

AUGUST 27, 2003

# How fair and balanced are the 10 Commandments?

**A** national media spotlight has focused on the battle between the Constitution of the United States and some religious fundamentalists who viewed themselves as angels of Montgomery. The removal of a big Ten Commandments monument from an Alabama courthouse on Wednesday was good news for people who prefer democracy to theocracy.

But as the holy smoke clears, news outlets might want to consider the concepts that have endured on those chiseled tablets — in the context of the media industry itself.

Before proceeding with this column, I wish to inform any litigious corporation among ye that I will be utilizing quotations from the Ten Commandments for “fair use” purposes in accordance with Title 17 U.S.C. Section 107.

Rupert Murdoch and News Corp. should note that while I do not have access to extensive financial and legal resources of the sort available to Al Franken and his publisher, I intend to defend myself fully against any claims that Fox News has a propriety interest in Exodus 20:1-17.

Furthermore, I would vigorously dispute any claims brought against me by Charlton Heston, since — unlike Arnold Schwarzenegger — I clearly recognize the distinction between Hollywood movies and real life. As for the original content-provider of the Ten Commandments, I am prepared to argue that all copyright protections have expired.

Now, let's consider some implications of the Ten Commandments for modern corporate media.

## **1 — “Thou shalt have no other gods before me.”**

This one has dubious growth potential. As any significant time spent in medialand ought to make clear, false idols are the essence of the advertising biz. These days, serious devotion to a non-monetary deity would seem rather quaint in contrast to Nielsen ratings, Arbitron numbers and the Audit Bureau of Circulations. The gold standard may have gone the way of the golden calf, but media references to spiritual pieties can be

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understood as window-dressing for an industry that knows there's a world of difference between prophets and profits.

### **2 — "Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image."**

No problem. Wood and stone are passe. Media images are what matter: for fast food, beer brands, cigarettes, new cars, politicians...

### **3 — "Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain."**

No worries. Cable TV shows and movies are just so cool with all their extremely naughty words; scriptwriters don't even bother with taking the Lord's name in vain anymore.

### **4 — "Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy."**

The 24/7 media business never puts its feet up. Thou shalt not lose market share.

### **5 — "Honor thy father and thy mother."**

That concept sells occasionally.

### **6 — "Thou shalt not kill."**

This one's a media loser. At best it only provides ancillary income streams. Any journalist in the habit of seriously making such an assertion is liable to be out of a big-media job. (Look what happened in the 1990s to Colman McCarthy at The Washington Post or Barbara Reynolds at USA Today.) On the other hand, when pundits opt to start beating plowshares into swords, they're welcomed by a lot more mainstream media outlets. (Look what happened for the born-again war enthusiast Christopher Hitchens.) Hey, when the president says it's time to make a killing, you can forget No. 6.

### **7 — "Thou shalt not commit adultery."**

BORing. But a ratings winner among certain demographics.

### **8 — "Thou shalt not steal."**

For a broadcast industry based on massive theft of the public airwaves for private corporate gain, that one's a laugher.

### **9 — "Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor."**

After the Patriot Act (brought to you by George W. Bush and John Ashcroft while

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underwritten by much media silence), who's going to know?

**10 — “Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor’s house, nor anything that is thy neighbor’s.”**

Hey, you’re supposed to covet just about anything that is thy neighbor’s ... if you’ve seen it advertised. ■

*Norman Solomon is co-author of “Target Iraq: What the News Media Didn’t Tell You.”  
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