

Assignment 13

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Case Study: Dysfunctional Persuasion - (Page 371 in 9th edition of textbook) See if you can determine what could have caused the editors to be so easily persuaded by Cooke and how we can protect ourselves from this type of dysfunctional persuasion? This case study is at the beginning of Chapter 13 in your textbook. Page # may differ.

CASE STUDY

Dysfunctional Persuasion

When Janet Cooke was interviewed and hired by the *Washington Post*, "every interviewer was impressed" (Green, 1981, para. 4). In fact, after Cooke had received and lost the prestigious Pulitzer Prize, they recalled: "So impressed had the staff been with her and her writing that the usual check of references was done in a cursory manner" (para. 10). The following story was adapted from Kidwell (2004) and Green (1981).

In her first 8 months at the newspaper, Cooke had impressed everyone with her writing and had written "52 by-line articles" (Kidwell, 2004, p. 178). However, what she really wanted was to land a front-page story and eventually the Pulitzer Prize (the *Post* had received a Pulitzer for its stories on Watergate). Cooke had heard about an 8-year-old boy who was addicted to heroin, and an editor encouraged her to seek out the child and write his story. After searching for several months with no luck, she decided to just invent a story about a child, his mother, and the mother's boyfriend, who she said injected Jimmy with heroin while she watched. The story began this way:

Jimmy is 8 years old and a third-generation heroin addict, a precocious little boy with sandy hair, velvety brown eyes, and needle marks freckling the baby-smooth skin of his thin brown arms. (p. 178).

Cooke's story made the front page on a Sunday morning and immediately "the *Washington Post's* telephone switchboard lit up like a space launch control room" (Green, 1981, para. 86) with people outraged by the article and concerned for the child's whereabouts. By Monday, a citywide search had begun by the police, the schools, and social services. A \$10,000 reward was offered for information leading to Jimmy. According to Green (para. 92), "It would be difficult to overestimate Washington's compassion for 'Jimmy' or its anger when the *Post* refused to reveal his identity or address." Yet, after 17 days of intense searching, no child was found. At this point, the police and mayor had serious doubts about the accuracy of Cooke's story. Feeling under attack, the staff went into a "protect the source and back the reporter" mode (para. 150). At one point, a worried editor spoke with Cooke and still remembers his satisfaction at her "gripping account of her visit to 'Jimmy's home'" (para. 152).

Cooke's story was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize by the *Post* leadership, and early the next year it was announced that she had won. The Associated Press and various papers

As you read this chapter...

See if you can determine (a) what could have caused the editors to be so easily persuaded by Cooke, and (b) how we can protect ourselves from this type of dysfunctional persuasion?

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immediately began researching the story behind Cooke's win. A comparison of her Pulitzer biography with her resume showed some discrepancies—she had added an additional six writing awards and fluency in two additional languages to the Pulitzer biography (Kidwell, 2004, p. 179). A further search found that some of her original resume had also been falsified—she had attended Vassar one year, but hadn't graduated from there magna cum laude as stated in her biography. When confronted with the discrepancies by several *Post* editors, Cooke admitted to the resume padding but insisted that her story about Jimmy was true. Finally, only days after receiving the Pulitzer, she admitted to fabricating the story and resigned from the *Washington Post*. Cooke was obviously a good writer, well-liked, highly motivated to achieve, and apparently persuasive enough in her interview and about her feature story that her editors didn't really question her credibility until the story had gone to print (Green, 1981).

Speaking of the incident, the executive editor of the *Post* had this to say (Maraniss, 1981):

The credibility of a newspaper is its most precious asset, and it depends almost entirely on the integrity of its reporters. When that integrity is questioned and found wanting, the wounds are grievous, and there is nothing to do but come clean with our readers, apologize to the Advisory Board of the Pulitzer Prizes, and begin immediately on the uphill task of regaining our credibility. This we are doing." (para. 4)

For more details, go to WashingtonPost.com. You can easily access this link through the CourseMate website for *Communicating for Results*.