

'Candid Camera' Gone Berserk?

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Ten years ago, network tv featured only two news magazines--CBS's "60 Minutes" and ABC's "20/20." With the debut last week of NBC's "Now," there are currently eleven such shows, with another on the way. That's not counting entertainment programs like "Hard Copy" and "Rescue 911," which many viewers mistake for news programming. This month, during rerun season, five of the top 10 highest-rated network programs are news magazines. "Dateline NBC," which by all logic should have been ruined by the publicity over faked crash tests in a story about General Motors last November, is up 43 percent over last summer. Go figure.

Soon enough, reality programs will come up against reality. If these shows just copy each other--jerking another tear out of the Jessica DeBoer story, busting another chiropractor--they'll end up as just one more TV fad. On the other hand, if they can break the formula with fresh, quirky stories, news magazines may transform the late prime-time period into a nonfiction zone. (Full disclosure: I've appeared on a couple of them.)

The value of these programs to a network's bottom line has been exaggerated: although they're only half as expensive as entertainment to produce, they rarely work as reruns and they can't be syndicated. But once such shows get a toehold in the ratings, they're perpetual money machines. At that point they don't have to cut corners and hype stories as much. In its early years, "60 Minutes" used ambush interviews and slanted editing more than it does today. Now it's the newer shows that are in the most danger of compromising standards.

Today's TV news magazines live in a killing field of competition, often within the same network. Among the victims are the three major evening news broadcasts, which have seen many of their best resources diverted to the magazines. The struggle has become so fierce that even Queen Bee talent like Barbara Walters and Connie Chung often get on the phone and grovel for interviews themselves. A lawyer for Heidi Fleiss rebuffed one producer recently by telling her that three anchors from competing shows had called personally. Hooker to booker: put the star on the line.

Unlike the tabloid programs and made-for-TV movies with which they compete, network news magazines can't pay for interviews. So with "hot" stories in short supply, these shows increasingly rely on investigative reporting, most of it picked up from small newspapers, dramatized for television, then passed off as original. There are exceptions: some of the best investigative reporters now work for these shows. But even they routinely grab some Hamburger Helper to spice up their stories.

Nowadays the extra ingredient is often the hidden camera. Some of the subjects of stories—racists, junketeering members of Congress, insurance-scam artists—clearly deserve what they get. But the targets, especially businesses, are fighting back. ABC's "PrimeTime Live," which has used hidden cameras to propel itself to the top of the ratings, is being sued by Food Lion, a supermarket chain where workers were videotaped repackaging old meat as fresh. And NBC's "Dateline," which used hidden cameras for a story on unnecessary cataract surgery, may also face a suit. Its reporter was himself spied on by one aggrieved clinic, anxious to employ GM's get-even strategy of surveilling the surveillants.

Using deception to find the truth is as old as journalism itself. Even tiny cameras aren't new. In 1928 a reporter for the New York Daily News strapped one to his ankle and snapped a picture of a woman prisoner dying in the electric chair. In 1977 the Chicago Sun-Times and "60 Minutes" set up a phony bar called the Mirage to entrap bribetakers. While major newspapers have recently avoided such techniques, TV has long thrived on them. Since 1972 NBC's Brian Ross has used hidden cameras to help crack fine stories ranging from Iraq's nuclear-smuggling program to WalMart's misleading "Buy American" campaign.

It's precisely because Ross is so well regarded that his involvement in the cataract story, while no GM-style fiasco, serves as a warning flag about trouble ahead for these shows. Network executives peddle the line that hidden cameras are used only when there is no other way to get the story. That's patently false. For instance, in this case, the story—that some cataract clinics do unnecessary procedures and elderly patients should get second opinions—was clearly established by the time the hiddencamera portion began. The doctors at the targeted clinic did not fall for the sting, so NBC entrapped some technicians instead.

In defending the piece, Ross says, "If we had just wanted to nail somebody, we could have picked some pipsqueak company" instead of a large clinic that performs thousands of cataract operations a year. Perhaps so, but it's the pipsqueaks that TV news magazines too often pursue. "PrimeTime," for instance, went after refrigerator repairmen with cameras hidden in a kitchen. "When you have a well-funded, for-profit cop on the beat pursuing five-and-dime criminals, is that real journalism or 'Candid Camera' gone berserk?" asks Dean Rotbart, who edits The Business News Reporter, a newsletter on ethics. The real means-versus-ends question—is this story so important that it's worth violating someone to get?—isn't asked often enough.

Not to worry. Before long, hidden-camera footage will become a visual cliché—the same fate as in-shadow shots, now parodied by Tony the Tiger on Frosted Flakes ads. Local news already uses a hidden camera to catch minors buying beer. That's a sure sign that its days as a novel ratings booster are numbered.