



# “To Catch a Predator:” An Ethical Analysis of Sting Journalism

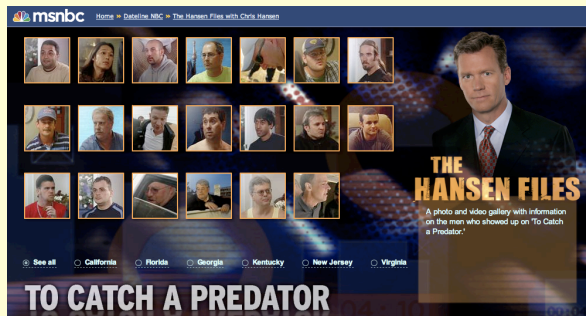
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## Abstract

This study uses John Rawls' Veil of Ignorance philosophy and the Potter Box of Moral Reasoning to evaluate the ethical justification for the use of deception and a sting operation by “Dateline NBC's To Catch a Predator.”

While there was benefit to society in bringing the issue of sexual predators to the public's agenda and facilitating the arrest and conviction of some sexual predators, the detriment that “Dateline NBC's To Catch a Predator” did was far greater through the deception they employed and the methods they used. It humiliated suspects, potentially threatening their civil rights, invaded the privacy of families, hurt the credibility of the profession and perpetuated the stereotype of sensationalistic journalists.

## Introduction



■For three years, starting in 2004, “To Catch a Predator” set up sting operations in houses across the country in an attempt to illustrate the problem of sexual predators on the Internet.

■“Dateline” hired the activist group Perverted-Justice, as paid consultants, to visit online chat rooms, pose as minors and invite anyone that approached them for sex to a house NBC set up.

■“Dateline” senior producer Allan Maraynes said that what he was “looking for was person-to-person conversation. Some sustained communication that might shed some light on how online predators think. How would they explain what they do and why they do it?”

■This study uses “To Catch a Predator” as a vehicle to explore the ethical implications of using deception by the media to expose the ills of society.

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## Research Questions

RQ1: Is “Dateline NBC's To Catch a Predator” the proper role for the media and can it be justified?

RQ2: Does partnering with an activist group challenge the media's role as an independent watchdog?

RQ3: Even though there is a free press right to broadcast, does that right outweigh an individual's right to a fair trial?

## Potter Box of Moral Reasoning

Four dimensions of moral analysis.

Two quadrants on the left side explicate what actually happens (descriptive)

Two quadrants on the right side concern what ought to happen (normative)

<p><u>1. Understanding the facts</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>■“Dateline” contracted with Perverted-Justice who posed as adults pretending to be minors on the Internet in an effort to attract sexual predators and expose them.</li><li>■“Dateline” worked in conjunction with police agencies to set up a sting.</li></ul>	<p><u>4. Loyalties</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>■“Dateline” has a loyalty to its viewers to provide information that is valuable for members of society to make intelligent decisions.</li><li>■“Dateline” has a loyalty to its parent company NBC to increase viewership and make money.</li><li>■“Dateline” has a loyalty to the children it is trying to protect from sexual predators.</li><li>■“Dateline” has a loyalty to uphold justice.</li><li>■“Dateline” has a loyalty to do no harm without justification.</li></ul>
<p><u>2. Values</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>■“Dateline” seeks to provide truth to the public, promote safety for society's children and insure justice is served by exposing sexual predators.</li><li>■We as a society want to protect our children.</li><li>■Perverted-Justice and the police want to catch criminals and incarcerate pedophiles.</li><li>■“Dateline” wants to perform its journalistic watchdog duty and benefit society.</li><li>■NBC wants to increase its ratings and make money.</li><li>■The suspects do not want to get caught.</li><li>■The suspects' families want to protect their privacy.</li></ul>	<p><u>3. Principles</u></p> <p>Rawlsian philosophy would require that distributive justice be balanced among all parties involved so that the weak would not needlessly suffer at the expense of the powerful.</p>

## Rawls Veil of Ignorance Philosophy

John Rawls believes that fairness is the fundamental idea in the concept of justice. Rawls' philosophy is egalitarian in nature and carries with it the familiar social contract theory of Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau.

Inherently, not everyone in society is equal so Rawls developed the Veil of Ignorance philosophy asking that all parties step back from real circumstances and start from “original position.” Roles and social differentiations are eliminated.

Two principles emerge

■Individual liberty is maximized meaning that liberty for all will be valued equally

■Weaker parties are protected because issues are discussed regardless of the relative strength of participants

## Results

RQ1: Journalism's first loyalty is to its citizens. The media can justify putting the danger of sexual predators on the public's agenda, but what “Dateline” did went beyond that by partnering with Perverted-Justice and acting as an investigatory agency with the hope of gathering evidence to convict sexual predators.

RQ2: Journalists must serve as an independent monitor of power. Perverted-Justice's stated mission is the exposure and conviction of sexual predators on the Internet. “Dateline's” loyalties became split between the public and its partner Perverted-Justice. This went beyond news investigation to overt advocacy.

RQ3: Even though these suspects thrust themselves into what they knew was an illegal situation, being confronted on camera put them at a disadvantage of power. Some would argue that the suspects deserve to have their faces shown on television, however another value must be taken into account. In America's justice system, there is a presumption of innocence and the right to a fair trial. By showing these suspects on television and posting the videos on MSNBC's website, “Dateline” severely compromised the ability for the suspects to receive a fair trial.

## Discussion

While the goal of “Dateline” was to protect children from harm, there are others that faced harm from the investigation. Spouses and children of the suspects may have had their privacy invaded unnecessarily by the broadcast. Balancing the individuals right to privacy versus the public welfare must be taken into account.

From Rawls' perspective, the detriment that “Dateline NBC's To Catch a Predator” did was far greater through the deception they employed and the methods they used.

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