[BE] Undercover “Security Test” Constitutes a Breach of Journalistic Ethics

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On 14 June 2007, the Flemish Council for Journalism has made clear that an undercover operation by a journalist, with the risk of endangering him or herself and others, can only be accepted under very strict conditions. The Council for Journalism formulated its advisory opinion after the Association of Professional Journalists (VVJ) had raised four questions before the Council with regard to a TV programme broadcast on VTM, the commercial TV channel with the largest audience in the Flemish Community. On 27 March 2006, VTM broadcast a programme showing how a journalist had easily checked in at the hotel where Merkel and Chirac resided during the European summit in Brussels. The report showed how the journalist succeeded in bringing a pistol and the material for making a bomb into her hotel room and how she could approach Chirac in the lobby of the hotel while carrying the pistol in her hand luggage. The programme resulted in a heated debate on journalistic ethics and on the security issue.

In its advisory opinion, the Council for Journalism makes clear that although the security issue of foreign heads of states constitutes relevant subject matter, the need for an undercover operation was not sufficiently demonstrated in this case. The insufficiency of security measures in and around the hotel where heads of states and leaders of governments resided, could also have been revealed and reported by using other journalistic methods of news-gathering. The Council is also of the opinion that the journalist created an important security risk for herself and for others, without sufficiently taking this matter into consideration. The Council is finally of the opinion that the programme also breached the principles of journalistic ethics by making it all look more spectacular than it was in reality and by giving the impression that the journalist had sneaked in a real bomb, while only some (non-explosive) parts of it were concerned.

In another advisory opinion of 14 June 2007, the Council was of the opinion that a radio journalist of the public broadcaster VRT had failed to respect journalistic ethics by going undercover in order to infiltrate a television programme to be broadcast on VTM. According to the Council there was no public interest involved in the matter, as it concerned an entertainment programme. The method used by the VRT journalist was neither approved nor coordinated with the editors of the radio programme.

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In both cases, the Council referred to its recent Directive on undercover journalism of 10 May 2007, emphasising that this method of journalistic reporting should meet four conditions (matter of public interest, subsidiarity principle of the method, proportionality of security risks and in coordination with the editor in chief or his representatives).

Raad voor de Journalistiek, 14 juni 2007, Advies over een reportage van Telefacts VTM (2007/11)

http://www.rvdj.be/pdf/beslissing200711.pdf

Council for Journalism, 14 June 2007, case on a report about security in Telefacts/VTM

Raad voor de Journalistiek, 14 juni 2007, Advies over een voorgenomen reportage van Radio 1 Wilde Geruchten (2007/12)

http://www.rvdj.be/pdf/beslissing200712.pdf

Council for Journalism, 14 June 2007, case on an undercover report by Radio 1

Richtlijn over undercover journalistiek, 10 Mei 2007

http://www.rvdj.be/pdf/richtlijn_undercoverjournalistiek.pdf

Directive on undercover journalism of 10 May 2007

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