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TO: Executive Addressed

FR: James E. Lukaszewski, APR, Fellow PRSA Chairman

RE: Media Deception - A Daily Fact of Life

Deception by reporters has become a routine tool, but is deception ever essential to gathering any news story? Shouldn't those who report hold themselves to a standard of behavior that's unconditionally honorable and unconditionally lawful? Which is worse, some corporate mogul caught with his hand in the cookie jar or the reprehensible reportorial techniques used to create such a story?

Sadly, deception is now too common a practice with neither oversight nor independent monitoring. Here's some food for thought. Compare the media's own criteria for being deceptive with the principles laid down by Eugene Isaac Meyer, the former owner of The Washington Post. You be the judge.

Criteria for Justifying Deception

(Excerpted from Chapter 6, Deception, Doing Ethics in Journalism, @ 1993, a Society of Professional Journalists handbook)

- When the information sought is of profound importance. It must be of vital public interest, such as revealing great "system failure" at the top levels, or it must prevent profound harm to individuals.
- When all other alternatives to obtaining the same information have been exhausted.
- When the journalists involved are willing to fully and openly disclose the nature of the deception and the reason for it to those involved and to the public.
- When the harm prevented by the information revealed through deception outweighs any harm caused by the act of deception.
- When the journalists involved have conducted a meaningful, collaborative, and deliberative decision-making process.

Eugene Isaac Meyer's Principles

(From a speech delivered on March 5, 1935, upon his purchase of The Washington Post.)

- The first mission of a newspaper is to tell the truth as nearly as the truth may be ascertained.
- The newspaper shall tell ALL the truth so far as it can learn it.
- As a disseminator of news, the paper shall observe the decencies that are obligatory upon a private gentleman.
- What it prints shall be fit reading for the young as well as for the old.
- The newspaper's duty is to its readers and to the public at large, and not to the private interests of the owner.
- In the pursuit of truth, the newspaper shall be prepared to make sacrifice of its material fortunes, if for the public good.
- The newspaper shall not be the ally of any special interest but shall be fair and free and wholesome.

Don Hewitt, executive producer of 60 Minutes, was quoted in the August 1997 issue of Biography magazine as saying, "Ever since I've been in journalism, reporters have talked their way into places they really don't belong by not leveling with the guy at the door about who or what they were after. You can't report if you don't do that. If you walk around with a press card stuck in your hat all the time that says, 'Hey, look at who I am,' you aren't going to learn anything. You'll never learn anything."

The question is how can you arrive at the truth if you don't begin with the truth? What do you think? Do you have an interesting story of deception by a reporter? Please mail, fax (914.681.0047), or E-mail (jel@e911.com) it to me.

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The Lukaszewski Group Inc. ■ Ten Bank Street, Suite 530, White Plains, NY 10606-1952
Telephone 914.681.0000 ■ Facsimile: 914.681.0047 ■ tlg@e911.com ■ www.e911.com