San Francisco Chronicle

ANONYMOUS SOURCES POLICY

The use of confidential, or anonymous, sources should be the exception rather than the routine. The use of anonymous sources to characterize or state opinions about individuals, especially in a political context or by a competitor in business or profession, must be approved by either the metro editor, business editor, an AME or above.

Issues to consider before publishing anything from an anonymous source:

Confidentiality: Editors and reporters should seriously consider the value of information received from a confidential source before deciding to print it. We want to get the information on the record, and every effort should be made to do so before publishing information without attribution. The decision to use a confidential source can diminish the credibility of the story and the newspaper. The following tests should be used in deciding to use a confidential source:

- Public importance. Is the resulting news story of such public interest that its news value outweighs the potential damage to trust and credibility?
- Alternatives. Can the story be recast to avoid the need of a confidential source?
- Last resort. Have all other reasonable means of getting the story been exhausted?

Identity: A reporter who pledges confidentiality to a source must not violate that pledge; however, a reporter pledging confidentiality to a source should inform the source that the editor of the story will be told the identity of the source. The Editor in Chief may also ask to know the identity of a source. The reporter should try to seek a guarantee that the source can be named in the event of a lawsuit, or, at a minimum, a court order. If the source wishes to withhold his or her identity from the editor, then the reporter and editor must decide whether or not to use the information even though the source's identity remains known only to the reporter. In the event of a court order to identify the source, the decision on how to proceed will be made in consultation with the reporter, his or her editors and legal counsel.

Motive: When a source must remain unidentified, the reason should be stated in the story if possible. Reporters are encouraged to indicate as much as possible in articles about an unidentified source to help readers evaluate the source's information, authority and credibility.

Clear source-reporter agreements: Reporters and editors should make sure that agreements with sources are clear, precise and understood by all parties. If a source indicates uncertainty

about whether information is on the record, we should attempt to clarify the situation. "Off the record," "on background" and other terms are not universally understood by journalists, much less by laypeople. It is required that all conversations in which a source asks for some degree of confidentiality include a thorough discussion of how or if the source will be identified and who else will know the source's identity.

The Chronicle newsroom will:

- Require that unattributed source stories appear rarely and must be approved by a Managing Editor or above.
- Require that anonymous quotes receive approval from at least one of the following: metro editor, business editor, an AME or more senior editor.
- Require that reporters seek out critical responses to anonymous sources, including the applicable individual or institution.
- Require that any use of unnamed sources in a story or column prompt a conversation between writer and editor to ensure that the test for confidentiality is met that it is a last resort and that the downside of anonymity is outweighed by its value to the Chronicle. The department head should be notified before publication that an anonymous source is being used.
- Require that editors know the identity of the source. Under rare circumstances, this rule might be relaxed, but it would be the exception and would require the approval of the Editor in Chief.
- Require editors to always ask whether the writer has sought alternate sources of citable information.
- Require writers to press confidential sources into agreeing to be named. If necessary, editors should ask reporters to try again.
- Explain to readers why a source was allowed to remain anonymous.
- Explain why unnamed sources should be trusted. Short of identifying them, give some indication of their expertise, their knowledge of the specific subject and their proximity to primary information. Many media rely too heavily on meaningless terms such as "informed source." Presumably we wouldn't use a source who isn't informed.
- Tighten the standards for confidentiality to avoid using it for the mere convenience of the source. Don't allow them to just avoid embarrassment or accountability, or to use the newspaper to snipe at a person or institution. In most instances, insist on a compelling case for anonymity i.e. that a source's job, economic or physical wellbeing, or standing in the community would be jeopardized.
- Require that when unnamed sources make derogatory comments about an individual or institution, such a statement must be one that enhances the readers' understanding of a crucial issue, and it should be corroborated by named sources, documents or public record. An exception would be if the source is widely known to be absolutely credible and reliable. A managing editor or above should approve all such derogatory anonymous quotes.
- Require that where there is potential for defamation or other liability actions against the paper, writers seek assurance that confidential sources will testify in court if necessary.

Without such assurance, consider not using the source. That must be part of the routine conversation between editor and writer.

• Require that pseudonyms should be used rarely and to protect innocent people. Their use should be disclosed to readers prominently and a deputy managing editor or above should be involved in such decisions.

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