

Chapter 4

Sourcing



Get your sources lined up well and the story will write itself

SOURCES ARE THE BUILDING BLOCKS of your story. Get your sources lined up well and the story will write itself. Miss a key source and your story - no matter how elegant the prose, important the topic, or hard your effort - is unpublishable.

Be strenuous and self-critical in assessing your sources. Are they in a position to know the information they are giving you and are they reliable or are they just passing on hearsay? Would your reporting stand up to rigorous fact checking or other independent scrutiny? Are corroborating sources truly independent of each other? If you are reporting from a document, do you have it in your possession or have you only been told about it?

In addition to strong sourcing, good journalism also ensures that sources are transparent. A solid news story allows the audience to form its own judgement on its reliability and accuracy based on the sources provided. Clearly identifying sourcing is essential in stories about conflicts, disputes or any controversy. It is the journalist's own protection against accusations of bias or partiality and adds credibility.

Sourcing addresses the question “How do we know?” and requires active attribution. We would know “12 people died in fighting” either because somebody told us or because we personally counted the bodies. But if a guerrilla leader is the source, how do we know he is telling the truth? We might know production of pistachios is up this year because a government statement said so. But do we trust government statements? Do we need to check with others? The key is to identify sources clearly so that the reader can come to his or her own conclusions.

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Planning Your Reporting

The first step for any story is to plot your sourcing and plan your reporting accordingly. Break the story idea into its simplest components, and chart the essential and optimal human sources, as well as documents, eyewitness or other accounts you would need to make the story work.

Much sourcing is common sense and core principles, but it is remarkable how often these basics - in the light of time, resource or other pressures - are neglected:

- If you are writing a profile of an individual - especially a critical one - it is imperative that you speak to that person or at least try very hard to do so. If you cannot, or the person refuses, state this in the story.
- If you are writing about a conflict, make every effort to speak to both sides, and to find a non-aligned source for independent assessment.
- If you are writing a reaction piece, for example, about a major public event, speak to a diverse selection of people on the street, as well as experts.
- If you are writing from a specific location, bring the reader there by presenting some notable details and human colour from your own eyewitness observations. Make clear to the reader that this is you, the journalist, on the spot.
- If your article is based on a report or document, do everything you possibly can to gain access to the original, and to have sources confirm its legitimacy. Be transparent and tell the reader, for example, “according to a document seen by this reporter” or “according to a document obtained by this newspaper”.

Remember the fundamental principles of international journalism are impartiality, fairness and accuracy. These goals can only be delivered through careful selection of your sources.

One further note, plan your time as well as your sources. It is essential to be well prepared before interviewing any source. But do not leave the most important source until too late. It is the reporter's nightmare to require a last call with a source to confirm a fact or obtain a balancing comment, only to find they are unavailable. Allow for the difficulty and variability of contacting people within your deadline.

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Two-source Rule

The golden rule of sourcing is that to treat something as publishable, you need to confirm it from at least two reliable and independent sources. This means that one of the sources did not learn the information from the other or that they themselves did not learn it from the same source.

In general one should never present anything as certain until it has passed this "two sources" test. If you have only one source for a particular detail but you feel it is important to report or

there is a good reason to believe it is true, then write it as “source A says” or “source A alleges”. Where you know a fact to be in dispute, do not hide the complexity but make clear that different people have different opinions on the question.

Using a single source in such a case depends on assessing the reliability of that source and the likelihood of the facts being correct. In such cases, the source should almost always be named. Sometimes of course, only one person can know some information but be sure that is the case. Two or more sources are always best.

Identifying Sources

In identifying sources, provide relevant detail so that the reader can come to a fair judgement about the person’s reliability. This means explaining clearly the basis of the source’s expertise and the potential points of conflict or bias.

The more scrupulous you are about this, the more trustworthy your reporting will appear. It may be necessary to include a short sentence of background to clarify context for the reader, for example to explain if a source has a financial or professional

interest in the subject, has had a long-standing dispute with the person he or she is criticising, or has some other personal involvement.

For example, if you are quoting a critical comment about government policy, the citation “commentator Hassan Ali said” is not as precise as “said Hassan Ali, a regular columnist for the leading opposition newspaper Tribune”. Or if you are quoting a comment supportive of the government, “said Randall Braithwaite, an independent expert on the region” would be misleading if the following applied “said Randall Braithwaite, a consultant who has regularly advised the government on regional issues”.

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Authoritative Sources

A good source is always someone in authority who is in a position to know. A defence minister is clearly an authoritative source on matters of defence policy; so is a senior official in his ministry, especially if you can use the person's name. But he may not be the best authority on other matters such as finance or foreign affairs. Where possible always give the person's full name and title, such as Secretary for Defence Stanley Smith.

Remember also that an official or authoritative statement may not provide all the relevant facts, and indeed may be designed to hide some. Just because something is the official position does not mean it should not be checked or a contrary view should not be sought in the interest of being fair and reliable. This would especially be the case, for example, if asking a defence minister about the detailed progress of an on-going military campaign where he is a partisan and therefore may be specifically unreliable. Despite, or indeed because of, his authoritative position, he may not tell the truth or may be adding pro-government "spin" in attempt to portray events in a favourable light.

Reporter or Eyewitness

A strong source is of course the reporter him or herself, or another reliable eyewitness who hears and sees what is being described.

It must always be clear from the context of the rest of the story that the reporter personally witnessed the events. Otherwise, the source should be mentioned: “IWPR got to the scene about 20 minutes after the blast. Correspondent Sayyid Jamal reported five bodies on the ground and dozens of policemen trying to move the crowd away.”

No Sourcing

Specific sourcing is not necessary if information is not disputed by anyone, for instance when relaying a clear historical fact, such as “Mithalistan became an independent republic in 1654”. But remember that many historical “facts” are disputed, so be careful.

Official Sources

An official source is someone with access to information because of his job, although not necessarily the person in charge. A police officer might be an official source about a security story, a civil servant on a story about government policy handled by his or her department, a UN or NGO worker for a story about humanitarian affairs they are working on, and so on. Always seek to quote the full name and title of the person if possible, though sometimes you may get information on the understanding that the person is not named. But always be sure then that you are not being misled.

In all cases the key is to demonstrate why the source is in a position to know the information they are telling you.

For example, “Abdel Baseer Mohammadi, a deputy at the Ministry of Economy, said prices had fallen 20 per cent since the same time last year” is better than “an official said . . .”

When sources are unnamed, describe their position as closely as possible. If the deputy in the example above refused to allow you to name him, referring to him as “a senior official at the Ministry of Economy” is, again, better than simply “an official”.

Do not make sources plural if they are singular. One policeman is “a policeman” not “police sources”. If one diplomat says something, the source is “a diplomat” not “diplomatic sources”. In all cases, avoid the imprecise term “western diplomatic officials”.

Avoid Passive Sourcing

Passive sourcing should be avoided. Terms such as “it was understood”, “it was reported” or “it was believed” are not appropriate for international journalism. They are unclear and lazy. The report must say who “understood” or who “believed”. “It was reported” is especially irritating since that is what you are supposed to be doing. The same is true of the ubiquitous term “reportedly”. But “Radio Kabul reported” is fine if that is the source. “Everyone knows that” is definitely not a valid source.

Location of Sourcing in a Story

Sourcing should be near the beginning of every story. Its precise location depends on how controversial the material is. If a story is about a forthcoming official visit by a president, it will

Always tell your reader how and from where your information was obtained

probably be an undisputed fact (unless it is a secret visit), so the sourcing need not be in the first paragraph. If it is secret then the story must show right at the beginning how the reporter knows his facts, and will require reliable sourcing.

If the visit is actually taking place and everyone can see it, then it may not even need a specific source. What happens on the visit will need clear sourcing. Any facts that could be challenged or are doubtful will need a source close to the stated fact. With an allegation especially, the source usually needs to be at the beginning.

Context

Always tell your reader how and from where the information was obtained. For example, “said at a news conference”, “in a statement to reporters”, or “in an interview with this newspaper”. Avoid the showy and overused term “exclusive interview”.

If some quotations from a source come from a previously published report, a document or public statement, and other quotations within the same article come from a direct interview, clearly identify which is which.

Sourcing Opinions

If the story involves a dispute between two or more parties, and only one side of the dispute is immediately available, use sources for facts not opinions and make sure it is clear that the story has been sourced from only one party.

An opinion can be important, however, if it has a relevance to the dispute in question. It might be proper to report, “A Mithalistani diplomat today accused Sakhestan of promoting evil policies”, as such an accusation obviously represents a factor relevant in the dispute between the sides.

But opinions should always be openly sourced. In such cases, do everything you can to avoid anonymous sourcing. If someone has something harsh to say, they should be willing to stand by it and put their name to it.

Finally, remember the rules of impartiality and balance. Your report should not take sides in the dispute, and must take care to present the opinions as viewpoints, not as facts. If you are writing a critical report, you must allow the other side a fair response.

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Explaining Sourcing Ground Rules

It is imperative to explain journalistic ground rules carefully, and to observe them scrupulously. This is especially the case with members of the public, who will not be acquainted with the way the media works. People who have made you welcome deserve to know what will happen, so be open with them if you are going to quote them. Public figures and officials will be more used to dealing with the press, but it is always useful to clarify the ground rules before you begin an interview:

- *On the record*: this means the journalist may use the information in full, and name the person speaking. You should always try to gain the interviewee's consent to speak on this basis, such as by citing the public interest of his or her remarks.
- *Not for attribution*: this means the information and the quotations may be used, but the name must be withheld. The journalist should agree with the subject how he or she will be identified, and should negotiate to make this as specific as possible (ie, "member of the army general staff" is much better than "an officer").

- *On background*: this means that neither the name of the source nor the information or quotes may be used. It provides the journalist with facts that can help direct his or her reporting, but which cannot be used unless independently verified.

Explain journalistic ground rules carefully, and observe them scrupulously

Similarly with images or voice recording, ask permission before using a camera or other device and make it clear if you intend to publish someone's photograph.

A journalist must never break his or her own commitments to these rules, and while interviewing must indicate clearly in notes if the ground rules during a conversation change. Sometimes it may be possible to bring "background" information on the record through a subsequent conversation, such as by explaining that other sources have provided corroboration, but only by clear and cordial agreement. Note that the term "off the record" is common, but may be taken to mean either "not for attribution" or "on background" and thus its usage should be clarified.

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Anonymous Sources

If a source is unwilling to put his or her name on the record, be sure you are not giving them a free license to spread lies and rumours. They may have a legitimate reason, such as fear of reprisal for speaking out. But if they won't put their name to something they have said, think carefully whether you are willing to put it in your story under your own byline, too.

The New York Times has had a few scandals in recent years, but it also has one of the most detailed codes of conduct in the business. As highlighted on the website of the Project for Excellence in Journalism, former executive editor Joseph Lelyveld developed a simple two-question test before using anonymous sources:

1. How much direct knowledge does the source have of the event?
2. What, if any, motive might the source have for misleading us, “spinning” the story, or hiding important facts that might alter our impression of the information?

Only after these questions were answered satisfactorily, would *The Times* run with the source. And then, as far as possible, the paper would suggest how the source was in a position to know

the information it provided (“a source who has seen the document”, for example) and what special interest that source might have (“a source inside the office of the general staff”, for example).

EXERCISES

Sourcing a story can often confront journalists with difficult professional and ethical choices. Take a look at the examples and questions below and discuss your views with colleagues:

1. A source has read you an extract from a secret government document on serious safety problems with the country’s nuclear reactors and you have made a note of the text. The source is aware you are going to use the information as the basis for a story and has allowed you to cite “sources close to the government”.
 - What are the potential pitfalls?
 - Would you try to verify the story with another source?
 - If you cannot verify the story, would you publish what you have?
 - Are there other sources you might want to speak to?

2. This same source is called out of the room abruptly on an urgent telephone call.
 - Do you sit patiently and wait, or quickly rifle through the secret report left in open view on his desk?
3. A car bomb has exploded in the centre of Baghdad and word is filtering back to the press that many civilians have been killed and injured. It looks like the bomb may have been outside one of the hotels used by foreign journalists but the area has been cordoned off and no one can get near.
 - Who can you ring to get information? Think of all the possible sources that could be approached, ranging from hard facts about the number of dead and injured to a detailed description of the scene.
4. What is wrong with the following phrases:
 - It is reliably understood...
 - People say that...
 - Word in the capital is that...
 - It was patently obvious that...

ADDITIONAL READING & REFERENCES

Help on finding experts:

www.ibiblio.org/slanews/internet/experts.html

Policy.com, a non-partisan site for links to policy issues:

www.policy.com

Poynter Institute tips on evaluating the value of sources:

www.poynter.org/content/content_view.asp?id=4634

Use the helpful search engine on the website of the Project for Excellence in Journalism (**www.journalism.org**) to find various tips and discussions on sourcing problems.