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**Report Information from ProQuest**

June 21 2012 09:47

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## Search Strategy

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## Hidden Network Cameras: A Troubling Trend? Critics Complain of Deception as Dramatic Footage Yields High Ratings

**Author:** Kurtz, Howard.

**Publication info:** The Washington Post (pre-1997 Fulltext) [Washington, D.C] 30 Nov 1992: a01.

[ProQuest document link](#)

**Abstract:** These reports - the first two from ABC's "PrimeTime Live," the last from CBS's "60 Minutes" - are part of the hottest trend in television: undercover investigations using hidden cameras. As technology has produced miniature cameras the size of a pen, use of such footage, often obtained by reporters or producers impersonating someone else, has become increasingly popular on network and local programs. Some targets of such stories are fighting back. Food Lion, the nation's fastest-growing supermarket chain, has sued ABC, charging "PrimeTime Live" with misrepresentation, fraud and possible violation of state eavesdropping laws. The broadcast accused the North Carolina-based chain of tolerating unsanitary conditions and repackaging old meat touched up with bleach or barbecue sauce.

"It's an invasion of privacy. . . . It's like being violated in some way," said Vincent Watkins, a Food Lion vice president. "They've discovered this kind of sensational, tabloid-type piece pulls viewers in." ABC spokeswoman Rena Terracuso said the network is seeking dismissal of the suit because "we don't feel we violated any legal rights of Food Lion."

**Links:** [Linking Service](#),

**Full Text:** Scenes from the television screen:

A Food Lion supermarket manager tells a new employee to cut the brown edges from some old pork chops and put them back on sale. "They look just as good as fresh," the manager says.

A quadriplegic patient cries out amid dirty conditions at a veterans hospital in Cleveland, "Don't leave me, please! They're trying to kill me out there!"

A Romanian man who brokers adoptions for visiting Americans makes his pitch to reporter Lesley Stahl, who is wearing a black wig. "So you've decided on a boy or a girl? . . . Anywhere from \$3,500 to \$7,000," the man says.

These reports - the first two from ABC's "PrimeTime Live," the last from CBS's "60 Minutes" - are part of the hottest trend in television: undercover investigations using hidden cameras. As technology has produced miniature cameras the size of a pen, use of such footage, often obtained by reporters or producers impersonating someone else, has become increasingly popular on network and local programs.

But the practice raises troubling questions: Should journalists be permitted to lie just to snare a story? And is it unfair to record the words of someone unaware that he or she is being filmed?

"Does it trouble me? Yeah," said Don Hewitt, executive producer of "60 Minutes." "There's a little bit of cops and robbers to it. There are theatrics that go with hidden cameras." But, he said, "It's the small crime versus the greater good. . . . If you can catch someone violating 'thou shalt not steal' by your violating 'thou shalt not lie,' that's a pretty good trade-off."

Richard Kaplan, executive producer of "PrimeTime Live," also sees the journalistic ends justifying the deceptive means.

"I don't think the American public loves the idea of surreptitious taping . . . unless it is in a really good cause," he said. "We don't like the idea of spying on each other. . . . You have to make sure, when you use a hidden camera, the story is important, or you end up looking like some KGB chief."

Some targets of such stories are fighting back. Food Lion, the nation's fastest-growing supermarket chain, has sued ABC, charging "PrimeTime Live" with misrepresentation, fraud and possible violation of state eavesdropping laws. The broadcast accused the North Carolina-based chain of tolerating unsanitary conditions and repackaging old meat touched up with bleach or barbecue sauce.

"It's an invasion of privacy. . . . It's like being violated in some way," said Vincent Watkins, a Food Lion vice president. "They've discovered this kind of sensational, tabloid-type piece pulls viewers in." ABC spokeswoman Rena Terracuso said the network is seeking dismissal of the suit because "we don't feel we violated any legal rights of Food Lion."

In another case, a federal judge last week ordered CBS's "Street Stories" to turn over videotape of a government raid on the apartment of a man indicted for credit-card fraud.

U.S. District Judge Jack B. Weinstein in Brooklyn criticized federal authorities for allowing a camera crew to join the raid. He also dismissed CBS's argument that the tape, which included footage of the man's cowering wife and 5-year-old son, was protected by the First Amendment.

Many media critics disparage use of hidden cameras. "I just think it's wrong," said Tom Goldstein, dean of the journalism school at the University of California at Berkeley. "Journalists should announce who they are. I'm uncomfortable living in a world where you don't know who you're talking to. . . . I don't think journalists are cops."

Stephen Klaidman, a fellow at Georgetown University's Kennedy Institute of Ethics, said that "there's no question it's deceptive. The question is whether you can justify the deception. If they're doing it simply to hype their ratings, that's not an acceptable justification."

Journalists have been going undercover since the days of Upton Sinclair, and newspapers were the first to use hidden cameras. A reporter for the New York Daily News photographed a 1928 execution of a woman at Sing Sing prison with a camera tied to his ankle.

Undercover reporting and "ambush" interviews became particularly fashionable in the late 1970s. "60 Minutes" set up a phony medical clinic to expose kickbacks in Illinois and had a sound man pose as a stricken patient to infiltrate a phony cancer clinic in California.

In the most famous sting of its kind, the Chicago Sun-Times, "60 Minutes" and the Better Government Association set up a Chicago bar, called the Mirage, and secretly filmed local inspectors soliciting bribes.

Most major newspapers, including the Sun-Times, would not allow such misrepresentation today. "I don't think we should pretend to be things we're not," Sun-Times editor Dennis Britton said.

The San Francisco Chronicle recently ran a series about reporter Shann Nix posing as a high school student. Executive editor William German said Nix obtained permission from the school's principal and interviewed the students and teachers afterward, deleting anyone who did not want to be identified.

But television, with its heavy reliance on visuals, has turned undercover work into highly rated entertainment. Such "reality-based" shows as CBS's "Street Stories" and Fox's "Cops" have put a premium on dramatic footage, and local "I-team" units have used the new technology to record malfeasance in their municipal back yards.

A decade ago, when bulky camcorders had to be stuffed into briefcases, the footage often was grainy and the sound unintelligible. Today's pen-sized cameras can be concealed in a hat or jacket pocket, and the video quality is much higher.

The possibilities seem endless. "60 Minutes" has photographed a New York City school custodian on his yacht during working hours. "PrimeTime Live" has turned its hidden cameras on televangelists, members of Congress vacationing in Barbados, squalid conditions at a New Orleans day-care center and Wichita students selling guns.

In September, ABC's "Nightline" did a hidden-camera story on efforts to lure jobs to Central America, with producer Leroy Sievers impersonating a U.S. manufacturer. "60 Minutes" did a similar story the same week,

with producer David Gelber posing as an executive of a company called New Age Textiles.

Nearly all of these stories required some degree of misrepresentation. "You don't like to baldly lie, but I have," said Mike Wallace, the veteran "60 Minutes" correspondent.

"It really depends on your motive," Wallace said. "Are you doing it for drama, or are you doing it for illumination? Each one has to be weighed separately as to the cost-benefit."

Hewitt ticked off stories from workers' compensation abuses to prison labor in China, saying: "The overall idea of doing this gives me pause, but the specifics of every one we've done do not."

Executive producer Kaplan said "PrimeTime Live" would like to do a hidden-camera story every week.

"The basic lie is one of omission," he said. "We don't say we're here from ABC News to catch you mistreating children. If you misrepresent yourself, it better be for a damn important story. . . . If you use it for trivial cases, you demean it. And if you demean it, it's going to get banned."

But some "PrimeTime Live" stories, such as exposing service stations that make unneeded auto repairs, seem to be less than national in scope. Kaplan defended such pieces as helping to educate consumers.

In the Food Lion case, the company's suit charges that ABC producer Lynn Neuffer Litt committed fraud on her employment application.

The suit says Litt, using the name Lynn Neuffer, applied for the job of "meat wrapper" at a North Carolina store last spring, saying on the application that "I really miss working in a grocery store, and I love meat wrapping. . . . I would like to make a career with the company."

When Litt quit after 11 days, "she stated that her grandfather had died and that she was moving to Pennsylvania to care for her grandmother," according to the suit.

Anchor Diane Sawyer said on the "PrimeTime Live" broadcast that the report was based on interviews with 70 current and former Food Lion employees, and two ABC producers who worked in three stores.

But Watkins of Food Lion, which tried to block the broadcast, said "PrimeTime Live" ignored state inspection records showing that the chain's sanitation record is about average. "There was absolutely no attempt at all to put any balance into the piece," he said. "It was viciously presented."

Kaplan replied: "That story was about one thing. You're a consumer. You go in and see a date on a piece of meat. You expect that freshness date is honest."

Kaplan also dismissed the non-union company's complaint that many employees interviewed by ABC were working with the United Food and Commercial Workers Union or had sued Food Lion over wage violations.

"We assume that whoever gives us the lead has a vested interest. . . . The reality is we're going to check it out," Kaplan said. Union spokesman Al Zack said the union put Litt in touch with 20 to 25 employees, "the same names we gave every reporter."

Clearly, the hidden-camera footage - such as that of one Food Lion counterman saying, "Sell the bad stuff first," gave the piece its impact.

"You can discredit whistle-blowers," said "PrimeTime Live" producer Ira Rosen. "You can't discredit the video. It's a very compelling way to show wrongdoing, to show abuses, to show criminality."

Illustration

INFO-GRAPHIC, Twp; PHOTO-MUG CAPTION: DON HEWITT. CAPTION: Food Lion employee in North Carolina holds old meat that he says can be sold as new. - "Prime Time Live" CAPTION: Lesley Stahl, in black wig, holds a Romanian baby who may be sold for adoption. - "60 Minutes" CAPTION: Baby cries in a New Orleans day-care center - "Prime Time Live" CAPTION: Students in Wichita negotiate the purchase of a gun. - "Prime Time Live"

**Publication title:** The Washington Post (pre-1997 Fulltext)

**Pages:** a01

**Number of pages:** 0

**Publication year:** 1992

**Publication date:** Nov 30, 1992

**Year:** 1992

**Section:** A SECTION

**Publisher:** The Washington Post Company

**Place of publication:** Washington, D.C.

**Country of publication:** United States

**Journal subject:** General Interest Periodicals--United States

**ISSN:** 01908286

**Source type:** Newspapers

**Language of publication:** English

**Document type:** NEWSPAPER

**ProQuest document ID:** 307595135

**Document URL:**

<https://ezproxy.library.nyu.edu/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/docview/307595135?accountid=12768>

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**Last updated:** 2010-07-23

**Database:** ProQuest Central

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