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Documentary's 'fact-finding' was flawed

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On a bright June morning, two young women showed up at Ohio State University's nuclear-reactor research laboratory and asked for a tour. They said they were on a campus visit and wanted to see the facility. A halfhour later, university police were called when the visitors had acted strangely upon leaving.

As it turns out, the two hadn't just detoured from a traditional campus visit; they were part of an elaborate ruse conducted over several weeks on college campuses across the country. They were helping gather information for a network-TV news documentary that is scheduled to air later this month.

But in doing so, the women most likely violated Ohio law as well as basic journalistic tenets in their quest to unveil supposed risks to the public.

The women were, indeed, college students, and they had been selected for summer internships with ABC News to work with the network's investigative unit supporting shows such as 20/20. The internships were sponsored by the Carnegie Foundation and touted on its Web site. For a journalism student, such an internship is a door into the big time. That is probably why those two were swept up in the glamour of network news.

They misrepresented themselves as casual visitors and didn't identify themselves as journalists. Once inside, they tried to carry their purses and small bags into a restroom, even though for security reasons visitors are prohibited from bringing things into the facility. A police report said one student attempted take from a wall a card that listed instructions for staff to follow in case of a bomb threat. After leaving the building, they began videotaping the outside of the facility until a reactor staffer walked toward them, at which point they jumped into their car and sped away.

Through discussions with officials at other university reactor labs across the country, we learned that student interns were testing the facilities' defenses as "research" for a documentary that ABC News had in the works. The topic was the safety and security of nuclear reactors in small research labs as well as major power reactors. The program had been intended to air near the anniversary of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, but Hurricane Katrina became the dominant news story.

Though the program's goals were laudable, it was flawed from the start in many ways.



First of all, university research reactors have operated safely and securely for decades. To my knowledge, there has never been a radiation leak into public areas from any of these facilities. Years ago, the Nuclear Regulatory Commission ordered operators of such reactors to shift from highly enriched fuel to low-enriched fuel, because the latter would have little use to terrorists.

Second, research reactors often are publicly accessible; they are tools for students and faculty and generally are open to the public for tour. At Ohio State, hundreds of students from elementary school to college-age to observe and utilize the reactor for research or education. Faculty members from statewide institutions use the facility for their research. These are the sites where students learn the basics of nuclear science for later careers. Requests by the news media to tour the facility routinely are granted.

While security and safety are the No. 1 priority, these reactor operations are not designed to be locked in vaults.

Most troubling about this summer's episode, however, is how these students were misused, willingly or otherwise. As interns, they had little choice to object to an assignment to visit the facilities under false pretenses. In this state, it is illegal for a person to intentionally deceive a public official, and public university staff and faculty are considered to be public officials.

From their positions of authority over the interns, ABC staffers took advantage of these students and violated the profession's guidelines. The Code of Ethics adopted by the Society of Professional Journalists admonishes reporters to "avoid undercover or other surreptitious methods of gathering information, except when traditional open methods will not yield information vital to the public. Since research reactors are often open facilities, there was no need for subterfuge.

Mentors always must focus on the welfare of those they advise. And journalists, young and old, need to constantly balance their passion for investigation on the public's behalf with common sense and ethical behavior.

In this case, neither occurred.

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