together these days that you can't tell the two apart." Orville Schell, dean of the University of California-Berkeley's Graduate School of Journalism told the Los Angeles Times: "The question of whether to run this story on your front page or evening newscast was a test of virtue for the media," he said. "When so many people failed it, as they did, everybody associated with the media become a little less dignified. This story is a very obvious example of a larger, more worrisome problem, which is that there are a thousand ways every day in which the contemporary media doesn't know how to make the dignified decision." In a column for MSNBC.com entitled "Media bungled clone claim coverage." Arthur Caplan, Ph.D., director of the Center for Bioethics at the University of Pennsylvania, wrote, ". . . the public comes away from the Raelian cloning story terrified by advances in genetics, the very science that holds the key to solving some of the biggest challenges human beings will face in this century. Despite 24-hour media attention to the story, the American people have been left confused, scared and clueless. Most Americans now believe that human cloning either has been done or will be done very soon, whereas most experts believe the opposite."

There is an opportunity to learn from this embarrassing episode and to ensure that it is not repeated. Newsrooms should establish guidelines about live coverage of news conferences. These guidelines should consider such questions as: what is known about the qualifications of those hosting the news conference, and how, and how quickly, can the news team verify and put into context what is announced at the news conference? It is a fundamental journalistic responsibility to test the accuracy of information. Kovach and Rosenstiel, in *The Elements of Journalism*, list two elements that are particularly relevant to this case study. The essence of journalism, they write, "is a discipline of verification...it must keep the news comprehensive and proportional." Los Angeles Times media columnist Tim Rutten said on the CNN "Reliable Sources" program: "It's a great cautionary tale. Editing is supposed to occur in a deliberative atmosphere, not in an echo chamber. And this notion that once something is said anywhere and people begin to talk about it in a casual way that that somehow makes it a legitimate story is a preposterous notion. It's a damaging notion."

Editors and news directors must decide how they will cover complex science, medical and health care stories. If they don't have specially-trained journalists on staff and decide they can't afford to offer training, serious consideration should be given to leaving some stories alone. That's a difficult concept, though, if you can't run the risk of getting scooped at the next Raelian news conference.

After all, maybe the little green men will really be there next time.