

Valley broadcaster helps nix Simpson TV special

By Rick Bentley / The Fresno Bee

11/21/06 04:13:19

Faced with outrage from viewers and even affiliates, the owner of Fox Broadcasting on Monday pulled the television special and book publication in which O.J. Simpson described how he would have killed his ex-wife, Nicole Brown Simpson, and Ronald Goldman.

Visalia-based Pappas Telecasting was one of the affiliates leading the revolt. The company said last week it wouldn't air the special, even though it was scheduled for the critical November sweeps period.

"A lot of people were angry it was going on. Period. We took those calls very seriously," said Mike Angelos, vice president of corporate communication for Pappas Telecasting. Pappas owns KMPH, Channel 26 and 22 other stations across the country.

"Since we made the decision, we have had a ton of e-mails and calls from people who were happy with what we did."

Fox was to have aired the two-part special Nov. 27 and 29 before the Nov. 30 release of the book "If I Did It," published by ReganBooks. Both are owned by News Corp.

In a news release announcing the cancellations, Rupert Murdoch, News Corp. chairman and chief executive officer, said, "I and senior management agree with the American public that this was an ill-considered project. We are sorry for any pain this has caused the families of Ron Goldman and Nicole Brown Simpson."

Angelos applauded the decision by News Corp. to end the projects.

"It takes guts to admit you were wrong," Angelos said. "This is just a great outcome for everyone."

In addition to its Valley TV station, Pappas Telecasting also owns Fox affiliates that serve Omaha and Lincoln, Neb., and Sioux Falls, S.D.

Angelos said no one at Pappas Telecasting was concerned about going against the network because the decision not to broadcast the specials "was the right thing to do."

Rob Williams, professor of history and media studies at Champlain College in Burlington, Vt., said that such a rebellion by a small group of affiliates against the network is rare. He has only seen such a reaction from public broadcasting affiliates to programming that was sexual in nature.

"It looks like the station [Pappas] was the conscience for the group. No affiliate likes to buck the national network. So maybe this is a hopeful sign," Williams said.

The affiliate revolt came after commentators and some members of the public raged against the book and interview. Objections came from commentators as varied as Bob Schieffer of CBS and Bill O'Reilly of Fox News Channel.

Simpson, who lives in the Miami area, had little to say Monday.

"He's totally indifferent about the fact that it's been canceled," Simpson attorney Yale Galanter told The Associated Press.

The families of the victims were less reticent.

"I think News Corp. finally stepped up, admitted they made a mistake and did the right thing," said Jonathan Polak, attorney for the Goldman family. "This is everything we have been asking News Corp. to do for the past two weeks. We want to thank the American people for helping make this happen."

The specials were expected to draw high ratings during the November sweeps period. November is one of four times during the year — February, May and July being the others — used to determine advertising rates.

But it's unclear what the financial effect of Monday's action will be on the network and its affiliates. Advertisers were reluctant to purchase commercial time during the Simpson telecasts.

At ReganBooks, the loss may involve not just potential profits but actual cash. Not only has the company promoted and printed the book, but it may have paid Simpson as much as \$3.5 million, according to some press reports.

Pre-orders for the book pushed the book onto the Amazon.com top 20 best-sellers list.

Simpson was acquitted of the murders in a criminal trial, but he lost a 1997 civil suit to the families of his ex-wife and Goldman. He still owes them most of a \$33.5 million judgment.

The rebellion by Pappas came against a network that has been criticized by viewers for its network programming. Some viewers attacked Fox for what they described as a vulgar situation comedy, "Married With ... Children," which ran in the 1980s and early 1990s.

Pappas, who launched KMPH in 1971, has been associated with the Fox Network since it began in 1986. He played a key role in getting the then-fledgling network to start children's programming.