

## CASES

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### CASE 4-A

#### CUOMO INTERVIEWS CUOMO

CHAD PAINTER

*University of Dayton*

Andrew Cuomo became a media star in 2020. The third-term New York governor became one of the most prominent, visible, and popular faces of the COVID-19 pandemic with more than 100 daily press briefings that were aired nationally. The spring 2020 briefings provided viewers with split-screen experiences as Gov. Cuomo provided a distinct and often contradictory portrait of the nation's health during the pandemic's first wave. Cuomo's briefings were a contrast to those of the daily Coronavirus Task Force briefings frequently led by former President Donald J. Trump.

Gov. Cuomo's briefings spawned social media parody and "Cuomo bingo." He also was interviewed on *Good Morning America*, *CBS Sunday Morning*, *Ellen*, *The Howard Stern Show*, *The Daily Show*, *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert*, *The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon*, and *Late Night with Seth Meyers*. It was during one of these briefings that Gov. Cuomo announced that his younger brother Chris had tested positive for the virus and would ride it out in his basement while continuing to anchor his CNN news show, a decision Gov. Cuomo called courageous. Multiple interviews resulted. Chris Cuomo's ratings doubled.

CNN had barred Chris from interviewing Andrew from 2013 to 2020 (though he had interviewed him prior to 2013). However, that restriction was lifted in March 2020 when the COVID-19 pandemic first hit New York.

The Cuomo brothers are the sons of former New York Gov. Mario Cuomo. Andrew was sworn in as governor in January 2011. He previously served as New York Attorney General from 2007 to 2010 and as the US Secretary of Housing and Urban Development from 1997 to 2001. Chris has been an anchor and commentator for CNN since February 2013. He previously worked at ABC (including stints on *Good Morning America* and *20/20*), CNBC, MSNBC, and Fox News. Both were educated as attorneys, but one of the things viewers learned during the spring was that Chris had made an active decision to pursue journalism instead of law, a choice his older brother said he supported.

The major question surrounding such interviews, of course, is whether a younger brother could ever conduct an evenhanded interview with his older sibling—whether the issue is excessive toughness or going too easy on his brother (Graham, 2020). The brothers jokingly discussed old arguments—who is their mother’s favorite child, who works harder, who’s better at basketball, whose clothes fit better (Graham, 2020). The Cuomo brother interviews were funny but became serious when Chris tested positive for COVID-19; his older brother was obviously moved and simultaneously worried. It all made for great television.

There were major advantages to the interviews. The ratings for *Cuomo Prime Time* doubled from the year before (Graham, 2020). Andrew Cuomo, a respected but not beloved governor, became more humanized, in part because of how he conducted his daily briefings. His approval ratings increased 32 points during the pandemic, according to FiveThirtyEight, though some of that can be attributed to a “rally around the flag” effect that leads to increased support for leaders during times of crisis.

Media critics also generally were okay with the interviews. *The Washington Post*’s Margaret Sullivan wrote, “To a nation inured to nepotism by the likes of First Son-in-Law Jared Kushner spouting ill-informed policy views from a White House podium, this is pretty harmless stuff.” Ben Smith, writing for *The New York Times*, not only didn’t see an issue but also thought that this type of programming could be the future of news:

They are, in their way, answering the endlessly debated question of how to restore trust in media. Do you strive to project an impossible ideal of total objectivity? Or do you reveal more of yourself, on Twitter or Instagram and in your home?

However, there also were major disadvantages, especially regarding accountability in terms of New York’s response to the pandemic. Gov. Cuomo, at least initially, received relatively little criticism regarding the timing of the initial lockdown in New York, and the number of deaths among those in nursing homes and the general public. As of Jan. 15, 2021, there had been 1.19 million COVID-19 cases and 39,997 deaths in New York State.

## Micro Issues

1. How would you prioritize Chris Cuomo’s loyalties? Would your priorities change if Andrew Cuomo had been the one diagnosed with the virus?

2. Ratings for *Cuomo Prime Time* doubled in part due to the interview segments with Andrew Cuomo. What role, if any, should an increase in ratings play in decisions to allow Chris to interview his brother?
3. What role, if any, should Chris Cuomo play in holding Andrew Cuomo accountable to the public? Should he have aggressively questioned him about his decisions related to the COVID-19 pandemic in New York? How would you respond to this question if it were directed at journalists working for the *New York Times*?

### Midrange Issues

1. Should CNN have lifted the ban of Chris Cuomo interviewing his brother Andrew? Use your answer to inform how local media outlets should decide whether to interview friends or family members of journalists working in those communities?
2. *New York Times* media columnist Ben Smith wrote, "Do you strive to project an impossible ideal of total objectivity? Or do you reveal more of yourself, on Twitter or Instagram and in your home?" Answer these questions in terms of loyalty.
3. To viewers, the conflict of interest with one brother (a journalist) interviewing another (a prominent politician) is obvious. Does the obviousness of the conflict mitigate the problem? Do you think revealing conflicts of interest at the local level would have the same impact?

### Macro Issues

1. The vast majority of Andrew Cuomo's interviews were conducted by entertainers. Chris Cuomo, however, is a news anchor. How is his role similar to and different from late-night hosts such as Stephen Colbert and Jimmy Fallon?
2. Analyze Chris Cuomo, Andrew Cuomo, and CNN's decisions in terms of Josiah Royce's definition of loyalty.
3. Repeat this analysis when the subject changes to whether Andrew Cuomo has committed multiple acts of sexual harassment during his terms as governor. How does this new set of facts change—or fail to change—your analysis of the micro and midrange issues in this case?
4. Loyalty to a profession means loyalty to the *ideals* of the profession. What are the ideals of journalism? Did Chris Cuomo uphold those ideals while interviewing Andrew Cuomo?