The Problem With Sources, A Source of the Problem

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Abstract

Given the centrality of sources to the journalistic mission, this study attempts to explicate some of the inevitable contradictions which lie at the heart of the relationship between journalist and source. Moreover, in light of recent controversies, it places a particular an emphasis on the problems associated with both anonymous sourcing and what might be termed the Needless Attribution Syndrome.

Sources—the sine qua non of journalism. The wellspring, the fountainhead, the mother lode from which journalists extract the raw material of their craft. Further still, their informational *raison d'être*.

First, a pop quiz: What, in your judgment, is the most famous source in recent memory? Clues might include the fact that the source in question was a male. He was indisputably petty and self-serving, and he could fairly be described as a disaffected bureaucrat, largely motivated by personal revenge. And he was obviously an exemplar of the most corrosive kind of disloyal. Now who would that be? We now know of course that Mark Felt, the associate director and number two official at the FBI, was the crucial source for the Watergate reporting of Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein, the one they named Deep Throat. And the likely verdict of history will probably be that he did good thing for a variety of quite bad reasons.[1]

Another question in our quiz: Who do you think the very first source in history might have been? It is hard to say for certain, but my candidate dates back to the dawn of writing itself. I imagine a chatty descendant of camp followers in Agamemnon's army. According to their family history, amazing things took place at the gates of Troy, and now many years later this story-teller shares the tales of his ancestors with a scribe. The time is around 750 BC, and the writer's name is Homer.[2]

And lastly, who would you say was the most important source in all of recorded history? I have a pair of colleagues with deep and rich spiritual lives. One insists that history's most important source was the wise men who had news of something special happening in Bethlehem. The other's candidate is a bystander with news of a caravan in flight on road from Mecca to Medina in A.D. 622. I am sorry to have to confess that I have yet to decide on a personal favorite.

It can be argued that thinking about sources this way—that is, categorically—has its advantages, not least of which is that certain aspects reveal themselves, features which otherwise might remain unexamined. With your permission, there might be value in continuing to think categorically about sources as a whole for a moment. At least five aspects come to mind.

First, sources come in both all shapes and sizes and a variety of forms. There is the *subject/participant source*: the person, in effect, to whom the news happened. The journalist talks to them, and they provide the journalist with first-hand factual information derived from their personal experience. There are the *witness source* (someone who directly observed the news happen) and the *indirect source*, passing along information given to them by someone else who in turn claims to be a witness. There is also the *official source*, who we can perhaps comfortably define as someone whose job it is to have an opinion about something that happened. And the *unofficial source*, about which we will have more to say in a moment.

One characteristic of sources we can perhaps agree on is they are absolutely essential to the practice of journalism. There is a certain vicariousness embedded in the practice of journalism. News does not happen to journalists but rather to others.[3] Under normal circumstances, journalists neither experience nor witness much of the news, so the need for sources is an indelible absolute. Simply put, if there were no sources, there could be no journalism. As a result, the job of the journalist is an essentially derivative one. Using agreed upon formats of presentation, the journalist converts the raw experiential and informational data of others into what we call news. At heart, that is the essence of journalism.

Which leads to a third notable aspect: the fact that it is the source's reality which becomes the journalist's reality. To put a finer still point on the matter, it is the source's truth which becomes the journalist's truth. The journalist is inescapably dependent. True, there are conventions for verification, such as double sourcing, fact checking, etc. There is, however, no denying the fact that in most cases our news is actually someone else's reality. Someone said it, the journalist reports it. It is difficult to imagine a better example of the shadows on the back wall of Plato's cave.[4]

But what of the fallibility of sources? Or worse? Sources lie. Sources misrepresent reality. They do this inadvertently, because they are confused, or because they are scared, or because they have had a lapse of memory. And some sources provide journalists with mistruths on purpose. The wonderful movie, *Good Night, and Good Luck*, earned a number of Academy Awards nominations for its portrayal of the McCarthy era.[5] The theme of the film is a stirring one: nothing less than the saving of the American Republic. The movie has two heroes. The most explicit is central figure, Edward R. Murrow, but the press itself shares in the glory.

We would, however, do well to remember—as Murrow might have parsed it—that the McCarthy era could not have happened in the first place had the press not reported and published all of the Wisconsin senator's wild and unsubstantiated claims.

The compelling narrative of *Good Night, and Good Luck* not withstanding, it is in retrospect hard to judge journalism as the hero of the tale. The discomfiting fact is that McCarthy's rise to power could not have happened without complicity on the part of journalists.

This leads us to one of the thorniest thickets when considering sources: Those instances when the journalist is, for a range of reasons good and bad, complicit in allowing a source not to take responsibility for his or her own information. This confidential or anonymous sourcing takes many forms, and each has a very official name. There is *not for attribution* sourcing, where the journalist is asked to use a descriptor which obscures the identity of the source, e.g. "a senior administration official." There is *background* sourcing, where the journalist is permitted to use the information but forbidden to use it in quotes. And there is information provided on *deep background*, given to the journalist for informational purposes only and explicitly excluded from appearing in the public sphere. Whatever the terms of the transaction, it is the result of preceding negotiation—a socioinformational contract—between the journalist and the source in which both parties acknowledge the rules under which the source is providing the information.

After all the scandals of recent years, including Stephen Glass at the *New Republic*, Jayson Blair at the *New York Times* and many others, magazines and newspapers have spent much time reconsidering their rules about anonymous sourcing.[6] Recently the *New York Times*, for example, instituted two major changes. First, no anonymous source can ever be quoted in the paper without at least one editor knowing the identity of the source. One way to think of this is that now the kind of standards that freelance journalists work under with established journalistic organizations are now applied to their own staff members.[7]

The second, and even more important, change is that "readers are to be told why the *Times* believes a source is entitled to anonymity [rather than] the previous practice of stating why the source asked for it."[8] A major shift implemented only recently and certainly to be applauded, this raises the ethical bar by putting the onus on the publication. Moreover, it will perhaps make less frequent the largely gratuitous, if not completely obvious, disclaimer. For instance, "She spoke on the condition of anonymity, citing the delicacy of the talks." Or "He asked not to be quoted by name for fear of reprisal."[9]

Ponder this, if you will, for a moment. "Delicacy of talks"? "Fear of reprisal"? Is this not virtually *always* the case with an anonymous source? There is no genuine explanation in that justification. But instead, by telling the readers why the publication went along with the request for anonymity, it is revealing its rationale rather than the source's—which I would argue is an important improvement.

An amusing aside on this same topic concerns a recent piece in the *Los Angeles Times* which took the use of the empty rationale to new heights. In an article on telephone etiquette in the film industry, the writer quoted a studio publicist who "asked not to be

named because people in Hollywood often reflexively ask for anonymity for no particular reason."[10] When asked about the phrase a few days later, the writer said: "It was just bizarre that people didn't want to go on the record about something so innocuous. And so, almost out of frustration or as an afterthought, I just wrote that, because it was what I was thinking. The truth of the matter is, I really didn't think it would make it in the paper."[11]

And finally, with your permission, it might be worthwhile to suggest one other area related to sources that we might consider a candidate for reform. And this has to come from reporters and writers themselves. We are all familiar with the reportorial device, "Most observers agree", or "Experts conclude that". For want of a better phrase, this might be termed the *Needless Attribution Syndrome*. Or perhaps better yet, *Phantom Sourcing*. It affects much of journalism, and for some reason magazine journalism -- particularly newsmagazines—is widely afflicted. As readers, we suspect that, in fact in most cases, there is often no actual source for that information. It is, however, something the reporter believes to be true. But most journalists, reluctant to assume any authorial authority, feel that they have to attribute the information to someone, anyone. And so, in an act of obligatory invention, they conjure up "most observers."

What is really happening here? Like the anonymous source, the reporters themselves are refusing to accept responsibility for their own data. It is their truth, it is their reality, it is something that they believe. And yet they feel the need to disavow it. Could it have something to do with "delicacy"? Or perhaps a concern about possible "reprisal"? Or, at the risk of seeming flippant, might it be simply something that journalists, like Hollywood publicists, do "reflexively" and "for no particular reason"?

Like other recent reforms in the realm of sourcing, if this could be brought to an end as a professional practice, I would argue that everyone—sources, readers and the journalistic profession itself—would be quite well served.

Endnotes

1. For the complete story of Deep Throat, perhaps the best reference is self-revealing memoir: Bob Woodward, *The Secret Man: The Story of Watergate's Deep Throat* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2005).

2. Even though more than forty years old, many scholars agree that the finest translation of Homer's masterpiece remains that of Richard Lattimore, *The Iliad of Homer* (University of Chicago Press, 1961). Though its precise dates are not known with exactitude, scholars also generally agree that the events of the Trojan War predate Homer's poem by more than 400 years.

3. Much of the criticism that followed the press coverage of Hurricane Katrina focused on the ways in which some journalists insisted on inserting themselves in their stories. One notable example was "Fox's Geraldo Rivera [who]...nudged an Air Force rescue worker out of the way so his camera crew could tape him as he helped lift an older woman in a wheelchair to safety." See Alessandra Stanley, "Reporters Turn from Deference to Outrage," *New York Times*, 5 September 2005, A-14. In a subsequent clarification, however, the paper wrote: "The editors understood the 'nudge' comment as the television critic's figurative reference to Mr. Rivera's flamboyant intervention. Mr. Rivera complained, but after reviewing a tape of his broadcast, the *Times* declined to publish a correction. Numerous readers, however -- now including Byron Calame, the newspaper's public editor, who also scrutinized the tape -- read the comment as a factual assertion. The Times acknowledges that no nudge was visible on the broadcast." See "Editors' Note," *New York Times*, 27 September 2005, A-2.

4. See Plato, "The Allegory of the Cave," Book VII, *The Republic*, trans. Alan Bloom, 2nd edition (New York: Basic Books, 1991).

5. One of the more insightful and balanced studies of Edward R. Murrow and his era is Alexander Kendrick's *Prime Time: The Life of Edward R. Murrow* (New York: Little, Brown, 1969).

6. For a thoughtful article on the profession's rethink of anonymous sourcing, see Bill Mitchell, "Recasting the Anonymous Source as Exceptional Event," *Poynter Online*, 21 June 2004, <http://www.poynter.org/content/content_view.asp?id=67304>.

7. For the text of the *New York Times* policy on confidential sources, see <http://www.nytco.com/company-properties-times-sources.html>. A similar set of new policies were published by the Washington Post, the text of which can be found at <http://www.poynter.org/column.asp?id=53&aid=61244>.

8. Byron Calame, "Anonymity: Who Deserves It?" New York Times, 20 November 2005, <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/11/20/opinion/20publiceditor.html?ex=1143176400&en=6115180248445dddb&ei=5070>.

9. For a compendium of such disclaimers, see Caroline Miller, "What They Are Leaking: New Times Tic Says More About Media Than Sources," *New York Observer*, 29 August 2005, 5.

10. Robin Abcarian, "A Cast of Many on the Phone Lines," *Los Angeles Times*, 19 March 2006, <http://www.latimes.com/technology/la-et-listen19mar19,1,3752873.story?coll=la-headlines-technology>.

11. Choire Sicha, "Off the Record," New York Observer, 27 March 2006, <http://www.observer.com/20060327/20060327___media_offtherecord-3.asp>. Note: Shortly after this item in the *New York Observer* drew attention to the quoted section in Abcarian's article, it was removed.

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