

CONFIDENTIAL NEWS SOURCES

February 25, 2004

Readers of The New York Times demand to know as much as possible about where we obtain our information and why it merits their trust. For that reason, we have long observed the principle of identifying our sources by name and title or, when that is not possible, explaining why we consider them authoritative, why they are speaking to us and why they have demanded confidentiality. Guidance on limiting the use of unidentified sources, and on informative description of those we do use, has appeared in several editions of our stylebook, including the current one, and in our Integrity Statement, dating from 1999.

In the last few months, readers and our professional colleagues have asked for additional assurances — that we heed our own guidelines uniformly and that we are accountable for compliance. This restatement of our sourcing policy adds those elements. The rules are effective on March 1, 2004, and will become part of a revised Integrity Statement to be issued in the coming months.

Principles for Granting Anonymity

The use of unidentified sources is reserved for situations in which the newspaper could not otherwise print information it considers reliable and newsworthy. When we use such sources, we accept an obligation not only to convince a reader of their reliability but also to convey what we can learn of their motivation — as much as we can supply to let a reader know whether the sources have a clear point of view on the issue under discussion.

In routine interviewing — that is, most of the interviewing we do — anonymity must not be automatic or an assumed condition. In that kind of reporting, anonymity should not be offered to a source. Exceptions will occur in the reporting of highly sensitive stories, when it is we who have sought out a source who may face legal jeopardy or loss of livelihood for speaking with us. Similarly they will occur in approaches to authoritative officials in government who, as a matter of policy, do not speak for attribution. On those occasions, we may use an offer of anonymity as a wedge to make telephone contact, get an interview or learn a fact. In such a case, the reporter should press the source, after the conversation, to go on the record with the newsworthy information that has emerged.

Whenever anonymity is granted, it should be the subject of energetic negotiation to arrive at phrasing that will tell the reader as much as possible about the placement and motivation of the source — in particular, whether the source has firsthand knowledge of the facts.

In any situation when we cite anonymous sources, at least some readers may suspect that the newspaper is being used to convey tainted information or special

pleading. If the impetus for anonymity has originated with the source, further reporting is essential to satisfy the reporter and the reader that the paper has sought the whole story.

We will not use anonymous sourcing when sources we can name are readily available.

Confidential sources must have direct knowledge of the information they are giving us — or they must be the authorized representatives of an authority, known to us, who has such knowledge.

We do not grant anonymity to people who are engaged in speculation, unless the very act of speculating is newsworthy and can be clearly labeled for what it is.

We do not grant anonymity to people who use it as cover for a personal or partisan attack. If pejorative opinions are worth reporting and cannot be specifically attributed, they may be paraphrased or described after thorough discussion between writer and editor. The vivid language of direct quotation confers an unfair advantage on a speaker or writer who hides behind the newspaper, and turns of phrase are valueless to a reader who cannot assess the source.

Anonymity should not be invoked for a trivial comment, or to make an unremarkable comment appear portentous.

We do not promise sources that we will refrain from additional reporting or efforts to verify the information being reported.

We do not promise sources that we will refrain from seeking comment from others on the subject of the story. (We may, however, agree to a limited delay in further inquiries — until the close of stock trading, for example.)

Responsibilities of Editors

When anonymity is granted, reporter and source must understand that the commitment is undertaken by the newspaper, not alone by an individual journalist. Any editor who learns a source's identity is required to maintain exactly the same confidentiality as the reporter. That editor may not divulge the identity to other reporters, or to unauthorized editors. And the editor may not use the source — either for reporting on the current story or for later ones.

- In the case of a routine story with unidentified sourcing, the name or explicit role of the source should be conveyed confidentially to the reporter's department head. At the discretion of the department head — and provided the reporter agrees — the responsibility for learning about the source may be delegated to a subordinate supervising editor. (Departments are expected to formulate their own day-to-day routines, in consultation with reporters, for expeditious handling of source information.) In all such

routine cases, the department head is accountable for knowing the identity of the source, or for knowing which subordinate editor has been informed. Upon request, the executive editor and the managing editors are entitled to know the identity of the source.

- In the case of a moderately sensitive story, the reporter may wish to share the identity with the executive editor or managing editor only. Such a request should be honored without prejudice, and not taken to signify a lack of trust.

- In the case of exceptionally sensitive reporting, on crucial issues of law or national security in which sources face dire consequences if exposed, the reporter may appeal to the executive editor for total confidentiality. In such circumstances, intended to be extremely rare, the executive editor may choose to ask for only a limited description of the source and waive the right to know the full identity. Only the executive editor may approve such a request.

The standards editor, while not necessarily entitled to know the identity of a confidential source, is responsible for spot-checking compliance with our procedures — that is, for knowing which editors have learned the identity.

Forms of Attribution to Confidential Sources

When we agree to anonymity, the reporter's duty is to obtain terms that conceal as little as possible of what the reader needs to gauge reliability. We should distinguish conscientiously between high-level and lower-level executives or officials. We should not use blind attribution — “*sources said*,” for example — which is more a tease than a signpost. Attribution should never amount to a truism: since “*source*” merely means a provider of information, “*one source said*” is equivalent to “*somebody said*.” And “*informed*” or “*reliable source*” is no improvement. (Would The Times quote an uninformed or unreliable one?) The objection is not to the word “*source*,” but to its emptiness without a meaningful modifier: “*a Senate source*,” for example, may be acceptable — unless, of course, it is possible to tell the reader still more. The word “*official*” is overused, and cries out for greater specificity.

Trail markers should be as detailed as possible. “*United States diplomat*” is better than “*Western diplomat*,” which is better than “*diplomat*.” Still better is “*a United States diplomat who took part in the meeting*.” And “*a lawyer who has read the brief*” or “*an executive close to the XYZ Company*” is far better than “*a person familiar with the case*,” a phrase so vague that it could even mean the reporter.

Readers value signs of candor: “*The report was provided by a Senate staff member working to defeat the bill*.”

Whenever possible, in writing about documents we should specify how we received them.

We should avoid automatic references to sources who “insisted on anonymity” or “demanded anonymity”; rote phrases offer the reader no help and make our decisions appear automatic. When possible, though, articles should tersely explain what kind of understanding was actually reached by reporter and source, and should shed light on the reasons and the source’s motives.

In editing on the copy desk or at higher levels, the description of a source must never be altered without consultation with the reporter who made the confidentiality commitment.

It should go without saying that The Times is truthful. We do not dissemble about our sources — we do not, for example, refer to a single person as “sources” and do not say “other officials” when quoting someone who has already been cited by name. We do not say a source has refused to comment if in fact that person has commented off the record. (We may, however, say — when it is true — that the source refused to comment on a specific aspect of the story.) There can be no prescribed formula for attribution, but it must be literally truthful, and not coy.

Multiple Anonymous Sources

When we grant anonymity, we do not necessarily require multiple sources. A cabinet official, for example, or the White House adviser on national security, may require anonymity while conveying a policy decision that is clearly “authorized,” necessitating no corroborating source.

But when we grant anonymity for less verifiable assertions — especially if they form a disputed account, or are potentially damaging to one side in a court case, for example — corroborating sources are often necessary. The reporter should confer with the department head or senior deputy to agree upon the need and the number.

In such a case, the reporter and editor must be satisfied that the sources are genuinely independent of one another, not connected behind the scenes in any kind of “echo chamber” that negates the value of a cross-check.