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NBC's Abbas Interview: A Dishonorable Deal

Among most well-brought-up news organizations, "checkbook journalism"—paying for an interview—is considered unethical, let alone tacky. But what of another kind of contractual agreement for an interview? A man, accused of being a master planner of terrorist murders, is on the lam. Also pursuing him are a lot of reporters. He decides to offer NBC News an exclusive interview on condition that the television correspondent and crew not reveal where the interview took place.

This, of course, is not a hypothetical. The man on the run is Mohammed Abu Abbas, charged with, among other things, planning the hijacking of the cruise ship Achille Lauro last October. In the course of that operation, an American, Leon Klinghoffer, was killed, allegedly by terrorists under Abbas' command.

On May 5, as a special treat on NBC's Nightly News, there was Tom Brokaw introducing correspondent Henry Champ's interview with a surprise guest by saying that it took place "in an Arab-speaking country, the name of which we agreed not to disclose."

Abbas did not pretend to be other than he is. He told the viewers that America is now the target of his operations because "America is now conducting the war against us on behalf of Israel."

The State Department, harshly criticizing NBC News for giving this gunman a platform, said that putting an Abbas on the air "encourages the terrorist activities we're all seeking to deter." Another State Department response was that NBC has made itself an accomplice to terrorism.

But there was no threat, not even from CIA Director William Casey, that the network would be prosecuted. This involves no classified documents or code-breaking, and NBC's First Amendment rights would be likely to prevail over any attempt to charge NBC journalists with being accessories after the fact—helping a criminal offender avoid being apprehended.

There is the further question, however, of whether a news operation should publish or broadcast everything the First Amendment permits it to. Lawrence Grossman, president of NBC News, told me that making the agreement with Abbas "wasn't even a close call." This man, said Grossman, "is an important international political figure. Why, the recent international summit meeting in Tokyo focused on terrorism, and that's what he represents."

I asked Grossman what his decision would be if a rapist and strangler, connected to a number of murders in New York City, offered the local NBC news division an exclusive interview with

him on condition that his whereabouts not be disclosed.

The head of NBC News was silent for a while. "I'd have to give that some hard thought," he said. "I doubt if we would do that."

I asked him what the difference is between the rapist-strangler and the terrorist. "One is a plain criminal," Grossman answered, "who can do specific harm if he isn't caught."

But Abbas is also a criminal, and he is not only capable of doing more harm, but during his NBC appearance, he specifically promised to bring his murder machine to the United States. After all, Abbas said, Ronald Reagan "has now placed himself as enemy No. 1" of this professional hit man, who, according to NBC's Champ, controls 1,200 other hit men, "a number of them prepared to carry out suicide missions." The rapist-strangler, though obviously dangerous, has no resources other than himself.

Grossman answered by reemphasizing the international importance of Abbas. Therefore, he said, "it is critical that the public be informed of what he has to say." It would appear that a fleeing criminal can have his hiding place kept secret by NBC only if he has committed sufficiently large-scale crimes and calls them political.

That's a news judgment. But it's also an ethical judgment. Many journalists rebel against acting as an arm of law enforcement, fearing that their credibility would thereby be eroded. But should journalists help conceal someone who is a danger to the lives of who knows how many people?

I can imagine one proffered interview with a murderer for which I would have made a contract similar to NBC's with Abbas. Some years ago, no one really knew whether Josef Mengele was alive. On both journalistic and ethical grounds, it would have been very much worth finding out if he was—through having an expert on Mengele as part of the interview team.

Abu Abbas, however, is known to be very much alive, and the deal NBC struck with him seems to make sense only in terms of that network's current surge to overtake CBS News in the ratings. And that kind of mechanical thinking, when lives are in danger, does no honor to any news operation.