

L.A. RIOTS AND THE PRESS

In the aftermath of the Rodney King beating case, the stunned disbelief and outrage at the verdict are giving way to a troubled examination of the press coverage of the riots that followed.

The actions of some members of the press have raised questions of judgement and highlighted difficult issues of professional responsibility and ethics.

First, did the rebroadcast of the videotape Rodney King beating immediately after the verdict inflame a volatile situation and contribute to the riots and the beatings that followed? How can and should a potentially volatile story be reported both comprehensively *and* responsibly?

Second, was it wise to telecast *live* interviews to get public reaction to the verdicts? At least one station's live coverage on Wednesday afternoon included a man emotionally calling for Violence in the streets

Third, at least one network broadcast live footage of rioters looting and of passersby being beaten. Did it occur to those reporters that they might have been able to *intervene* and save people from grave injury or even death?

What is troubling about these issues is not just the actions that were taken or not taken, but the lack of any publicly articulated principles, values or standards that did — or were intended to — guide the judgement and conduct of reporters, producers and the rest of the press.

As custodian of a Constitutionally protected right essential to democracy, and as wielders of enormous power and influence, member of the press owe to the public and accounting not only of the exercise of the power, but of the principles that guide it use.

If journalist can not agree among themselves what these principles and standards should be then let the individual publications, stations, and networks determine them for their own People — And then tell the public what these are, so that we can judge whether they are adequate to protect our trust and merit our confidence — and whether they are live up to when tough decisions are made.

As the press itself has taught us by their critical examination of business and politics where there are no clear standards their will be no accountability. And without accountability the public's confidence and trust in the press itself will continue to erode. Whither, then the precious right and freedom of press?

For Ethics at Work, this is Gary Edwards.

***ERC 1992**