



Embarrassing Moment for Katie Couric

An entry from the CBS's anchor's video 'Notebook' shares some uncomfortable similarities with a Wall Street Journal column. How musings about a library led to some embarrassing moments—and the firing of a network producer.

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April 10, 2007 - CBS certainly got something different than it bargained for when it stole America's Sweetheart from the "Today" show last year. Not only has Couric failed to draw her loyal fans to her new network: "CBS Evening News with Katie Couric" remains a distant third behind NBC and ABC. Now, Couric is embroiled in an embarrassing flap with The Wall Street Journal over plagiarism, the ultimate journalistic sin.

The problems began when an April 4 installment of "Katie Couric's Notebook"—a daily essay by the anchor that appears in video and audio form on CBS News' Web site, among other places—was uncomfortably close to musings by Wall Street Journal columnist Jeffrey Zaslow on the fading allure of library books. Opining in his March 15 "Moving On" column headlined "Of the Places You'll Go, is the Library Still One of Them?", Zaslow wrote of libraries' appeal to kids: "It's a last-ditch place to go if they need to find something out." Couric likewise observed in her April 4 "Notebook," "It's a last ditch place to go if they need to find something out." Amplifying his point, Zaslow wrote, "Sure, there are still library-loving children, but books aren't necessarily the draw." That also was Couric's viewpoint, almost verbatim: "Sure, children still like libraries, but books aren't the draw." Couric, through a spokesperson, declined to comment. Seven other sections of "Katie Couric's Notebook" closely matched the wording in Zaslow's column.

Among them:

Couric: "For kids today, the library is more removed from their lives. It's a last ditch place to go if they need to find something out. If Google doesn't turn it up first."

Moving On column: "The library is more removed from their lives. It's a last-ditch place to go if they need to find something out.... They usually turn to Google if they want to research something."

Couric: "Many kids skip the library altogether and head for the store. Sales of juvenile books rose 60% from 2002 to 2005."

Moving On: "Many kids, of course, skip the library and head right for the store. Sales of hardcover juvenile books rose 60% from 2002 to 2005."

Couric: "But many tech-savvy kids never experience the joy of using the library's shelves as a place to discover new worlds."

Moving On: "But many tech-savvy kids never experience the library as a place for serendipitous discovery."

Alerted to the striking similarities by The Wall Street Journal, CBS News immediately pulled the video from its Web site. And under the headline, " 'Couric & Co.' Blog Apologizes For 'Omission,'" the network admitted in a Web item posted today that "much of the material in the Notebook came from Mr. Zaslow, and we should have acknowledged that at the top of the piece." CBS describes "Notebook" as a regular feature appearing on the "Couric & Co." page of the CBS News Web site. CBS News posts a transcript and a video, which is also made available to CBS-owned local stations, and an audio version is distributed to CBS-owned radio stations.

In an interview with NEWSWEEK, a CBS spokeswoman acknowledged that the network fired the producer of "Notebook." She declined to identify the producer. Couric apparently faces no repercussions, because she doesn't actually write "Katie's Couric's Notebook"—though many of the entries are presented in the form of first-person essays, as was the controversial piece. Addressing her audience, Couric began: "Hi everyone, I still remember when I got my first library card."

The episode started last week, when Couric and the show's producers gathered for a regular weekly meeting to discuss possible topics for the "Notebook," according to a CBS News official and others who declined to be identified elaborating on the embarrassing development. These sources said that the idea for the library essay arose at the meeting. The CBS official expressed uncertainty about whether the now-fired producer alluded to the Zaslow column during the discussions. Whatever the case, the producer involved went off after the meeting to write the essay for Couric.

The similarities came to light when a Wall Street Journal reader who'd read, heard or saw "Katie Couric's Notebook" alerted the newspaper, according to an insider at The Wall Street Journal. Zaslow, the author, said two CBS officials phoned him to express regrets. "They were very gracious and very apologetic," he said. "They were glad that it was called to their attention." Robert Christie, a spokesman for Dow Jones & Co., parent of The Wall Street Journal, said: "We're happy with the way this was resolved."

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