

College of Journalism

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Home Discussion Briefing Skills Law **Ethics & Values** Glossaries Events

You are here: Ethics and Values > Sources : Using Sources

Using Sources



Sources are vital to journalists.

Making sure you use them to produce truthful, accurate journalism is a core skill.

Sources

Using Sources

Anonymous Allegations

Some journalists talk about their sources in almost mystical terms. If you ever happen to be a source for another journalist's story, you'll see how the dial on your status and seniority meter is often tweaked up to impress their audience.

This is not exactly honest.

Some journalists truly believe that information from 'their' source is more truthful than information that is publicly available; certainly more reliable than official sources.

This is not exactly honest.

A source is exactly that: a source of information that you are able to check, weigh, examine, test ... all in pursuit of a True and Accurate story. Sometimes a source will be a person; sometimes a document.

On the record

Ideally, you should want all your sources to be prepared to go on the record. If you're working on audio or video content, this will normally mean recording an interview or doing one live.

If you're writing an online piece or need a quote for a script, you should again prefer to attribute any quotations or background.

Audiences are increasingly distrustful of content derived from 'sources close to' or 'friends of'. And while much political and business journalism depends on briefings and sources who'd rather not be named, you should always ask to name your source and make it clear that an on-the-record quote or background is your preference.

Protecting sources

Protecting sources is a key principle of journalism for which some journalists have gone to jail.

It's one of your main functions as a journalist to assist in the disclosure of information in the public interest. And that will sometimes mean talking to sources who would be in jeopardy, professional or even personal, if their identity were widely known.

Such sources often ask for anonymity, but it should never be granted automatically. The general rule is that, however much you empathise with your source's desire to remain anonymous, you should make every effort to persuade them to speak in their own name.

Because anonymity is a last resort, you should take care if or when you

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promise it that you can actually deliver it, including the need to resist a court order.

It's something you will almost certainly want to consider with your editor or a senior colleague in advance.

When anonymity is essential, you should take care that no document, computer file or other record could identify the source. This includes notebooks and administrative paperwork as well as video and audio tapes.

Remember that whenever a BBC story involves an anonymous source the relevant editor has the right to be told their identity.

If the source is making serious allegations, you should resist any attempt by your source to prevent their identity being revealed to a senior BBC editor. If this happens, you should make it clear that the information obtained confidentially may not be broadcast.

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Anonymous Allegations



Why should your audience trust a serious allegation based on a single anonymous source?

As a journalist, you can't ignore such an allegation. But what if you can find no other sources? Or if, in the case of a whistleblower, even looking for corroboration could put your source in jeopardy?

Sources

[Using Sources](#)

[Anonymous Allegations](#)

Your chief concern is the truth - that you don't deceive your audience. By putting a story that is significant, makes a serious allegation and is based on a single source, you are saying to your audience: 'You can trust me on this.'

Better make sure they can.

There are clearly considerable risks. You may be acting in good faith ... but how can you be sure that your anonymous source is?

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Do you know their agenda? How can you check or corroborate what they tell you if they're your single source and it's a confidential matter? You'll need to put the allegation to the person against whom it's made ... but can you do so without revealing your source?

The first step is to decide whether or not you actually have a story. The allegations may seem serious, but are they new? Is disclosure in the public interest? Is the source in a position of authority to make the allegation? Are they so clearly on one side of a controversy that their allegation is predictable and possibly misleading?

Important links

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Check your notes and quotes. Look at what you have verbatim. Is there another interpretation other than the one you've made? Did you test the allegation robustly at the time - and is there evidence in your notes that you did?

Have you exhausted all other options for corroboration? Should you go back to your source to try to persuade them to go on the record?

Key questions

Once you've decided you may have a story, it's essential to discuss it with your editor, who will probably take BBC Editorial Policy and/or legal advice.

You'll need to be able to answer a number of important questions, so it's worth thinking about them beforehand:

- Is the story of significant public interest?
- When did the conversation take place?
- Do you have a recording or comprehensive note of the conversation?

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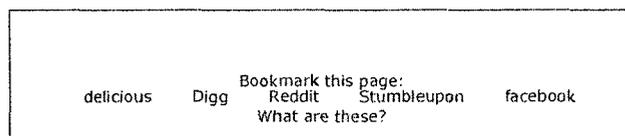
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- Does the recording/note support the story you're planning to run?
- Were there any circumstances in which the conversation took place that are relevant?
- What is the identity of the source, or what is a comprehensive description?
- Has the source proven to be credible and reliable in the past?
- Are they in a position to have sufficient knowledge of the events alleged?
- Would publication endanger the source?
- Is the source aware of the potential dangers of publication?
- Are there any legal concerns? If so, what is the level of risk?
- Has a response to the allegations been sought from the people or organisations concerned? If not, why not?
- Is there any potential confusion about the status of the conversation with the source?

If, after discussion, you and your editor decide to broadcast or publish the story, you'll need to take a number of other steps designed to ensure that both your output and any subsequent stories based on it are accurate:

- The precise wording of the story should be pinned down and adhered to on all platforms and formats, including two-ways
- Any script or text or other format should make a clear distinction between the precise words of the source and any interpretation, context or background
- The precise words used to describe the source should be considered and adhered to on all platforms
- You must actively seek a response from the people or organisations concerned to the precise allegations that you plan to broadcast, plus any interpretations you plan to put on them
- You should consider whether to allow live responses to the allegations - particularly the risk of a defamatory rebuttal or the identification of your source.



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