

CBS, New York Times Squabble Over Proposal to Jessica Lynch

A CBS News proposal to interview former POW Jessica Lynch has raised concerns about media conglomeration—and sparked a war of words between CBS News and the New York Times, which first reported on the proposal Monday.

“CBS News combined its pitch for a two-hour documentary with many other projects envisioned by the other divisions of its corporate parent, Viacom,” [wrote Jim Rutenberg](#) in the *New York Times*.

Rutenberg gleaned his information from a copy of a letter to Lynch from CBS News.

“Attached you will find the outlines of a proposal that includes ideas from CBS News, CBS Entertainment, MTV networks and Simon & Schuster publishers,” wrote Betsy West, a CBS News senior vice president, to Lynch’s military representatives, according to the *Times*. “From the distinguished reporting of CBS News to the youthful reach of MTV, we believe this is a unique combination of projects that will do justice to Jessica’s inspiring story.”

The *Times* portrayed CBS News’ letter as the “dangling of movie, television and book deals” in front of a potential interviewee—a practice tantamount to what some critics call “checkbook journalism,” or the practice of paying news subjects for access and information.

CBS News’ action “has troubled some media critics who worry that in an age of media conglomerates, where news operations coexist with their entertainment counterparts, journalistic independence can suffer in the race for synergy,” wrote Rutenberg.

CBS News wasted no time responding to the story’s implications.

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“Unlike the *New York Times*’ own ethical problems, there is no question about the accuracy or integrity of CBS News’ reporting,” the news division said Monday in [a statement](#).

“CBS News does not pay for interviews, and it maintains a well-established separation from other parts of Viacom,” the statement continued. “The letters selectively quoted by the *Times*, when read in their entirety, make that explicitly clear.”

CBS did not release a copy of the letters forming the proposal, but it did release several sentences from the proposal that the *Times* omitted from its story.

CBS News’ statement indicated that the proposal to Lynch included the following: “CBS News maintains editorial independence from the entertainment division,” and “we never tie interview requests to entertainment projects.”

The *Times*’ story did include quotes from CBS executives maintaining that the proposal was ethically airtight, though the newspaper did interview other media professionals who nevertheless felt that CBS News’ mention of other potential offers from Viacom divisions was confusing at best and improper at worst.

[Reuters reported](#) that a *Times* spokesman issued the following statement: “We believe our coverage was thorough, accurate and fair—and fully representative of the complete document in our possession.”

Lynch remains hospitalized at the Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, D.C.

Lynch, a supply clerk with the 507th Maintenance Corps, was ambushed with other members of her unit in southern Iraq on March 23. She was held as a prisoner of war until rescued in a commando raid April 1.

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