Conference 2014 Speaker Series: An Interview with James Dean

James Dean is a business reporter for The Times, where he has carried out undercover investigative work to break stories including the Lloyds payment protection insurance (PPI) selling scandal.

He will be speaking at the Polis Annual Conference on Friday 28th March, on a panel focused on discussing how journalists sometimes have to 'cross the line' in pursuit of a story to hold power to account.

Free tickets, as well as information on our line-up, are available here. Our keynote speakers are Alan Rusbridger, Editor of the Guardian, and Ian Katz, Editor of Newsnight.

Interview by Polis reporters Emma Goodman and Meg Charlton.

The panel discussion you will speak on is entitled 'crossing the line' – have there been occasions when you have been highly aware of crossing a line in the pursuit of a story, or does this happen more gradually?

Absolutely. When you do undercover work, you cross a line as soon as you adopt a persona that isn't yours. The feeling comes on very quickly.

The nature of your work depends in some ways upon secrecy: how do you remain transparent about your practices? Do you think it is important for investigative journalists to do so, even if it might compromise their future work? How do you strike the right balance?

Subterfuge should only be used when there's a strong public interest in finding certain information but there's no other way of getting to it. I can think of a number of incredibly important stories that would only have come to light through undercover work, which in turn bought about positive change.

That said, of all the tools investigative journalists have, subterfuge is – rightly – one of the least-used, because it creates the most ethical problems. Obviously you can't be transparent about what you're doing while you're working undercover. It becomes pretty obvious what you've been doing when you publish your story, though, and when you do, you should explain why you had to use subterfuge.

Have you personally faced dilemmas over transparency in your work?

Yes. While working undercover, you meet people who are completely innocent and unconnected to the story you're chasing, but believe that you're someone else. You have to be incredibly sensitive to that. I try to avoid communication, or if that's impossible, I try to be as honest as I can about who I am without blowing my cover.

The current digital environment offers huge risks for undercover journalists to be surveilled and exposed, but what opportunities do you see? How does this environment both help and hinder you, or is it simply one or the other?

Any undercover work carries the risk of being exposed, regardless of technology. Being aware of how you might be exposed is important, so I think as long as you're aware of the technology that can find you, and how it works, you

have a better chance of countering it and staying hidden.

How significant a role would you say that online comments and social media have had in increasing journalists' accountability to their readers?

Journalists have always been accountable to their readers. Certainly being able to comment online is a good deal more immediate than the traditional 'letters to the Editor' page, but it's not a new concept. Online comments and social media make it possible to engage with readers and to see how a story is being received. It's worth remembering, however, that commenting and social media only capture a limited demographic of readers.

Interview by Polis reporter Emma Goodman and Meg Charlton.

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