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Practicing Deception In the Pursuit of Truth

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Should journalists lie, as they pursue the noble goal of informing the public?

Put more charitably, if the word "lying" is too harsh, should journalists masquerade as meat packers in a supermarket to get a story, engage in a bit of clever misrepresentation and bluffing to trick a source, use "lipstick" cameras hidden in wigs and tiny microphones pinned to brassieres to succeed in undercover reporting, produce (in the words of one NPR reporter) "cockamamie cover stories" to protect an exclusive? In other words, in an industry theoretically still devoted to truth-telling, can deception, in whatever guise, be regarded as an acceptable way of getting the news?

Ever since a North Carolina jury slapped ABC News with a \$ 5.5 million penalty for "fraud" and "trespassing" in a 1992 report on a Food Lion store, a decision that ABC is appealing, reporters and scholars have been engaged in a nonstop seminar on journalistic ethics and practices, from which two rather important, if depressing, conclusions have emerged.

The first is that various forms of deception in the practice of journalism have, like a spreading virus, compromised the craft, affecting local and network news, regional and national newspapers; and the deception is quite sophisticated. The second is that publishers and network news executives, finding themselves in a new world of ferocious competition and radically new technology, simply accept these practices as routine tools of the trade and justify their use as necessary to uncover the truth.

Journalists do not deny these conclusions, they rationalize them. They argue that there has always been a degree of deception in investigative or undercover reporting and that it is "absurd" to quote a columnist for the Wall Street Journal, to think otherwise. Even the estimable Walter Goodman of the New York Times approves of "lying" to advance the public service.

Ethical standards are collapsing everywhere. These days in Washington, where the president seems to have turned the White House into an expensive B&B, everyone cuts corners, and so do journalists, but only, they insist, when they are in pursuit of the news, not when they are reporting it -- a distinction that most people fail to appreciate or understand. If journalists play games getting a story, then many people may feel that they play games reporting a story too.

Sadly, the public does not trust reporters much these days. A recent Roper study reported that only 2 percent believe everything they read in newspapers; 5 percent believe everything on network news. Last year, the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago found that only 11 percent felt "a great deal of confidence" in the press.

Journalists rank slightly higher than politicians, but they are both held in low public esteem. Journalists passionately believe they are different from politicians -- that they are in the business of protecting the public from the excesses of corrupt government and big business and that this is a constitutionally endowed responsibility so awesome that they may every now and then have to tell a fib, even, a whopper, to protect a higher societal good. They tend to forget that elected officials, when caught in a lie by a self-righteous press in the heat of a feeding frenzy, also spin a similar yarn -- that they too had to be less than candid, that they too had to engage in clandestine, possibly illegal, activities, because they were protecting the national interest. It should come as no surprise then that many Americans end up lumping journalists with politicians and pronounce a plague on all of them.

Journalists are uncomfortable discussing their business, especially now, when their ethics and practices have been subjected to frequent criticism. They know that they have lost the confidence of many Americans, that judges and juries in recent years have come down against the press, that legislation or constitutional amendments cutting into their freedom may yet be enacted, that there are renewed calls for a National Press Council, that as a result of recent mega-mergers one or two news divisions may not survive the fierce competition and that news, as it molds into entertainment, is losing its distinctiveness.

They also know that it is in their interest to turn over a new leaf. They represent the freest, most protected, press in the world. They set an example for everyone. Central to the craft is the guiding principle that journalists should be the truth-tellers, which means they should not lie or concoct fanciful tales or identities or use hidden cameras or microphones. They should walk in the front door of a story, not sneak in the back and rationalize the deception by claiming it was the only way to get at the truth.

Exceptions to these traditional guidelines do exist, but only for extreme, life-or-death situations -- not for ratings, not for reasons of laziness, not for sensationalism, not for a snappy headline. Exceptions to deceptive practices are exceptions; today they seem to be the rule.

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