

## Getting the Truth Untruthfully

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According to the contorted ethics of ABC News, nothing's wrong with a minor lie in pursuit of a major truth. Put another way: When the story is the rotten meat of Food Lion, a rotten fraud by ABC is just fine.

Last month "PrimeTime Live," using hidden miniature cameras and a reporter passing herself off as a meat wrapper in a Food Lion store in North Carolina, aired a segment that caught some of the supermarket's employees doctoring outdated meat or allowing unsanitary conditions. In a post-broadcast suit filed against ABC, Food Lion said that a "PrimeTime" producer wrote on her job application, "I really miss working in a grocery store, and I love meat wrapping. . . . I would like to make a career with the company."

Really bold journalism. Don Hewitt, executive producer of "60 Minutes" and a booster of gotcha reporting, told The Washington Post: "It's the small crime versus the greater good. . . . If you catch someone violating 'thou shalt not steal' by your 'thou shalt not lie,' that's a pretty good trade-off."

In the Ten Commandments at "60 Minutes," Moses Hewitt offers a conveniently self-serving exoneration of what is, in essence, lazy journalism, not aggressive reporting. It's possible to uncover the truth by being untruthful but where do television newspeople secure the right to legitimize their deceits? How about some truth-in-packaging as the program begins: "We lied to get this story." Perhaps the Emmys ought to have a new category: "Cleverest Ruse to Nab a Crook."

It isn't likely that ABC or CBS would be protesting that the public has a right to know if a reporter from "Hard Copy" secured employment as a copy aide through fakery and then, equipped with a hidden camera and mike, caught "PrimeTime" executives or Don Hewitt in their less than noble moments.

Other ways - truthful, ethical - exist besides hidden camera footage to nab wrongdoers. Classic investigative reporting relies on public documents, skilled interviewing, exhaustive research and cross-checking. Why should electronic

journalists exempt themselves from the rules of fairness?

It is unimaginable that the giants of U.S. journalism - I.F. Stone, George Seldes, to take two - would have ever used hidden cameras to rake muck. They were journalistic moles, not chameleons. They were information diggers who refused to compromise their honesty. Both were reportorial lie detectors, aware that becoming untruthful yourself was not necessary to expose the governmental or corporate liar. That approach might have been harder, but if the path to a good story had no hills, holes or barriers, it probably was not leading anywhere anyway.

In Hewitt's and other news executives' justifications for their "small crimes," a tone of self-importance - "60 Minutes" and "PrimeTime Live" as the Truth Squad - came through. "If you misrepresent yourself, it better be for a damn important story," ABC's Richard Kaplan told The Post. "If you use it for trivial cases, you demean it."

That settles it. It is the damn important stuff that ABC's "PrimeTime Live" trades in, like day-old hamburgers. It is as if Alan Funt had claimed - as he never did - that "Candid Camera" was high art.

While the courts examine ABC's treatment of Food Lion, crimes, evasions and hustles of governments and businesses continue to flourish, as ripe for picking as the summer peach. A special few reporters and editors, in both print and broadcast journalism, have provided enormous public service by rooting deep and defiantly for all the relevant facts findable, and doing it independently of guile. To recall only a few: Jonathan Freedman on Mexicans crossing the border in San Ysidro, Calif., Patrick Sloyan's expose's of the Pentagon's Persian Gulf War deceits and Seymour Hersh on Henry A. Kissinger.

If more news organizations gave more space or air time to investigative reporting, wrongdoing would surely lessen. The old ethical way of reporting might not make for great TV or high ratings, but it is an honest day's work.