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Case No. 05/99

Date of Hearing : 5 March 1999

P GOSS

Complainant

vs

SABC

Respondent

IN REGARD TO NEWS CASTS SHOWING BODIES OF DEAD PERSONS

Commission: Prof Kobus van Rooyen SC (Chairperson)
Mr Sam Mphuthi
Ms Refiloe Mokoena
Mr Windsor Leroke
Ms Lindi Nkosi-Thomas
Prof Sunette Lötter

For the SABC: Mr Malan Otto (General Manager, Central Complaints Office,
SABC)

SUMMARY

The Commission held that unless exceptional reasons exist, a scantily clad, uncovered body of a dead person should not be shown as part of a newscast. This applies, for example, to cases where, after a murder etc. the body is being carried to an ambulance or a police vehicle.

JUDGMENT

The question which arose in this matter was whether the Code of this Commission prohibits the showing of the body of a dead person being carried from a scene of disaster or murder (etc.) to an ambulance or another vehicle without being properly covered.

The complaint which was received related to a shot of the naked body of a Mr Kwon, previously the Daewoo SA chairman, during a news cast. It was said that there was a possibility that he had been assassinated and shots of his body being carried to an ambulance or a police vehicle were shown. In one instance, it could be seen how his naked body was lifted in the air and placed on a stretcher. This was done at medium range.

At the hearing of the matter, the SABC screened a few other examples of news casts of the same event where the body was substantially or fully covered by way of a sheet.

We have come to the conclusion that an absolute rule in this regard would be inappropriate. There could be circumstances where public interest in fact demands that a nude body be shown (eg. a documentary on the Holocaust).

However, in cases where bodies are carried away from a disaster scene, it is practice to show their bodies covered by way of a blanket or sheet. Accordingly, we have come to the conclusion that the instance where the body of Mr Kwon was shown being picked up and placed on a stretcher was, although not indecent, very insensitive. The body of a dead person is protected by common law and legislation and it is believed that it would be improper to exhibit a body under such circumstances without covering it properly. The news item in question would have lost none of its dramatic impact if the shots of the body being lifted from the car had been left out.

The complaint is, accordingly, upheld insofar as this one instance is concerned. In the other instances, the body was suitably covered.

J C W van Rooyen
Chairperson