

A costly 'exclusive'

At the height of the investigation of the disappearance of 12-year-old Jennifer Schweiger of Westerleigh, the city's two tabloids found the case sensational enough to give it front-page treatment on a daily basis. Those two Manhattan-based tabloids, as everyone knows, are in an anything-goes circulation battle — a battle which could well result in the demise of one of them.

That anything-goes ethic was carried to the point where a Daily News reporter, Heidi Evans, posed as a friend of then-suspect Andre Rand in an effort to gain admittance to his room in the psychiatric ward of Kings County Hospital.

She succeeded in fooling hospital officials and getting in to talk to Rand, and the results were published in an "exclusive," in which Rand said nothing more than that he had nothing to do with Jennifer Schweiger's disappearance. It didn't take a covert operation to get that information.

Most of the story rehashed previously known

details of the case, but the News nonetheless played up their "exclusive," and probably persuaded some readers to purchase the paper. No doubt they viewed it as a great victory over the competition, especially the Post.

But at what cost? Some cutthroat types in the business might applaud Reporter Evans' ruse as a demonstration of journalistic initiative. But it really wasn't good journalism; it was a lie — a devious ploy to get a story which other newspapers and media in this city, including this one, might have tried but didn't. What's the credibility of a news organization that has its reporters lie to get a story?

The News got its one "exclusive" paragraph from Andre Rand, but lost the respect of many inside and outside the news business. And News readers got the news that Andre Rand denied his guilt. Was it really worth it?