

Real-estate probe built on deception

Henry McNulty

Columnist D3

On May 21, after a weeks-long investigation, The Courant reported extensive evidence of racial discrimination and steering in several Hartford-area real-estate agencies. In some cases, agents gave black people tougher financial scrutiny than they gave whites. In others, black people were "steered" toward certain areas. These actions are illegal.



The Courant report was dramatic and disturbing. The investigation had been meticulously prepared, carefully written and clearly presented. In fact, I could find only one thing wrong with what The Courant did: We had to lie to get the story.

The Courant staffers who showed up at real-estate offices pretended to be potential home buyers, but they were not. They used altered names, and provided other false information that masked their identities as reporters. In short, they didn't tell the truth.

In this case, was that so very wrong? Doesn't the result justify the falsehoods? The investigation struck a strong blow for justice and equality. Racial discrimination is reprehensible, and our story may well play a part in reducing it. Gov. William A. O'Neill has ordered a statewide investigation of racial discrimination by real-estate agencies. Arthur L. Green, director of the state Commission on Human Rights and Opportunities, said the commission would begin random testing of real-estate agencies this month.

I say the lying was unjustified. It's not easy, or pleasant, to find fault with what The Courant did. But even when the goals are noble, and the results are positive for the community, I don't think journalists should lie.

Courant policy states that in seeking information, "we do not misrepresent ourselves." But that is followed by the statement that

"from time to time, legitimate stories in the public interest might involve a conflict with [this policy]." In other words, we will not misrepresent ourselves unless we think we should. The escape clause essentially means we have a policy that permits misrepresentation. It shouldn't; the policy needs to be changed.

Saying "journalists shouldn't lie" opens up a host of questions: What about restaurant reviewers who pretend to be ordinary consumers when in fact they intend to report on their dining experience? How about the writer who puts on ragged clothes and lives with homeless people for a month in order to do an in-depth story? Aren't they misrepresenting themselves, too?

Perhaps. But these questions — and there are many more — can't be answered simply. Each requires detailed and serious examination. And there's no guarantee that two people will come to the same conclusion in every case.

Could we have investigated discrimination without misrepresenting ourselves? Executive Editor Michael E. Waller, who approved the project, thinks not. The main problem, he said, involves finding people to be "testers" — that is, black people and white people who would visit real-estate agencies and report on how they were treated.

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"To have an outside group . . . do the testing would still have posed problems," Waller said. "They would have had to misrepresent themselves — and I see little ethical difference between us misrepresenting ourselves and asking someone else to do it for us.

"Asking real home buyers . . . to be the testers posed, in my mind, insurmountable problems. The first would be finding the people to fit the test criteria and getting them to do it simultaneously and in a timely manner. The second would be keeping any reasonable control of accuracy and assurance that they faithfully would follow all the testing guidelines."

I think these are reasonable arguments, and I'm willing to admit that it would have been nearly impossible to get this story without our giving false information. So, with regret, I conclude that we shouldn't have done this investigation, despite its social importance.

Credibility is our most important asset. And if we deceive people in order to get a story, we have compromised our credibility before a word is written.

Henry McNulty is The Courant's reader representative.