

Seeking the Truth - Part A

(This case was prepared by University of Georgia journalism student Megan Ernst for JOUR 5170, Advanced Studies in Journalism, based on secondary sources cited below.)

In 1989, *The Hartford Courant* published an investigative piece about discriminatory practices in the real estate business. To get the story, reporters went undercover as home buyers. Controlling for all other factors except for race, the reporters found that some real estate agents gave black buyers tougher financial scrutiny, while others “steered” black buyers toward towns that already had significant minority populations – practices that are illegal. All agreed that the presentation of the investigation was meticulous, and a column ran alongside the piece about how and why the test was done.

Discussion:

At first glance, does anything appear unethical about this investigation to you?

Do you find it problematic that journalists misrepresented themselves to get the story?

Could the story have been executed without misrepresentation?

Seeking the Truth – Part B

Courant reporter Henry McNaulty had a problem with the story. In an op-ed column, he discussed his concern about journalists lying to get a story. The reporters who went “undercover” as home buyers used false identities and didn’t disclose that they were journalists. Even though there’s a long history of journalists “disguising themselves to root out corruption,” and even though this investigation did a lot of good in terms of raising important issues of discrimination and racism, McNaulty didn’t think the ends justified the means. “Even when the goals are noble, and the results are positive for the community, I don’t think journalists should lie,” he wrote in his column. Lying in cases like this might affect credibility in other cases, or might even encourage journalists to lie in less black-and-white situations.

Discussion:

Do you think McNaulty should have published the column?

Do you think McNaulty’s column raised issues of credibility that could negatively impact the paper?

Does lying in cases “where goals are noble” create gray areas where the goals and outcomes of the misrepresentation isn’t as clear?

Is misrepresentation in “noble” cases important enough that it outweighs these potential negatives?

Seeking the Truth - Part C

Courant policy states that in reporting, “we do not misrepresent ourselves.” But, that promise is followed by this qualification: “from time to time, legitimate stories in the public interest might involve a conflict with this policy.”

McNulty called out this “escape clause” – “in other words, we will not misrepresent ourselves unless we think we should.” McNulty argues that the level of discretion involved in deciding when reporters “think we should” misrepresent ourselves is too much leeway, when transparency is such an otherwise untouchable value of journalism.

Discussion:

Do you find these statements in the *Courant*’s policy conflicting?

Do you think that the potential good that can be achieved from undercover reporting outweighs the instability inherent in such a discretionary policy?

Do you think this qualifies as reporters “deceiving sources”? If so, can we justify this kind of deception while condemning others?

Seeking the Truth – Conclusion

McNulty conceded in his column that the test required for the investigation would have been “nearly impossible” to do without reporters posing as the home buyers. His executive editor, Michael Waller, said that finding “testers” to act as homebuyers would have been tough to do. Even tougher was that those testers would have had to misrepresent themselves too, and he saw “little ethical difference between misrepresenting ourselves and asking someone else to do it for us.” Alternatively, using real homebuyers would disrupt the scientific guidelines of a successful test.

However, McNulty concluded that “we shouldn’t have done this investigation, despite its societal importance.” Credibility is vital to an effective news source. McNulty argues that when reporters “deceive people to get a story” in any way, credibility is compromised.

Discussion:

Do you agree with McNulty (does deception compromise credibility)? Are there exceptions?

Should the *Courant* have done the story? What’s the justification for your answer?

Sources:

http://dlib.nyu.edu/undercover/sites/dlib.nyu.edu.undercover/files/documents/uploads/editors/Real-Estate-Probe-Built-on-Deception_Hartford-Courant_1989June4.pdf