

What Do You Know, and How Do You Know It?

By DANIEL OKRENT

AT the beginning of the most controversial article published in *The Times* in the last few months, writer Peter Landesman described a house in Plainfield, N.J., that had once harbored a sex slavery ring.

"When I stood in front of it on a breezy day in October," he wrote in *The Times Magazine* on Jan. 25, "I could hear the cries of children from the playground of an elementary school around the corner. American flags fluttered from porches and windows. The neighborhood is a leafy, middle-class Anytown."

I visited Plainfield last week, and I can assure readers that every detail in Landesman's description is accurate. I can also assure you that every detail in my own description is accurate:

"When I stopped my car in front of the house on a wintry day in February, the loudest noise came from the traffic roaring past. Across the street stood a pair of body shops; virtually next door, Friendly Check-Cashing conducted its desultory business. Yards away sat the single-story home of the Faith Tabernacle Church, and just beyond that the rotting hulk of an enormous 90-year-old Mack Truck factory, a dark satanic mill that would have been at home in any dying industrial city."

Not every journalist sees every fact from the same angle.

The assault on "The Girls Next Door" and its assertions of widespread sex slavery in the United States began within hours of its publication, mostly on the Web: alarmist, unconvincing, undersourced. Soon after, I received the first of several messages from *Times* reporters expressing similar views, their tone ranging from studied skepticism to barely contained outrage.

From *Times* staffers? Don't be so surprised. The antipathy directed toward *The Times Magazine* by many of the daily paper's writers and editors is decades old. Standards at the magazine are deficient, many say; at a meeting I attended recently with several dozen members of *The Times*'s Metro staff, one reporter said, "No one in this room would have written that story."

The magazine's defenders make the case that their standards are in fact tougher than those in force at the daily paper. Newspaper reporters aspire to corroboration of disputed facts by relying on more than one source; magazines, say those on the other side, do the same but may not provide the evidence in print. They also subject their stories to examination by checkers who review every fact. Magazine people say most newspaper stories aren't written well enough, or dramati-

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ly enough, to engage the reader: newspaper people say magazine writers excel not at storytelling but at embroiling.

Both sides are better at offense than defense. It's impossible to read a typical day's *Times* without corroboration being attributed to... well, to people who asked not to have their words attributed to them. "Sources say," "analysts say" and all the similarly empty variants suggest corroboration but don't confirm it. The *Times*'s new policy on anonymous sources, announced last week and available at www.nytimes.com/sources, may mitigate this practice, but imagining a modern newspaper without unattributed quotes is like imagining the Arctic without ice.

At magazines, fact-checking can help you get details right, but can't pin down the unpinnable: sometimes, a source will make an assertion — for instance, that he saw women walking through Cottonwood Canyon, Calif., in high heels. (An Editors' Note addressing this and some other matters relating to Landesman's article appeared in *The Times* on Feb. 15.) Virtually all the fact-checker can do is call the source and ask, "Did you see women walking through Cottonwood Canyon in high heels?" The firmest "yes" doesn't even approach proof. It's often not the fact that gets checked, but the fact that someone said it was a fact.

Newspaper reporters engage in a daily dialectic, and try to follow a controversial declaration with a balancing statement from someone on the other side. Magazine writers, believing in the primacy of narrative, will withhold contrary views until the end of the piece — or, often, withhold them altogether. Magazine writing, says Gerald Marzorati, editor of the *Sunday* magazine, "encourages point of view and authorial opinion." Newspaper writing does not. (Except, of course, when it does.)

For Landesman, the dialectical approach would have been pretty difficult — it's not easy to find people who'll make the case for sexual slavery. But there are always doubters, and I know Landesman talked to several. In a newspaper story, they would have been quoted or paraphrased, even if left unidentified; in a magazine

story, practitioners argue, it's often enough for the author to assimilate contrary views and then make a judgment. Persuaded by his own reporting, and able to convince his editors of its accuracy, Landesman marshaled all the evidence he could find to support what became a piece of advocacy journalism.

But Landesman and the editors carried the advocacy to a fault. In possession of a horrifying story, they didn't allow it to speak for itself. I won't use the word "hype," which connotes a mendacity that was in no way present here. The verb I prefer is "shout," which the magazine did in two different voices, one presentational and one rhetorical.

The presentational excess began with the cover line, "Sex Slaves on Main Street," with the Anytown implication it carries. The cover photograph depicted a partly obscured young woman who we later learn is 19 years old, but whose clothing (knee socks, kilt, sweater vest) suggested someone much younger. Inside, the display type above the headline declared that "perhaps tens of thousands" of young women "are captive and pimped out for forced sex" in the United States. Always beware

script of Landesman's interview with Andrea, and despite some internal contradictions, it is impossible not to believe it in its outlines and in much of its detail. But excerpting it without qualification, or without a convincing explanation of why Andrea's detailed memories of events that happened many years ago are believable, only undercuts its credibility. The question is not whether Landesman believes Andrea — what matters is whether he can persuade the rest of the world to believe her.

When I first read Landesman's piece, I found him credulous. Having examined the article more closely, and having done some reporting of my own, I'm convinced that the proper adjective would be "inflamed." As he went deeper into his reporting, the degradation and the horror he encountered rendered him passionate — hardly an insult, but in the newspaper business often a disqualifier. He brought into the story figures, facts and circumstances that he felt added to his argument. Instead they turned some readers into skeptics, some skeptics into critics.

In the weeks after Landesman's article went to press, authorities in both Mexico and the United States brought charges against what *The Associated Press* described as "a family-based ring that lured girls and women into sex slavery in Mexico and in New York" — an operation based in the town of Tenancingo and described in detail in Landesman's article. In late January federal officials busted a suspected sex slavery ring in Queens. A few days later, Los Angeles authorities broke up another operating out of a motel across the street from Disneyland.

The road from West Front Street to Anaheim is a long one, and every mile along the way provides a battlefield for the ongoing war between newspaper reporters and magazine writers. One journalist presents one set of facts; the other presents another. Both make choices that shape the terrain of an article. Each relies on a different descriptive technique, and on different claims of proof. Based on my examination of Landesman's materials, on conversations with law-enforcement authorities and on the internal evidence itself, his choices were fairly arrived at. But they weren't justified terribly well.

So do you tear Landesman apart because you don't believe his sources, or because you can't locate an audit trail to some of his assertions? Or do you accept the hideous realities he describes and emerge convinced that sex slavery is a genuine problem? Do the latter — I just wish he and his editors had been more circumspect in making the case.

An article about sex slavery ignites a war over both style and substance.

"perhaps," the most dangerous word in journalism. As often as not, it's a synonym for "Who knows?"

The barely more refined number — 30,000-50,000 — in the piece itself, put forward by the president of America's largest anti-slavery organization, is an example of the article's rhetorical problems. If your material is strong enough — and I believe Landesman's was — you don't need to underscore, capitalize or quantify, especially when there is really no way of coming up with a number accurate enough to be meaningful.

If your material is strong enough, you don't need to cite prosecutions that may have involved smuggling women for voluntary or temporary prostitution, but not for what you'd call slavery. You don't need to bring in tangential references to other forms of sexual horror that have nothing to do with slavery. You don't need to rely on the testimony of a pseudonymous young woman, "Andrea," for the most dramatic, detailed and harrowing description in the entire piece. I've read the tran-

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