

## [Craig Calhoun](#)

# Craig Calhoun on BBC's 'dangerous' use of LSE camouflage in North Korea

## Opinion piece

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## AT THE HEART OF THE HIGHER EDUCATION DEBATE

### **Craig Calhoun on BBC's 'dangerous' use of LSE camouflage in North Korea**

15 April 2013

LSE director condemns BBC tactics over controversial Panorama documentary



The BBC's actions in using a group of students from the London School of Economics to disguise a visit to enter North Korea illegally in order to make a film for Panorama has left the LSE, and indeed academics generally, in a very difficult, if not dangerous, position.

Once the trip was over and the secret was out, the BBC seemed to think that if we concealed what went on from staff and students, nobody would be any the wiser.

They said they wouldn't name-check us on Panorama. LSE could not do this. What if other students planned a trip in blissful ignorance that the North Koreans now suspect their motives? What if academics in the region came under suspicion, or worse, with no idea why? And the BBC behaviour was so odd it was leaking out — journalists were starting to make calls.

The facts are clear: the BBC journalists posed as LSE staff or students to trick their way past North Korea's refusal to admit foreign journalists. The subterfuge was employed, ironically, because the North Korean government considers BBC and other independent journalists akin to British spies. The danger now is that the North Koreans, and governments in equally sensitive parts of the world, will think the same of LSE staff and students. The entire enterprise was reckless and irresponsible from start to finish, as well as deeply dishonest.

The trip was not planned or officially sanctioned by the LSE. The BBC advertised through a student society that itself was not a formal sponsor. The students were deliberately given limited information about the plan, being told only that "a journalist" would join the group, when in fact it appears the entire visit had been planned from start to finish to facilitate the insertion of a three-person Panorama team.

The primary organiser was a recent graduate of the school who had organised a trip to North Korea - but an above-board one - while still a student. Her husband is a professional investigative journalist who seems to have claimed on his visa application to be an LSE PhD student, and once in the country allowed himself to be addressed as "professor".

The school authorities were not consulted at any stage, in any way, by the BBC. Instead the school, and its students, were both kept in the dark and cynically enlisted as cover for an immensely risky exercise by an organisation that should really know better.

By entering the country in this way the BBC party exposed not only themselves but every participant on the trip to the possibility of arrest and imprisonment. North Korea is not the sort of country where such risks can be taken lightly. No competent risk assessment could conclude that there is anything acceptable about the possibility of discovery and retribution that these individuals faced, regardless of the ultimate objective. No competent assessment could conclude that the BBC had any right to use the LSE in this way, nor to make such judgements on behalf of students who were not BBC employees.

The school works in politically sensitive and unstable countries. We have to. We study democracy and democratisation, social movements and economic change, international politics and regional relations, a whole host of topics relevant to such states. We study them, often, by physically visiting territories where suspicion of foreigners asking questions runs high. That suspicion is heightened by incidents such as this. In order to pursue our academic mission, our students and our staff need to be able to move as freely as possible about the world without facing stigmatisation as possible spies. The BBC's irresponsible actions directly threaten that freedom.

Investigation is an important component of modern journalism. Investigative journalists must sometimes employ subterfuge. That is not our objection. Our objection is to the BBC using our name and our students to support that subterfuge, without properly informing either the school or the students of their plans so that they could judge the risks. This meant wilfully exposing ten young people to grave risk and all LSE staff and students in future to unknown potential consequences for uncertain gain. The BBC would not tolerate others using its name like this. They would protest in the strongest possible terms. They should not expect our reaction to be otherwise.

There clearly is a public interest in learning about North Korea, especially now. There is a public interest in learning about all challenging states. That interest is not best served by actions that undermine the work of established academics. It is not best served by shaky footage of those parts of North Korea that the North Korean authorities want western tourists to see.

I am sorry the BBC has decided not to withdraw the Panorama report before it airs, despite our strong objections.

That gesture, however belated, would have shown the organisation capable of taking responsibility for its mistakes. It would have shown that there are limits to what conduct is acceptable in the pursuit of a story. It would not have erased the offence. But it would at least have demonstrated contrition.

For the participants on this trip, we are glad that nothing serious happened while they were in North Korea. For our staff and students in future we hope the longer term consequences will not be too profound.

**Author:**

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