



The Undercover Panhandler

Is it OK for journalists to pretend to be someone else to get the story?

Before class (10 minutes): [Watch](#) and [read](#) “Panhandlers: Who are they and how much do they make?”

Class time needed: 20-30 minutes

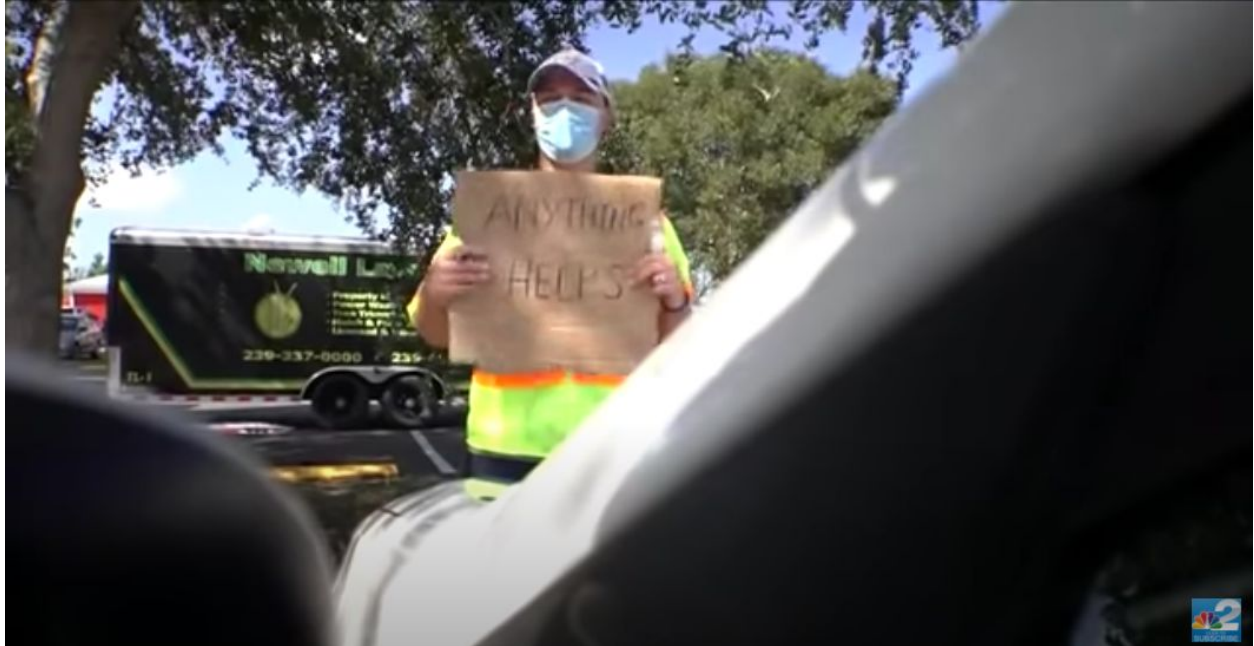
Categories/Tags: Broadcast, ethics, misrepresentation, going undercover

Learning objectives: At the conclusion of this activity, participants will be able to:

- Conclude that it is almost universally inappropriate for journalists to misrepresent themselves.
- Outline alternative methods to undercover reporting

Issue overview: Are there times when journalists can misrepresent themselves to report on an issue?

Background: Evan Dean, a reporter for NBC2 in southwest Florida, [reported on a story](#) about the rise of panhandling in Ft. Myers. He decided to pose as a panhandler to see how people reacted to him. He reported that he collected \$80 in two hours at two different intersections, which he donated to The Homeless Coalition. He also talked to several other people who were standing at intersections, asking for cash from people who drove by.



Screenshot, Youtube

Discussion questions

1. Was it appropriate for Dean to tell the story this way? Why or why not?
2. Under what circumstances might journalists pretend to be someone they're not?
3. Do you think Dean's expertise was made stronger by his experience of standing in the sun in a busy intersection and asking strangers for money? Was Dean's story "accurate?"
4. What would an alternative have been to Dean representing himself as a panhandler?
5. What was the most compelling piece of this story?

For further reading

- ["The lying game — Is it ever okay to tell a whopper in the name of journalism?"](#) CJR
- ["Using deceit to get the truth,"](#) Indiana University Media School case study
- ["Is It Ever OK for Journalists to Lie?,"](#) Politico

Supporting materials

- Slideshow (coming soon)