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THE PUBLIC EDITOR

Culling the Anonymous Sources

By CLARK HOYT Published: June 8, 2008

A STUDY that I requested by students at the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism suggests that The Times has made progress in its effort to set higher standards for using anonymous sources, the lifeblood and the bane of journalism.



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Submit a Question Jill Abramson, the managing editor, is answering readers' questions about anonymous sources.

The policy requires that at least one editor know the identity of every source. Anonymous sources cannot be used when on-the-record sources are readily available. They must have direct knowledge of the information they are imparting; they cannot use the cloak of anonymity for personal or partisan attack; they cannot be used for trivial comment or to make an unremarkable comment seem more important than it is.

Although the purpose of the policy was not explicitly to reduce the number of anonymous

Anonymous sources have provided some of the most important information in The Times, like the disclosure of the Bush administration's extralegal bugging of international communications. But they have embarrassed the newspaper too, as with unsubstantiated suggestions that John McCain had an extramarital affair with a lobbyist.

Vital as they can be, their use is sometimes silly: a CBS producer talking about Katie Couric could not be quoted by name because management did not want anyone criticizing her. The producer said people who work with her like her.

Readers hate anonymous sources because they cannot judge the sources' credibility for themselves.

"How does a reader or a viewer know if the 'high-ranking official' ... simply has an ax to grind and may even be the janitor or imaginary?" wrote James R. Poling of Laguna Niguel, Calif., who said he discounts stories with unnamed sources because he does not trust news organizations and thinks they are biased.

Because the painful Jayson Blair scandal involved articles containing unnamed sources who apparently did not exist, The Times tightened its standards in 2004. Bill Keller, the executive editor, and Allan Siegal, then the standards editor, wrote a policy declaring, "We resist granting sources anonymity except as a last resort to obtain information that we believe to be newsworthy and reliable."

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sources, Keller said last week, "If you tell the editing system to be more challenging of anonymous sources, it ought to reduce the number."

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Not long after I arrived as public editor last spring, I asked a class at Columbia to study The Times's use of anonymous sources to see how well the newspaper was living up to the 2004 policy.

A group of 17 students under the direction of Professor Richard C. Wald, a former president of NBC News, read every word of every article in six issues of the newspaper published before the policy and six from last fall. Here is what they found:

The number of articles relying on anonymous sources fell by roughly half after the policy was introduced.

Most anonymous sources — nearly 80 percent — were still not adequately described to readers. How did they know their information? Why did they need anonymity? But that was still better than before the policy, when nearly 90 percent were inadequately described.

The use of anonymous sources to air opinion, not fact, increased after 2004, even though the policy would seem to discourage that.

Anonymous sources were much less likely to appear on Page 1 under the new policy, perhaps because front-page articles got more scrutiny from editors.

The use of anonymous sources declined in virtually every part of the newspaper, except the Business section, where they inexplicably shot up. Stories from Washington, where anonymity is bred into the political and government culture, accounted for roughly a third of all anonymous sources in the newspaper before the policy and declined to roughly a quarter of them afterward.

The findings suggest that The Times is policing the unnecessary use of anonymous sources better than the students or I expected — but that it still has a long way to go to help readers understand the reliability of an unnamed source and why that source cannot be identified.

"I've worked in newsrooms," said one of the students, Jim Edwards, who hopes to be an investigative business journalist. "I was expecting that there would not be a very dramatic effect, and it surprised me there was."

The study highlighted something else. It is easy to say, in the abstract, that anonymous sources are bad. But when the students started discussing them, the judgments were very difficult. Cassandra Lizaire said the students had a lot of debates over whether a particular anonymous source was necessary and even what constituted an anonymous source.

The students decided, for example, to count quotations from the Defense Ministry of Sri Lanka or a Ford spokeswoman as anonymous sources, because an individual was not named. Keller did not agree with that, and I agree with him that these clearly are official statements that an institution is standing behind.

The study highlighted something that bothers readers and that Times editors were already trying to fix: the common but uninformative explanation that a source could not be named "because he was not authorized to discuss the matter." Sanjay Arwade, a reader from Amherst, Mass., wrote recently to ask if such explanations "really mean anything more than that the source did not want to be quoted by name. They seem like empty justifications to me."

In an in-house critique to the staff in April, Phil Corbett, the deputy news editor in charge of the style manual, said that relying "on such standard formulas works directly against our goals in accounting for anonymous sourcing." He said that if the source is afraid of getting in trouble with the boss, that is what the explanation should say. But the more important thing to tell readers, Corbett said, is how reliable the source is. The Columbia students found that The Times failed to do that quite often.

Wald, Edwards and Lizaire presented the findings a week ago Friday to Keller, Jill Abramson, the managing editor for news, and Craig Whitney, the standards editor. The full study will soon be posted on the Web site of the Columbia Journalism Review. Abramson will answer readers' questions about anonymous sources on the Web site of The Times this week.

Keller sent a memo Wednesday telling the newsroom that the Columbia study presented "an excellent opportunity to remind ourselves that unnamed sources are not to be used lightly."

But he said it was "high-minded foolishness" to suggest that The Times or any newspaper forswear them altogether. "The ability to offer protection to a source is an essential of our craft," he said. "We cannot bring readers the information they want and need to know without sometimes protecting sources who risk reprisals, firing, legal action or, in some parts of the world, their lives when they confide in us."

That is why it is so critically important that anonymous sources not be used lazily or out of habit, and why, when they really are necessary, readers need to be told as much as possible about why the sources can't be identified and how they know what they know.

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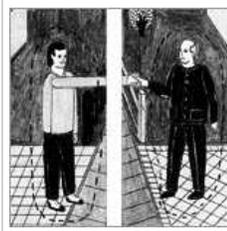


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