

Al Jazeera's One Nation sting wasn't just legally solid, it was ethically responsible too

Al Jazeera's expose of the One Nation's NRA designs was a masterclass in the power — and responsibility — of journalists to keep democracy transparent.

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MAR 29, 2019 (IMAGE: AL JAZEERA)

The politics of distraction are infuriating when the regular parties do it. When One Nation tries out the same technique, it's like watching a car crash in stop motion made by the *Wallace and Gromit* team.

Sure, party officials voluntarily flew to Washington, met with the NRA and the billionaire Koch brothers and discussed approaching them for \$20 million to help One Nation turn Australia into the 51st US state. But that *Jazeera* guy tricked them into it!

"Islamist!" Hanson snarled at her press conference. "Media entrapment!" Mark Latham barked. Obviously, Hanson and Co aren't going to do anything but quadruple-down and claim that *Al Jazeera* slipped her a mind-control drug, which made her tell the hidden camera in her vol-au-vent that Port Arthur was a hoax.

But media entrapment is a real thing, and more serious people than Pauline have queried whether *Al Jazeera* did overstep the boundaries of ethical journalism in getting One Nation so good.

Two forms of deception were engaged here:

1. Journalist Roger Muller spent three years in character as a gun lobbyist, infiltrating the NRA and One Nation, ultimately using the connections he'd built with each to bring them together; and
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3. The extensive use of hidden cameras to record James Ashby and Steve Dickson bonding over their mutual affection for whisky and a new world order.
4. Entrapment is a sexy word, but in Australia it has no legal meaning. The police routinely run sting operations to catch criminals and, even if they acted illegally, that doesn't give the accused a defence.

As to whether *Al Jazeera's* secret recordings broke the law: no, they didn't. It looks like all the recording happened either in Queensland or the US. In Queensland, it's not illegal to secretly record a conversation to which you're a party, and it's OK to publish it if doing so is in the public interest. Recordings made overseas don't trigger any Australian laws, so they're in the clear.

For the media, entrapment is framed as an ethical question, but it is really one of public policy too. The morality of journalistic choices isn't the issue, rather the contest between the public interest in stories of genuine importance, against our legitimate expectation of privacy. Nobody (apart, ironically, from neo-fascists) wants to live in a surveillance state where we're not ever safe to get on the piss and share conspiracy theories from the dark web.

The Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance has a [Journalistic Code of Ethics](#), which bind MEAA members but aren't a law. They open with the words: "Respect for truth and the public's right to information are fundamental principles of journalism." They also invest journalists with the responsibility to "animate democracy", which means more than just reporting what's obvious, but obliges them to be prepared to lift some nailed-down lids.

The Code requires journalists to use "fair, responsible and honest" means. It says they should identify themselves before obtaining an interview, and not exploit peoples' vulnerability.

One Nation might argue that *Al Jazeera's* actions breached this standard. Mind you, read literally, it would prohibit all undercover work and put *A Current Affair* out of business altogether. We couldn't have that.

More seriously, the Code aims to reflect the infinite degrees of nuance with which the media must contend. It explicitly requires "conscientious decision-making in context" and acknowledges that the standards may need to be overridden sometimes; but only for "substantial advancement of the public interest or risk of substantial harm to people".

Both principles are alive in the case of One Nation. Jokes aside, Ashby and his friend were seriously trying to shop Australia's gun laws and democracy to the most genuinely evil coalition of interests in the world. It gets no worse, from the perspective of Australian public safety and social cohesion, than the NRA and the weirdos of the American far-right. Their beliefs are perverted and their money is pure poison.

I last wrote that, [when it comes to white supremacists](#), all bets are off. One Nation's leaders, bluntly ignorant and foolish as they are, aim to perpetrate the ultimate fraud on Australia's democracy and apply no limitations to how low they'll go to achieve it.

Given that reality, a journalistic sting operation which catches them in a situation such as the one revealed this week, is hardly an ethical stretch for a conscientious journalist.

The only entrapment here is the self-own achieved by One Nation's gang of gullible no-hopers.