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Smile, You're on Hidden Camera

The ACORN videos and the future of investigative journalism

[Greg Beato](#) | September 22, 2009

No one wants to see Sean Hannity or Michael Moore pursuing truth in crushed-velour ass pants, but thanks to the efforts of [investigative pranksters James O'Keefe and Hannah Giles](#), such spectacles may be in the offing. Posing as the world's least discreet international sex traffickers, the enterprising duo visited ACORN offices around the country and explained that they were interested in purchasing a house for themselves and some underage hookers from El Salvador. In at least five instances, ACORN employees responded in shockingly helpful fashion, offering advice on how to hide earnings on tax returns, claim their adolescent harem as dependents, and write off condoms as business expenses.

While it's one thing to commit [voter registration fraud](#), [embezzle a million bucks](#), and [commingle funds of legally separate affiliates](#), it's another thing entirely to jeopardize the welfare of a dozen imaginary teen sex slaves. O'Keefe and Giles [posted their first video on BigGovernment.com on September 10th](#), and within days, the Census Bureau cancelled a contract it had awarded ACORN to help out with the 2010 census, the House of Representatives had voted to cut off all funding to the organization, the □ Senate had voted to cut off funding as well, and ACORN itself had decided to stop taking new walk-in clients until it could review its operations. It's hard out there for a community organizer!

For fake pimps and hos, however, the future looks as bright as [Lil Wayne's diamond-encrusted choppers](#). While news media outlets have been conducting hidden-camera stings since at least 1976, when 60 Minutes [set up a fake health clinic in Chicago](#) to lure medical lab personnel who'd be paying kickbacks to doctors for sending them patients who needed blood and urine tests, O'Keefe and Giles have shown what can happen when you go beyond the template established by Mike Wallace and company and also incorporate the tactics of original prankster Alan Funt, who, in 1947, [pioneered the genre](#) of surreptitiously documenting the targets of his practical jokes.

In the traditional approach to hidden-camera journalism, reporters attempt to obtain visual documentation of events that they know or strongly suspect are already occurring. For example, a TV news team gets a tip from an insider that local Jiffy Lubes are charging customers for services they don't perform, then rigs a car with cameras to [capture such deceptions on tape](#). With hidden-camera entertainment, however, producers simply invent unlikely scenarios designed to provoke dramatic responses, then turn the cameras on and wait for the fun to erupt.

This is what Giles and O'Keefe did. Indeed, while ACORN and its employees have been charged with numerous transgressions, attempting to turn fancy men and their frails into taxpayers on a path towards home ownership was not one of them. Instead, that idea sprung from the minds of the young filmmakers. "One day I was jogging after work and I saw an ACORN, and I was like, hmm, you know, I've never seen them before, I don't like them," [Giles explained to Fox News' Glenn Beck](#). "And I came

up with the idea: What if a prostitute walked into ACORN, had no legal paperwork at all, and wanted a house to set up her business?" [Echoing](#) Giles at Biggovernment.com, O'Keefe explained how the duo upped the ante "by posing the most ridiculous criminal scenario [they] could think of." Thus, [Grandma's fur coat](#), the [funkadelic sunglasses](#), and the imaginary tween sex slaves.

The ACORN employees depicted in the videos took the bait, and voila, we now have a new template for 21st century news-gathering. O'Keefe and Giles produced a story that prompted government action, had every major news organization in the country playing catch-up, and may lead to the downfall of a nationwide organization that has been a political force for decades, all for a reported total cost of only \$1300. At a time when newspapers can barely afford enough ink to give us our daily crossword puzzle fix, that may be a little steep for most dailies to invest in a single story--but for better funded operations and individuals like The O'Reilly Factor, Rush Limbaugh, The Daily Show, and any blogger who has a day job, there's no longer room for excuses--why aren't they out there breaking stories of similar magnitude?

Certainly there are countless organizations and programs worth investigating. Indeed, if after snaring only \$53 million from the federal government since 1994, ACORN was somehow in line to get \$8.5 trillion in stimulus money, [as Sean Hannity recently insisted](#), then the Laura Bush Library Program, which has received more than \$73 million in the last three years, must be eligible for \$8.5 trillion-gazillion. Spend a few minutes perusing the [Catalog of Federal Domestic Assistance](#), and you can find hundreds of expensive government programs that attract little scrutiny. In May, the Cato Institute's Chris Edwards [compiled a sampling of them](#): Healthy marriage promotion gets \$150 million a year. Community abstinence education gets \$117 million. The Seniors Farmers Market program gets \$22 million. Who exactly is getting all this money and what are they doing with it?

One imagines the rabbi in Washington, DC who's been collecting nearly \$500,000 a year from the federal government to promote marriage, even though he sometimes merely ends up [telling Woody Allen jokes to empty rooms](#), is less inclined to help steer fake pimps and hos toward the path of home ownership. And the [Illinois library that's getting \\$420,000](#) to teach employees how to use [Facebook, instant messaging, and Second Life](#) may have little interest in giving tax advice to sex traffickers. But don't you want to know for sure?

After all, if there's one thing we've learned from 60 years of hidden-camera entertainment, it's that corruption lurks everywhere. Parents who are willing to sign up their kids for a Lord of the Flies-style reality series, [complete with rabid boars and countless other dangers](#)? Yes, [they exist](#). People who are willing to endorse a hamburger grill that just blew up in someone's face, as long as they get \$20 for doing so? [They're out there](#).

Of course, many states, including two in which O'Keefe and Giles taped their exchanges with ACORN employees, [have laws against surreptitiously recording in-person conversations](#) in settings where there's a reasonable expectation of privacy. News organizations, suspicious spouses, and voyeurs regularly break such laws, however, and in the wake of the ACORN tapes, no one seems too concerned about the privacy implications of the case. Perhaps as investigative pranking becomes more and more common, some pushback will occur as people decide their right to speak freely in private is more important than protecting make-believe sex slaves. Until then, every subsidized farmer who hires illegal aliens with government hand-outs and crisis pregnancy center staffer who gets underwritten by the Department of Health and Human Services to tell teen girls that abortion causes breast cancer should be on notice. That chatty pimp who keeps showing up at your place of business asking for advice on how to smuggle underage hookers into the country just may be [Ashton Kutcher](#) on the hunt for a Pulitzer.

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