

Noddy won't pay the ransom

 blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2007/09/07/noddy-wont-pay-the-ransom/

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The TV fakery debate has reached new heights (or depths). Apparently the former controller of BBC 2, [Alan Yentob](#), who now presents a rather ponderous and self-important arts show called *Imagine* has been [cheating](#). His researchers have been conducting interviews for the programme without Yentob's august presence. He has then recorded 'noddies' to make it look like he was there. 'Noddies' are cut-away editing shots where you see the reporter nodding sagely at the interviewee. Sometimes you can see the interviewee; that is a 'two-shot' and proves that all were present and correct. Sometimes you only see the reporter, head bobbing up and down; that is a straight-forward single-shot noddy. Generally, they are only used as a way of editing the interview. It allows you to splice different bits of an answer. If you didn't do it the interviews would ramble on forever (although inevitably the subject will complain about misrepresentation – but that's another issue). You usually have to film noddies or other editing shots after the interview because you only have one camera which is pointed at the interviewee throughout. I confess I have filmed noddies.

I have filmed noddies where the reporter was there. I have filmed noddies after the interviewee left. I have filmed noddies when a studio interview was done down the line with audio-only and it was then set up to look as if done from the studio in vision. But I have never recorded a noddy when the journalist was not really doing the interview. Everything else is an editing device. To put yourself somewhere that you never were, is a misrepresentation. That's where I think Yentob is cavalier with his audience and trust in TV. Whether it matters much in an arts show is open to debate. It certainly doesn't happen much, if at all, in news. I certainly disagree with the BBC source who is quoted as saying that it is '[a universal practice](#).' My point here is that you should always try to be as straight-forward and transparent as possible. Once the audience's confidence in the illusion that is TV is broken it is difficult to repair. But it is difficult to be too prescriptive. [[Don't forget the POLIS TV trust debate: September 25th](#)]

Five News has [banned](#) noddies along with some other TV Newstechniques that tweak reality, but they are missing the point. (It is interesting that Sky, who make *Five News*, have not adopted the same regime). Every editor I ever worked for would like journalists never to use noddies or other crass techniques such as those dreadful walking shots which set up interviews. But journalists operate under limits of time and resources and are prone to adopt formulaic practices when under pressure. *Five* is not really addressing the other more important issues about trust.

Newsnight conducted its own investigation into practices like Noddies and its editor [Peter Barron](#) came up with a very intelligent and considered response. Barron writes:

"The issue of editing shots is in a different league from the incidents of deception and dishonesty which have caused turmoil in the TV industry in recent months. But if the industry's response to those problems is a new level of transparency towards our viewers then it is surely right to address what we used to call the "magic of television"

I think the noddy debate is a distraction. But we are right to be concerned about trust. This is not just about faked phone-ins or badly edited promos for Royal documentaries. In an internet age people expect much greater transparency and much greater humility from journalists. We need to be more open and interactive. As [Jeremy Paxman](#) pointed out in his Edinburgh [lecture](#) – a brilliant exposition of the pressures on good TV journalism – the root of the evil is the triumph of the market mentality over an editorial culture. What he alluded to, but I think underplayed, is the degree to which new media means we *must* change our ways. The party is over. The Oxbridge/metropolitan elite that has run the nicer end of British TV news for its own satisfaction has to realise that its culture has to evolve, and rather quickly.

Oh, and by the way. The reason for the headline for this post? My kid's favourite joke (OK, MY favourite joke) is this:

Why have elephants got big ears?

Because Noddy won't pay the ransom!!!

[POLIS](#) will be debating Trust in TV with a panel of major TV figures on September 25th:

details [here](#).

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