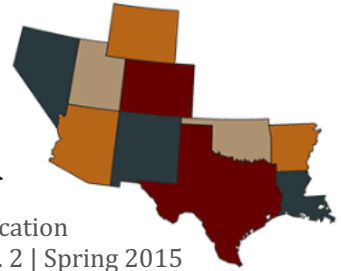


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Anonymous Sources: More or less and why and where?

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Anonymous sources have been important factors in some of the major news stories of our time. But does this reliance on unnamed sources go too far? The use and possible abuse of anonymous sources is a matter of continuing controversy in the media and can have a direct bearing on the credibility of the media. Questions related to the use of such sources are examined in a study of the use of anonymous sources in 14 daily editions of three daily newspapers, focusing on the quantity of articles using anonymous sources, their subject matter, location, and rationale for using unnamed sources. This is done within the context of the ongoing controversy about the reliance on such sources in major news organizations. Results of this study are reported and analyzed and provide some clear indications about the extent and nature of the use of anonymous sources, and point to a possible over-dependence and problematic trend.

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ANONYMOUS SOURCES: More or less and why and where?

Hoyt Purvis

Abstract:

Anonymous sources have been important factors in some of the major news stories of our time. But does this reliance on unnamed sources go too far? The use and possible abuse of anonymous sources is a matter of continuing controversy in the media and can have a direct bearing on the credibility of the media. Questions related to the use of such sources are examined in a study of the use of anonymous sources in 14 daily editions of three daily newspapers, focusing on the quantity of articles using anonymous sources, their subject matter, location, and rationale for using unnamed sources. This is done within the context of the ongoing controversy about the reliance on such sources in major news organizations. Results of this study are reported and analyzed and provide some clear indications about the extent and nature of the use of anonymous sources, and point to a possible over-dependence and problematic trend.

Confidential information can be vital to journalists in their duty to inform the public about matters of importance. A number of the most important investigative stories of our time – the classic example being the historic Watergate scandal of the early 1970s – have been based, at least in part, on information from anonymous sources. Some of the most respected journalists and news organizations in the country readily admit that anonymous sources are

highly important to their work. Philip Taubman, former Washington bureau chief for the *New York Times*, told *Editor and Publisher* magazine (Strupp, 2005) that unnamed sources can be “indispensable” for journalists.

But does this reliance on unnamed sources go too far? How extensive is the current use of such sources? What is the primary rationale for granting anonymity? What subject areas involve the largest use of unnamed sources? Coverage from which locations results in the heaviest use of these sources? These questions will be examined through a study of the use of such sources in three newspapers and within the context of ongoing controversy about reliance on anonymous sources in major news organizations.

“I see the overuse of anonymous sources as a major cause of public distrust of the news media,” says Gene Foreman, who managed newsroom operations at the *Philadelphia Inquirer* for more than 25 years. (2013) Readers constantly “complain about the overuse of anonymous sources,” said *Washington Post* Ombudsman Andrew Alexander in 2009.

The Code of Ethics of the Society of Professional Journalists states that journalists should identify sources whenever feasible, noting that “the public is entitled to as much information as possible on sources’ reliability.” The ethics code further states that journalists should “always question sources’ motives before promising anonymity.” (SPJ)

In 2003, following the Jayson Blair scandal at the *New York Times*, in which the young reporter engaged in a prolonged binge of fabrication and plagiarism, an editorial in *Editor & Publisher*, a journalism trade publication, accused the *Times* of being addicted to anonymous

sources: “One inescapable conclusion from this scandal is that the *Times* has developed an addictive tolerance for anonymous sources, the crack cocaine of journalism.” (2003). Although this may be a rather dramatic depiction, there is no doubt that the *Times* has often relied on anonymous sources.

Despite all the admonitions about relying too heavily on anonymous sources, the solemn pledges to limit their use, and the legal limitations that can come into play when reporters are ordered by courts to reveal sources, such sources continue to be used with regularity. “I think we use them more than we like to admit,” said Nicholas Kristof (2008), Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter and columnist for the *New York Times*.

Following the Blair scandal, the *Times* announced that it was tightening its standards on unnamed sources. “We resist granting sources anonymity except as a last resort to obtain information that we believe to be newsworthy and reliable,” wrote then Executive Editor Bill Keller (2008) and Allan Siegal, who had been appointed as the paper’s “standards editor.” While pushing for reduced dependence on anonymous sources, Keller in 2008 said, “The ability to offer protection to a source is an essential of our craft.” And he called it “high-minded foolishness” for a news organization to foreswear anonymous sources altogether.

After the announced tightening of standards on the use of anonymous sources, there was an apparent reduction in the number of articles in the *Times* relying on such sources. According to a study requested by Clark Hoyt (2008), public editor of the *Times*, and conducted by students at the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism, the number of articles relying on anonymous sources fell by roughly half after the tighter policy on their use was

instituted. That study analyzed every article in six issues of the paper published before the policy and six from 2007. Although the study focused on limited periods, it would seem to indicate a definite decline in the use of anonymous sources.

Although there is periodic evidence of such declines in the use of anonymous sources, it is also apparent that they continue to be widely used by leading news organizations. So even though the Columbia analysis had indicated a drop in the use of anonymous sources in the *Times*, as Clark Hoyt (2010) was nearing the end of his stint as the *Times'* public editor, he said the paper continued to squander readers' trust "by using anonymous sources so often and so casually." He said, "The *Times* continues to use anonymous sources for information available elsewhere on the record. It allows unnamed people to provide quotes of marginal news value and to remain hidden with little real explanation of their motives, their reliability or the reasons why they must be anonymous."

In another study of the use of anonymous sources in 16 newspapers before and after several major controversies involving such sources, results showed an overall decline in the use of anonymous sources in 2004 compared with compared with 2003. Journalism professors Renee Martin-Kratzer and Esther Thorson (2007) found a decrease in the use of anonymous sources in newspapers in their study of 16 papers, including four of the nation's largest in circulation. This appeared to reflect the newspaper industry's increased attention to the issue of anonymous sources following a series of controversies and embarrassments. However, the study's authors concluded that this trend did not hold true for television network news, "where the frequency of anonymous sources increased from 2003 to 2004." The study also indicated that the increased reluctance to use anonymous sources in major newspapers "did not extend

to stories about the Iraq War.” Indeed, there was actually an increase in unnamed sources in government and foreign affairs stories. The study’s authors said it appeared that editors and reporters “are making a greater effort to reserve anonymity for topics in which on-the-record information is hard to obtain.”

In the period analyzed by the Columbia students before the new standards were introduced at the *New York Times*, roughly one-third of the anonymous sources in the newspaper had been from Washington, where, as Hoyt (2008) wrote, “anonymity is bred into the political and government culture.” However, in the later period, that had declined to roughly one-fourth of the total.

The current public editor of the *Times*, Margaret Sullivan (2014), recently wrote, “I’ve been critical, repeatedly, of the overuse of unnamed sources, while acknowledging that they are sometimes necessary. Certainly, they have dominated the paper’s recent coverage from Washington.”

Dean Baquet (2011), current editor of the *New York Times* and the paper’s former Washington bureau chief, calls himself a “defender of anonymous sources,” but acknowledges that the *Times* uses such sources “too much – especially the Washington bureau.” He reminded that “some of our biggest and most important stories came from anonymous sources. ” Baquet said, “We try to crack down, but anonymous sources do a lot of good. We have pledged at various times to reduce dependence on anonymous sources, but they are still frequently used.”

Anonymous sources are particularly associated with Washington and with coverage of national government and government-related news. “Washington reporters couldn’t operate without promising confidentiality,” said Fred Brown (2007), retired state capitol bureau chief for the *Denver Post* and a TV political analyst. “In the rest of the country, confidentiality is not as necessary, not as acceptable.” Brown added, “Anonymity is fine for tips, but verification should be on the record. In a business devoted to transparency and disclosure, journalism loses credulity and its claim to virtue when anonymous sources are used indiscriminately.”

An indication of how endemic anonymous sources are in Washington could be seen in an incident in July 2014 when White House press secretary Josh Earnest became testy as reporters pushed back against White House criticism of a *Washington Post* article for relying on anonymous sources. As reported by Andrew Kaczynski of BuzzFeed Politics (2014), Anita Kumar, White House correspondent for McClatchy Newspapers, said in response to Earnest’s criticism, ‘You criticize anonymous sources, but we have anonymous sources from you all every day...How can you criticize that when that’s all you give us every day except for the briefing?’

This was also pointed out on Twitter by Peter Baker (2014), *New York Times* White House correspondent, who said “@PressSec condemns anonymous sources. Just arriving in email White House invitation to reporters for call with anonymous admin officials.” He was referring to a scheduled White House phone call with reporters and “senior White House officials” on jobs training programs.

When he was an investigative reporter, Bill Marimow (2008), now editor of the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, said he often used anonymous sources. However, Marimow, who won a

Pulitzer Prize for investigative reporting, said he relied on such sources “only as a last resort when their information is an important part of an important story, and is not available otherwise – and when disclosure might put a source in jeopardy.”

“There is nothing more toxic to responsible journalism than an anonymous source,” said Daniel Okrent (2004) when he served as the “public editor” (readers’ representative) at the *New York Times*. However, he added, “There is often nothing more necessary, too; crucial stories might never see print if a name had to be attached to every piece of information.”

“Reporters ought not grant anonymity too easily,” said Robert Kaiser(2003), who was an associate editor at the *Washington Post*, “but their willingness to do so is not hard to understand,” Kaiser said reporters don’t see much value in badgering reluctant sources to speak on the record. “It’s easier to go along, as shown by the number of ‘senior administration officials’ quoted in the *Post* and elsewhere.”

“Confidential sources are a staple of *Post* reporting,” former *Washington Post* Ombudsman Deborah Howell (2005) acknowledged in 2005, although she said that “the rules on how they are used have been tightened.” Howell noted that the *Post* was among many media outlets “trying to rein in the use of anonymity, feeling that credibility suffers when readers don’t know who sources are or what their agendas might be.” Three years later, Howell (2008) said, “I think the *Post* still uses too many anonymous sources.” This was partially due to “government and sports sources not wanting to go on the record,” she observed, noting that in too many cases reporters “give anonymity when it’s unimportant.”

Anonymity, when granted judiciously, can benefit the public interest and be important to the media in fulfilling its watchdog role. As Andrew Alexander, who succeeded Howell as the *Post* ombudsman, noted in 2010, "Sources often require confidentiality to disclose corruption or policy blunders. On a lesser scale, stories can be enriched with information from sources who would suffer retribution if identified." However, Alexander (2010) echoed comments made by Howell and said the *Post* erodes its credibility and perpetuates Washington's "insidious culture of anonymity" by casually agreeing to conceal the identities of those who provide non-critical information. Too often, he said, the *Post* grants anonymity "at the drop of a hat."

Alexander (2010) joined a long line of *Post* ombudsmen over the decades who criticized the newspaper for failing to follow its own standards on anonymous sources. He called the problem "endemic" and said reporters should be blamed but the solution "must come in the form of unrelenting enforcement by editors, starting with those at the top." Despite the *Post*'s stated policies setting "a high threshold for granting anonymity," there was evidence that the use of anonymous sources was growing, Alexander said. The phrase "spoke on condition of anonymity" appeared in an average of 71 *Post* stories a month in the first five months of 2010, an increase over the previous year. And, Alexander said, that those ubiquitous "senior administration officials" were quoted more than 130 times in the five-month period in 2010.²¹

Frank Fellone (2010), deputy editor of the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*, said of anonymous sources, "We don't like them much at this newspaper." He added, "We have a rule here about sources who insist on remaining anonymous in print must have two."

The late Al Neuharth, the *USA Today* founder, was a consistent critic of reliance on unnamed sources and when *USA Today* began in 1982, “we effectively banned all anonymous sources.” If anonymous sources are used, Neuharth (2004) said, “Fiction gets mixed with fact.” Therefore, Neuharth said, “the only way to win the war against this evil is for journalists at all levels to ban all anonymous sources.” To his chagrin and the embarrassment of *USA Today*, however, in 2004, after Neuharth had retired (although still writing a weekly column), the paper was rocked by a scandal involving anonymous sources when it was determined that star reporter Jack Kelley had fabricated numerous sources and stories.

A CURRENT ASSESSMENT: SCOPE AND PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

Given the widely proclaimed disdain for anonymous and unnamed sources, a purpose of this study is to take a snapshot view of the quantity of such sources used in three newspapers, to provide an assessment of how extensively such sources are being utilized in day-to-day news coverage. The study also focused on some specific aspects of the use of unnamed sources in terms of subject matter and reporting locations.

Each of the three newspapers were examined to provide a total of 14 daily issues from May, June, and July 2014. Most of the issues were weekday editions within a two-week period, but two additional dates were also examined for some additional perspective.

The three papers examined in the study are the *New York Times* (national edition), *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*, and *USA Today*. They were not selected necessarily for their comparability, but to provide a look at three newspapers that differ in many respects. (Print, not on-line editions were analyzed.)

The *New York Times* is considered by many to be the most important American newspaper. By any standard it ranks high in reputation and circulation, and has the third highest circulation among U.S. papers. The *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette* is a regional daily newspaper, which includes coverage of national and international news as well as state/local. *USA Today*, with the second highest daily circulation among U.S. newspapers, has a limited number of “news” articles, but provides basic coverage of national and international news. Both *USA Today* and the *Democrat-Gazette* have in the past taken a principled stand against the use of anonymous sources. It should be noted that the *Democrat-Gazette* and *USA Today* have far less space devoted to news than does the *New York Times*; on average, for the 14 days in this study the news hole in the *Times* was four to five times as large as the other two papers, meaning that there were many more news articles from the *Times* to factor into the study. All news articles in the first or “A” sections of the newspapers were considered for this portion of the study.

A separate and secondary category involved the use of unnamed sources in the sports sections of the three papers. This was to determine how much difference there might be between news and sports coverage in using such sources. Informal observations by the author have suggested that there considerable reliance on such sources in sports coverage, where there would seem to be much less justification for not naming sources.

In addition to the quantity of articles relying on unnamed sources, the study also examined the subject matter of articles using such sources and the primary reasons cited for granting anonymity when they were specified. Further the study indicated the geographic origin or location from which these articles were reported, although not all carried a dateline.

RESULTS

The study left little doubt that the *New York Times* does rely heavily on unnamed sources. For the 14 daily editions in the study, there were 103 news articles that used such sources. (See Table 1.) That is an average of 7.35 articles per daily edition. Many of these articles included multiple unnamed sources. The highest number on any one day was 14 on May 30, 2014. There was not one single story of exceptional importance that day but a variety of issues ranging from delays in treatment in veterans' hospitals to conflicts in the Middle East.

During that same period, the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette* had a total of 32 news articles that used unnamed sources and *USA Today* had 10 such articles.

Datelines (geographic indicators of the location where the article originated) in the *Times* were dominated by Washington (29 stories) and overseas reports. Washington accounted for 28 per cent of the articles with unnamed sources. Other cities with multiple datelines included Jerusalem and Baghdad 5 each; London 4, Los Angeles, Beijing, Kabul, and Cairo, 3 each. Other than Washington, there were U.S. datelines only on 8 articles, although some stories from New York did not carry a dateline.

Washington, with 9, also accounted for the largest number of datelines on *Democrat-Gazette* articles using anonymous sources, almost all of which were from news service reporting. Of 32 datelined stories, 17 came from a scattering of foreign locations, including Bangkok, Ramallah (West Bank), Baghdad, and Cairo, along with Los Angeles, with 2 each.

Datelines appear infrequently in *USA Today*. During the period under study, Washington datelines were on 4 stories using anonymous sources, with one each from Baghdad and Vatican City.

As for the subject matter of articles using unnamed sources, international affairs and U.S. national security/military were clearly the dominant topics. In the *Times*, there were 38 articles related to international affairs and 26 to national security, with those two categories accounting for about 60 per cent of the articles using unnamed sources. Other major topics were government-public policy (15), politics (8), and Congress (6). Obviously there was some overlap in story categories, but each story was assigned to a category based on the most dominant topic within it.

In the *Democrat-Gazette* there was a similar pattern, although with fewer total articles. International affairs was the subject of 14 articles, and national security 11, with politics (3), the only other subject of multiple stories. In *USA Today*, there were 5 security/military-related stories and 3 on international affairs, the only subjects with multiple stories.

For this study, there are two basic types of quoted or referenced sources. One is the “generic” unnamed source: administration officials, officials, a senior official, people familiar with, etc. The other category involves specific reference to anonymity and often an indication of why the source was granted anonymity.

These were some of the rationales for anonymity that were cited in the *Times*’ articles: because of the sensitivity of the matter; not authorized to speak publicly; citing government policy in declining to be identified; had filed a whistle-blower complaint; for fear of retribution;

to protect internal discussions; because of diplomatic protocol; had not been cleared to brief the public; asked not to be quoted by name in talking about national security; for fear of reprisals; asked not to be named in talking candidly about internal party views; in order to preserve relationships at the agency; for fear of losing their jobs; not authorized to discuss intelligence matters; because the investigation was continuing; for fear he could be prosecuted.

In the *Democrat-Gazette*, with most of the articles using unnamed sources coming from the Associated Press or “wire reports,” the reasons cited for anonymity included: because intelligence matters were involved; according to people familiar with the plan; weren’t authorized to discuss the covert program publicly, because of concerns over being detained; not authorized to discuss details of the negotiations; not authorized to speak to the media; feared for his life; to avoid repercussions from the authorities; sensitive subject.

The reasons cited in *USA Today* included: the sensitivity of the matter; not authorized to speak publicly; not authorized to speak publicly because of pending court cases; or the source was identified as a person with knowledge of the situation.

SPORTS SECTIONS

In comparison to the news sections of the newspapers, the number of stories in the sports sections was much smaller. (See Table 2.) Most of the articles that did cite unnamed sources related to sports business – contracts, hiring and firing of coaches or managers, ownership,

player signings, etc. In the 14 daily editions of each paper in this study, none of the papers had more than two sports stories with unnamed sources on any one day. The *Times* has the smallest total number (5), well behind the *Democrat-Gazette* and *USA Today* with 10 each, but still averaging less than 1 per day. Eight of the total of 25 stories related to one subject: the dispute over the ownership of the Los Angeles Clippers NBA team.

ANALYSIS

The extent of the use of anonymous or unnamed sources in this study was substantial by any standard, particularly in the case of the *New York Times*. While there have been periodic downward trends in the use of such sources in the past, often following major controversy, the period examined for this study demonstrates heavy use of these sources in news articles.

The two other papers, both of which have a history of strong opposition to citing anonymous sources, had far fewer news articles using such sources but they did appear with some regularity, an average of more than two a day in the *Democrat-Gazette* and a total of 10 in *USA Today* in the 14 editions examined.

The *Times* and the Associated Press (which reported many of the stories in the *Democrat-Gazette*) in most cases provided reasons for granting anonymity. Some seemed valid while others were less convincing. By far the largest number simply said that the source was unauthorized to speak to the media, which doesn't offer much explanation. Also cited in a number of cases was "sensitivity," which, again, doesn't really tell the reader much. Appearing to be more compelling were those who cited fear of retribution or personal safety.

It must also be noted that in a number of cases, terms such as “officials” or “senior administration officials” or “government officials” and in some cases “advisers” or “strategists,” were used without any specific identification of who these individuals were.

Jack Shafer (2014), columnist on the media and politics for Reuters news service, has been a persistent critic of anonymous sources and has been especially critical of the *Times* and the *Washington Post* for relying more heavily on them than other print outlets. He noted that two stories that appeared in the *Times* during the period of my study, and which relied on anonymous sources, turned out to be inaccurate. That, of course, raises a number of questions about too readily using these sources and granting anonymity and the danger of undermining media credibility.

It is probably not surprising that by far the largest number of stories with anonymous sources in this study relate to national security and/or military matters, representing 60 percent of such articles in the *Times* and 78 percent of those in the *Democrat-Gazette*. In the case of the Arkansas newspaper, only one staff-written local story used unidentified sources, although many of those related to national security or international affairs were “compiled by *Democrat-Gazette* staff from wire reports.”

Also not surprising was the large number of stories emanating from Washington, far more than from any other location and bearing out comments cited earlier in this paper suggesting that “anonymity is bred into the political and government culture (Hoyt, 2008).” Undoubtedly, the nature of the way things are done in Washington lends itself to leaks and

anonymous or unnamed sources, but this study and others suggest that a disproportionately large percentage of Washington stories fall into this category.

Beyond the dominance of Washington, the datelines on stories from around the world reflect the locations of flashpoints and international crises, where in some cases news coverage can be very perilous for both journalists and sources. However, particularly when U.S government officials are quoted (but not identified), questions arise as to whether anonymity is too easily granted. As the current executive editor of the *Times*, Dean Baquet (2011), said when he was Washington bureau chief, although “some of our biggest and most important stories came from anonymous sources,” they can be used too often.

The secondary study on sports coverage indicated a small but steady number of stories using anonymous sources, in a section of newspapers that would not normally be associated with unnamed sources. One inference that might be drawn, however, is that with the increasing development of sports as big business, there could well be an upward surge in sports stories with unnamed sources -- particularly at those points when player signings and contracts, hiring and firing of coaches and managers occur, and in controversies about use of performance-enhancing drugs.

This study of the use of anonymous sources and the reasons, subjects, and origins of stories utilizing such sources provides a limited view and analysis, offering a snapshot of such coverage in three newspapers. However, it does provide important indicators about the extensive use of anonymous sources, far more than many would expect or acknowledge. There

is no question that coverage of some important stories is dependent on such sources, but there is a danger of over-dependence and what may constitute a troubling trend.

TABLE 1

NUMBER OF NEWS ARTICLES USING ANONYMOUS/UNNAMED SOURCES

	NEW YORK TIMES	ARK DEM-GAZETTE	USA TODAY
May 28	4	0	0
May 29	8	2	1
May 30	14	3	1
June 2	6	3	0
June 3	5	3	1
June 4	10	4	2
June 5	9	2	0
June 6	9	3	0
June 9	5	2	1
June 10	5	2	1
June 11	2	1	0
June 12	12	2	1
June 23	6	4	1
July 9	8	1	1

TABLE 2

NUMBER OF SPORTS ARTICLES USING ANONYMOUS/UNNAMED SOURCES

	NEW YORK TIMES	ARK DEM-GAZETTE	USA TODAY
May 28	1	1	1
May 29	1	2	2
May 30	1	2	0
June 2	1	1	0
June 3	0	0	2
June 4	0	0	1
June 5	0	0	0
June 6	0	0	0
June 9	0	0	0
June 10	1	1	2
June 11	0	2	0
June 12	0	0	0
June 23	0	1	1
July 9	0	0	1

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