

What would Hewitt have done?

By Rory O'Connor
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Why didn't anyone ask Don Hewitt what he thought? Of all the unanswered questions raging over the CBS News/Bush National Guard service memo flap, this remains one of the most puzzling. After all, Hewitt is the acknowledged creator of the 60 Minutes "brand" that is now endangered by the controversy. Moreover, for all his obvious flaws – he's famously mercurial, abusive, demanding, and profane – Hewitt is a certified broadcasting legend, and his decades of experience might have spared CBS News the painful public embarrassment it now faces.

In other words, if I had been in the room with Jeff Fager – Hewitt's successor at the helm of 60 Minutes -- or program producer Josh Howard, or field producer Mary Mapes, or the now-beleaguered Dan Rather, or senior executive Betsy West, or CBS News head Andrew Heyward (and there was any question or doubt at all about whether or not to move forward with the broadcast) I would have suggested taking advantage of the experience and wisdom of Hewitt.

So why didn't anyone ask Don Hewitt what he thought?

Puzzled, I decided to put that question to Hewitt myself.

At first, the now sidelined 60 Minutes producer was a little difficult to find, which may tell you something in itself. Since I don't talk to Hewitt often – our few previous telephonic encounters have been fairly one-sided and volcanic – I don't have his direct extension and called the main CBS switchboard to reach him.

The operator forwarded my call to a general 60 Minutes extension, where a young woman answered and said that Hewitt "wasn't around much" and didn't have his own extension any more, but she would take a message and give it to him if she saw him.

Given the nature of my call, I demurred and instead took the unusual step of phoning Hewitt at home. His wife answered and cordially asked why I hadn't called him at CBS.

"He's there right now," she said. I explained what I had been told when I called initially, and she pointedly responded, "That's not true," and gave me his direct extension. Before

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hanging up, she urged me to “tell him what they told you – tell him they said he doesn’t have his own extension anymore.”

More trouble in paradise, obviously, but not a flap I wanted to insert myself into. Instead I simply dialed the extension and, when Hewitt answered, put the question to him: Why didn’t anyone consult with you?

“I don’t know,” Hewitt answered, in his usual forthright manner. “I’ve been trying to figure out the same thing.”

“A lot of guys up here know what I can do,” he continued. “They think they know better than me – now it’s been proven that they don’t!”

The gravity of the situation and its ongoing impact on CBS News, however, seems to have left Hewitt in a less-bombastic mood than is his norm.

I asked if he agreed with 60 Minutes correspondents Morley Safer and Steve Kroft, who have been loudly expressing to other reporters what many others both inside and outside CBS else have been whispering, “This never would have happened on our show [Sunday’s edition of 60 Minutes. The Rather gaffe aired on the Wednesday edition] because we have higher standards.”

In other words, this never would have happened on Hewitt’s watch.

“Morley and Steve are full of shit. Why are they beating up colleagues in public?” Hewitt said. “I told them they should both keep their mouths shut.”

Then, uncharacteristically, Don Hewitt decided to do the same. Sounding strangely subdued, he concluded only that “people here should know better,” and said he wanted to wait for the outcome of the of the independent investigation led by former Attorney General Dick Thornburgh and former Associated Press head Lou Boccardi before commenting further.

Which begs the question: Why didn’t anyone ask Don Hewitt what he thought?

I would have.

– Rory O’Connor’s blog, “Media Is a Plural,” can be found at www.roryoconnor.org.

FULL DISCLOSURE: O’Connor once worked with Jeff Fager as a producer at the CBS News program 48 Hours, when the program’s Executive Producer was current CBS News chief Andrew Heyward.