

### Case Study:

Is it ever acceptable for journalists to use deception to gather facts? What is the resulting story uncovers a major social wrong?

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Henry McNulty, a reader representative for *The Hartford Courant* was faced with dilemma when journalists from his paper went undercover to report on racial bias in real estate firms. Reporters posed as potential home buyers and found that in some cases real estate agents treated people of a specific race differently. All of the reporters (potential home owners) appeared to be identical in their financial status, but weren't treated like they were. According to the article, "real estate agents gave the 'testers' who were black tougher financial scrutiny. Other times blacks were 'steered' into towns that already had significant minority populations." It was obvious that these reporters were uncovering acts of racial profiling and discrimination.

After taking into consideration the facts of the case, The Potter Box method requires a reporter to consider their loyalties, review personal values and consider appropriate principles. In this case, McNulty was faced with a dilemma because he did not believe the reporters should have altered their names and given false information to hide their identities. "I can't think of a case in which such deception would be justified," McNulty said. "Even when the goals are noble, as these certainly were, and even when the results are positive for the community." It was obvious that he considered his loyalty to the profession to be more important than the loyalty he had to citizens and to his employer.

As a reporter, I consider my obligation to the truth and my loyalty to the citizens to be more important than any other obligation. McNulty believed remaining transparent in his reporting was the best way to uphold the standards of the profession, which was why he didn't support the act of going undercover. In the article, he stated credibility was the most important aspect of journalism and by deceiving people, "we've compromised that credibility before a word is written." Additionally, by writing this article on the dilemma of bending the truth to

expose injustice, McNulty was going against his loyalties to his employer. He even went so far as to discuss the Courant's policy and how they've managed to find a loophole in their own policy. "I say, with deep regret, that we couldn't - and so, we shouldn't - have done this investigation, despite its social importance," McNulty said.

With these factors in mind, I aim to take this ethical dilemma and provide substantial evidence as to why the reporters of the Courant remained ethical through their reporting. By using the Potter Box method, I have already decided my loyalty to the citizens would surpass any loyalty, because our jobs as reporters is to seek and report the truth, so that people may remain informed. In this specific case, people would want to know that local real estate firms may be displaying racial discrimination. As a citizen, it is important to remain informed on the social injustices that could be occurring in your town.

Other important aspects of The Potter Box to consider are the Nine Principles that all reports must live by. The first two discuss the importance of remaining truthful and loyal to citizens, which correlates with this story. Other principles that apply include serving as an independent monitor of power, providing a forum for public criticism and compromise, and making the news significant and relevant. The one that speaks to this case study the most is serving as an independent monitor of power. This principle holds journalists responsible for making the management and execution of power transparent and serving as watchdogs over those whose power and positions affect citizens. Obviously this principle references government officials and other influential town people, but wouldn't you consider real estate firms to have a significant affect on citizens? When looking at the bigger picture, real estate firms are the companies people go to when they're trying to find a home or a new piece of property. Most, if

not all agencies are trusted by people and this story has proven that some of those firms do not have the citizens best interest in mind. As a citizen, it would be very eye-opening to read that agencies I have turned to for guidance and support are actually discriminating against certain races and are even attempting to segregate certain groups of people.

Additionally, by publishing this story, the Courant created a forum for public criticism and compromise in Connecticut. I consider this principle to be applicable because once the paper was published, Connecticut's governor ordered a statewide investigation of discrimination linked to real estate firms. This investigation allowed for citizens to make their own decisions on the real estate firms in town and it also gave the state government a reason to bring these issues to light. By creating this forum for public criticism, the reporters were ethical in their decisions to go undercover and publish the story. This story has affected change and proved that when journalism is done right, it can positively influence a large number of people.

Another theory or system that applies to this case study is communitarianism, because it discusses the importance of social justice. This ideology emphasizes the responsibility of an individual to the community and says social importance is the predominant moral value. When reviewing this case study, McNulty says this story has social importance, but he fails to realize that is what reporters set out to do. By emphasizing the connection between an individual and the community, McNulty could have seen that these reporters were actually just individuals contributing to the social justice in Connecticut. This theory, along with J.S. Utilitarianism, supports the idea of affecting the greatest number of people when faced with a dilemma.

Utilitarianism says the best actions bring the greatest happiness or least suffering. This case study

is a prime example of the overall greater good the reporters did by exposing the real estate firms for their racial discrimination and social injustice.

Lastly, I think it's important to address the Courant's policy, which McNulty finds to be an "escape clause" to the standards of the paper. The Courant's policy states, "we do not misrepresent ourselves in pursuing a story...from time to time, legitimate stories in the public interest might involve a conflict (with this policy)." In addition to that policy, the Courant put out a sidebar headed "How, why the test was done." McNulty even says the paper did not hide its deception. This is a perfect example of blunting bias. In class, we established blunting bias as telling people why you withheld information. As reporters, we all know transparency is key and although these reporters did not show their transparency to the real estate firms, they did provide their readers with reasoning as to why they went undercover for the story. I consider the Courant's policy and the sidebar they used to be representation of transparency. They are coming forward and putting their loyalties and principles out there for the world to see and in this specific case study, the Courant found that this project would not have been easy to do or even possible to execute if the reporters had not gone undercover as potential home buyers.

In conclusion, after reviewing this case study using The Potter Box, various theories, systems, principles, and loyalties, I have argued against Henry McNulty's decision, and have sided with *The Hartford Courant's* decision to send reporters undercover. This story is about the end result and by publishing it, the real estate firms displaying racial discrimination were exposed and citizens were informed of the major social wrongs that were occurring.