

# Journalists can't afford lost trust, anonymous or otherwise

**ANONYMOUS SOURCES** are one of the sexiest things in journalism. The idea conjures images of late-night meetings in parking garages, voice modulators and Watergate-era intrigue. The fact that someone feels the need to be protected makes their information *feel* more valuable.

Like a lot of news consumers, I've become increasingly less skeptical of anonymous sources. If I trip over every one and hesitate on who to trust, I'll never get to the bottom of a national security story again. I've begun reading "senior administration official" the same way I'd read it if it were a named source: I take in the information and use it to inform my understanding of the world.

Here's the thing, though: It's not the same. Anonymous sources fundamentally shift the way audiences interact with news sources, and they shift accountability away from government officials (the vast majority of anonymously sourced stories come from coverage of the U.S. government and national politics) and onto news outlets.

Think about it.

Article 1 reads:

*"We're confident the program is working," said John Smith, director of strategic programs for the agency.*

Article 2 reads:

*"We're confident the program is working," said a senior agency official, speaking on the condition of anonymity to discuss active programs.*

The journalist in Article 1 is asking for a very basic level of trust from the reader: *Trust me as a journalist to accurately report a quote, name and job title from a government official.* If the audience uses the information in Article 1 to reach the conclusion that the program in question is successful, then the reader is also placing trust in John Smith, and in the government to hire a "director of strategic programs" who is qualified and capable in that job.

In Article 1, the reader's trust in the success of a government program is placed in a clearly defined system, and in an accountable public employee responsible for that government program. The audience's perception of the government is informed by journalism that serves as a simple conduit for information. News consumers don't have to place trust in the journalist or news organization to make any qualitative assessments of *anything*. If the government program in question turns out to be a failure, audiences could be justifiably upset with John Smith for misrepresenting the program, but not with the news outlet

(at least based on that line in the story) for documenting what Smith said.

The dynamics are fundamentally different in Article 2.

In order for a audiences to reach a conclusion about the government program described in Article 2, they must trust the journalist and news outlet a great deal: *I trust you to choose a government official with an appropriate level of knowledge and involvement with the government program in question, and I trust you to choose an official whose assessment of the program is free of unpredictable bias or influence.*

If the reader uses the information in Article 2 to reach the conclusion that the program in question is successful, that conclusion is based on the completely (and necessarily, if anonymous sources are to be protected) un-transparent methodology that the journalist used in choosing the source. What if that government official doesn't know anything about the program in question? What if that government official is lying? What if the program fails?

If any of those things happen, there's no one for the public to hold accountable for the program's failure, or lies that covered it up. The reader could be justifiably upset only with the journalist who interviewed the wrong official, or trusted a liar to tell the truth. No government official is on the record making false statements, and the public has misplaced its trust *in journalism*, not in government.

Viewed through this lens, the strong negative sentiment toward journalists in the United States makes sense in some ways. Anonymous sources helped push the United States into the Iraq war, the consequences of which are still playing out. People are frustrated that government isn't serving them as they want it to. Yet many nationally focused news outlets insist on creating an accountability screen, a wall of secrecy that prevents people from understanding who is really speaking on behalf of the government. It prevents people from holding those officials accountable when things don't work right.

None of this is to say there aren't very valid, responsible uses of anonymous sources. Some of the best journalism to come from the first months of the Trump administration has been based on unnamed sources. The best of these stories verify information with multiple sources, use documents whenever available and get as much from named sources as possible.

When trust is in short supply, journalists can't afford to misplace their own. ❖



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