

BBC Panorama and the LSE North Korea row: why the BBC needs to take a wider view of its ethical responsibilities

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'Professor' John Sweeney in North Korea

The LSE row with Panorama came just days after some top BBC journalists spoke at a [journalism conference run by my LSE think-tank Polis](#), where we were debating 'trust'. One of the reasons that we do trust the BBC, despite scandals such as Savile or the *Newsnight* children's home film, is that it is prepared to be held to account when it gets things wrong and that it stands up for its own values in the face of criticism. So I don't think that the North Korea fracas is a sign of the BBC's ethical decline, but it does sound alarm bells. 'Ding Dong', as it were.

Even if you accept the gist of the BBC's case you are still left with a journalism team that was prepared to put other people's safety at risk and another institution's reputation on the line for

the sake of a story. You will have to judge the Panorama programme for yourself to decide if this was worthwhile. But considering there are other ways of getting into North Korea I question the management system that thought that an undercover fishing expedition was worth endangering members of the public and putting the work of hundreds of other academic researchers in jeopardy.

In this case I don't think that the consent process was entirely reasonable. The pre-trip briefing was haphazard with students being 'informed' through conversations in noisy pubs. Asking people in Beijing airport whether they want to go on with a trip which is then revealed as a BBC stunt is not a fair or honest way to proceed. Verbal consent isn't really worth the paper it's not written on. But even if the students had agreed whole-heartedly, the programme makers had still not taken into account their wider responsibilities beyond clearing some internal compliance process. So in that sense, consent is almost irrelevant.

So what about the BBC's risk assessment process? Luckily, no one has been directly harmed by the BBC's Korean gamble, but what if they had and we were now reporting on a group of students being detained in a North Korean prison? Would the BBC still be arguing that it was 'worth the risk'? I hope someone at New Broadcasting House is asking themselves honestly how disastrous it would have been for the BBC as well as the innocent bystanders. It would also, of course, have put the LSE in the horrible position of having to tell families why they had not been able to exercise their duty of care.

There was also the risk to the LSE's reputation for academic neutrality if it emerged that it was associated with journalistic subterfuge. The BBC offered to not refer to the LSE in the programme but it had already leaked so was in the public domain. Even though it was not an official LSE trip even the BBC has been mistakenly referring to it as an 'LSE study tour'. Can you imagine how furious the BBC would be if an academic or a rival hack pretended to work for the corporation?

There is a wider context to this case as well. Broadcasters regularly work with other organisations to get their job done, but it has to be an honest relationship. However, at no point did the BBC tell the LSE what it was doing – even

though the reporter was claiming to be a representative of the LSE. It might be fair enough to lie to the North Koreans, but John Sweeney was in effect, lying to the LSE. If the project was so worthy why didn't the BBC come clean to all concerned before leaving the UK?

I know from my own experience that journalists have to be allowed to take risks and even make mistakes. Deception can be justified if the result is significant revelation. I have some admiration for the way that the BBC has defended its journalism in this case. I don't want the programme pulled – I instinctively reject that course of action – and anyway it's too late. The students did get home safely – though some of them now feel angry and abused. The row around this issue may help clarify that the LSE was not involved. It may be that the BBC learns practical lessons, too, about better management of its more 'creative' talent.

But if they want to be trusted then they have to admit it when they get it wrong. The LSE has fully confessed that it made a massive mistake over Libya and has taken significant steps to prevent a similar blow to its integrity recurring. It is now a more transparent organisation with new rigorous ethical checks built into its systems. The BBC is already our most accountable media organisation because it has to be. It is founded by law on public service principles and is funded by the citizen. I hope this latest episode encourages greater humility and self-criticism on their part. In this digital age of public scepticism anything else simply won't be accepted.

[I should point out that these are my views – I do not speak on behalf of the LSE – their view is put [here by LSE Director Craig Calhoun](#)

An opposing view is put by ex BBC journalist [Robin Lustig here](#)]

Update:

In the wake of the actual programme I think [Guardian TV critic Sam Woolaston gets it right](#). This was a fairly good programme with interviews and archive that had nothing to do with the trip. The footage from the tour was atmospheric but hardly added any revelations. In a way the programme itself doesn't matter. When the BBC allowed Sweeney to act in what the LSE thinks was an irresponsible way they had no idea what they would get.

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