

6. STEALTH JOURNALISM

Undercover journalism exposes injustices, negligence, corruption, and wrongdoing. New York University's Division of Libraries houses a database of undercover stories dating back to 1830, which include exposés of significant issues such as the slave trade, treatment of patients in asylums, the condition of tenement houses, and political corruption. Yet, going undercover to expose wrongdoing remains controversial.

Undercover journalists contend that they are fulfilling a fundamental duty of journalism. The Code of Ethics of the Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ) states that “public enlightenment is the forerunner of justice and the foundation of democracy. The duty of the journalist is to further those ends by seeking truth and providing a fair and comprehensive account of events and issues.”

In the wake of recent school shootings, some news organizations have taken upon themselves the task of testing school security. Reporters have gone into schools with hidden cameras to assess the effectiveness of safety measures.

Jonathan Vigliotti, a WNBC journalist, entered seven New York City schools in late fall 2013, without being stopped. When he attempted to enter another three, school staff asked him for identification and prevented him from wandering unescorted through the halls.

In January 2014, John Kelly, a reporter from St. Louis news channel KSDK entered Kirkwood High School and roamed the hallways for a few minutes. He went to the office, asked to speak to someone about school security, and then asked directions to the restroom. When staff noticed he didn't head toward the restroom, the administration put the school in lockdown and called law enforcement. Frantic parents came to the school after receiving text messages from their frightened school children.

Supporters defend the practice of undercover investigation of school security as responsible news reporting on an issue of great concern and significance that has helped to uncover troubling security lapses. Others decry this tactic as unnecessarily terrifying to children, disruptive of the school day, wasteful of law enforcement resources, and an alert to potential criminals that the school's security is vulnerable. Even parents have been divided on their response to undercover journalism in investigating school security. Some welcome the assessment of security measures, while others object to what they see as harmful to children and the educational process.

Likewise, a difference of opinion exists among news professionals. Some journalists urge respect for a fundamental tenet of the SPJ Code of Ethics: “Avoid undercover or other surreptitious methods of gathering information except when traditional open methods will not yield information vital to the public.” Other news professionals defend the practice of undercover reporting, arguing that they would not be able to expose the truth without resorting to surreptitious methods.