

## Case 10-F

### Who Is America?

CHAD PAINTER  
*University of Dayton*

Ex-Israeli Mossad agent Errod Morad interviewed former Alabama judge and U.S. Senate candidate Roy Moore during the July 29, 2018, episode of *Who Is America*. During the interview, Morad demonstrated a new Israeli Army device that reportedly could detect sexual offenders. The device, which was much like a metal-detecting wand, consistently produced an alarm whenever Morad swiped it past Moore, who initially laughed it off but eventually left the interview.

Morad is not a real person; he is a character invented by comedian Sacha Baron Cohen for his Showtime series *Who Is America*. Cohen played a variety of characters on the show, including tree-hugging liberal Nira Cain-N'Degeocello, alt-right conspiracy theorist Billy Wayne Ruddick, Finnish YouTube sensation OMGWhizzBoyOMG!, billionaire fashion photographer Gio Monaldo, and British ex-con turned artist Rick Sherman.

Throughout the seven-episode series, these characters attempt to get political figures, journalists, and celebrities to say and do outrageous things. Part of the appeal of the show was the guests who agreed to interviews. In addition to Moore, Cohen's characters interviewed Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders, former Vice President Dick Cheney, former governors Howard Dean of Vermont and Jan Brewer of Arizona, former Maricopa County Sheriff Joe Arpaio, and former Trump campaign chairman Corey Lewandowski.

Jason Spencer, a Georgia state representative who previously authored a failed bill that would have banned Muslim women from wearing veils, resigned following his July 22 appearance. During his interaction with Cohen's Morad, Spencer performed a racist impersonation of a Chinese tourist, flashed his butt while threatening to infect a member of ISIS with homosexuality, and screamed a racial slur.

Cohen's Monaldo asked minor celebrities including *The Bachelor*'s Corinne Olympios and internet entrepreneur Mahbod Moghadam to endorse his charitable causes, which include worthwhile efforts such as ending the Ebola virus and harmful acts such as providing weapons to child soldiers in Africa. Both Olympios and Moghadam agreed to be photoshopped into pictures of aid workers in order to make it appear that they were helping with relief efforts though neither had done such work.

*Who Is America* follows a long line of shows such as *Candid Camera* that encouraged viewers to laugh at people caught in staged scenarios. The correspondents on political satire programs such as *The Daily Show* and its offshoots also use deception or omission at times.

Still, there are a host of ethical problems with using deception. Sissela Bok argues that some level of truthfulness always has been seen as essential to human society. Lies, therefore, can have immediate harm to others, to the liars themselves, and to the general level of trust and social cooperation.

Mark Cenite studied the aftermath of Cohen's film *Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan*. He argued that if portraying participants can result in foreseeable, substantial negative consequences for them, the portrayal must serve an overriding public interest.

### **Micro Issues**

1. What should be the standard for informed consent on shows such as *Who Is America*? For *The Daily Show*? Can producers withhold information about the production to help get participants, or portray participants in a different light than anticipated?
2. Is *This Is America* comedy? Gotcha journalism? Both? Explain your answer.

### **Mid-range Issues**

1. There are foreseeable, substantial negative consequences for those politicians, journalists, and celebrities who appeared on *Who Is America*. Did the show serve an overriding public interest that trumped these consequences?
2. Do shows such as *Who Is America*, which uses deception to get newsmakers to embarrass themselves, harm the ability of “real” news programming to attract potential guests?

### **Macro Issues**

1. When, if ever, is it ethically justifiable to mislead participants about the nature of a film or television program?