

Should reporters play roles?

When the Chicago Sun-Times published an extraordinary series on graft and shakedowns by city inspectors of a saloon covertly managed by the newspaper's reporters, many thought it a certain winner of a Pulitzer prize. That did not happen. Instead, a striking philosophical issue developed in the public-service committee that was judging the Sun-Times entry. The issue was role-playing by reporters. Was it classical journalistic enterprise for Sun-Times reporters to be posing as saloon keepers with a hidden camera monitoring the scene? Or was it a form of entrapment that some editors do not countenance on the part of law enforcement, much less their own reporters?

Two members of the Pulitzer board offer their views—Clayton Kirkpatrick, president of the Chicago Tribune, who until recently was editor of that newspaper, and Gene Patterson, president and editor of the St. Petersburg Times. Both have distinguished newspaper careers. Kirkpatrick supports the journalistic endeavor of his direct competitor, the Sun-Times. Patterson does not.

DAVID HALVORSEN
Managing Editor
San Francisco Examiner

Yes

At the outset let me assert that I do not believe that there are substantial differences between my good friend, Gene Patterson, and me with respect to basic journalistic ethics. I voted for the revised ethical code approved by ASNE in 1975, and I am sure he did also. There is no specific prohibition of role-playing in that statement of principles.

Furthermore the major premise in the public debate has been distorted by another issue which was raised initially in the Pulitzer Board discussions of the merits of the Mirage series of the Chicago Sun-Times. This was the possibility that the reporting team had been guilty of legal entrapment.

Being aware of the elaborate legal precautions that had been used to avoid entrapment, I was confident that this

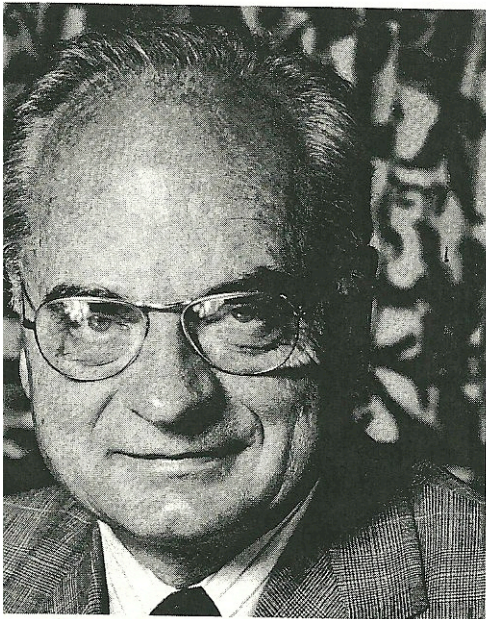
was not a barrier to selection of the entry for a prize—and I said so.

However, the discussion quickly shifted to the propriety of role-playing by reporters. This generated so much reaction that the question of entrapment was submerged. Nevertheless I am convinced that suspicion of entrapment was a decisive subjective factor in the voting of several members of the board. There is no other logical explanation why some of the same members of the board could vote for entries in which role-playing was acknowledged (including three from The Chicago Tribune subsequent to 1970) and then cite that reason for voting against an entry in 1979.



Clayton Kirkpatrick is president of the Chicago Tribune.

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John Kirkpatrick is president of the Chicago Press Guild.

tions, including The National, the Society and the Inland Daily.

I would defend it if it is carried out under constructive deceit or fraud. If abandoned, I hope—stars and misrepresentation of sheriff's deputies is a matter of minutes or any other kind of taking a reporter to task for corruption in a public office seems to me a proper

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The scheme was a violation of honored journalistic principles, the role of an ordinary citizen and pricing policies, but the approach was

There are times when you have to get a story and the result is mayhem. I find it difficult to see how these conditions would require that and his purpose at a picket-line confrontation.

The argument might be that reporting can be done in a little more difficult. In prison, for example, you can interview inmates. But the dramatic impact of a witness would be lacking.

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mistaken standard of ethical purity
80 other ways
drama
value of personalization

Furthermore the voting of the Pulitzer Board was exceptional in view of the contrary decisions by other judges of journalistic excellence. The Mirage series was a winner in eight state and national contests sponsored by organizations, including The Associated Press, United Press International, the Society of Professional Journalists (SDJ), and the Inland Daily Press Association.

I would defend role-playing as ethically proper as long as it is carried out under strict rules. There should be no constructive deceit or fraud. The old practice—long since abandoned, I hope—of allowing reporters to carry phony stars and misrepresenting themselves as policemen or sheriff's deputies is unacceptable. Using false identity documents or any other kind of forgery is improper. But allowing a reporter to take a job, under his own name, to expose corruption in a public office or among public officials seems to me a proper journalistic practice.

So far as I could learn, the licensee for the Mirage Tavern obtained the license in his own name and the people who worked there worked under their true identities. No solicitations for bribes were made.

The scheme was a little more elaborate than such time-honored journalistic enterprises as sending a reporter out in the role of an ordinary citizen to test the service practices and pricing policies of television or automobile repairmen, but the approach was basically the same.

There are times when going under cover is the only way to get a story and the only way to protect a reporter from mayhem. I find it difficult to accept that ethical considerations would require that a reporter announce his identity and his purpose at a Klan cross-burning, or a violent picket-line confrontation, or a civil riot.

The argument might be made that all investigative reporting can be done without going under cover; it is just a little more difficult. It is true that inhuman conditions in a prison, for example, could be described by inmates or former inmates. But the corroborative evidence and the dramatic impact of a first-person account by a credible witness would be lacking.

The value of corroborative evidence should not be underestimated. The purpose of an investigative project should not be to retail a four-day or a four-week sensation.

It should be to stimulate corrective action, to bring about lasting administrative or legislative remedies. Documentary proof, photographs, legal testimony rather than hearsay are vital for this purpose and cannot be assembled by unskilled observers.

My final argument against rigid and doctrinaire enforcement of an ethical prohibition against role-playing in investigative reporting is philosophical. I think newspaper readers like to personalize their newspapers and to impart human characteristics to them as crusaders against evil. They are not enchanted by the image of a drybones data bank spitting out sterile and antiseptic streams of facts.

The drama of an undercover expose is a powerful factor in persuading a newspaper reader that his newspaper will go to extraordinary lengths to defend his rights. It could be sacrificed by unnecessary and uncompromising adherence to a mistaken standard of ethical purity.

No

Americans have long accepted the fact of cops in plain-clothes, blending into the societal scenery to stalk bad guys.

We do get a tiny twinge of unease when these cops pose as crooks and open up a "sting" warehouse to bait bearers of stolen goods. But after all, it's thieves they're trapping.

Then they move up the practice another notch. They paint up a policewoman as a flatfoot floozie and walk her down the street as a provocative enticement to johns who might have had their minds on loftier things until she overtly intruded temptation into their evening. When this inflames some lover boy to the kindling point of a proposition she turns into Miss Susan Mussentouch and cools the boob in the slammer. If that's not entrapment, it's certainly stretching the skirt of the law to the limit.

At last, though, they clearly overdo it. A plainclothes agent for the Florida attorney general recently got his official ear into a Tampa press conference in the guise of a

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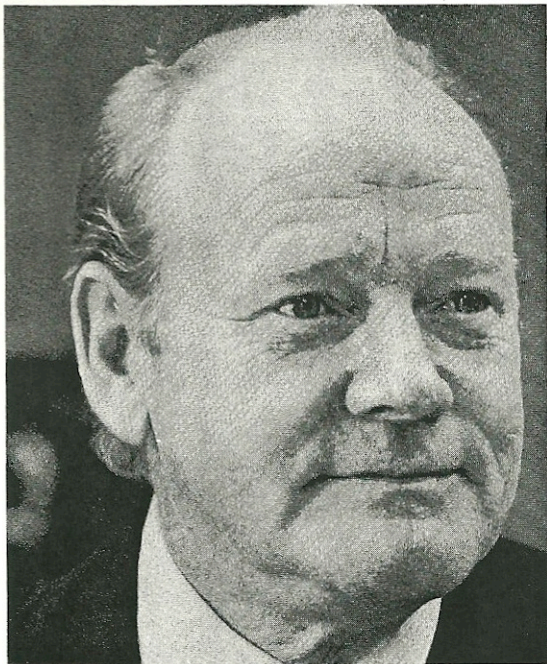
Role-playing

not a goody two shoes
business
BUT

reporter, and blam! We and the rest of the press visited editorial outrage around his ears until he pledged a healthy new enlightenment as to divisions implied under the First Amendment. When official infiltrators presume to invade our own turf, in other words, we are swift to recognize the utmost evil is beating at our gates.

If we turn over the sheet music now and run the scale of distinctions as they apply to us, not cops, the simple gets very complex.

All of us engage in plainclothes reporting. Our restaurant reviewer doesn't wear a press card on her lobster bib; she takes pains, in fact, not to be recognized in the joints she's casing for our readers' guidance. Neither does our consumer reporter volunteer her non-customer status when she sets out to nail a bait-and-switch advertiser. She's not even



Gene Patterson is president and editor of the St. Petersburg Times.

above driving a rigged car into a series of garages in order to report the wildly varying cost and effectiveness of auto repairs.

So let's turn it up a notch. To expose a nursing home's abuse of patients, do we plant a masquerading reporter on the institution's payroll as a night nurse and thus enable him to do an inside job? To expose illegal "steering" of home buyers to racially separated parts of town by real-estate agents, do we permit a reporter to pose as a prospective buyer and thereby trap the winking broker?

I've done both. I reserve the right to deploy disguised reporters again if we must, in order to serve the public's interest.

But I wouldn't do either of those specific stories again by the undercover route, for two basic reasons.

First, both of those stories could have been reported by straight means if we'd been willing to work harder. Our morning paper did, in fact, take up the steering story and advance it very effectively by having its reporter interview real buyers who'd been steered instead of wasting the broker's time (and thus money) by posing as a prospect himself. There's no law saying we have to push people around to get the news. Nor do I harbor the impulse to make reporters into witnesses for the prosecution.

Second, my mind has changed about the wisdom, if not the rectitude, of resorting to stunt journalism when above-board reporting can suffice.

We've inflicted pretty high ethical standards on public and private institutions with our editorials in recent years and I worry a lot about our hypocrisy quotient if we demand government in the sunshine and practice journalism unnecessarily in the shade.

To repeat, I reserve the right to infiltrate reporters if fakery is truly the last resort and the only way to serve a vital public interest.

This isn't a goody-two-shoes business. But posing as something we aren't does put our pursuit of truth on a tainted tangent going in and I don't think we ought to take it as a norm. A phony means to an honest end still leaves a faint disquiet in me.

So, as long as shoe leather and elbow grease, applied in the open, can get the story, I encourage our staffs to forget the fun of collegiate tactics for the simple reason that we'll feel, as professionals, cleaner. ■

feel clean¹⁴
if u don't feel disquiet