

Defining and Analyzing Journalistic Deception

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Many journalists, readers and scholars exhibit confusion concerning the nature and justification of deception. In this article, we clarify those acts that should count as deception. Before discussing if any cases of deception can be construed as morally justified, we clarify which investigative, interrogative, and information-giving techniques are deceptive on their face. We also bracket borderline cases.

Deception has been a tool of effective and award-winning reporting since 100 years ago when Nellie Bly went undercover to expose corruption in industry and government. It has also been a practice that has created additional distrust for journalists, who are already suffering from credibility problems.

The conflict between creative journalism and credibility surfaces whenever journalists go undercover. The 1991 Gulf War inspired freelance reporter Johnathan Franklin (1991) to pose as a moonlighting mortician to gain access to returning dead soldiers at Dover Air Force Base in Delaware. "When the Pentagon cancelled all press access to Dover to prevent the American public from being demoralized by the sight of body bags and coffins, I found the ordinary rules of reporting unacceptable," he said (p. 1).

Franklin's story produced both condemnation and accolades after he had spent 20 minutes viewing soldiers' bodies and gathering evidence that the Pentagon was underreporting U.S. combat casualties. That range is not an uncommon consequence of journalistic deception.

A classic example of journalistic deception and the impassioned reaction it draws is found in "The Mirage" (Smith & Zekman, 1979).

In 1979, the *Chicago Sun-Times* opened a tavern to expose governmental corruption. Two *Sun-Times* reporters posed as the owners of the bar, ironically named "The Mirage." Government inspectors subsequently offered to take bribes rather than force the new bar owners to complete expensive repairs. The newspaper later published details of the elaborate masquerade along with examples of government corruption.

The reporters, Pamela Zekman and Zay Smith, became national folk heroes among investigative reporters. However, a group of peer judges withheld the coveted Pulitzer Prize because, they said, the reporters had used deceptive techniques to gather their information. The judges decided that a journalist should not be rewarded for a story gotten by masquerading.

Ben Bradlee, Executive Editor of *The Washington Post* argued successfully for withholding the prize, said at the time, "In a day in which we are spending thousands of man hours uncovering deception, we simply cannot deceive" (Goodwin, 1987, p. 135).

At the time, Bradlee also said, "We do not lie about our profession but we don't waste time telling everybody what our profession is" (Goodwin, 1987, pp. 135-136). The suspect implication in Bradlee's statement is that there is a morally relevant difference between deceiving people by lying and deceiving them by withholding information.

Journalism scholars and journalists often make judgments about deception without making clear which acts count as deceptive. For example, Phil Meyer (1987) presented the following case in his book, *Ethical Journalism*:

A just-nominated presidential candidate is meeting with state party chairpersons to discuss his choice for vice-presidential candidate. The meeting is closed to the press. A reporter, pretending to be a party staff



person, hands a briefcase to one of the people going into the meeting and asks him to leave it on the table for his boss. The briefcase contains a tape recorder, and the reporter retrieves it after the meeting. (p. 83)

Meyer's (1987) analysis of the situation includes the following:

Here we have a case of pure eavesdropping by electronic means, and that carries a heavier moral burden than an undercover operation where one meets the deceived person face to face. The invasion of privacy is flagrant, and the deception is greater. To get that bugged briefcase into the room requires an outright lie. Deception, or at least the withholding of relevant information, is a common reportorial trick. (p. 83)

Why does surreptitious taping carry a heavier moral burden than masquerading? In what way is invasion of privacy related to deception? And, just what is deception if it does not include "withholding of relevant information"?

Deception as a Prima Facie Wrong

Before answering the question of instances in which journalistic deception is morally justified, a clear account of what counts as deception must be established.

In this article, we give a definition of what counts as deception. We then apply this definition to various kinds of journalistic practices, distinguishing those that are deceptive (and thus require moral justification) from those that are not. We will not, in this article, go on to present a theory of moral justification.¹

To deceive is, in a prima facie sense, to do something morally wrong. When saying that a person has deceived another, there is an implication that the deceiver is worthy of blame, unless he or she can provide adequate moral justification for the deception.

The consent of the person being deceived almost always provides adequate moral justification for the deceptors. We might say admiringly of a magician, "Wow, he or she really deceived me!" When we know the situation and are willing to suspend our sense of disbelief, we like being tricked. However, to be deceived about the price of the ticket to the magic show or about what time the show started is not part of the wilfull consent.

The deception discussed in this article is the kind practiced by some journalists to accomplish professional ends—that of acquiring or publishing information. It is often easier for the journalists to gain information if they act deceptively, just as it may be easier for a doctor to gain consent from a patient who has not been told that a proposed treatment is dangerous. However, ease of deception does not furnish adequate moral justification for either the journalist or the physician to engage in such practices.

Traditional Views of Deception

Although some current philosophers (Bok, 1978, 1982; Chisholm & Feehan, 1977; Freid, 1978), have written about deception, they focus on intentionally false assertions rather than on deception in general, leaving open many questions about the nature and justification of acts of deception that are not lies.

Bok (1978) identified a lie as "any intentionally deceptive message which is stated" (p. 14). She noted that lying is part of the larger category of deception. However, she does not discuss how lying might be morally distinct from deception.

In a later book, Bok (1982) discussed the dangers of journalistic deception, but did not specify which acts ought to count as deceptive.

Charles Freid (1978) said that lying is like breaking a promise. "To make an assertion is to give an assurance that the statement is true. An assertion may be seen as a kind of very general promise; it is a promise or assurance that the statement is true (p. 57).



Although Freid said that “under appropriate circumstances, even remaining silent may constitute assertion” (p. 57), he also states that deception is not the same as a lie—it lacks the property of assertion. Chisholm and Feehan (1977) argued that lying is worse than other types of deception.

It is assumed that, if a Person L asserts a Proposition p to another Person D, then D has the right to expect that L himself believes p. . . . Lying, unlike the other types of intended deception, is essentially a breach of faith. (p. 153)

We disagree; withholding information may constitute a breach of faith greater than does lying. Lying to a stranger on an airplane about the price of one’s laptop computer seems less a breach of faith than a doctor’s not telling a patient important side effects of a drug.

Thus, whereas we accept that the statement “You deceived me” would be appropriate in situations in which “You lied to me” would not, we believe that acts of deception that are not lies are as morally problematic as those that are.

We think that Gert (1988) is on the “right track” when he made the following point in explaining why “Don’t lie” is too narrow an expression for one of the moral rules he lists in his system:

A rational person would want to avoid being led to have a false belief by silence, by gestures, even by a true statement made in a certain tone of voice; it is being led to have a false belief that is important, not that it is done by making a false statement. Thus the rule should be concerned with prohibiting acts so as to lead someone to have a false belief. I shall formulate this rule as “Don’t deceive.” (p. 126)²

Conditions for Deception

Condition 1: Person A acts deceptively toward Person B if and only if Person A acts with the intention to deceive.

Person A must act purposefully, though not necessarily successfully. Person A can act deceptively without Person B being deceived.

Consider a reporter who dons a white coat and stethoscope to stride purposefully into a restricted area of the hospital, intent on gaining access to a patient’s record. If the reporter is stopped by a security guard who says, “I know you. You are a reporter, not a doctor,” that person has still acted deceptively. The attempt to deceive requires moral justification even if the deception is not successful.

Condition 2: Person A acts deceptively when lying or when acting in a way that is a nonverbal equivalent to lying.

Person A lies when asserting a proposition, P, that Person A believes to be false with the intention of having Person B believe it is true.

Person A acts deceptively—through a non-verbal equivalent to lying—when Person A presents himself/herself in a way intended to lead Person B to a false belief. Nonverbal equivalents to lying include gestures, physical appearance, even truthful statements said in such a way as to mislead. In dressing up like a police officer to initiate a belief in others, a deception has occurred.

Condition 3: Person A acts deceptively by withholding information only if (a) Person A intentionally withholds a proposition that he or she believes to be true and believes that that withholding will lead Person B to form or maintain a false belief; and (b) Person A breaks a law, breaks a promise, cheats, or neglects a duty by withholding the information.

Deception by withholding is more controversial than deception by lying. First, we describe the conditions under which the withholding of information counts as deception in a general sense. Second, we then apply these conditions to journalistic activities.



When withholding information violates the law: Person A acts deceptively when Person A fails to offer information that the law requires Person A to provide. For example, if Person A withholds information from the IRS concerning extra money earned giving paid lectures, then Person A has acted deceptively.

Deception by withholding as breaking a promise: If Person A promises Person B that nobody may use their jointly-owned sailboat without getting Person B's permission, and Person A subsequently lends the boat to Person C for a weekend without telling Person B, then Person A has acted deceptively toward Person B. Person A has acted deceptively by withholding information that Person A promised to tell.

Deception by withholding as cheating: Deception by cheating occurs when Person A withholds information that Person A is expected to tell due to rules that govern a situation that Person A has entered of his or her own volition. Gert (1988) described special characteristics of cheating:

Cheating, in its basic form, takes place only in voluntary activities with built-in goals and which are governed by a public system. . . . Cheating usually involves the violation of a rule of the public system that applies to all participants which it is expected that none of them would violate. . . . Cheating is a social rather than personal phenomenon; it is failing to live up to certain standards expected by all who participate in the activity. (p. 130)

Suppose Person A stops to ask directions from a stranger, Person B. Person B listens with seeming attention while Person A says, "I'm trying to get to Woodstock, so I'll continue to drive north on Route 5." Person B, by presenting himself as listening attentively to Person A's planned route, voluntarily entered into a social relationship that includes the social rule or custom of not misleading. If Person B withholds what he or she believes to be true, namely that Woodstock is nowhere near Route 5, he or she will have acted deceptively. Miles down the road, Person A will rightly feel that Person B was deceptive.

Other people on the street who have not entered into this special relationship with Person A have no similar obligation even though they may have heard the conversation and know that Person A is mistaken. It would be laudatory for Person C, standing nearby, to say to Person A, "Wait a minute, that's not how you get to Woodstock." There is no special obligation for Person C to do so: Person C has not entered voluntarily into the relationship with Person A and is not governed by the customs of that relationship. Person C has not cheated by remaining silent, although Person B has.

A letter of recommendation exemplifies another voluntary social relationship in which one may deceive by withholding information. In writing a positive letter of recommendation for an employee discharged because of embezzlement, not mentioning the person's criminal financial behavior causes the letter writer to have acted deceptively toward the potential employer.

This would be the case even if every statement made in the letter is true. Omission of the seriously incriminating material is deceptive because there is a widely shared custom that letters of recommendation will not fail to mention material of this seriousness.

Deception by withholding as a failure to do one's duty: Duties to tell certain kinds of information are often required by professional relationships. For example, if an internist finds, during a routine medical examination, a growth on the back of a patient's hand needs medical attention, the internist would be acting deceptively in withholding information allowing the patient to believe no medical problems had been found.

If, on the other hand, a physician passing a person on the street notices the growth, there is no duty to tell the stranger to seek medical attention even if the doctor believes the growth needs such attention.

Also, a doctor who withholds information from a patient about an important side effect of a prescribed drug has acted deceptively. Physicians have a duty to inform their patients of the important side effects of the drugs they prescribe.



Borderline Cases

It is sometimes hard to decide whether intentionally withholding information represents deception. Often this is because there is disagreement among reasonable people about whether a particular instance of withholding of information counts as cheating or as a violation of duty.

Suppose, for example, that a letter of recommendation does not mention that a former employee hums continually when working and some co-workers have found this very annoying. The hummer claims humming is required in order to work. Some might claim that irritating idiosyncrasies fall within the customary understanding of what letters of recommendation should include, others would probably claim not.

Borderline cases also can be found within professional relationships because some professional duties may change as social understandings of the profession change. For example, prior to a change in the American Medical Association Code of Ethics in the late 1940s, it could have been considered a breach of ethics for a doctor to tell a terminally ill patient that he or she was dying. Now the convention is the opposite—the doctor is presumed to have a duty to tell the patient such information, and doctors who do not tell are regarded as acting deceptively.³ Now, let us see how these withholding practices play out in journalistic work.

Journalistic Deception 1: Investigative Deception

Journalists carry out different kinds of roles in their work. First, they are professional investigators. They collect data from their own observations and from other sources for stories. The deception that occurs while journalists are investigating a story provides classic quandaries in journalistic ethics. We examine them in light of our definition of deception.

1. A reporter pushes through a crowd of spectators and steps over police barricades at a crime scene, saying, "Let me through, I'm a doctor."

2. A crime reporter, seated at the news desk in the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD), decides to verify that a suspected rapist is under investigation in another state. The reporter calls the police department in Detroit, identifying himself only as "Jones from LAPD."

3. A reporter, wishing to gain access to the family of a critically injured state senator, puts on a white uniform and walks past the security officers who are denying entry to all but medical personnel.

4. A photojournalist joins the American Nazi Party and becomes its official photographer. He joins hoping to collect information that will damage the organization. Nevertheless, the photojournalist acts as a loyal member of the party and fulfills the responsibilities of official party photographer.

5. A university newspaper editor is alerted to a meeting of an incest survivors' support group by a notice in the school paper. The editor attends and remains silent when the facilitator says that the meeting should be regarded as private. She assumes that all eight women attending are incest survivors. The editor listens closely, but does not take notes, for the story she intends to write.

6. A consumer reporter who has received complaints of price gouging by local service stations decides to investigate. The reporter has a car's excellent condition verified by a cooperative state inspector before taking the car to local garages, asking mechanics to "check it out." She then collects the stations' written estimates of repair work and prepares a consumer report for the television station.

7. A Hispanic reporter decides to investigate complaints about unfair housing practices. The reporter stops at a local rental office that has been the subject of complaint and asks if any apartments are available for rent. He has no intention of renting.

8. A foods editor buys six different brands of food processors to test one against the other for a comparison story. The editor does not tell the salespersons the reasons for the purchases.

9. A theater critic attends the opening night performance of a new play. She observes the action critically, makes some notes during intermission, and plans the structure for the review she will write at the end of the evening.



All these examples involve journalists allowing others to falsely believe that they are something other than journalists – but not all are acting deceptively. Examples 8 and 9 reflect actions clearly not deceptive. Examples 1 through 5 represent deception, whereas Examples 6 and 7 are borderline cases because the social customs governing the actions are not clear.

A journalist has acted deceptively in the course of investigation (a) if he or she has, through lying or through a nonverbal equivalent to lying, attempted to initiate or sustain a false belief; or (b) if the reporter, by withholding information that he or she is morally required to tell, has allowed another person to form or sustain a false belief.

Examples 1, 3, and 4 are deception by verbal and nonverbal lying. The reporter in Example 3 who dons a white uniform to walk past security guards is asserting nonverbally, “I am a nurse,” as surely as the reporter who in Example 1 announces, “I am a doctor.”

However, it is not only his or her saying, “I am a nurse” that is deceptive. It is his or her also not saying, “I am a reporter,” in a setting in which entry is explicitly denied to reporters. The reporter is deceiving both by lying and by withholding.

Example 2 shows how a reporter can deceive through ambiguity. Jones is not lying when he identifies himself as “Jones from LAPD.” His name is Jones, and he is calling from a location in the LAPD. But the police department in Detroit, as Jones knows, is likely to believe that Jones is a police officer. If the intention of the speaker is to use ambiguity to lead the listener to a false belief, then the speaker is acting deceptively.

The photojournalist in Example 4 is deceiving both by lying and by withholding information that he has a duty to disclose. He deceives by action and assertion because he is causing others to believe that he is a Nazi when he is not. But even if he were a Nazi, the act would be deceptive: He is able to collect information not just because party members think he is a Nazi, but because they also think that he is not a journalist or an FBI agent working undercover. The photojournalist has voluntarily entered a social relationship guided by particular customs and has acted deceptively through cheating by not adhering to those customs.

If journalists are present and working in a situation in which entry or information is explicitly restricted to an identifiable class or classes of people that do not include journalists, then the journalists are acting deceptively by cheating; they are violating a social rule that everyone is expected to follow. That rule is: In situations in which journalists are implicitly or explicitly excluded, they should not be silent about their journalistic intent.

Example 5 shows that reporters can sometimes act deceptively by attending and reporting on “public” events. There are two senses of public that need to be distinguished. The incest survivors’ group is public in one sense: It was advertised in the school newspaper and was presumably open to any person who wanted to attend. However, as the group facilitator made clear at the outset, the meeting was not public in another sense: Membership in the group was explicitly limited to a class of people that excluded someone functioning as a journalist.

Once these ground rules were clear, the journalist acted deceptively by cheating when she failed either to leave or to announce that she was functioning as a journalist. The college newspaper editor attending the meeting *qua* journalist would still be acting deceptively even if she were also an incest survivor.

What separates the reporters in Examples 4 and 5 from the reporters buying consumer products for testing or conducting critical reviews in Examples 8 and 9 are that the former cheat and the latter do not.

The products and entertainment offered in Examples 8 and 9 have no implied or explicit restrictions concerning who may buy them or for what purpose. The reporters in Examples 8 and 9 have not violated the terms of any social custom.

Notice the difference between Example 6 and Example 8. Although the consumer reporter taking a car in for estimates in Example 6 is doing only what anyone might do, she is allowing the mechanic to believe that she is a consumer with a car problem. She withholds the information that she is a journalist working on a story. In a similar fashion, the journalist in Example 7 is not lying when he asks if there are



any apartments available for rent, but he is withholding his reason for asking. Examples 6 and 7 are borderline cases. Reasonable people disagree about whether social customs govern car fixing and rent inquiries.

Sometimes asking a question is nothing more than that. Asking, "Is it raining outside?", nothing additional needs be implied. However, sometimes asking a question implies an accompanying statement. If asking, with particular inflection, "Interested in dinner?" the speaker is usually implying, "I want to eat dinner with you if you say 'yes'." If the listener says "yes" and the speaker replies, "I hope you'll figure out a way to get something to eat," the speaker might be correctly accused of acting deceptively because the question strongly implied, "I'd like to have dinner with you."

Whether the reporter acted deceptively by asking if there were apartments available for rent depends on whether the question customarily implies, "I myself might want to rent one." Whether the reporter acted deceptively by asking the mechanic to inspect her car depends on whether the request customarily implies, "I think there is something wrong with this car."

Journalistic Deception 2: Interrogative Deception

Journalists can act deceptively even when relevant others know that they are journalists conducting an interview. We believe that journalists have a duty to relate information about the procedural features of the interview to the source.

We include among those duties:

1. A duty to tell the source that an interview for publication is taking place, including a duty to relay more detailed information to less sophisticated sources;
2. A duty to tell the source how the information is being recorded;
3. A duty to tell the source if, through some misunderstanding and resultant action on the part of the source, the source becomes more likely to be harmed than he or she knows.⁴

Here are some of the possibly deceptive techniques that are used by journalists as they conduct interviews:

1. A reporter for a local newspaper interviews a college president for a story on plans to deal with a deficit. The president knows she is being interviewed, by a journalist taking notes to write a news story, but doesn't know that the journalist is taping the conversation on a hidden tape recorder.

2. A medical-ethics specialist is explaining political difficulties in the field to a national news magazine reporter. "This is off the record," the ethicist says and, without pausing, recounts a detailed and personal account of infighting among experts. The ethicist is upset when he sees his account in print. The reporter says that he never agreed for the information to be off the record.

3. A reporter receives evidence that the spouse of a candidate for public office has recently been treated for drug dependency. The reporter interviews the candidate, and asks, "Have you had any personal experience with drug problems?" The candidate's expected denial, along with the reporter's evidence to the contrary, will go into the story.

4. The reporter is young and attractive. She thinks the official, charged with misuse of state funds, is very unlikeable and clearly guilty, but knows he will not level with her if she tells the official how she feels about him. Therefore, the reporter is sympathetic in interviewing the official, and after hearing early in the interview that the official's wife has left him, suggests that the official call the reporter sometime if he's lonely.

We consider all but Example 3 to be examples of interrogative deception.

In Example 1, the reporter has acted deceptively by making an audiotape without the source's consent. A source varies in his or her vulnerability depending on the means by which information is gathered. Most people are likely to be far more guarded about how they present themselves if they know they are being videotaped or audiotaped than if they think they are simply serving as a source for an on-the-record interview. Surreptitious taping deprives sources of the freedom to adjust their message to the method of collection.⁵



This “staging” by sources is precisely why some journalists argue in favor of surreptitious taping.⁶ However, if the journalistic duty were to take information from sources when the sources are in their most natural state—that is to be the observer on a scene—then the role of journalist as interviewer would need to be defended.

Journalistic duty is to get the best and most complete information for a story possible without acting immorally to get it.⁷ The reason that most journalistic gathering of news is done in the open is that sources generally provide the best and most complete information when they know they are speaking to a reporter for publication. It is not consistent to allow sources to adjust their message to speaking on the record, but not allow them to adjust their message when speaking on a recording device.

Example 2 illustrates the problem of “on” and “off” the record. The words, “off the record” act as what philosophers call a “performative.” When sources say, “Off the record,” they expect that the rules of the interview change just by that utterance. However, “off the record” may be understood by journalists to mean anything from “Use the quote, but don’t identify me as the speaker,” to “This information is on background—it is for your help in understanding the situation, but not to be published.”

These nuances may be a mystery to even the most sophisticated source. But all sources who utter “off the record” are indicating restricted information to follow. If the journalist withholds his or her intention to disregard the source’s statement, the journalist leads the source to a false conclusion. The reporter is acting deceptively by cheating and by violating a duty to be clear about a key procedural aspect of the interview.

Examples 3 and 4 provide a different twist. In Example 3, the reporter is concealing knowledge. In Example 4, the reporter is feigning emotion.

The reporter in Example 3 is not acting deceptively when she withholds information from her source. There is no social custom that the reporter will share all the information he or she knows when interviewing a source for a story. In fact, the customs of journalistic interviewing make it reasonable for sources to believe that reporters withhold information. The reporter is often looking for that source’s perspective, unadulterated by information provided by others.

However, feigning emotion (Example 4) is different from concealing knowledge. Feigning emotion is the equivalent of saying, “I feel this way about you.” If “this way” is not genuine, the reporter is acting deceptively through action or assertion. He or she is lying.

The reporter also acts deceptively by feigning knowledge. A reporter nodding affirmatively at the source’s statement, “I suppose you know about X,” is the non-verbal equivalent of “Yes, I know about X” If the reporter does not know, then he or she has lied.

On the other hand, concealing emotion, is not deceptive. The reporter’s duty is to act “professionally” when interviewing a source. If the reporter feels hostility toward a source (or even warmth or sexual attraction), that emotion is presumably not part of a news story and is something that a professional can and should set aside.

Journalistic Deception 3: Informative Deception

Something counts as informative deception if either (a) the reporter intentionally includes false statements in a published story or (b) the reporter withholds information that, by breaking a law or a promise, cheating or neglecting duty, allows the reader to initiate or sustain a false belief.

In their role as news presenters, reporters have a duty to disclose information that the news organization has explicitly or implicitly promised to tell. American mass market news organizations have explicitly or implicitly promised to give their readers what they believe to be accurate and important information.

The duty does not imply that journalists will supply all known facts. Most of the information gathered will simply not fit the context of the story and will, therefore, be left out. The news value of an event or issue defines the story’s context and scope. The importance of a story is always relative to other facts known to the news organization within a particular deadline cycle.



With all the contingencies and relative relationships to consider, defining acts of informative deception can be even more difficult than defining investigative or interrogative types.

Consider the following:

1. Reporters write “hero” stories about the person who has knocked a gun from the hand of a potential assassin and has saved the president’s life. Although the reporters know that the person is gay, they withhold that information from the readers at the hero’s request.

2. The newspaper publishes a story on the safe return of an abducted 6-year-old. The journalists knowingly exclude the fact that the child was sexually molested as well as kidnapped.

3. A reporter writes a story based on a justice department investigation of insider trading. The story contains detailed information that makes a broker look clearly guilty. The reporter includes a truthful paragraph that the story was compiled from many unidentified sources. However, all the incriminating material came from a justice department source. The reporter withholds an identification of this source, knowing that readers might question the validity of information if they knew it came from one biased source.

4. An editor receives information that the government is planning military intervention in an attempt to rescue U.S. citizens being held hostage. The President calls to ask that the newspaper withhold publication until after the intervention. The editor holds the story.

We believe that the journalist in Examples 2, 3, and 4 were acting deceptively. The journalist in Example 1 was not. It is not deceptive to omit the hero’s sexual orientation from the story. Readers would not reach any false conclusions concerning the hero’s public action if they were not informed of the person’s sexual preferences.

On the other hand, readers of the story outlined in Example 3 might well reach a different (and likely more accurate) conclusion concerning the probable guilt of the broker if they had full information. The journalist in Example 3 is deceptive in withholding information about the source of a story, thereby allowing readers to reach a possibly erroneous conclusion about the broker’s guilt—a conclusion they would not be likely to reach if they knew the source was biased.

This kind of deception also occurs when news organizations run company press releases so that they appear to be staff-written stories. Readers will rightly draw different conclusions about the information in a story if they know that the writer of a particular article is not a dispassionate reporter, but a corporate communications officer.

The journalists in Example 2 also acted deceptively. Readers will reach a false (or at least seriously incomplete) conclusion concerning the nature of the child’s victimization. The child’s sexual molestation is contextually tied to the abduction.

However, most news organizations have a well-known policy that they will not reveal information concerning the sexual assault of identifiable children due to the potential harm to the child victim. This is a good example of deception that is morally justified and of journalistic deception that is condoned by most communities. Most readers would agree that the harm caused to them when being deceived in cases like this is far less than the harm that would be caused to the molested child if that information was provided.

Example 4 is informative deception because the news media in the United States has explicitly promised to provide readers with information necessary for self-governance. Although reasonable people might be willing to allow news media to withhold information about pending military operations, it is nonetheless deceptive and therefore requires moral justification.

Conclusion

This article has offered a definition of journalistic deception, emphasizing that it is sometimes just as morally problematic for journalists to withhold true information as it is to give false information.

Our task in this article has been definitional, though we note that to deceive is immoral in a *prima facie* sense. If an act of deception lacks adequate justification then it is “unethical.” The deceiver has the



burden of proof of providing adequate justification. What counts as moral justification for deception is tackled elsewhere.

Notes

1. For a discussion of what counts as adequate justification for journalistic deception, see Elliott (1991).
2. Much of our definitional work is an extension of Gert's (1988) analysis of the moral rule, "Do not deceive."
3. Only some professional duties are relative to place or time. We believe that each profession has some essential values that translate across time and culture.
4. Others would disagree with such a statement of journalistic duty. See, for example, Malcolm (1990).
5. A particularly persuasive argument against hidden taping can be found in Cooper (1987).
6. See, for example, Hodges (1988).
7. This is no different from our expectation of any profession or occupation. The societal rule might be stated: Do your job, but don't cause unjustified harm in the process.

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