



Pandemic Prime Time for the Cuomo Brothers: Ethics, Objectivity, and Relationships in Journalism

As panic around the COVID-19 pandemic set in to New York state, the nation's hardest hit area, Governor Andrew Cuomo, a self-professed "cool dude with a loose mood," was thrust into the national (and indeed, international) spotlight. His daily appearance in press briefings is characterized by a reliance upon facts, reporting of statistics, and clear, calculated directives. The "New York Tough" attitude, together with his focus on the health of the community (wearing masks is a sign of care for others, and being loving is part of being tough, he suggested) gained approval by not only New Yorkers, but also politicians and citizens around the country.



On April 2, 2020, Governor Andrew Cuomo (left) invited brother Chris (right) to participate in his daily press conference (ny.gov)

At the same time, the governor's "little brother" Christopher, 12 years Andrew's junior, garnered increased attention when he was diagnosed with COVID-19. He continued to broadcast his nightly CNN show, *Cuomo Prime Time*, from the basement of his home via Cisco Webex and in casual clothing. The younger Cuomo was quarantined from his wife and three children, and reported experiencing fever and chills so intense that he chipped a tooth. Viewership of his show nearly doubled as the novel coronavirus became the main story in global media.

The brothers' media appearances came together with increasing frequency in mid-March 2020, when their on-screen interviews were bookended by fraternal banter. While interviewing his brother on his show, "Cuomo Prime Time," news anchor Chris urged governor Andrew to "call Mom." Andrew retorted that he already did, and that Mom told me "I'm her favorite." Before and after more serious discussions about public safety and health protocols in subsequent interviews, the pair bantered about their prowess on the basketball court (Chris claiming superiority), and how much they work (Andrew jesting that Chris only works one hour a day on his popular news broadcast). A collection of the brothers' on-screen banter on is available online (NowThisNews, April 2, 2020).



On April 9, 2020, Governor Andrew Cuomo was a guest on Chris's CNN show (Instagram) routine America needs right now" (Chiu, 2020). Comedians Trevor Noah and Ellen DeGeneres have publicly agreed that they are self-declared "Cuomosexuals" (The Ellen Show, April 20, 2020).

When Chris was diagnosed with COVID-19, he became a "canary in the coal mine" and the face of the illness to those who were unfamiliar with its symptoms and challenges. As the public health crisis escalated, Governor Cuomo invited his brother to join his daily press conference via video (CNBC, April 2, 2020). In this meeting with his brother, the governor took on a serious tone, refusing to retort when Chris reported that he had a feverish dream in which his brother was dressed in a ballet outfit, wishing that he could wave a wand and make the virus go away. Rather, Governor Cuomo praised his brother, and said that because he shared his diagnosis and continued to appear on television, "from a journalistic point of view, a public service point of view, you're answering questions for millions of Americans." Despite Governor Cuomo's kindness, the following month brought continued teasing, this time with Chris joking about the size of the nasal swab needed to test the governor for coronavirus (CNN, May 20, 2020).

The brothers' co-appearances and humour have been met with enthusiasm. The Washington Post collected tweets and accolades from the public, indicating the sense that the Cuomo brothers are "the comedy routine America needs right now" (Chiu, 2020). Comedians Trevor Noah and Ellen DeGeneres have publicly agreed that they are self-declared "Cuomosexuals" (The Ellen Show, April 20, 2020).

Adoration for both of the brothers' professional work, together with their playful and "bromantic" banter, has arguably been a successful combination of serious news with a lighter side. At times, viewers feel as if they're in the backseat of a car between two bickering brothers on a long road trip; the sibling rivalry and support feels familiar to many in these trying times. While everything else is scary, confusing, or overwhelming, the expertise and accomplishment of the Cuomo brothers, combined with the entertainment of their rivalries, has potentially brought more attention to news, self-isolation, social distancing, and important public health messages.

However, not everyone is on the Cuomo's bandwagon. Some news organizations wouldn't dream of endorsing a government-meets-media relationship on their watch, as CNN apparently did. For example, James Bennett, editorial-page editor at the *New York Times*, was told that he would be forced to recuse himself from any work at the newspaper related to the presidential election should his brother, Colorado senator Michael Bennett, run for president



(Pompeo, 2019). NPR legal affairs correspondent Nina Totenberg was criticized given her friendship with Supreme Court Justice Scalia (Jensen, 2016). Even if Chris was not intending to show favoritism to his brother, it may have been difficult to be critical or push his brother toward answering difficult questions. Some argue that personal relationships are bound to get in the way of unbiased reporting, and that being “too close” to those involved in news coverage can jeopardize objectivity amongst those who report it.

Indeed, the most recent criticism of Chris and Andrew’s interaction on the news is not their first. In 2013, when a New York train was derailed which left four people dead, Chris interviewed his brother Andrew about the accident. Some journalists argued that although Chris declared his potential conflict of interest, he awkwardly referred to his brother as “Governor,” and slipped in a few accolades into the interview, including that the Governor arrived quickly to the scene. Nevertheless, Chris tweeted that his interview with his brother was no different than others because it was about news, and not about politics (Cuomo, 2013).

The close relationship between the Cuomo brothers is a significant reason why this coverage seems so effective at bringing attention to the story of COVID-19. Some still have concerns, however. Journalism codes of ethics typically advise against becoming too close to sources, given that journalists may have to report unflattering things about people they like or with whom they have forged friendships through being on a long-term assignment. An entertaining interview or on-screen connection can lead to concerns about objectivity. Although the parties may not intend to mislead the audience, Chris may unintentionally treat his brother differently than he would treat another government official serving as a source. Even if Chris’s treatment of his brother is even-handed, there is still the chance that audiences might *think* that he’s showing favoritism to the New York governor, thereby undermining the credibility they place in either CNN or this particular journalist.

The Cuomo’s on-screen fraternal relationship is a delicate balance between a unique and powerful style of reporting that appeals to viewers and prudence in not crossing an ethical line that could expose journalists to potential biases. The Cuomos both appear to want to “do the right thing” by way of informing the public about their relationship. Yet they must also ensure that the stories and information on air does not erode trust and compromise important messages – in this case, about public health and safety as it pertains to COVID-19.

Discussion Questions:

1. By continuing to broadcast “Cuomo Prime Time” from his home, was Chris, as Andrew suggested, doing a service to the American people by answering their questions about the effects of COVID-19?
2. Is it acceptable and appropriate that Governor Cuomo was interviewed by his brother Chris during his appearance on CNN? Should these interviews have been passed to another anchor? Would it matter if the fraternal banter that audiences



have loved and appreciated was lost?

3. Chris Cuomo appeared on his brother's government press conference wearing a baseball cap featuring branding from his own news program, "Cuomo Prime Time." He claimed that he was wearing the cap because he needed a haircut and couldn't get one because he was in quarantine. Is wearing this cap advertising his show? Is it advertising the news network at which he is employed? If so, is that problematic?
4. In 2013, Chris claimed (via twitter) that he would not interview his brother Andrew about politics. Did he break this commitment by asking his brother, in a COVID-related interview on CNN, if he was going to run for President? Did he break this commitment by asking him about how the novel coronavirus has affected New York state?
5. Is disclosing the relationship between journalist and interviewee enough to mitigate potential conflicts of interest? If the audience is aware of a relationship, does this adequately equip them to evaluate the reporting?

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