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# Unnamed Sources: A Longitudinal Review of the Practice and its Merits

Matt J. Duffy
*Georgia State University*

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By Matt J. Duffy

Under the direction of Gregory C. Lisby

ABSTRACT

This dissertation reviews the history and discourse of the debate regarding the use of unnamed sources in journalism. A quantitative content analysis explores how the use of anonymous sources has changed over the years. The author offers guidelines for their future use.

INDEX WORDS: Anonymous sources, Unnamed sources, Journalism, Ethics, Pedagogy, Media credibility, Content analysis

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by

MATT J. DUFFY

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By Matt J. Duffy

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Georgia State University

Committee

_____________________________
Gregory C. Lisby, Chair

_____________________________
Leonard Teel

_____________________________
Ann Williams

_____________________________
Carrie Packwood Freeman

_____________________________
Barry Hollander

_____________________________
David Cheshier, Chair

May 2010

**DEDICATION**

I dedicate this dissertation to my wonderful wife, Ann, and my extraordinary children, Lydia and Jake.

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# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Background of the Problem

On August 16, 2009, the ombudsmen for the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* chastised their own papers for the same misdeed: egregious use of unnamed sourcing. In the *New York Times*, public editor Clark Hoyt noted that the paper had published a story in violation of its own rules regarding anonymous sourcing. The offending article featured an anonymous figure who made an allegation against a doctor caring for pop star Michael Jackson. After reviewing the incident, the paper issued a correction and admitted that the paper should not have published the personal allegation. Hoyt concluded:

> Readers complain to me constantly about anonymous sources in *The Times*, and I see them sometimes used in ways that seem too casual, in violation of the paper's own high standards. Top editors say they are trying to instill vigilance. The Jackson episode shows how vital that is: one lapse can mean big trouble. (Hoyt, 2009b, para. 14)

Meanwhile, *Washington Post* ombudsman Andrew Alexander noted that the reporters and editor at his paper rarely follow the internal rules governing the use of unnamed sources. In fact, his survey of reporters indicated that many did not even understand the exact nature of the newspaper's rules. He complained that too many stories granted anonymity too easily and without a clear benefit to the reader. Alexander pointed to an incident in which a political operative anonymously criticized a member of the other party, a task that would seemingly not require anonymity. He suggested that the paper institute staff training to clarify the rules for reporters, warning that "anonymity can be overused and abused. Sources can make false or misleading assertions with impunity. Journalists can inflate a source's reliability or even fabricate his or her existence" (Alexander, 2009, para. 5).

Both newspaper representatives simultaneously pointing to the inherent problems of unnamed sourcing uniquely highlights the importance of the issue. For decades, journalists and academics have debated the value of the anonymous source. On the one hand, journalism's practice of granting anonymity in order to break a story has produced stellar reporting. The *Washington Post*, for instance, uncovered the Watergate scandal with the publication of information from unnamed, independently verified sources (Bernstein & Woodward, 1974). Others point to journalistic triumphs such as Watergate and the Abu Ghraib scandals as examples of the power of anonymous sourcing (Coile, 2005).[1] However, unnamed sources also create a veil between the reader and the purveyor of information—presumably leading to distrust and lack of credibility. And, as the ombudsmen pointed out, unnamed sourcing may also be abused or even fabricated. The validity of arguments in favor and against anonymous sourcing feeds the debate while at the same time each side calls for solutions which satisfy their own points of view. Some critics call for the outright banishment of anonymous source reporting (for instance, Neuharth, 2004), others insist that their use should be greatly restrained (Boeyink, 1990; Smolkin, 2005; Weinberg, 1996), and some contend that there is no problem at all (Blankenburg, 1992; Rivers, 1984; Bob Woodward as quote in Shepard, 1994).

1 Coile commits a common mistake in his analysis. He confuses information *obtained* from anonymous sources with information *published and attributed* to anonymous sources. For example, none of the information provided to Woodward and Bernstein by Deep Throat ever made it into the newspaper. The source provided background information, but he insisted that the reporters find and attribute the information to someone else. The reporters did attribute some of their information to unnamed sources but none of the information from Deep Throat was attributed in this manner.

The issue of unnamed sourcing is innately tied to news media credibility. If readers do not know the identity of a news source, they might justifiably question whether they should believe what they are reading. Over the past three decades, many journalism scandals—which resulted in retractions of information that had turned out to be false—stemmed from information from unnamed sources.

In 1981, *Washington Post* reporter Janet Cooke received a Pulitzer Prize for her reporting on a drug-addicted eight-year-old in Washington, D.C. (Maraniss, 1981). The articles were based on interviews with the boy, the mother, and the mother's boyfriend. Cooke never revealed the full name of any of her sources. Two days after winning the Pulitzer, the *Post* admitted that Cooke had fabricated all of her anonymous quotes. The Pulitzer Prize was revoked. The scandal had a long-lasting impact on the newspaper. The ombudsman for the *Post* reported that 13 years later readers would still bring up the Cooke incident when referencing the paper's credibility (Shepard, 1994).

In yet another illustration of the dangers of unnamed sourcing, a reporter for Los Angeles television station KABC reported in 1994 that DNA tests proved that blood found on a sock in O.J. Simpson's house matched that of his former wife's blood. Judge Lance Ito called the report, which was based on one unnamed source, "outrageous" and "irresponsible" (Shepard, 1994). The station later admitted that it could not stand by its report. Other reports based on unnamed sources included the discovery of a ski mask at the scene, a hammer as a murder weapon, that Simpson was covered in scratches at the time of his arrest and that he acted strangely during a trip to Chicago. None of the reports were true (Shepard, 1994).

Similarly, in 2005, *Newsweek* created a global firestorm with the publication of a story based on one unnamed military source (Seelye & Lewis, 2005). The magazine reported that a military official had confirmed an allegation that an American interrogator at the Guantanamo Bay detention facility had flushed a Koran down a toilet. The report provoked widespread anger throughout the Muslim world, leading to riots that left at least 16 people dead. More than two weeks later, the magazine officially retracted the article, saying that they were "still trying to ascertain" whether the report was true," adding that its "brief item was based on an unnamed senior U.S. official who now says he can 'no longer be sure' of the information provided to reporter Michael Isikoff" (Seelye & Lewis, 2005, para. 3). In the brief report, the magazine failed to explain why the military source could not be named or why he had been granted anonymity. The report cited "military sources," although they later admitted it was based on only one source (Seelye & Lewis, 2005).

A number of high-profile stories with unnamed sources have publically humiliated private individuals. In a report attributed to no one (i.e., written in the "voice of God"), the *Atlanta Journal* falsely accused a heroic security guard of being the main suspect in the bombing at the 1996 Summer Olympics. No public official ever verified that report (Myers, 1997). Zhang and Cameron (2003) studied the *New York Times'* reporting on the espionage case of Chinese-American scientist Wen Ho Lee, much of which was based on anonymous government sources. These sources leveled serious allegations of treason and espionage at Lee, but the promised case against him never emerged; he eventually pled guilty to only a relatively minor charge. The authors concluded that "anonymous sources became an embarrassment for investigative journalism" (p. 98).

Many other stories with unnamed sources have had national and international political ramifications. In 2004, for instance, CBS News aired a report based on documents obtained from an unnamed source questioning former President George W. Bush's Air National Guard attendance during in the early 1970s. After serious doubts about the documents' authenticity emerged, the network admitted that the anonymous source who had provided the document was a known partisan operative. The network's anchor, Dan Rather, apologized for airing the report (Rather, 2004).

Based on unnamed White House officials, much of the *New York Times'* coverage of the run-up to the Iraq War in 2003 turned out to be inaccurate. In 2004, the *New York Times* famously criticized its own reporting on the run-up to the Iraq War. An apologetic editor's note said some of its reporting contained "information that was controversial then, and seems questionable now, was insufficiently qualified or allowed to stand unchallenged" (The Editors, 2004, para. 3).

The newspaper said much of the reporting came from a small circle of Iraqi exiles and was confirmed by government officials. The *Times* doesn't point to anonymous sourcing as part of the problem, but a review of the most-widely criticized article finds it replete with unnamed sources (Gordon & Miller, 2002). The article detailing Saddam Hussein's increased hunt for atomic bomb parts doesn't quote a named source until the twenty-fifth paragraph. The article uses phrases such as "Bush administration officials said," "according to American intelligence," "an Iraqi defector said," and "a senior administration official" (Gordon & Miller, 2002). The authors made no attempt to explain why the sources had to remain anonymous.

In the fallout from their Iraq War coverage, the *New York Times'* former public editor offered a critical assessment of their coverage, focusing on the over-reliance of information from anonymous sources. Daniel Okrent wrote:

> There is nothing more toxic to responsible journalism than an anonymous source. There is often nothing more necessary, too; crucial stories might never see print if a name had to be attached to every piece of information. But a newspaper has an obligation to convince readers why it believes the sources it does not identify are telling the truth. (Okrent, 2004, para. 16)

Okrent's comments point to the underlying issue of unnamed sourcing: credibility. When journalists employ unnamed sourcing, they must weigh an assumed drop in credibility against the duty to report a story that may otherwise go unreported.

Over the years, news media credibility numbers have consistently declined. In its report on the *State of the News Media 2006*, the Center for Excellence in Journalism offered some sobering news. "People don't really believe a whole lot of what their daily newspaper tells them," the report stated flatly. "For that matter, they don't believe much of what any news medium has to say" (Edmonds, 2007, para. 24). Two years later, a new poll found that media trust had dramatically declined further—to an all-time low. The survey found that 63 percent of respondents reported that news articles were often inaccurate, up from 53 percent in 2007, and only 29 percent said the media generally "get the facts straight," down from 39 percent two years earlier (Pérez-Peña, 2009).

The decline in media credibility can be attributed to a variety of factors, including media polarization and audience fragmentation. Yet, researchers should not overlook the possibility that the news media, quite simply, are not doing a good job. Perhaps the media's approach toward anonymous sourcing—over-reliance on the method in spite of dubious results—has led, at least in part, to this decline.

## 1.2 Purpose of the dissertation

Some critics of unnamed sourcing insist that journalists are using it more today than in the past. Following a scandal at *USA Today*, founder Al Neuharth called for the complete ban of all anonymous sourcing, a practice he described as the "evil of journalism" (Neuharth, 2004). He stated that competitive pressures have led to more unnamed sourcing: "As competition for readers and viewers and listeners and prizes from peers has become greater, more and more publishers and editors and broadcast managers have relaxed their rules" (Neuharth, 2004, para. 8) The former editor of the *Washington Post*, Leonard Downie Jr., said that "the culture of anonymity in dealings with the news media has proliferated" (Downie, 2004, para. 12). Other critics also share the view that journalists in the past handled anonymous reporting with greater restraint and more care (for instance, Glasser and Pound as quoted in Shepard, 1994). However, this assumption has been largely untested, a fact recently pointed out by the managing editor of the *New York Times*.

In 2008, the *New York Times'* public editor released the results of a Columbia Journalism School study on the paper's use of anonymous sources. The review found that despite some improvements, nearly 80 percent of the unnamed sourcing did not follow the paper's guidelines regarding the use of anonymous sources (Hoyt, 2009a). In an online question-and-answer session with *New York Times* managing editor Jill Abramson, a reader suggested that the paper used unnamed sourcing far less in the 1960s, when the news media's credibility was far higher. However, Abramson took issue with the contention that reliance on anonymous sourcing was a new phenomenon (emphasis added):

> The *Times* and other major news organizations have relied for centuries on anonymous sources, including, in the most famous case of all, the Pentagon Papers, almost exactly 40 years ago (*the Columbia Journalism School study, alas, does not have a decade-by-decade comparison*). And the suggestions in your question, that if we banned anonymous sources we would get back to 'normal,' and that anonymous sources have made reporters lazy, are ones with which I disagree. (Ambramson, 2008, para. 3)

Ambramson noted that a study of the historical use of unnamed sources has yet to be undertaken. Such a review would be worthwhile, since many critics suggest that unnamed sourcing standards have lowered over time.

Examining how current unnamed sourcing compares to its historical use should be quite illuminating—especially since some view the 1960s and 1970s as a "Golden Age" of journalism (Hume, 1997; Schudson, 2010). This dissertation fills the void of research on this subject.

The dissertation explores the use of anonymous sources over several decades to determine whether this journalistic practice has changed over time. The author conducts a longitudinal quantitative content analysis and qualitative textual analysis over the past six decades. Starting with an examination of the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* in 1958—an era when news media credibility numbers remained relatively high—it continues at 10-year intervals through 2008. If the content analysis finds that these newspapers historically used unnamed sourcing more than or at about the same level as they did in 2008, then the findings would cast doubt on the argument tying the drop in media credibility to this practice. However, if the news media employ unnamed sourcing at a higher level in 2008 than in the past, then these results would offer support to those who suggest that unnamed sourcing is a factor contributing to the decline in media credibility. The longitudinal content analysis also examines a raft of such other factors as the explanations for granting anonymity and the practice of independently verifying anonymous information.

The dissertation is structured in the following manner. First, a thorough literature review examines four areas in detail: the utilitarianism ethical model and its application toward unnamed sources, the concept and decline of media credibility, the use and impact of anonymous sources—including their link to credibility—and a historical review of the professional journalist's view of the practice. A methodology section follows, focusing on the content analysis and its coding scheme. The results section details the content analysis findings, followed by a discussion section featuring a qualitative content analysis of unnamed sourcing over the decades. The discussion uses utilitarianism to weigh the justifiability of unnamed sourcing in specific cases. In the conclusion, the author summarizes the findings, offers commentary on how new codes could help guide journalists toward best practices, details limitations to the current study, and offers ideas for future research.

## 2 Literature Review

The literature review consists of four main parts. First, an overview of the theoretical conceptions surrounding the use of unnamed sources focuses on the ethical justifications for their use. Second, a comprehensive review of writings on media credibility examines how researchers have explored the decline in public trust of the news media over the decades. Third, the author reviews research on the use of anonymous sources—their benefits to journalistic inquiry, their abuse and damage to the profession, legal precedents, and an exploration of their use and connection to media credibility. Fourth, a review of journalism textbooks, handbooks, and codes of ethics examines how the profession has treated the use of anonymous sources over the past century. The literature review concludes with a set of research questions which stem from the literature.

### 2.1 Theoretical grounding: Utilitarianism

British philosopher W.D. Ross noted that the act of communication requires the obligation to be truthful. Ross supports this argument by creating a Kantian categorical imperative—without a commitment to truth-telling, societies fail to function (Ross, 1946). Without confidence that other parties are telling the truth, backed by consistent actions that over time create a positive reputation and engender trust, people may lose their ability to transfer information, to act effectively as moral agents, or to even co-exist with others. Ross' adherence to truth-telling applies especially to journalists. Journalists cannot do their jobs without telling the truth. If their reports are untruthful, or have an appearance of obfuscation or of a lack of truth, then readers will not trust them. Those readers, therefore, will turn elsewhere to obtain the information they seek.

Boeyink (1990) noted the importance of sourcing as a method of fostering trust: "[A]ttribution serves as an important truth-telling check on a reporter's accuracy. If the source of the information is provided, that information can be independently verified by others. Errors can then be more easily discovered and corrected" (Boeyink, 235.) Offering full attribution provides an implicit promise to the reader: This information is true and you can go ask to the source to verify our work.

Truth-telling is not the only duty of journalists; they must also report the news. As journalism ethicists Kovach and Rosenthiel point out, the primary purpose of journalism "is to provide citizens with the information they need to be free and self-governing" (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2007, p. 12). The authors stress that journalism does little good if it fails to help people make informed decisions. Many journalists argue that attributing information to anonymous sources may occasionally be the only way to fulfill this duty to inform. In his defense of anonymous sources, *Washington Post* assistant managing editor Bob Woodward notes that the only way to report the news is to employ unnamed sourcing (Shepard, 1994). The ethics surrounding the use of anonymous sources therefore involves two competing principles: duty to be truthful and transparent versus the duty to inform the public. In order for journalists to make the best decision, they must weigh the competing interests within an ethical framework.

Many journalists weighing these two competing principles decide that the duty to inform the public outweighs the duty to be transparent. Carl Lavin, deputy managing editor of the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, noted that his paper discourages the use of unnamed sources, but "this needs to be balanced with the need to present vital information to the reader that cannot be obtained by other means" (Crary, 2005, para. 9). The managing editor of the *Seattle Times*, David Boardman, argued anonymous sources should be avoided unless "an important story can be told no other way" (Crary, 2005, para. 7). For these journalists, the duty to inform the public and fulfilling journalism's mission of "to provide citizens with the information they need to be free and self-governing" outweighs any potential harm stemming from the use of anonymous sources.

Many journalists who employ unnamed sourcing work within a utilitarianism ethical philosophy. The ethical theory of utilitarianism, developed by Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill, holds that the moral worth of an action can be determined by the amount of happiness or pleasure it produces (Mill, 1969). The framework is often described by the phrase "the greatest good for the greatest number." However, as Elliott (2007) notes, Mill's system is far more structured and often misunderstood:

> The mistaken understanding of utilitarianism as "arithmetic good" violates Mill's requirement of impartiality as well as the dependency that each individual has on the community for his or her own happiness. If we allow the greatest number of people to benefit from an action, doing so implies that happiness of the majority is more important than the happiness of those harmed in the bargain. The mistake allows one to conclude that having some happy and others not happy is good for the community. Mill's notion of aggregate good stresses the importance of valuing all people involved. (2007, p. 135)

Utilitarianism looks at outcomes to help make decisions regarding moral actions. A potential decision will be judged upon how much happiness it brings or how much harm it avoids—not just to the individuals involved but to the entire society. The philosophy differs from deontological ethics, such as Kant's philosophy of categorical imperatives, which does attempt to weigh the consequences of an act to help determine its moral worth (Kant, 2008). Under the utilitarianism paradigm, journalists ask which decision will bring about the greatest happiness or good for society in each particular situation. Editors weigh the benefit of using an anonymous source versus the possible detriment—including the potential harm to individuals and to society. They must carefully weigh the ramifications of such a decision and decide if the good produced for all will outweigh the harm to both individuals and society.

In addition to harming the subjects of their reporting, unnamed sources have the potential to harm society by lowering the credibility of the news media. Publishing information from anonymous sources that turns out to be wrong will hurt the credibility of their news organizations. Even in the more likely cases in which the anonymous information is true, the public still has fewer reasons to trust the veracity of the information.[2] As Ross noted, societies cannot function properly without the ability to trust communication. The public cannot make informed decisions if it does not trust information from news outlets. This impact on credibility must be part of the discussion when using a utilitarianism paradigm to evaluate decisions about unnamed sources.

The focus on the impact of the news reporting on the overall health of society should not be understated. Elliott notes:

> It would follow that the good journalist and good news organization acting well have the good of the community as a practical priority. Certainly the First Amendment allows news organizations to publish whatever they want—and Mill would enthusiastically support this liberty. But, in "Utilitarianism," Mill answered the question of what one is

[2] See the research on unnamed sourcing and credibility in section 2.3.4

> supposed to do with all of that freedom. The answer is promote the good of all. (2007, p. 107)

Elliott stresses that, when examining journalistic actions, the good of the community must make up part of the equation. Therefore, any use of unnamed sources must be weighed against the potential harm and the potential good to the society which the media outlets serve.

#### *2.1.1 Mill's principles of justice*

To decide when unnamed sourcing is justified under the tenets of utilitarianism requires a close reading of Mill's ethics. In order to fully understand how Mill would approach the use of unnamed sources, one must first examine his principles of justice. Under these principles, the following moral rules are justified because they advance the aggregate good.

First, Mill argues that it is unjust to deprive people of that to which they have a legal right (Mill, 1991, p. 178.) Elliott notes that, within this boundary, journalists cannot break the law in the process of getting a story—if even the story would benefit the public. In most circumstances, the use of unnamed sourcing would not deprive anyone of legal rights. In rare occasions, this principle could conflict with the use of anonymous sources. For instance, granting anonymity for a source to make a defamatory statement could deprive an individual of the legal right to not be libeled.

Mill's second principle of justice describes that it is unjust to deprive people of moral rights (1991, p. 179). Elliott explained that Mill means civil rights, whether they were recognized by contemporary law or not. To offer just coverage, the news media must make sure that minority opinions are heard and expressed. By providing an outlet for minorities to speak without fear of retribution, granting anonymity may help the media meet this goal. On the other hand, the use of unnamed sources may also damage moral rights by allowing critics of minority positions to speak without accountability.

Mill's third principle of justice contends that each person should get what they deserve—be it good or bad (1991, p. 179). This principle allows for the punishment of wrongdoing and for the conferral of benefits upon those who act with good intentions. Elliott argues that such a theory could prohibit a newspaper from publishing a photo of a mother grieving for her child who died in a fire. While the greater good may be served in telling her story, the woman would not "deserve" having this private moment publicized. Oftentimes, unnamed sourcing appears to be justified because an individual or being covered is getting "what he deserves." However, journalists should be wary of believing that they know what individuals deserve. For instance, Wen Ho Lee appeared to be a Chinese spy when the *New York Times* began reporting (via unnamed sourcing) the government case against him. However, over time it became clear that he did not "deserve" the treatment he received in the press (Zhang & Cameron, 2003).

Mill's fourth principle of justice describes the duty to not break faith, to deliver that which is promised to others (1991, p. 179). The application of this principle to unnamed sourcing appears clear—reporters should not promise to keep sources confidential unless they are willing to keep that promise, even at risk to themselves (e.g., the threat of jail or fines). Given the frequent use of unnamed sources, one wonders whether journalists have thought through how far they are willing to go to protect their sources. Indeed, Norman Pearlstine, the former editor of *Time* magazine, noted that he gave the government his reporters' notes during the Plame investigation partly because the source was never promised complete and utter confidentiality (Pearlstine, 2007).

Mill's final principle of justice argues for treating people impartially (1991, p. 180). Elliott notes that journalism thrives on the individual example; an issue is often best illustrated by finding one person who exemplifies it. So, reporters may find it hard to live up to the demand to treat subjects with impartiality. But, journalists can take certain steps to ensure impartial coverage. For instance, if a story involves a person who needs money for a life-saving treatment, the newspaper should not suggest that readers contribute to only that one cause. In order to strive for impartiality, a fund for all the people who need medical help should be highlighted. Allowing the use of unnamed sources provokes many instances of impartiality. Granting anonymity to certain officials while forcing others to speak on the record creates an imbalanced playing field.

These principles of justice can help make ethical decisions based on utilitarianism principles. Mill concludes:

> Justice is a name for certain moral requirements, which, regarded collectively, stand higher in the scale of social utility, and are therefore of more paramount obligation, than any others, though particular cases may occur in which some other social duty is so important, as to overrule any one of the general maxims of justice. Thus to save a life, it may not only be allowable, but a duty, to steal, or take by force, the necessary food or medicine, or to kidnap, and compel to officiate the only qualified medical practitioner. (1991, p. 201)

Mill, therefore, makes it clear that after careful examination, acts which may appear to be unjust may turn out to be justifiable—when taking into account the greater good, particularly the good of society.

### 2.1.2 Utilitarianism decision tree

In order to explore the justifiability of a moral action, Elliott (2007) created a utilitarianism decision-tree based on Mill's work. Ethical evaluators must answer the following questions when deciding the morality of a potential action:

1) What is the intended action?
2) Will it cause harm? (If not, then the action is just. If so, then review principles of justice.)
3) Is someone being denied legal rights? (If so, then action is unjust.)
4) Is someone being denied moral rights? (If so, then action is unjust.)
5) Is the person being harmed getting what s/he deserves? Or, is the person being helped getting what s/he deserves? (If so, then action is just.)
6) Has the person being harmed had a promise broken to him/her? (If so, then action is unjust.)
7) Has everyone in the situation been treated impartially? (If so, then action is just.) (p. 111)

Given these questions, utilitarianism constitutes far more than "the greatest good for the greatest number." Few situations will arise in which an unjust action can still be justified for the greater good. In those cases, Elliott distinguishes: "It is essential to show how the exception will lead to the aggregate good and how following the rule will not lead to the greatest good for the whole group" (2007, p. 110). In such a situation, one must answer two final questions in order to determine whether an act is justified:

8) How will harming this individual promote the overall good of the community? Consider whether the community will be better or worse if everyone knows that individuals can be harmed in this way for this reason.
9) How will the community be harmed if the proposed action is not taken? Consider whether the community will be better or worse if everyone knows that individuals will NOT be harmed in this way for this reason. (p.111).

These final questions in particular should provide help in deciding whether or not unnamed sourcing is ethically justified within the boundary of utilitarianism. Any use of unnamed sources must weigh its benefit to society against any potential harm—including the harm of creating distrust of the news media. The utilitarianism decision tree will be revisited and applied in the discussion section.

## 2.2 Media credibility research

### *2.2.1 Operationalizing news media credibility*

Researchers and journalists have used a variety of operational definitions over the years to measure to the concept of news media credibility. According to two leading researchers on media credibility, the most applicable definition of credibility is “believability”—the extent to which what is reported on the air or in print is believed by the audience (Gaziano & McGrath, 1987, p. 1). The authors note that the most-often researched components in credibility include “confidence in media as institutions, press performance, trustworthiness, fairness and accuracy” (p. 1). This dissertation does not distinguish between “credibility” and “believability.” This author views the terms as interchangeable, since both deal with the public’s trust in what they are being told.

In 1936, journalist and scholar Mitchell Charnley produced some of the earliest work on newspaper credibility. In his “Preliminary Notes on a Study of Newspaper Accuracy” (1936), Charnley found that newspapers quite often got basic facts wrong. By surveying three daily newspapers in Minneapolis, he discovered that half of the stories were erroneous. Charnley’s model was simple: he asked people who appeared in the news stories whether the information reported was correct. Researchers who have followed this approach over the years have found that accuracy in reporting remains an elusive goal. Charnley did not study the effect that these inaccuracies had on the audiences' perceptions of credibility; however, later researchers would address those concerns.

In 1951, psychology researchers Carl Hovland and Walter Weiss made some of the first forays into the subject of credibility from the audience's standpoint. While studying the process of forgetting, the authors found that, at the time of exposure, subjects discounted material from "untrustworthy" sources. However, over time, respondents tended to disassociate the source and the content, effectively diminishing their original skepticism. Eventually, untrustworthy material became more accepted, leading the authors to conclude that "lies, in fact, seemed to be remembered better than truths" (Hovland & Weiss, 1951, p. 636). The authors found two main components created source credibility: trustworthiness and expertise. Their findings would lead later researchers to examine exactly which factors lead to media credibility.

The subject of media credibility gained more interest in the late 1950s, when the Roper polling organization began asking in surveys about the difference between television and newspaper credibility. Usually, respondents were asked a question such as, if presented with conflicting information between television and newspaper reports, which media would one trust? Television news always fared better in such surveys. The "credibility gap" between the two mediums increased until the 1970s, when television outweighed newspapers by a 3 to 1 margin (R. S. Lee, 1978). Later survey research tended to minimize television's dominance and questioned whether the public truly trusted television news more than newspapers. In 1989, researchers found that the higher credibility for television news could be attributed to the public's differing conceptions of trust for each type of media (Newhagen & Nass, 1989). Respondents based confidence in a newspaper on its performance as an institution while they based their perception of television news on an aggregate of on-camera personalities.

While conducting several credibility studies in the 1980s, Gaziano and McGrath determined that the varying conceptions of credibility led to discrepancies in the studies. The authors observed that previous research often relied upon the Roper's "relative believability of media" question (Gaziano & McGrath, 1986). Fourteen earlier academic studies had used some form of the Roper question to explore the differences between television and newspaper media credibility. Some of the previous studies had found that credibility responses differed when respondents were asked about "national" or "local" news. For local news, newspapers would sometimes receive more credibility than television stations. But, as mentioned earlier, television news overall was almost always perceived as more believable than newspapers. The authors used a factor analysis of survey data to determine exactly what criteria audiences had used to answer questions about credibility. Gaziano and McGrath identified 12 items that tended to affect perceptions of media credibility. They included nine "credibility" factors: whether newspapers and television news are fair, are unbiased, tell the whole story, are accurate, respect people's privacy, watch out after people's interests, are concerned about the community's well-being, separate fact and opinion, can be trusted, are concerned about the public interest, are factual, and have well-trained reporters (Gaziano & McGrath, 1986). They also specified three "social concerns" factors: do the media care about what the audience thinks, do they avoid sensationalizing stories, and do they act morally.

The use of anonymous sources does not appear on Gaziano's and McGrath's list of 12 criteria, and none of these credibility concerns directly speak to the issue of anonymous sources, which is the focus of this dissertation. However, the use of unnamed sources may fit into these credibility factors as an unwillingness to "tell the whole story," as a concern for accuracy, or as a "bias" against the subject of a report using unnamed sources (Gaziano & McGrath, 1986).

By adding up each of the 12 credibility factors, the authors created a scale upon which they could base overall media credibility. About one fourth of respondents rated the news media low on credibility while about one third gave high marks. The remaining 40 percent gave the media marks in the middle range of the credibility scale. Respondents' individual ratings on each factor tended to vary. For instance, 60 percent of respondents scored newspapers high on caring about the community they served. About half of respondents gave favorable marks to both television and newspapers on fairness, trustworthiness, morality, accuracy, and being factual. Both media did relatively less well (only 4 out of 10 favorable) on being unbiased, caring about what the audience thinks, separating fact and opinion, watching out for their audiences' interests, and telling the whole story. Especially low areas for both media included respecting people's privacy and propensity toward sensationalism. The researchers also found that credibility ratings varied depending on the topic. For instance, 5 in 10 viewed reporting on President Reagan, the government, and business news as credible; yet, coverage of Arab countries, Latin America, and the Soviet Union received lower marks. One area where opinions of television and newspaper credibility deviated involved coverage of local, national, and international stories. As the scope of coverage increased (i.e., toward international), viewers tended to favor television news. In a finding that is especially interesting for this current study, when Gaziano and McGrath asked about the government's right to seize journalist's notebooks, they found that most respondents, regardless of their perceptions of media credibility, strongly supported the need of the press "to keep information and sources confidential" (Gaziano & McGrath, 1986, p. 462). This conclusion, however, does not relate to the quoting of unnamed sources in a story.

Gaziano and McGrath also explored the makeup of the audience and the effect this makeup has on audience perceptions of media credibility. Using focus groups and survey data, the authors found that two specific groups questioned media credibility more than others: the "sophisticated skeptics" and the "less well informed" (Gaziano & McGrath, 1987, p. 3). The authors noted that "sophisticated skeptics" tended to be members of a higher socio-economic status, having had personal experience with the media and possessing negative associations with those experiences. The "less well informed" people tended to have a low socio-economic status, to be suspicious of the media's motives, and to know little about how the media operate. The authors noted that one main criticism offered by "sophisticated skeptics" was a perceived liberal bias of the media. The group, disproportionately Republican and conservative, criticized the way the media covered organizations and politicians that shared their beliefs. The authors noted that sophisticated skeptics in one focus group "had great interest in news and newspapers, [but] they had much lower loyalty to the two major newspapers in that market" (p. 14).[3] In  , Gaziano and McGrath's research showed that media credibility wasn't necessarily

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[3] Written 20 years ago, this statement may have foretold the dramatic decline in newspaper circulation. With the ability to receive news via the Internet, "sophisticated skeptics" no longer have a reason to continue subscribing to their local newspapers, especially since they perceive their papers to be a less-than-credible source of news. Some recent research finds evidence that audiences are increasingly turning to media outlets that apparently share their partisan leanings (Hollander, 2008).

linked to type of media outlet and could be tied to a wide assortment of variables, both pertaining to the media and to the audiences.

Gunther (1992) continued the study of audience characteristics as they relate to media credibility. He noted that previous studies focused on media characteristics, audience demographics, or skeptical individuals. In contrast, Gunther argued that trust in press coverage of a group or issue is more likely to be affected by an individual's participation in or knowledge of that group or issue rather than by other factors. Gunther cited the "hostile media effect" to support his argument that issue involvement is a factor affecting media skepticism. This effect was first suggested in a landmark study (Vallone, Ross, & Lepper, 1985) in which two groups of participants—Israelis and Palestinians—watched the same news report on the 1982 "Beirut Massacre"; each group believed the report was biased against their group, suggesting that partisans perceived news reports about their interests as negatively biased. Building on Vallone, Ross & Lepper's research, Gunther (1992) used survey data to measure several audience attributes, including objective media attributes (what media they consumed), perceived media attributes (their perceptions of that media), audience demographics (ethnicity, age), skeptical disposition, involvement in issues, and perceptions of favorable or unfavorable coverage of certain groups. Gunther found that involvement—operationalized as membership in political groups—proved the best predictor of media credibility (i.e., involvement in an issue or movement led to skepticism toward news coverage of that issue or movement.) He concluded that media organizations should beware of overstating their ability to control perceptions of media credibility. It is important to note here that the validity of Gunther's conclusion may bear revisiting; since media credibility ratings have continued to decline in the two decades since his research, audiences have either become more involved or other factors are at work.

Robinson and Kohut (1988) found that media credibility depended upon the wording and phrases in the questions posed by researchers. Using data analysis, they found that no credibility crisis existed when surveys asked readers about "believability." The authors also found that the vast majority of readers believed what they read or watched from a specific source, but were more likely to express doubts about the generic "press." Robinson and Kohut also failed to find any distinction between the credibility of television and newspapers as a whole—a finding supported by later studies.

Kiousis (2001) explored perceptions of news credibility between television, newspapers, and online news. He issued a survey to a random sample in a mid-sized city and asked about people's attitudes toward the three media channels. The study also examined contingent factors that could influence news credibility perceptions such as media use and interpersonal discussion of news (i.e., frequency of conversations with others regarding the news). Kiousis found that people were generally skeptical of all three media channels but viewed newspapers as most credible. The relatively high performance of newspaper credibility was surprising given prior research regarding the relative believability of television news. Kiousis' research supported other studies that found television news credibility overstated (Flanagin & Metzger, 2000). Kiousis also found that opinions about news credibility correlated with one another across media outlets, pointing to a broad skeptical attitude. For television news, Kiousis found a moderate negative linkage between interpersonal discussion of news and perceptions of media credibility (i.e., the more people talked with others about the news, the less media credibility they perceived). Kiousis did not observe a negative link for newspapers, but online news credibility had a positive correlation.

### *2.2.2 News media credibility and its decline*

No uniform data sets offer an overarching view of media credibility numbers over the past six decades. Various polling organizations have explored the concept, but they often use their own language and measurements. Still, by looking at a broad selection of academic and trade literature over the decades, one can discern a noticeable downward trend.

In 1970, Vice President Spiro Agnew's attacks on the perceived bias against Republicans on television networks led Erskine to compile opinion polls over the previous four decades (1970). The author reported that 56 percent of respondents thought Agnew was right in "criticizing the way the television networks cover the news" (Erskine, 1970, p. 630). As a comparison, she used a poll from Gallup done a year earlier; this survey's data reported that only 40 percent of respondents thought the television networks had presented political and social news fairly. From this starting point, Erskine examined polling data over the previous four decades (as early as 1936) from a wide variety of polling outfits including CBS News, Gallup, Harris, Roper and Associates, University of Chicago National Opinion Research Center, and the University of Michigan Survey Research Center. The review showed that audiences' perceptions of credibility had dropped dramatically over the previous three decades. A 1937 survey had found 66 percent of respondents felt the press was "fair." A Gallup poll asking a similar question in 1969 found only 37 percent would call the press fair—a drop of nearly 30 points. Given the different wording in all the surveys and their concentration on different media, Erskine calls the data “flimsy evidence” (p. 630). Still, she concludes that the “American public has reached a low opinion of the news media” (p. 630). This indicates that, even in the early 1970s, some observers had already begun to investigate the media’s credibility levels.

Since Erskine’s study, the issue of media credibility has appeared sporadically, usually coupled with some scandal or major criticism of the news media. The American Society of Newspaper Editors (ASNE) first examined the issue in 1985, after a spate of journalism scandals and other detrimental factors. Criticisms included the exposure of several journalistic fabrications (e.g., the 1981 Janet Cooke/*Washington Post* Pulitzer Prize episode), a series of lawsuits against media outlets (e.g., *Westmoreland v. CBS*), and the presidential exclusion of the press from the first few days of the Grenada invasion (Gaziano,1988). Other factors included the widespread criticism that the media had helped cause the United States’ loss in Vietnam and a continuing decline in newspaper readership. The ASNE report found that 75 percent of the public had serious reservations about the credibility of the press (McGrath, 1985). Later research, however, found that the credibility “crisis” may have been overstated. Gaziano noted that the public were clearly skeptical of some of what they saw or watched in the media, but cautioned that uncritical acceptance of all news media was not necessarily a realistic objective. “Futhermore,” she added, “the public has its own biases and imperfections” (Gaziano,1988, p. 726).

Later research buttressed Gaziano’s conclusions. Robinson and Kohut noted that the ASNE definition of credibility was gauged rather broadly, including dimensions of press image that ranged from rudeness of reporters to insensitivity of coverage (1988). Therefore, the worry over the decline in media credibility in the 1980s was largely dismissed. In the 1990s, however, concerns proved more compelling.

In 1998, Johnson and Kaye reported that media credibility should receive renewed interest since “credibility levels have dropped considerably during the 1990s” (Johnson & Kaye, 1998, p. 326). The authors offered a robust set of data to confirm their assessment. The 1996 National Opinion Research Center Poll showed that, from 1986 to 1996, the percentage of Americans who had a great deal of faith in the news media had declined from 18 percent to 11 percent. The number of people with at least some confidence plummeted over the same time frame—from 72 percent to 39 percent. A study by the Pew Charitable Trusts found a solid majority (between 72 percent and 74 percent) of the public still viewed the three major networks as credible, but believability ratings had dropped 10 points from the previous decade’s results. Also, a 1997 Roper report showed that fewer than half (47 percent) of respondents believed the media, in general, were doing a good job (Johnson & Kaye, 1998). Furthermore, the number of people who agreed that the news media reported “the news fully, fairly, and accurately” dropped from 70 percent in 1974 to 26 percent in 1994 (Fibich, 1995, p. 16).

The numbers continued their decline into the 2000s. A 2002 Pew Research survey found 59 percent of the public believed that journalists are biased, 67 percent believed that journalists have covered up their mistakes, and only 39 percent believed that journalists are moral (Geary, 2005). A 2004 Gallup poll found that confidence in television news reporting had dropped 5 percent and hovered at 30 percent—an all-time low since tracking began in 1993.

Newspaper confidence also sat at 30 percent (Geary, 2005). As mentioned in the introduction, the credibility numbers have continued their decline throughout the last decade.

### *2.2.3 Contributing factors of the credibility decline*

Researchers and journalists studying the drop in news media credibility attribute it to a variety of factors. They identify the most common culprits to be lower professional and ethical standards, increased errors and bias, the advent of additional media outlets, and increased polarization and fragmentation.

In 1999, the American Society of Newspaper Editors issued a report examining their industry's declining credibility (Urban, 1999a). The ASNE report found that the "public's fundamental concerns about journalism … center on accuracy, the newspaper's relationship with its community, and perceptions that newspapers too often are biased and tend to over-cover sensational stories" (Urban, 1999a, para. 2). The report was based on 3,000 telephone interviews with newspaper readers, 16 focus groups, 1,714 self-administered journalist surveys, and other methods of inquiry (Urban, 1999b). The research discovered that journalists and the public differed greatly in their understanding of the problem. For instance, journalists tended to overstate how well local papers both respected and understood their communities. Journalists also failed to understand the public's widespread perception of bias in news accounts and the degree to which the public felt that journalists over-covered sensational stories.

Additional research has also pointed to the public-versus-journalist divide on the issue of the news media's credibility. Geary (2005) pointed out that only 28 percent of journalists told pollsters that the public had lost trust in the media. Furthermore, despite the preponderance of news media scandals, journalists rated ethics and standards dead last—five percent—when presented with a list of top problems facing the profession (Geary, 2005). Future research could examine why journalistic self-assessments differ so widely from the public's assessments of journalism. Journalism schools may be partly to blame for the disconnect. Few journalism textbooks stress the extent of the media credibility problem (Brooks, Kennedy, Moen, & Ranly, 2005).

The ASNE's 1999 report focuses on accuracy as a predominant factor in the decline of credibility. This perception buttresses the arguments of journalism critics Kovach and Rosenstiel who observed that news accuracy is "the foundation upon which everything else builds: context, interpretation, debate, and all of public communication. If the foundation is faulty, everything else is flawed" (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2001, p. 43). According to the ASNE report, the public and the press both agreed that too many factual errors and spelling and grammatical mistakes appear in newspapers. Small errors undermine public confidence in the press, the study found, and the public finds many small errors in their publications. Surveys showed that publishing corrections did help improve perceptions of credibility (Urban, 1999c). The accuracy section also included other factors which could lead to erroneous reporting; these include attitude toward corrections, the rush to publish, and the use of unnamed sources.

Regarding the use of anonymous sources, nearly half of readers agreed that a story should not be published if no one is willing to go "on the record." The report offered that "there is great skepticism among readers about unnamed sources" (Urban, 1999a, p. 11). Readers suggested that unnamed source reporting should include transparency and as much information as possible. However—perhaps showing a disregard of the perception problem—

the ASNE had failed to include a question about unnamed sources on its journalist survey. Yet, one unprompted journalist noted that "anonymous sources are a major news-gathering problem. Why should I trust the judgment of a reporter about whom I know little?" (Urban, 1999c, para. 42). Such marked skepticism from a colleague makes distrust from the general public over "sources said" reporting easier to understand.

In the mid-1990s, most of the blame for lower credibility focused on the news media's ethical lapses. In an *American Journalism Review* article, Fibich reported that "the public's contempt for the mainstream media seems more intense than ever before" (Fibich, 1995, p. 16). She explored some of the reasons behind the tarnished reputation of the press, including the actions of CBS news reporter Connie Chung. The reporter had recently coaxed Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich's mother into speaking negatively of then-first lady, Hillary Clinton. During a taped interview, the reporter had asked her to talk privately about Clinton "between you and me," a move criticized as unethical. The article also discussed the 1989 *New Yorker* profile of journalist Joe McGinnis and his book *Double Vision*. In Janet Malcolm's piece, she chastised McGinnis for misleading the book's protagonist into thinking the work would help absolve him of suspicion in the murder of his pregnant wife. She had written that "every journalist … knows that what he does is morally indefensible" (p. 20). Ironically, Malcolm's own reporting helped further erode journalism's reputation. She was accused of fabricating quotes in a libel case that she ultimately lost at the Supreme Court. Fibich's article offered several other specific criticisms of the media culled from public opinion surveys and observers. Additional criticism included the presses' tendency to underreport complex issues, to be more adversarial than necessary, and to unfairly approach the subjects of critical reports.

Citing increased attention toward political sex scandals, critics also took aim at journalists who had "actually permitted themselves to become the new moral squads" (Fibich, 1995, p. 20). James Warren, the Washington bureau chief for the *Chicago Tribune*, noted that the public perceived the press at the time as "hypocritical, privacy-invading, emotionally and practically remote from them, paternalistic, and prone to frequent error" (p. 18). Based on 45,000 telephone calls during her three-year tenure as the *Washington Post*'s ombudsman, Joann Byrd said that audiences no longer view journalists as engaged in public service. Instead, they believe that "journalists are engaged in self-service—getting ratings, selling newspaper or making their careers" (Fibich, 1995, p. 18). The article palpably tied the negative opinions of journalists to their waning credibility.

In the following decade, credibility numbers dropped further and critics pointed to still more ethical lapses. Geary (2005) prepared an exhaustive review of recent journalism scandals. For instance, a columnist at the *Sacramento Bee* admitted that the "real people" in his social issues columns were often fabricated. ABC News suspended news anchor Carole Simpson for lying in a speech about an anthrax scare. To get an exclusive interview with rescued prisoner of war and U.S. Army Private Jessica Lynch, CBS News offered her a made-for-TV movie, a book deal, and the opportunity to co-host a music show. NBC News engineered an exclusive deal with runaway bride Jennifer Wilbanks, who reportedly received a collateral book deal worth $500,000. ABC's Cokie Roberts was caught faking a live shot, appearing in a coat in front of a green screen pretending to be in front of the U.S. Capitol building. CNN's chief admitted trading "truth for access"—hiding bad news about Saddam Hussein in order to interview Iraqi leaders.

And, as already mentioned, *Newsweek* magazine retracted a story that alleged the U.S. military desecrated a Koran (Geary, 2005).

This anecdotal evidence seems to point to a dramatic ethical shift in the news business. However, no studies have examined whether news operations of the past few years suffer from more ethical scandals than in earlier eras. The apparent increase in ethical lapses may be linked solely to an increase in media outlets—and the amount of coverage they devote to their own mistakes.

### *2.2.4 Specific remedies for strengthening media credibility*

Scholars and critics have floated several ideas to increase media credibility. Suggestions include placing a greater emphasis on accuracy, improving grammar, explaining ethical decisions, increasing fact-checking, and limiting the use of unnamed sources.

Citing the ASNE report on credibility, Maier (2005) found a correlation between newspaper accuracy and credibility. The author surveyed 4,800 news sources cited in 14 newspapers to assess newspaper accuracy and the effect of the errors on newspaper credibility. He found that sources reported errors in 61 percent of local news and feature stories. The number represented the highest inaccuracy rate reported in 70 years of accuracy research—the previous inaccuracy rates range from 41 percent to 60 percent. Newspaper credibility in relation to severity and frequency of errors, as perceived by news sources (not the readers), also significantly declined. Furthermore, Maier found that sources became less willing to cooperate with the press after occurrences of inaccuracy in reporting. Sources considered subjective errors the most egregious, indicating that the manner in which a story is conveyed is at least as important as making sure the facts are accurate.

Noting the ASNE's focus on accuracy as a factor in lower media credibility, a number of critics have taken aim at the poor grammar and writing skills of some reporters. This criticism has led a few critics to push for an overhaul in journalism education programs. Seamon (2001) researched the contemporary requirements of writing and basic grammar at journalism schools; he found many to be woefully inadequate, prompting his call for a creation of a uniform competency test for all journalism programs. He noted that similar calls had been made before, but "the failure of J-schools to adopt practices such as language competency exams on a large scale would seem to suggest that grammar curricula reforms are a tough sale" (Seamon, 2001, p. 62). Of course, the apparent rise of grammatical mistakes in newspapers could also be a result of a decrease in the numbers of copyediting staff members at struggling media outlets. Journalists surveyed about the issue often blame increasingly heavy workloads for the numbers of typos and grammatical mistakes (Seamon, 2001).

As an attempt to rebuild trust, some journalists and academics have called for media outlets to both explain their decisions and offer more transparency. In the *American Journalism Review*, Paterno (1998) reported some editors have offered transparency as a way to improve trust with readers. For instance, the *Washington Post* explained to readers how it was handling the use of anonymous sources during the Monica Lewinsky scandal. In California, an editor for the *San Jose Mercury News* explained why the paper decided to run a front-page photo of a murderer making an obscene gesture. And in the *Boston Globe*, the paper explained why it chose to run a story about an elected official's drinking (Paterno, 1998). According to Paterno's article, the practice of transparency was once thought to hurt credibility. Ethicist Michael Josephson described that experiences with the readers in seminars showed that just the opposite was true. He noted that the public appreciated the explanation of how a tough decision was reached. Interestingly, the article mentions three instances when editors ran sidebars to stories explaining why the paper chose to use unnamed sources in news reports (Paterno, 1998).

Paterno does not offer any test of the assumption that greater transparency leads to greater media credibility. Only anecdotal evidence affirms its benefits. Future research could test the hypothesis that those media outlets offering explanations for their actions enjoy greater credibility among readers. Such a test may be hard to devise, as many variables are involved in media credibility. An organization which cares enough about credibility to explain its actions probably does a number of other things well, too.

In *Quill Magazine*, published by the Society of Professional Journalists, Trombly examined efforts to improve fact-checking at newspapers (2004). She noted that many of the journalism scandals involving fabrication of sources and quotes took an incredibly long time to be uncovered. For example, *USA Today'*s foreign correspondent Jack Kelley wrote for that newspaper for 21 years before editors finally figured out that many of his reports were pure fabrications. Kelley resigned while the paper had to admit that information in 150 of his articles could not be verified. "The longer the problem goes unchecked," Trombly wrote, "the bigger the hit to newspaper's credibility" (p. 19). Kelley's actions—and the actions of all the other reporters who have been fired for fabricating quotes or plagiarizing others—would be caught sooner if media outlets used more stringent fact-checking protocols.

Trombly pointed to the *Fort-Worth Star Telegram* as an example of a newspaper which takes such an approach, both to prevent a major journalism scandal and also to stress the importance of getting the smallest details correct. To meet this goal, the news research department randomly selects one story per week and extensively checks the article for inaccuracies. Articles are reviewed, sources are called, and facts are double-checked. If an honest mistake is identified, then a correction is issued and the paper moves on; if serious problems are identified, then the reporter's previous reporting will be reviewed. In addition, the *Star Telegram* randomly mails accuracy questionnaires to sources. The surveys ask eight questions about the accuracy of the article and the experience of dealing with the newspaper reporter. Editors and reporters review the responses (often few in number) to gauge the quality of the journalist's reporting. No other newspapers have embraced the Fort Worth paper's zeal for ensuring accuracy, but several journalists and academics note that their approach represents a notable attempt to prevent a repeat of a major journalism scandal that could damage a media outlet's credibility (Trombly, 2004). The *Star Telegram's* practices could also help improve credibility by stressing to reporters the importance of making sure to get the small details correct. Future research could examine the credibility numbers of papers with stricter fact-checking protocols and compare them to other news outlets.

### *2.3 Unnamed Sources: An overview*

Journalism operates on a normative basis of objectivity, with reporters operating as objective observers who attribute information to sources (Schudson, 2001). Sources interact with reporters through a variety of means to ensure that information reaches news consumers.

To compete in the marketplace of news, journalists often rely upon their sources, a situation which creates a potential barrier to the ideal of objective detachment (Carlson, 2007). At times, sources may demand anonymity in order to provide information. As Roscho explains: “[I]n exchange for information about high-level activities—often, activities that other, powerful sources would prefer to conceal—reporters bypass the norm of attributing news to specifically named informants” (Roshco, 1975, p. 92). Since granting anonymity to a source creates an absence of transparency, most journalists and scholars insist that the practice should be used sparingly (for instance, Alexander, 2009; Blankenburg, 1992; Boeyink, 1990; Hoyt, 2008; Okrent, 2004; Weinberg, 1996). Yet, as the following section shows, studies have found that the practice is actually quite prevalent.

### *2.3.1 Scholarly research on unnamed sourcing*

A review of research on the use of unnamed sourcing reveals that its use increased during the 1970s and through the 1990s, and then declined in the 2000s. However, the studies used various methodologies, so only the broadest conclusions should be drawn from any meta-analysis.

Sigal (1974) performed the earliest study, a content analysis of about 3,000 stories from the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* over a 20-year period. He found “background briefings” and “leaks” accounted for fewer than 10 percent of the articles.[4] Later that decade, a review of newspapers found unnamed sources in 33 percent of stories (Culbertson, 1978). In the early 90s, another study found a similar amount—roughly 30 percent of the newspaper

[4] “Background briefings” 7.9 percent; “Leaks” 2.3 percent

articles from three large papers, contained anonymous sourcing (Blankenburg, 1992). News magazines had a far greater rate of anonymous sourcing. An analysis of *Time* and *Newsweek* from 1982 discovered anonymous sourcing in 80 percent of its content (Wulfemeyer, 1985). A review of seven prestige newspapers found nearly half of the stories quoted White House staff anonymously (Hallin & Manoff, 1993). A more recent study found that anonymous sourcing in newspapers got worse before it got better. A content analysis found that 80 percent of large circulation newspaper stories from 2003 contained anonymous sources (Martin-Kratzer & Thorson, 2007). The authors found the usage dropped to 20 percent the following year in the aftermath of journalism scandals and complaints about over-use of unnamed attribution. The widely varying levels of anonymous sources point to the need for a uniform longitudinal study.

Several studies have examined the differences in sourcing between television and newspaper reporting. Lasorsa and Reese (1990) studied the coverage of the 1987 Wall Street stock market crash and noted that the television news coverage employed anonymous sources for the story far more than prestige newspaper outlets. A content analysis of television news broadcasts found that 55 percent of programs contained at least one anonymous source (Wulfemeyer & McFadden, 1986). The authors reported that television consistently employs anonymous sourcing more than print outlets. Many observers attribute the differences to the time constraints of broadcasting.

National security coverage often features the use of anonymous sources. Brown, Bybee, Wearden and Straughan (1987) found that stories about the military featured more anonymous sources than other beats. Landers (2004) found that anonymous military sources were common in *Newsweek*, *Time,* and *U.S. News & World Report* coverage. The military sources would often report victories that would later be judged as defeats. Martin-Kratzer and Thorson (2007) found that use of anonymous sources in several newspapers and television news broadcasts increased in Iraq War stories from 2003 to 2004, despite the dramatic overall decline of their use. The authors suggested that government sources may use anonymity to help manage war-related messages. Other authors (Blankenburg, 1992; Martin-Kratzer & Thorson, 2007) have also found that reporters covering the military use anonymous sources more than journalists covering other subjects.

### *2.3.1 The debate over the merits of unnamed sourcing*

Complaints over the use of anonymous sourcing are not a new phenomenon. Boeyink (1990) criticized the rampant use of anonymous sources noting that the "dependence on trust is the vulnerable jugular of journalism" (p. 237.) He reviewed the use of anonymous sources and found no universal guidelines governing their usage. Boeyink noted that most media outlets followed four general rules: 1) An editor must know the source, 2) The story must be important, 3) Anonymity should be a last resort, and 4) Reasons for anonymity should be explained in the story. Noting veiled source scandals of his era, Boeyink created seven new guidelines for news outlets to follow: 1) Editors must authorize promises of anonymity, 2) Anonymity must be granted as part of a just cause, 3) Anonymity should be a last resort, 4) Sources should be as fully identified as possible as well as reasons for granting anonymity, 5) Benefits of using anonymous source should be weighed against harms, 6) Anonymity should not be granted unless intentions are just, and 7) Information must be independently verified from a second source. One of Boeyink's suggestions, the explanation for granting anonymity, has been widely adopted. However, his insistence on verifying information from unnamed sources has lost adherents over time.

Journalistic attitudes toward anonymous sources have changed over time. St. Dizier (1985) surveyed journalists in 1974 and again in 1984 about their use of anonymous sources. He found that the number of journalists who said that avoiding unnamed sources would seriously hamper their ability to report the news dropped from 56 percent in 1974 to just 23 percent in 1984. The timing of the surveys likely had some effect—the earlier survey occurred just after Watergate and the latter shortly after the Janet Cooke scandal. No researcher has replicated the survey to see how attitudes have changed since 1984.

Some researchers have examined reporter's motivations or circumstances and the link to use of anonymous sources. Powers and Fico (1994) surveyed 121 journalists at high-circulation newspapers and found that anonymous sources significantly and negatively correlated with length of experience (i.e., reporters with more experience were less likely to grant anonymity). Reinardy and Moore (2007) found that graduating college students—who presumably had gained some real-world journalism experience in school—frowned on using anonymous sources far more than new students. A 1983 survey of journalists found that—despite the recent occurrence of the Janet Cooke anonymous sources scandal—only one news outlet in four had a firm written policy concerning the use of unnamed sources (Wulfemeyer, 1983). The author notes that the survey created a benchmark for future research; however, no other researchers have replicated it.

Son (2002) examined ethics codes of various news organizations to see how they suggested handling "leaks" from government officials. He found only passing references to the subject, leaving the decisions largely up to individual journalists. Son noted that "the more journalists grant anonymity to sources without verifying their bias, calculation, and purpose, the more often they sink to being government's managerial tool, putting journalists on slippery moral ground" (2002, p. 170). Many authors (Brown, 2003; Gassaway, 1988; Hoyt, 2005; Strupp, 2005) have criticized the press for granting anonymity too easily.

While many envision the use of anonymous sources as the only viable method to gain information that would otherwise remain hidden—e.g., the lone whistleblower doing what's right in a malevolent bureaucracy—the reality is often far different (Hess, 1996). Anonymous sources are often high-placed officials carefully crafting their message. As Sigal (1973) notes, "most unattributed disclosures in the news are not leaks below deck, but semaphore signals from the bridge" (p. 144). In the *New York Times* Iraq War coverage, for instance, observers have noted that Vice President Dick Cheney produced information for the newspaper anonymously (Bergman, 2007). He then appeared on the NBC news program *Meet the Press* and pointed to the article as objective evidence supporting his claims.

At times, it appears, anonymous sourcing may be used as a managerial tool by those in positions of power. Tuchman (1978) described how officials often used news outlets to test reactions to various proposals while hiding behind the shield of anonymity. Anonymous sourcing can also help burnish a reporter's reputation. A former reporter and editor for the *Baltimore Sun* noted that employing an anonymous source in a story could help persuade management to place it on the front page (Keat, 2005). Culbertson (1978) reported that some authors may make a story more "dramatic" or "investigative" by needlessly using veiled sources to create an impression of secret sources not available to other journalists.

Critics also contend that unnamed-source reporting could lead to bias in coverage. Esposito (1999) studied the use of anonymous sources in the coverage of the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal. He found that network news broadcasts and CNN used an anonymous attribution at least once in 71 percent of their stories. When citing a source, the news stations would use an anonymous source 45 percent of the time. The author noted that the White House used the ability to anonymously leak information (the prosecution team were largely limited by law from leaking information) to their advantage in winning the war of public opinion.

Defenders of unnamed sourcing argue that using anonymous sources opens a space for dialogue in the public discourse. Blankenburg (1992) suggested that the utility of anonymous attribution should be weighed against an examination of its costs, its potential loss of credibility versus its benefits, and against the possibility of providing fuller coverage. He argued that the benefit of unnamed sourcing outweighs the costs:

> [A]nonymity permits not just more information but more antagonistic information. The virtue of this is that the First Amendment is grounded in a marketplace assumption that expects the “truth”—a viable public opinion, among other things—to rise from competing arguments. Anonymous attribution can enhance diversity and competition of viewpoints in a mass communication system that tends to value authority and “responsibility.” (p. 11)

Blankenburg argued that if unnamed sources were not quoted in the press, then information would simply not be released and thus, the sphere of public discourse would diminish. He also noted that secrecy should not be confused with deceit. Secrecy in aid of critical truth-telling is valuable, Blankenburg argued, and should not be disdained. He argued that some lack of transparency is tolerable in exchange for the benefits that secrecy produces.

Many journalists and other experts similarly have defended the use of anonymous sources. Often a journalist cannot obtain information without a guarantee of anonymity (Gassaway, 1988; Sigal, 1974, pp. 42–46; Swain, 1978, pp. 48–49). Many journalists embrace the use of anonymity, insisting that their use is simply a reality of the job. *Washington Post* assistant managing editor Bob Woodward, famed for his Watergate coverage, noted that “the job of a journalist … is to find out what really happened. When you are reporting on inside the White House, the Supreme Court, the CIA or the Pentagon, you tell me how you’re going to get stuff on the record” (Shepard, 1994, para. 10). Woodward notes that frowning on the use of unnamed sources looks good on paper—especially after a scandal involving erroneous reporting—but does not work in reality.

One previous attempt to limit unnamed sourcing supports Woodward’s argument. In 1975, *Washington Post* editor Ben Bradlee instituted a policy of a complete ban on the use of anonymous sources. The editor had grown tired of the Nixon administration’s practice of anonymously leaking information to different news outlets to control their message. Reporters were instructed to walk out of meetings with administration sources if the material delivered could not be attributed to a named source. Of course, none of the rival reporters left the room, leaving *Washington Post* staffers feeling hamstrung. *The New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal* promptly published articles that the *Washington Post* avoided. Apparently Bradlee disliked getting scooped more than being manipulated by anonymous sourcing. The ban lasted two days (Bagdikian, 2005).

### *2.3.2 Attempts to limit anonymous sourcing*

After a scandal involving unnamed sourcing, journalists and critics often hope that the event will mark an end to their abuses. Following the spate of false O.J. Simpson reporting, for instance, a journalism professor, Tom Brislin, hoped that change was imminent. He said:

> My hope is that the O.J. story will be to anonymous sources what the 'Jimmy's World' story [by Janet Cooke] ... was to deception, fictional and composite characters … [Hopefully, in ten years] we'll look back … on O.J.'s world and anonymous sources as those bad old days in our ethical evolution." (Shepard, 1994, para. 11)

Brislin's hope never came to fruition. The 1990s saw continued use of unnamed sourcing and new scandals emerged in the next decade. In 2004, the *New York Times* apologized for its sloppy Iraq War reporting that was predicated on many misleading, unnamed sources. Executive Editor Bill Keller made a similar pledge: "A year from now, I would like reporters to feel that the use of anonymous sources is not a routine, but an exception, and that if the justification is not clear in the story they will be challenged" (Smolkin, 2005, para. 20.) The newspaper created even more stringent requirements for unnamed sourcing, including requiring that at least one editor know the identity of every anonymous source in the paper. Other newsrooms including *USA Today* and the *Washington Post* tightened up their policies on anonymous sources as well.

In March 2004, amid concern over Iraq War reporting and administration spin, the *Washington Post* issued new guidelines over anonymous sources. The guidelines reiterated the paper's preference to get all sources "on the record" and to object to "background briefings" from administration officials, a traditional fountainhead for much unnamed sourced reporting. Executive Editor Leonard Downie Jr. said that the present era is hallmarked by "Internet-borne rumors, talk-show speculation and sophisticated spinning by newsmakers who want to influence how the news is reported while hiding their responsibility for doing so" (Shafer, 2004, para. 2). Downie did make exceptions for whistleblowers and other cases.

Later that month, *USA Today* fired one its top reporters, Jack Kelley, after determining that much of his reporting was false. Of more than 150 stories flagged as suspicious, dozens cited anonymous intelligence officials. After the scandal, Editor Ken Paulson imposed a more stringent policy and said he saw the use of unnamed sources shrink by 75 percent (Smolkin, 2005). Paulson said he would have implemented the new policy regardless of the Kelley scandal because he's heard hundreds of complaints about anonymous sourcing during his seven-year tenure as executive director of the First Amendment Center, a press freedom organization. Paulson noted that the press works "in a culture in which everyone wants to go off the record all the time, and we know that readers trust us less when we do that" (Smolkin, 2005, para. 26.)

Given the recent complaints of the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* ombudsmen, the lofty goals of those paper's editors appear to remain out of reach. This researcher's longitudinal content analysis should help see how current journalists are performing as they strive to limit unnamed sourcing.

Some media outlets have solved the problem of unnamed sources with a model method: an outright ban. In a 2005 survey, nearly one-quarter of respondents said they never allow the use of anonymous sources ("Newspapers Frown on Anonymous Sourcing," 2005). The editor of the Jackson (Mich.) Citizen Patriot said that an outright ban made it easy to weigh whether anonymity should ever be granted. The editor, Eileen Lehnert, noted: "Our policy is to get people on the record. Period. Once you operate from that standpoint, you rarely have to reconsider your position" (2005, para. 7). Editors at smaller papers tended to prohibit unnamed sourcing and tied their reasoning to credibility. The editor of the Longview (Texas) *News-Journal* said: "We might as well be writing fiction if we cannot give our readers a source" (para. 26).

### *2.3.3 Legal issues surrounding unnamed sourcing*

The legal system sits at the periphery of any discussion regarding anonymous sourcing. Material from unnamed sources quite often comes from government officials who are releasing classified information. Strictly speaking, such disclosure is a crime. Recent examples of reporting based on anonymous classified information include the *New York Times* report regarding the warrantless wiretapping of terrorism suspects (Risen & Lichtblau, 2005) and the *Washington Post* exposure of secret CIA prisons located in Eastern Europe and other countries (Priest, 2005). Both reports involved the anonymous dissemination of classified information to reporters—commonly referred to as a "leak."

In a comprehensive law review article, Lee notes that "our political culture largely tolerates leaks and recognizes the importance of leaks in the democratic dialogue" (W. Lee, 2008). Presidents and agency chiefs do decry leaks, but they often decide to not seek prosecution over them. On the few occasions that the government tries to find the identity of the government leaker, the longstanding practice at the Department of Justice is to focus on the potential leakers rather than the press. Investigations leading to any criminal charges are extraordinarily rare.

The "Plame Affair" diverged greatly from the unwritten rules regarding leak investigations. In that case, independent prosecutor Patrick Fitzgerald actively targeted journalists while probing the outing of a CIA employee, Valerie Plame. The courts compelled two journalists to reveal their sources in that case, dismissing arguments that their First Amendment rights outweighed their duty to cooperate with a criminal investigation. In 2007, a jury found the vice president's chief of staff Scooter Libby guilty of obstructing justice as a result of the case. No one was ever charged with the disclosure of Plame's identity. Lee cautions against drawing too much out of the Plame affair. Lee noted that "criminal prosecutions against government employees who leak are imbued with an overwhelming sense of randomness due to the rarity of those prosecutions" (para. 160).

Some lawmakers would like to pass a federal shield law to prohibit the government from compelling journalists to reveal their unnamed sources. Proponents of the proposed law, dubbed the "Free Flow of Information Act," argue that the public benefits when reporters protect confidential sources who have helped bring important information to light. Opponents argue that unauthorized disclosure of classified material can harm national security. They also argue that journalists should not have the power to decide whether national secrets should be revealed (Savage, 2009).

### *2.3.4 Audience studies on credibility and unnamed sourcing*

Several researchers have conducted experimental designs to search for a link between anonymous sourcing and credibility. Early studies tended to find little evidence that unnamed sources led to diminished credibility. However, later studies did find such a link.

Adams (1962, 1964) found that certain college students attached rather high credibility ratings to unnamed news sources. He also found that other variables, such as prior knowledge and existing opinions, can be more influential than attribution in shaping a readers' perception of credibility. Edelstein (1974) found fairly high public respect for the media's handling of Watergate coverage and its extensive use of anonymous sourcing. Culbertson and Somerick (1976) found respondents saw no significant differences between anonymous and named news sources.

Riffe (1980) examined the believability of unnamed sources over time. Comparing his results to Adams' earlier study, he found that most people trusted unnamed sources representing government agencies less in 1979 than they did in 1960. He attributed the decline to the corresponding drop in public opinion toward government institutions following the Vietnam War and Watergate. Riffe also found that the credibility of unnamed sources varied according to the government or non-government agency the source represented. Respondents afforded the lowest credibility ratings to sources without any institutional backing, such as "it was learned" or "learned on high authority" (Riffe, 1980, p. 622).

Fedler and Counts (1981) conducted an experiment with 160 participants, primarily college freshmen and sophomores enrolled in communication courses. The authors designed both a controversial and a noncontroversial news article and prepared three versions of each—one with named sources, one with unnamed sources, and one with no attribution at all. Each student read only one of the stories. They found that perceptions of fairness and accuracy (the authors did not ask specifically about credibility) varied between the controversial and noncontroversial stories. Fedler and Counts concluded that the type of story could influence whether readers cared about unnamed sources. Hale (1984) also found that story type had a greater effect on perceptions of credibility than use of named or unnamed sources.

Smith (2007) found more evidence that credibility of unnamed sources was tied to the type of story. In an experiment using college students, Smith measured credibility with a simple 4-point Likert scale with "not credible" and "very credible" at opposite ends. He found respondents perceived a news story involving personal allegations made by unnamed sources with low credibility. However, a separate group who read an unnamed-sourced story about a whistleblower reporting abuses at a local jail reacted with far more credulity. Smith also found a correlation between trust in anonymous sources and trust in a local media outlet. He noted that students who read a paper occasionally were more likely than those who didn't to have a favorable impression of their local newspaper.

Smith pointed out that the difference in story types (i.e., personal allegations vs. whistleblower) is significant. He quoted the *Kansas City Star*'s guidelines on anonymous sources, which directs reporters to avoid letting "sources use the cloak of anonymity to attack other individuals" (2007, p. 15). The finding mirrors recent press criticism. For instance, the public editor of the *New York Times* took his newspaper to task for allowing anonymous sources to harshly criticize baseball player Alex Rodriguez and to question Caroline Kennedy's qualifications for the U.S. Senate (Hoyt, 2008).

Previous research on unnamed sourcing and credibility has not been anchored on a distinct theoretical foundation. However, attribution theory, a psychological theory developed by Heider (1958), may offer a useful theoretical framework to capture this phenomenon. The theory suggests that people behave as amateur psychologists when weighing information. In an effort to understand others' actions, people make assumptions about the cause(s) of their behavior. Attribution theory has been used explain behavior in the classroom (Ahles &

Contento, 2006), in human resource decisions (Knouse, 1989), and in a study of management effectiveness (Freedman, 1984). Rains (2007) used attribution theory to observe reactions to health information literature featuring anonymous sources. In keeping with some aspects of previous research, Rains found that respondents who read health-related information saw no difference between the credibility of named and unnamed sources. Rains explained that "source anonymity may only be important when the receivers have some motivation to question the source's intentions or merit" (2007, p. 208.) Attribution theory appears to offer an explanation for Smith's (2007) discovery of differing levels of anonymous source credibility. Readers who attribute good intentions to the anonymous sources motivations (i.e., in the whistleblower story) will perceive the article as credible. Readers who attribute bad intentions (i.e., in the accusation story) will perceive the article as less credible.

The most recent study on credibility and unnamed sources found that their use diminished credibility regardless of story type. In an experimental study, Sternadori and Thorson (2009) examined how audiences rated the credibility of named and unnamed sources in real-world news stories. Interestingly, the authors used both award-winning and non-award winning articles. Respondents viewed both types of stories as less credible when they contained unnamed sources. They also found that the least credible of all articles were the award-winning stories. Sternadori and Thorson observed that this may reflect the disconnect between the industry's judgment of journalistic quality and the reader's perception of credibility; the authors noted that the 1998 ASNE credibility study found that many readers perceive the media as out of touch with prevailing societal norms. Sternadori's and Thorson's study had two significant limitations—the experiment featured only 60 participants, all drawn from a pool of college students. Thus, authors suggested that future research focus on older news consumers. Such a study should be far more insightful, since regular news readers should have firmer opinions on the use of unnamed sources in journalism.

The change in reader response to unnamed sourcing is interesting. Earlier studies have seemed to show that veiled attribution did not affect credibility, while later research found more of a connection. The difference could reflect a societal change in attitudes toward anonymity. However, the change could also be due simply to the varying research designs used by different researchers.

## 2.4 Historical review

This section of the literature review examines how professional journalists have approached the use of anonymous sources over time. The author reviews a variety of journalism textbooks, handbooks, and codes of ethics, spotlighting how the profession handled unnamed attribution in different eras.

### *2.4.1 Journalism textbooks and handbooks*

The author closely examined 18 texts for the historical review encompassed in this section of the dissertation. The texts were selected from a collection of roughly 50 textbooks and guidebooks found in the Georgia State University library. All of the early books were examined thoroughly. After 1970, when textbooks became more plentiful, the author selected the books at random while keeping the gap between publishing dates at less than five years.

The author thoroughly read many of the early texts to find any mention of attribution and sourcing. In the books after 1955, the table of contents or index provided the most direct access to the section addressing unnamed sourcing.

The review begins with *Making a Newspaper,* a 1907 handbook for journalists authored by John Given, a former editor with the *New York Evening Sun*. He offers a wide array of instructions on reporting, but doesn't address anonymous attribution. The author does mention quotations, but only to stress the correct use of single and double quote marks. Given does emphasize the importance of using direct quotations. After getting a particularly good quote from a source, he suggests making a speedy exit, thus "leaving the other man to wake up when he sees what he has said starting at him in print" (Given, 1907, p. 182) The author also warns against agreeing to accept off-the-record information, saying "a reporter who listens to a story and then keeps it from his office exposes himself to many perils" (p. 180.) Such agreements, he warns, could create contention with an editor or allow a rival to get a scoop. Given suggests a wide variety of news sources, including court clerks, police officers, firefighters, and government officials. But he doesn't address how to attribute information gathered from them—whether by name or not. For Given, the question of attribution is not worthy of attention.

The 1916 journalism handbook, *Newspaper Reporting and Correspondence,* avoids a direct discussion of anonymous sources and places little importance on attributing information. Hyde (1916) surprisingly suggests that reporters shouldn't bog down their stories with any attribution of their information. In researching a fire story, the reporter should interview dozens of different people to piece together what happened. The author insists that the article should not “mention any of the interviews behind it except when the reporter is afraid of some statement and wants to put the responsibility upon the person who gave it to him” (Hyde, 1912, p. 9). The composite story, Hyde instructs, should be an amalgamation of all the people interviewed—the fire chief, the owner, the tenant, the man who discovered the fire, and anyone else interviewed. While Hyde doesn’t speak directly to the use of anonymous sources, he endorses non-attribution. Far from worrying about the credibility of the lack of attribution, the author sees it as the job of the reporter to weigh various perspectives and to offer an article with sources “massed together and sifted and retold in an impersonal way from the point of view of a by-stander” (p. 9). Hyde does make a distinction between interviewing for a broad story and securing a statement or opinion “that is to be printed with the name of the man who utters it” (p. 6-7). Sourced attribution in Hyde’s newsroom appears to be the exception rather than the rule.

The 1932 book *Ethics and Practices in Journalism* covers a wide variety of ethical dilemmas facing newspapers of the day but offers no commentary on the use of anonymous sources. Henning (1932) devotes chapters to “Suppression of the News,” “Faking News and Making News,” and “Sensationalism.” He chides newspapers that purposely stretch the truth to liven their stories—apparently a common practice at the time—and urges journalists to end the practice. He also suggests a code of ethics for the profession, noting the “absence of any regularly adopted and approved code prescribing professional conduct” (Henning, 1932, p. 63).[5] Made up of 30 declarative statements, his own code stresses accuracy, fairness, and the

[5] The appendix of Henning’s book includes the “Cannons of Journalism,” the code of ethics adopted by the American Society of Newspaper Editors in 1923. He apparently didn’t feel that the ASNE’s work went far enough toward “prescribing professional conduct” or he didn’t feel that they were widely followed.

avoidance of deceit, both to obtain news and while delivering it. Regarding attribution, Henning simply states that journalists should “quote no one without his advance knowledge” (p. 63.) The code doesn’t mention anonymous attribution or transparency of news sourcing.

The 1955 journalism textbook, *An Introduction to Journalism,* is the first book in this review to refer specifically to anonymous sourcing. Bond (1955) mentions the use of unnamed sources in a chapter on “How News Reaches the Newspaper.” In a section devoted to Washington correspondents, Bond notes that President Calvin Coolidge first insisted that newspaper reporters not identify him by name. He demanded that the information he provided be attributed to “an official spokesman” or “someone close to the president” (Bond, 1955, p. 81). President Herbert Hoover expanded upon this use by creating three types of attribution: 1) statements that could be directly sourced to the president, 2) information that could be published but not attributed to the presidential source, and 3) “off-the-record” comments that could not be published at all, provided only as background or to anticipate future news. Apart from the president of the United States, Bond does not discuss any other sources of news that receive such anonymous treatment. In a section on interviewing, he discusses the importance of providing the reader with an accurate description of interviewees “names, occupations, addresses, (and) titles” (p. 178). Apparently for Bond, the only news source who could qualify for anonymity was the president of the United States.

The 1960 book, *The Professional Journalist,* discusses anonymous source reporting in greater detail, reflecting its increased use in the profession. Hohenberg wrote the book “to serve as a professional guide to the principles and practices of modern American journalism”

(Hohenberg, 1960, p. viii). As with the other books, the work does not stress normative practices but rather reflects the contemporary state of affairs. In a chapter entitled "Ground Rules for Reporters," Hohenberg states that granting anonymity is a new phenomenon. In describing the rise of the anonymous attribution of news, he notes that the press has not always followed such a model:

> Editors generally insisted that the sources of the news must be identified by name, whether or not they could be quoted directly. The presence of an anonymous figure, who could not be described in any way except in relation to what he represented, was almost an affront to many reporters and editors. (Hohenberg, 1960, p. 227)

Hohenberg points out that this objection to anonymity has recently diminished. After World War II, articles about the federal government, United Nations, Congress, and legislatures began including information attributed to anonymous sources inside those bodies. He notes: "When it became evident that the editorial bars were down, and newspapers were so eager for news that they would accept even anonymous sources, spokesmen appeared as authorities" (p. 227). Hohenberg traces the history of the use of anonymous sources to the European continent and Great Britain, where reporters respected the desire of working-level government officials to not disclose their identities in print. Civil servants should not be identified, according to European tradition, because it is the politicians who should receive blame or credit for public policies. Hohenberg noted that, in Europe, that practice was not widespread and most readers knew the identity of the source. However, the practice exploded in the United States; a large array of public officials—in city halls, on boards of education, at police headquarters, and even in street cleaning departments—began requesting and receiving anonymous attribution. Hohenberg laments this development: “The practice has been accepted,” he writes. “The press has limited itself” (Hohenberg, 1960, p. 228).

Hohenberg devotes several pages to the nuts-and-bolts of anonymous attribution. He notes that news sources often refer to anonymous attribution as “backgrounding.” In print, such information can only be attributed to “well-informed sources,” “official sources,” “diplomatic sources,” “officials,” or even with no source at all other than the reporter’s byline. The author warns reporters that some sources may be offering the information as “trial balloon” to see if a new idea, policy, or other opinion will be supported—all without the potential detriment of taking a public stand. He also notes that reporters and sources alike often use anonymous attribution to add allure to their stories.

Hohenberg describes how the practice really took off in the United States during World War II, with *Newsweek* magazine reporter Ernest Lindley first employing it regularly. Lindley found that government rules prohibited high-level officials from talking to him on the record, and these people refused to talk to him off the record. He “persuaded them to give him needed explanations of current and coming events under a pledge that he would not identify them as his sources. Thus, background came to be a half-way house between on-the-record and off-the-record” (p. 228). These conversations would be referred to obliquely in print with words such as “sources said” or “it has been learned.” Off-the-record conversations were already well-accepted journalistic practice, but reporters knew that none of that information could be used in print. Thus, with “backgrounding,” the taboo of anonymously attributing information in print disappeared.

In his review of journalism practices circa 1960, Hohenberg makes clear that many journalists were uncomfortable with the rise in anonymous attribution. He cites Edwin Lahey, Washington bureau chief for Knight Newspapers, who seriously questioned the process. Lahey believed that the practice was being abused and that journalists should stop and consider "whether it's worth it" (Hohenberg, 1960, p. 230). But, Hohenberg admits that the background source had already "become firmly lodged in American journalism" (p. 231). He said the competitive pressures of journalism would lead reporters to continue taking their news where they could find it.

*Newswriting and Reporting Public Affairs*, a book written in 1965 and updated in 1970, illustrates that the view of anonymous attribution had changed little since the 1950s. Bush first notes that "newspapers almost universally refuse to publish any statement without some kind of attribution" (Bush, 1970, p. 89). Bush then goes on to detail the situations in which anonymous attributions are acceptable.

Bush suggests two types of situations in which sources may ask to not be quoted. In the first situation, a source may want to say something to injure another person or embarrass a political rival. He notes that, "as a rule," newspapers do not publish such information anonymously (1970, p. 90). In the second situation, the newspaper may publish a statement anonymously (e.g., "a reliable source") as long as the "reporter and editor know the source is reliable and the statement has been made for an honorable purpose" (p. 90). In contrast to Hohenberg's book written a decade earlier, Bush notably offers no qualms about using such information and makes no indication that information obtained should be verified by another source.

Bush also provides an overview of “backgrounding,” referring to it separately from anonymous attribution. The review is largely similar to Hohenberg’s except that he offers no caveats about the practice. He noted that backgrounding usually arises only in Washington or a foreign capital and that the “ground rules” of diplomacy may require the practice. “In these instances,” he writes, “the high official has honorable as well as practical reasons for not being quoted” (p. 91). Bush goes on to say that the “management of news” from officials requesting anonymous attribution deserves more discussion but notes that the topic goes beyond the purview of his text.

The 1971 textbook, *Guidelines for News Reporters,* ignores the overall practice of anonymous sources, but offers two examples in which unnamed attribution should never be used. Unlike the previous books, Robinson’s text is aimed at television and broadcast reporters. The author notes in the preface that the mass media—like the government and other areas of establishment—had suffered from a decline in credibility during the 1960s. He intended his book as a public service to help repair some of the damage done to his profession. Given the preface, Robinson’s book should also be read as a normative ideal, not necessarily a simple reflection on the practices of the era’s news media. Robinson never addresses the use of anonymous sources in general, but regarding two cases—reporting on riots and race relations—he suggests that they should always be avoided. “Never broadcast any report or statement without quoting a reliable source,” he writes. “If a person requests that you do not use his name in connection with a statement concerning a riot, don't use the statement" (Robinson, 1971, p. 55). In another section of the text that discusses the news media and minorities, Robinson warns: "I cannot stress too strongly the importance of quoting the source regarding any allegation of charges" (p. 93). Robinson avoids a firm decree on the use of unnamed sourcing in general, but does frown upon the practice in certain situations.

The 1971 book, *Reporting Today: The Newswriters Handbook,* explains and defends the use of anonymous sourcing. In a section on attribution, Stein states that a reporter identifies "the source of his facts so the story will have credibility" (Stein, 1971, p. 83). But, he admits that sometimes sources will not release information if their names are attached. "This not-for-attribution type of statement is not the most desirable way to get news," he writes, "but it's better than not getting it at all" (Stein, 1971, p. 83). He goes on to warn that anonymous sourcing can be perilous—since the reporter is the only name attached to the information.

The next books examined in this review were published in the wake of the Watergate scandal. Woodward and Bernstein's reporting led to the resignation of President Richard Nixon and left a lasting impact on journalism (Giuffo, 2001; Hume, 1997; Schudson, 1992). The *Washington Post* based much of its investigation on anonymous sources, although managing editor Ben Bradlee insisted that the reporters independently verify information with at least one other source (Strentz, 1978). Watergate provided defenders of anonymous sourcing with a powerful example of its merits—without unnamed attribution, the Nixon administration may have gotten away with gross misconduct. Observing the evolution of anonymous sourcing in the wake of Watergate should prove interesting.

The 1977 textbook, *On Reporting the News,* offers few reservations regarding the use of anonymous sources. Burrows warns against allowing officials to make allegations about others anonymously. Then, he outlines when anonymous sourcing can be acceptable, providing two basic criteria: “(1) it must be relatively important and appear to the reporter to be true, a factor that usually can be double-checked by going to a second source; (2) the ‘source’ must be someone who would either be in great professional trouble, or whose life would actually be in danger, if his or her name appeared in the story” (Burrows, 1977, p. 177). Burrows’ criteria agree with the circumstances used in the Watergate reporting. Indeed, his criteria—verifying with another source and establishing the importance of anonymity—exceed Bush’s 1970 parameters, which only required that the source be reliable and his purpose honorable. Burrows summary of the tradition of backgrounding with diplomatic officials differs little from Bond’s 1955 overview except for one area. Burrows offers little negative editorial comment—warning reporters only that taking information as a backgrounder (i.e., attributed to “a senior administration official”) will leave them responsible if the story turns out to be wrong. Bonds frowned on the practice, one that was apparently becoming more and more commonplace, whereas Burrows accepts anonymous sourcing as a routine part of the job. Yet Burrows’ criteria do call for independent verification, an emphasis that would wane over the next 30 years.

The 1978 book, *News Reporter’s and News Sources,* delves deeper into the issue of anonymous sourcing. Strentz starts the discussion in a chapter to devote to informing, promoting, and protecting news sources. He notes that the use of unnamed sources had become commonplace: “Daily reading of a newspaper will suggest to anyone that reporters routinely grant anonymity to sources in reporting a wide range of items from baseball locker room talk to conversations in a Senate cloakroom" (Strentz, 1978, p. 69). The tests in those cases, Strentz writes, are whether the information is useful to the news audience, whether it's reasonable to request anonymity, and whether some other source could publicly offer the same information.

In a later chapter devoted to traditional and nontraditional news sources, Strentz devotes a section to the problems surrounding anonymous sources. He summarizes and supports journalism critics who were already complaining about their overuse. Strentz quotes a 1975 editorial from the *Washington Post* ombudsman which noted that "a few decades ago, the 'informed source' and the unnamed 'high official' were rare birds. But today these shy but knowledgeable fellows are everywhere ..." (1978, p. 87). Strentz cites research that showed the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* were the largest offenders—using them in 54 percent of the their stories. Strentz argues suggests that reporters and editors had become too comfortable with anonymous sourcing. He stresses that news sources who request anonymity should be greeted warily. If using anonymous sources, the "reader deserves information to help in evaluating the credibility of the message" (Strentz, 1978, p. 89). The suggestion to offer more information about the source and why he or she sought anonymity is a new development and one echoed by later critics (for example, Boeyink, 1990). The shift toward transparency seems to be an acceptance that the practice will not disappear, so journalists should at least improve it.

Strentz then offers three guidelines to consider when weighing whether to use anonymous sources. First, he suggests that reporters must corroborate information from an anonymous source. He notes that one or more sources independently verified all of the *Washington Post*'s Watergate reporting. Second, anonymously sourced articles should always carry bylines, since the responsibility for what is said must rest somewhere. Third, anonymity should not be the option of first resort—reporters should not offer anonymity at the first sign of hesitation from a public official. The reporter should instead stress that public officials be accountable to the public they serve. These conversations may not be easy, but the reporter should not shirk the duty to get information from public sources. He concludes: "There are good reasons for the use of anonymous sources, but the list of such reasons does not include making the reporter's job easier" (Strentz, 1978, p. 90). Strentz accepts that anonymous sourcing has become an integral part of the news business and offers specific methods for making it as reliable and credible as possible. He also stresses the need to independently verify information from unnamed sources.

The 1978 book, *Reporter's Ethics,* covers the ethical issues behind anonymous sources and off-the-record information. Rather than offer any normative guidelines, Swain interviews many reporters and editors to see where they stand on the issue. Surprisingly, little is said about the use of anonymous sources. Most of the chapter entitled "On and Off the Record" discusses protecting sources and receiving off-the-record information. Swain states that "off-the-record" information may mean "promising to not use the information obtained at all, or to use the information only indirectly, or not to attribute the information to the source" (Swain, 1978, p. 47).

Swain's definition differs from other professionals, who usually make a distinction that "off-the-record" means that the information will not be used at all. Regardless, Swain details cases in which anonymous attribution serves the public good. He tells of a *New York Times* court reporter who complained of his paper's policy against anonymous sourcing. The reporter had included objections to a new judge from anonymous sources in one of his stories. Because they were perceived as personal attacks, the anonymous quotes were edited out of his story and the article ended up making the judge look like a glowing figure. A few months later, the judge's behavior showed a less than polished character, but the public had never been warned. Swain does not offer an opinion on the story, but it leaves the reader with the idea that anonymous sourcing can prove to be a good practice even if the "establishment" opposes it. The anecdote could persuade some journalists that rules against anonymous personal attacks should be loosened.

Swain also discusses a 1971 incident in which the *Washington Post* revealed that an anonymous source in a pool report was Secretary of State Henry Kissinger. Managing editor Ben Bradlee defended the move by saying that the statements made during a "deep background" pool report—which were supposed to be attributed to "administration officials"—amounted to a policy shift. Bradlee said he believed the statements necessitated attribution. Other papers and the administration chastised the *Post* for breaking a long-standing rule about the attribution of information from high-ranking officials.

Swain does discuss some problems with anonymous sourcing. The practice can allow a source to make "advantageous and untrue revelations without accepting any responsibility for them" (Swain, 1978, p. 49). With no attribution, the reader has no way to gauge the truth of the allegation. And, if the information turns out to be untrue, the reporter will have no one upon whom to pin the blame. Swain also warns that permitting anonymous attribution can allow unscrupulous reporters to cite their own ideas under the veil of an "administration official." He pointed to a well-known columnist who was accused of succumbing to that temptation. Swain's review leaves the reader with an understanding of the ethical debate around anonymous sourcing but it fails to provide any overt guidance on proper journalism behavior. Yet, by noting a case in which anonymously sourced personal allegations could have proven useful, Swain helps argue that sourcing guidelines should be weakened.

The 1978 guidebook, *Investigative Reporting and Editing,* offers concrete suggestions for anonymous sourcing. Williams devotes a chapter to the art of "Talk and Listening" and notes that most information in investigative stories comes from people who want to remain anonymous. But, the author stresses that these sources point reporters in the right direction, effectively helping the reporters uncover verifiable, attributable information for their stories. Veteran investigators "decry the story based on a single unnamed source. The writer, therefore, must get confirmation, not from other unnamed people, but from records and from attributable sources" (Williams, 1978, p. 68). Williams offers far stronger guidance than other authors of the 1970s. He makes it clear that reporters should use anonymous sources to gather information, but that information should not end up in print directly. Information should instead be verified by on-the-record sources and documentation. Also, Williams strongly decries reporting based on one unnamed and unverified source.

The 1984 textbook, *News in Print,* offers few caveats regarding unnamed sourcing. Rivers describes how to handle anonymous attribution since “direct quotation is not always possible” (Rivers, 1984, p. 170). He notes that anonymity should not be offered too quickly and that some sources will abuse the opportunity. However, he then stresses the real-world benefits of their use, even outside of Washington, D.C. As a case in point, he refers to a hypothetical reporter covering the city council. A chamber of commerce officer wants to criticize the policies proposed by his organization and the city government. If quoted by name, the source may be chastised for depicting the city in a negative light. He asks that he be quoted as “a concerned businessman.” The reporter weighs the request and decides that the source’s motives are honest, so he grants him a venue for airing his concerns anonymously. “As a result,” Rivers writes, “an important point of view was expressed that would not have been expressed had the reporter insisted on full attribution.” (p. 170). Rivers does not suggest trying to find another source who would make this point on the record or attempting to independently verify the complaint about the proposed policy. This attitude toward anonymous sourcing presents a notable shift away from the previous authors’ more deliberate and cautious approach.

Rivers then lists the various types of anonymous sourcing—indirect quotation, off the record, not for attribution, background—and notes that the terms are not necessarily uniform. He recommends that the “beginner should become familiar with local practices” (Rivers, 1984, p. 171). Rivers’ account leaves the reader with the impression that anonymous sourcing is widely used in journalism with little or no reservations.

The 1987 book, *Journalism: State of the Art,* includes a long chapter on anonymous sourcing, summarizing the professional and academic debate on the subject. Willis cites the many academic studies conducted over the 1970s and 1980s regarding the use of anonymous sources. He concludes that the use of anonymous sourcing saw a rise during the 1970s and dropped steadily over the next decade. Willis blames the rise on Vietnam War and Watergate coverage—two issues that necessitated anonymous sourcing. He attributes the decline to journalism scandals, namely the Janet Cooke incident at the *Washington Post* in which the newspaper was forced to return its Pulitzer Prize after revealing the fabrication of an anonymous source. The incident and other cases led newspapers to tighten their policies on anonymous sourcing. “These guidelines do not prohibit reporters from the use of confidential sources, but they alert the reporters to the negative impact of using them” (Willis, 1990, p. 86). The guidelines go on to warn that too much reliance on confidential sources can only increase the paper’s inaccuracy and lower its credibility in the community. Willis offers no normative suggestions for journalistic behavior, he only summarizes what others have said on the subject.

The 1996 *Reporter’s Handbook*, published by the Investigative Reporter’s and Editors organization, discusses unidentified sources in its section on ethics and offers concrete suggestions to guide journalists. Weinberg notes that the debate over the use of anonymous sources “will never go away” (1996, p. 491). He makes three suggestions to help reduce the controversy. First, journalists should try to get the information from on-the-record sources or documents. Second, reporters should try much harder to get reluctant officials on the record—often it just takes some prodding. Third, journalists “should explain much more fully than they do now why the source has requested and been granted anonymity while defaming other human beings" (p. 491). With the last suggestion, the author takes aim at the common practice of information to a source with no explanation of identity or any clue lending credibility. Weinberg singles out Watergate reporter Bob Woodward for his extensive, seemingly unquestioned use of anonymous sources. He chides Woodward for granting anonymity to so many government employees. Weinberg asks: "Why should they ever be granted anonymity by any journalist who believes government officials … should be accountable to the citizenry for their thoughts and actions?" (p. 491). The question shows a distinct uneasiness with the level of unnamed sourcing in the journalism of the era. His suggestions also offer concrete guidance for normative journalistic behavior. Notably absent from Weinberg's three recommendations is any call to independently verify information.

The 1997 textbook, *Advanced Reporting,* offers several pages on the subject of anonymous reporting with the similar run-down of definitions (e.g., background, off-the-record, not for attribution) found in previous works. Shaw, McCombs and Kier explain that many different news outlets hold differing views on the use of unnamed sources. The book quotes the policy of the *Roanoke (Va.) Times and World-News,* which directs reporters to never rely solely on anonymous sources, to reveal sources to editors, and to not allow anonymous personal attacks (Shaw, McCombs, & Keir, 1997). By citing this relatively small newspaper's policy on unnamed sources, the authors show the practice's ubiquitous nature. Shaw, McCombs, and Kier also point out that some outlets are far more stringent, requiring reporters to get permission before granting anonymity. The book also notes that *USA Today* does not allow their use at all. The authors end the section with a couple of quotes from practicing journalists who urge reporters to be careful with the use of unnamed sourcing.

The 2005 journalism textbook, *News Reporting and Writing,* offers just one paragraph on anonymous sourcing. The authors note that unattributed information should be used sparingly (Brooks et al., 2005). When the tactic must be used—and the authors do not offer any ground rules about when that may be—reporters are urged to offer as much information as possible about the source (e.g., "a source close to the chancellor"). The text cites the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal as a time when the *Washington Post* and *New York Times* often employed unnamed source reporting. The criticism of that reporting (for instance, see Esposito, 1999) went unmentioned.

The 2007 textbook, *Writing and Reporting the News,* offers several examples of the proper use of anonymous source reporting. Lanson and Stevens note that the best stories often come from sources who have secrets to tell. Since some secrets cannot be revealed without the sources losing their jobs, reporters must occasionally "negotiate different levels of source protection" (Lanson & Stephens, 2007). The authors cite a *Toronto Star* article about a Canadian official complaining of his superiors' purchase of shoddy submarines from the United Kingdom. "It is not difficult to imagine why this 'official,'" they write, "did not want his or her name used" (p. 240). The authors do state that reporters have come under increasing criticism ("rightly so") for using anonymous sources too often and using the method to allow for attacks at the personal level. They note that "many newspapers are taking greater care to at least find out why a source was granted anonymity" (p. 240). The text then offers the perfunctory definitions of background, deep background, and off the record. The authors make no mention of the need to independently verify information from an anonymous source.

### *2.4.2 Codes of ethics and the Associated Press Stylebook*

The next part of this review focuses on explicitly normative texts—two codes of ethics for professional journalists as well as the *Associated Press Stylebook*. As discussed earlier, many of the journalism textbooks have merely surveyed the landscape of practicing journalists, focusing on how they were treating the use of anonymous sourcing. Few of the books offer specific guidance for practicing journalists on the use of unnamed sources. The following texts do offer specific guidance, although they may also provide outlets for journalistic rationalization. Because some of these historical codes are difficult to procure, they are all offered as an appendix to this dissertation.

Both incarnations of the American Society of Newspaper Editors ethics code frown upon the use of information from anonymous sources but accept certain situations in which the practice may be used. The ASNE formed in 1922, following ethical scandals which had engulfed the profession. A year later, the ASNE adopted the *Canons of Journalism,* a statement of ethical principles which included a call for truthfulness, accuracy, objectivity, impartiality, fairness, and public accountability (Mellinger, 2008). The ethics code saw its first test in 1924, when the publisher of the *Denver Post,* Fred Bonfils, became embroiled in the Teapot Dome scandal. After eight years of debate over whether Bonfils' paper should be sanctioned, the ASNE decided that the code would be a normative guideline rather than an instrument for policing journalistic violations (Mellinger, 2008).

In its third section, entitled "Independence," the *Canons of Journalism* speaks to transparency in news reporting. The code specifies that "so-called news communications from private sources should not be published without public notice of their source or else substantiation of their claims to value as news, both in form and substance" (Appendix A, para. 6). Observers see this section as a response to the rise of the public relations industry, rather than as guidance on the practice of unnamed sourcing. The sentence implies that newspapers should not run press releases without looking into them and verifying their claims (Brown, 2009). This original language remained in the code until 1975, thus many journalists may also have applied this wording to the use of unnamed attribution as it became a popular practice in the 1950s and 1960s. If a journalist follows the ASNE code and uses unnamed sources without identification, then the journalist has the responsibility to substantiate the information in both "form and substance." As such, the wording therefore implies independent verification of information obtained from unnamed sources.

When the ASNE updated their ethics code in 1975 (renaming them a *Statement of Principles*), the organization dropped the reference to "so-called private sources of news." In a section entitled "impartiality," the ASNE code stresses that anonymity granted toward sources should be taken seriously: "Pledges of confidentiality to news sources must be honored at all costs, and therefore should not be given lightly" (Appendix A, para. 6). With this new passage highlighting the importance of confidentiality, this version embraces the use of anonymous sources far more than its predecessor. The code does make clear that transparency should be the default setting: "Unless there is clear and pressing need to maintain confidences, sources of information should be identified" (para. 6). The updated code eliminates any call to "substantiate" (i.e., independently verify) information from unnamed sources. The shift away from independent verification and toward protecting anonymity shows a discernable movement away from past practices. The ASNE has not updated its code of ethics since 1975.

The Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ) has addressed anonymous sources in all versions of their code of ethics over the years. The organization, a collection of practicing and retired journalists as well as journalism educators, first adopted a code of ethics in 1926, simply duplicating the ASNE *Canons of Journalism.* The SPJ revisited and updated the code in 1973 (Appendix B). The group added some new language but kept much of the old *Canons of Journalism*'s wording as well. The 1973 version shortened the ASNE's language about anonymous sourcing: "So-called news communications from private sources should not be published or broadcast without substantiation of their claims to news value" (Appendix B, para. 12). The SPJ eliminated the call to offer "public notice of their source." It appears that the code was moving away from the original intention of the wording—which addressed the origination of news stories from press agents or press releases—and toward addressing the handling of anonymously sourced information. The 1973 version also offers some direction on confidentiality: "Journalists acknowledge the newsman's ethic of protecting confidential sources of information" (para. 14). The latter directive points to the increased acceptance of disseminating information from unnamed sources, since journalists who engage in the more-common practice are warned to keep their sources confidential.

In 1986, the SPJ updated the document again, but left language on anonymity and confidentiality unchanged (see Appendix B).

The SPJ largely rewrote their ethics code in 1996, making interesting changes to sections regarding unnamed sourcing. The new code omits the language about the increasingly anachronistic “so-called news communications from private sources” and moves much of the concern about influence from the public relations industry to a section entitled “Act Independently.” A new section, “Seek Truth and Report It,” offers specific guidelines on the contemporary practice of unnamed sourcing (see Appendix E). The code suggests that journalists: “Identify sources whenever feasible. The public is entitled to as much information as possible on sources’ reliability” (para. 6). The wording offers a novel method with which journalists should determine when to use unnamed sources—feasibility. However, the code offers no guidance on measuring the feasibility of naming or not naming sources or when concerns about credibility should be included. The updated code does offer a caveat: “Always question sources’ motives before promising anonymity. Clarify conditions attached to any promise made in exchange for information. Keep promises.” The SPJ suggests that journalists should be skeptical of the motivation of those wishing to remain nameless. In unmistakable language (“Keep promises”), the code insists that promises of confidentiality must be kept. Missing in the updated code are any references to substantiation or independent verification of information from anonymous sources. The code also makes no determination of the ethics of allowing anonymous sources to make allegations at the personal level.

Considered an essential handbook for most working journalists, the *Associated Press Stylebook* offers concrete guidance on anonymous source use. Surprisingly, the stylebook did not dedicate an entry on the subject until 2004. The first entry reads:

> Use anonymous attribution only when essential and even then provide the most specific possible identification of the source. Simply quoting "a source," unmodified, is almost always prohibited. Do not attribute information to sources—anonymous or otherwise—when it is obvious, common sense or well-known. The basic guidelines for use of anonymous sources: The material must not be available except under the conditions of anonymity imposed by the source. In some cases, it may be appropriate to say why the source requested anonymity. The source must be in a position to have accurate information, and, to the best of the reporter's ability to determine, must be understood to be reliable. Be sure to seek more than one source for the story. (Goldstein, 2005, p. 17)

The AP entry is far more direct than many of the textbooks and other guidebooks—offering specific guidance on normative journalistic behavior. The entry suggests reporters only use anonymous attribution when "essential," although it does not offer any criteria for determining such a condition. The entry prohibits the anonymous attribution of "common sense" information, although the literature found no critics who complained that such reporting was part of the problem. The entry is also riddled with room for journalistic rationalization. Reporters should "almost always" avoid anonymous attribution without any description of the source's identity. Journalists should "seek" a second source, but the entry does not prohibit reporting if the journalist fails to find one. The book offers normative guidelines, but they do not seem strict enough to affect the decision-making process.

The 2009 *Associated Press Stylebook* revised the entry substantially, making changes which remove some of the wiggle room from the previous entry, although in one case the standards were loosened. This new standard reads:

> Whenever possible, we pursue information on the record. When a source insists on background of off-the-record ground rules, we must adhere to a strict set of guidelines. Under AP's rules material from

> anonymous sources may be used only if: [a] The material is information and is not opinion or speculation, and is vital to the news report. [b] The information is not available except under the conditions of anonymity imposed by the source. [c] The source is reliable, and in a position to have accurate information. Reporters who intend to use material from anonymous sources must get approval from their news managers. Explain in the story why the sources requested anonymity. And, when it's relevant, describe the source's motive for disclosing the information. The story also must provide attribution that establishes the source's credibility; simply quoting "a source" is not allowed. Be as descriptive as possible. (Christian, Minthorn, & Jacobsen, 2009)

In a tightening of protocol, reporters are now told they *must* explain why the source requested anonymity instead of reserving that action for "some cases." Journalists are also now instructed to consider disclosing the motive for the source's actions, a move toward greater transparency. Reporters must now always provide a description of the source to help with credibility (instead of in just some cases). And reporters must also seek the approval of their boss to use anonymous information. These changes represent palpable, inflexible restrictions on anonymous source use. However, in one important respect, the AP loosened the rules. The suggestion to seek a second source has been removed entirely. The journalistic tradition of verifying anonymous information is no longer required by the Associated Press.

### *2.4.3 Summation of historical review*

This review of textbooks, handbooks and codes finds that the use of anonymous sources in journalism has followed a trend from rare use to general acceptance. Before World War II, being cited as an unidentified source was a right reserved solely for the president of the United States. After the war, the practice gained greater acceptance, particularly with foreign diplomats and in Washington, D.C. But by 1960, the practice had spread beyond a few specific arenas. Hohenberg's account notes that although journalists once derided the anonymous source, the stigma attached to the practice faded. He laments the acceptance of unnamed sourcing and wonders whether journalists had taken the time to consider its implications. Later authors have accepted the widespread use of anonymous sources, but stress that any information used in such reporting should be independently verified by other sources. Woodward and Bernstein followed this model to great success. Yet, fewer and fewer journalism textbooks in the post-Watergate era have emphasized independent verification. While textbooks still stressed the sparing use of unnamed sources, they noted that unnamed sources may be useful tools for news gathering—regardless of the source's motive or whether the information may be confirmed independently. The 1984 textbook from Rivers offers the most extreme evolution of unnamed sourcing practices in this review. Rivers specifically endorses the use of unnamed sources in small-town, city hall reporting without any independent verification. This representation marks a dramatic shift from a practice that was once relegated to Washington and usually required independent verification. Over the next two decades, books have continued to discuss anonymous sourcing but with various levels of skepticism. By the mid-1990s, Weinberg had taken the most critical approach, even chastising Watergate hero Woodward for his seemingly unending reliance on unnamed sourcing. Weinberg's suggestions for limiting anonymous sourcing stress the need to limit unnamed sources, yet he does not offer any guidance on independent verification for when the practice is used. Later textbooks both accept the practice with less criticism than Weinberg and ignore the subject of independent verification altogether.

The journalism codes of ethics and *AP Stylebook* follow the same pattern. Early codes frowned upon the use of information obtained from anonymous sources and demanded that reporters either verify the information or attribute it publicly. In the 1970s, the codes changed to enact a more widespread acceptance of the practice with emphasis placed on keeping sources confidential. Both the SPJ and ASNE codes drop the call to independently verify information from anonymous sources—even after the success of Watergate reporting. The updated codes stress that reporters should always strive to name their sources, citing the link between transparency and credibility. In the 1990s, the SPJ updated their code of ethics further, suggesting that reporters name sources whenever “feasible” and leaving out any call for verification of information. The latest edition of the *Associated Press Stylebook* provides the most restrictions on unnamed sourcing—reporters must ask for managerial approval to use them and must provide information on the source’s identity. However, the AP removed calls to independently verify information from anonymous sources.

Over the years, many journalism experts have fretted about the growing acceptance of anonymous sourcing, but journalists have continued to embrace the technique. As the practice has gained in acceptance, the rules governing it have loosened. By the 1980s, few journalists were being told that information from an anonymous source must be verified by another source. After many anonymous sourcing scandals, authors in the 1990s and 2000s began to more frequently question the practice. Journalists were told to consider identifying the motives of unnamed sources and to provide as much detail about their identity as possible. Nonetheless, the general reliance on the method has continued through the current era. The latest journalism textbooks and guidebooks accept anonymous sourcing as a viable method for gathering news while simultaneously worrying about its use and abuse.

The review also reveals the decline in rules requiring independent verification of information from unnamed sources. Woodward and Bernstein ensured accuracy by basing their Watergate reporting on information that was doubled-checked by other unnamed sources. In the late 1970s—following the Watergate scandal—three books (Burrows, 1977; Strentz, 1978; and Williams, 1978) all insist that news sources must be independently verified. However, later books stopped stressing this important element of unnamed source reporting. The 2004 *Associated Press Stylebook* did mention "seeking" another source—but even that loose directive was removed in 2009. The loosening of the requirement (or even guideline) of independent verification represents the biggest change to the practice over the last 40 years. No journalism texts advocate going back to verification of anonymous information. This simple system—confirming what an unnamed source says with some other person or persons—would seem to be a prudent rule. To justify the edict, editors would need only to point to the *Newsweek* article about the Koran which led to rioting deaths in the Middle East—all because of the information from one unnamed, unverified source.

This review also uncovers a trend applicable to journalism pedagogy. With few exceptions (e.g., Robinson and Weinberg), journalism textbook authors simply explain the current state of affairs in journalism, detailing exactly how reporters and editors chose to do their jobs. Few offer concrete suggestions about *how* journalists should be doing their jobs. Ideally, journalism instruction should focus on training journalists with the proper behavior, not merely preparing them to adopt the attitudes and norms of current journalism practice. Instructors do the profession a disservice by neglecting to offer a normative target at which future journalists should aim.

## 2.5 Research questions

The review of the literature suggests several different avenues for research. For this analysis, the author examines six decades of coverage in the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* and answers five broad research questions:

> $RQ_1$) Has the use of anonymous sources changed over the last six decades?
>
> $RQ_2$) Has the press changed the types of stories that employ anonymous sourcing?
>
> $RQ_3$) Has the press changed its approach toward offering some details regarding the identity of the source of the information?
>
> $RQ_4$) Has the press changed its approach toward independent verification of anonymous sourcing?
>
> $RQ_5$) Has the press changed its approach toward explaining why anonymous sourcing is justified?
>
> $RQ_6$) What ethical guidelines are revealed when individual cases of unnamed sourcing are examined using the utilitarianism framework?

The answers to these questions will not only reveal the amount of unnamed sourcing over time but will also show how journalists have presented the information. The answers should prove useful in weighing the proper role of unnamed sourcing in reporting. For instance, if the press has loosened its approach toward anonymous sourcing over the years, then this finding may suggest that journalists should return to the standards of an earlier era. But a finding that nothing has changed over the years or that anonymity was used more loosely in the past should dampen the call for journalists to change their use of anonymous sources today. Such a finding would reject the idea that a “golden age” of journalism existed in the past, one in which better practices led to more credibility with audiences. By examining how journalists have approached unnamed sourcing, this dissertation offers tangible information for journalism practitioners and observers to help guide the profession.

# 3 Methodology

The primary research design examines manifest content in a sample of articles pulled from six decades of newspaper coverage. The quantitative content analysis guidebook authored by Riffe, Lacy, and Fico (1998) serves as a foundation for the research design. The authors stress the need for a rigorously planned research design to achieve reliability and validity. Researchers must determine "in advance such research design issues as the time frame for a study, what kind of communication constitutes the focus of the study, what the variables are to be, or how precise the measurement will be" (Riffe *et al*., 1998, p. 20). The authors stress the need for a careful coding scheme to ensure that researcher bias does not affect the results, noting that "a biased measurer might stretch the rubber yardstick" (p. 104).

## 3.1 Parameters of the study

Following the historical review, the researcher determined that the content analysis should begin with newspapers in that in 1950s since that era saw the first widespread use of unnamed sourcing. Given the limited budget available for the study, the researcher decided to conduct the content analysis at 10-year intervals. Since 2008 was the last full-year available for study at the time of the research, the years chosen for analysis are: 1958, 1968, 1978, 1988, 1998, and 2008. The examination only includes articles from the front pages of the newspapers.

The research design borrows from content analysis conducted by the Project for Excellence in Journalism (PEJ) that led to the study by Martin-Kratzer and Thorson (2007). Their analysis found that the use of unnamed sources dropped from 35 percent in 2003, to 9 percent in 2004, following a slew of scandals involving the practice. The original research, undertaken by a division of the well-funded Pew Charitable Trusts, is far more robust than the analysis proposed by this author. The PEJ coders analyzed 16 different newspapers and several broadcast newscasts. This study examines two newspapers, the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*. These outlets should provide sufficient analysis since the point of the research is to find out how “the press” handled unnamed sourcing over time. The two newspapers have been the focus of many previous studies, particularly when the research aims to discern common practice in journalism (Boyle & Armstrong, 2009; Nemeth & Sanders, 2009; Vujnovic, 2009). Martin-Kratzer and Thorson (2007) examined articles on both the front pages of both the main newspaper and the “metro” sections of each paper. For this study, only articles on the front pages are examined. The selection of these articles is valid because the front page typically features the most newsworthy stories of the day.

The newspapers were selected via a randomized 14-day constructed week. Such a sample ensures that news coverage particular to a certain day of the week does not skew the results. Using a random number generator, two dates from each day of the week were picked (i.e., two Mondays, two Tuesdays, etc.). Riffe and Aust (1993) found that that such a sample was large enough to be generalized to represent a typical year’s coverage.

The coding could have been conducted by hand or with content analysis software. Computer-assisted content analysis has two distinct advantages. First, using software saves a vast amount of time—the computer can search for specific terms in seconds and provide a rich data set for analysis. Secondly, the software removes human judgment from the process and eliminates the need for any intercoder reliability testing, increasing the reliability immensely. However, several factors led to the decision to conduct the analysis with human coders. First, the examination is a longitudinal study spanning six decades, thus it was unclear whether the terminology used today (e.g., “administration officials”) would be similar to terminology used in the past (e.g., “it has been learned”). In effect, determining all of the possible variations of references to anonymity could prove more time-consuming than simply conducting the content analysis by hand. If the terms are not chosen properly, then the results could have been skewed, severely impairing the study’s validity. Second, roughly a third of the newspaper articles required for the study (prior to the 1970s) are available only in PDF or microfilm format. In order to use the software, the articles would have required conversion to text-based files, itself a time-consuming process. Given these factors, the coding was conducted by hand.

The researcher conducted the main body of coding. The coding was conducted on a computer, with the articles read onscreen and data entered into an online database. To test the reliability of the coding protocol sheets, a pre-test was conducted on a small portion of the work. Another coder, a master’s degree student in the communication department of Georgia State University, coded the same section. The results were compared and adjustments to the coding protocol and coder training were instituted to ensure the design was properly rigorous.

## 3.2 Variables

The study involves the comprehensive content analysis of newspapers from 1958, 1968, 1978, 1988, 1998, and 2008. The unit of analysis is a single new story. The relevant variables are as follows:

**Story topic:** Main topic of each story identified as one of the following: government, military/defense, election, domestic affairs, business, crime, foreign relations, accidents/disasters, science/technology, lifestyle, celebrity/entertainment, health or other.

**Anonymous sourcing:** The inclusion of a source without a name.

**Attempt at identification:** The inclusion of details about the identity of the unnamed source.

**Independent verification:** Inclusion of more than one source to verify the information.

**Explanation of anonymity:** Inclusion of the reason the unnamed source received anonymity.

**Number of sources:** Total number of sources used in the article (0, 1, 2, 3, or 4 or more).

## 3.3 Research instrument—coding protocol sheets

The coding protocols for the study are based on the Project for Excellence in Journalism materials; however, they have been changed substantially to narrow the focus to newspapers and to strengthen the guidelines for how to count unnamed sources (see Appendix F).

After conducting the pre-test, it was clear to the researcher and coder that answering these questions could often prove vexing. Even the simple question of determining whether unnamed sourcing was used (V5 on the coding sheet) could be troublesome. For instance, at times the reporter would cite the "police" or the "military" as a source and would not offer any more details on the specific source of the information. According to the coding protocol, these instances are counted as unnamed sourcing since they do represent an obstruction to transparency. Other examples that would count as unnamed sources include "a state department spokesperson" or "lawyers involved in the case." However, the coding protocols make allowances for space-saving techniques (e.g., “Democrats argue that the bill would…”). The coding sheet instructs: “Sometimes a reporter will speak generally about a group of people, but isn’t revealing information that is anonymous. The reporter’s motive is simply to save space. In those cases, the information should not be coded as anonymous.”

The coding sheets were strengthened for the other categories as well. For instance, specific instructions guide the coder on how much detail counts as identification of the source (V6). Overly broad descriptions (e.g., “informed sources” or “A U.S. source”) do not count as an attempt at identification. More specific examples (e.g., “a state department source” or “a White House staffer”) do count as an attempt at identification. As for independent verification (V7), the coding sheet advised that “any information attributed to two or more sources counts.” When coders are presented with a single source offering unverifiable information (e.g., their own opinion), the coding sheet advises a “yes,” so that false negatives aren’t included in the data. Regarding an explanation for anonymity (V8), coders are advised to record a “yes” if any of the sources are accorded an explanation for anonymity (e.g., “who wished to remain anonymous because he’s not authorized to speak to the press”). This wording guides coders when some sources in an article have explanations for their anonymity while others do not. (Such a decision is arbitrary, but the intention is to make the coding as consistent as possible, so that individual coders are not forced to make their own arbitrary decisions.) As for number of sources (V9), coders are told to count any reference to plural “sources” as two. Under this rule, any article with a reference to “Pentagon officials” and “White House officials” would automatically be counted as “four or more” sources. Little detail was required for the personal allegation variable (V10), as that situation was easily identifiable and arose relatively infrequently.

In some cases, only some of the unnamed sources received treatment that would be coded as a “yes.” For instance, one source may receive an explanation for anonymity while another does not. Or, some information may be independently verified, but some information is not. In those instances, coders were instructed to code as “yes” as long as any sources in the article qualified. Again, the decision is arbitrary with an intention to create a consistent approach.

A final instruction was offered for one specific reporting method: the “Voice of God.” This reporting technique involves stating developments as fact without attributing the information to any direct sources. For instance: “Bell Atlantic Corp., the Washington area’s major local phone company, has agreed to buy fellow telephone giant GTE Corp. for more than $52 billion, in a deal that would create a company controlling one-third of all local phone lines in the United States.” The article never mentioned the source of the information since the official announcement would occur later that day. In cases such as these, reporters are told to code the story as: “yes” to anonymous sources, “no” to attempt at ID, “yes” to independent verification, “no” to explanation for anonymity, and “four or more” for source count (with the assumption that many sources would be contacted before employing this method).

## 3.4 Intercoder reliability

Reliability is an important aspect of any study because it verifies “the assumption that content coding is determined by the concept definitions” (Riffe *et al*., 1998, p. 105).

Recommendations vary on the size of an intercoder sample. Some suggest 10 to 20 percent of the content in a study, while others recommend only 5 to 7 percent (Kaid & Wadsworth, 1989; Wimmer & Dominick, 2003). For this study, a 10 percent random sample of the articles will be reviewed for intercoder reliability.

Many researchers simply use Holsti's simple agreement to calculate reliability; however others suggest more sophisticated techniques. Simple agreement is calculated by dividing the number of identical answers by the number of total chances for identical answer. Some researchers discount this method because it does not take into account two coders accidentally agreeing. But, Riffe *et al*. note that "the fact that agreement can take place by chance does not mean it does … All agreements could be the result of a well developed protocol" (1998, p. 128). The authors do nonetheless suggest using at least one other calculation of intercoder reliability to allow for accidental agreement.

For the purpose of this study, a calculation of Scott's Pi will also be used to test for intercoder reliability. Riffe *et al*. report that "research usually reports in the .80 to .90 range" (p. 131). They warn against a sample agreement score lower than .70 as "hard to interpret and the method of dubious value to replicate" (p. 128). Martin-Kratzer and Thorson (2007) reported intercoder reliability of .83 and higher, although the authors did not reveal the method of calculation. For this study, an intercoder reliability score greater than .80 will be considered acceptable.

## 3.3 Qualitative analysis

The study will also include a qualitative textual analysis of some of the articles coded during the content analysis. In a textual analysis, the researcher attempts to discern the likely interpretations that could be made from that text (Lester-Roushanzamir & Raman, 1999; A. McKee, 2003). Researchers use textual analysis to consider not just the words used, but the motivations behind the use of those words and how the words might be interpreted (McKee, 2003). Textual analysis offers a chance to examine the ways in which ideas or events are given importance as well as how readers might understand and respond to the text (Shah, 1999). The textual analysis should provide an additional layer of understanding regarding the use of unnamed sources and the ethical justifications for that use.

Since the researcher is conducting the main body of coding, he identified unnamed sourced newspaper articles that would prove helpful in discussion. After the content analysis was completed, the articles were examined to help expand and comment on the quantitative findings. The author also examined the specific use of unnamed sources within the framework of the ethical theory of utilitarianism, for which the textual analysis will provide support. The textual analysis is offered in the discussion section.

## 3.4 Summary

The research design outlined in this section should provide a rich set of reliable and valid data regarding the use of unnamed sources over time. With data analysis—both descriptive and statistical—the research questions should be easily answered. The data allows for discussion over whether the frequency of unnamed source use has changed over time. It also allows us to see whether journalists in earlier decades took different approaches toward identifying sources, independent verification, and explanations for anonymity. The findings will add to the discussion regarding the balance between the reporter’s mission to report the news and the need for transparency to establish credibility.

# 4 Results

With the literature review and methodology set, the researcher embarked upon the coding and analyzing. The process went smoothly except for a couple of impediments which will be discussed in the following paragraphs.

## 4.1 Intercoder reliability

A second coder was trained on the coding protocol and given specific instructions regarding how to make the best judgments in specific situations. The coder examined a random sample of 127 articles to test for intercoder reliability. Four of the articles were excluded from the sample because of errors with the story ID code. The remaining 123 articles represent roughly 10 percent of the total sample. The sample achieved an acceptable overall simple agreement rate of 85.4 percent. Table 4.1 shows the results for the individual variables, both as simple agreement and Scott's Pi.

**Table 4.1: Intercoder Reliability**

| Variable | Percent Agreement | Scott's PI |
|---|---|---|
| Newspaper | 100 | 1 |
| Story ID | 100 | 1 |
| Story Type | 57.3 | 0.440 |
| Unnamed Sources | 94.2 | 0.882 |
| Attempt at ID | 82.7 | 0.624 |
| Independent Verification | 82.7 | 0.601 |
| Explanation for Anonymity | 98.3 | 0.791 |
| Number of Sources | 68.03 | 0.487 |

In reviewing the data set in Table 4.1, two variables lowered the reliability ratings tremendously—story type and number of sources. Despite copious instructions, the coders often disagreed when categorizing each story. For instance, a new drug approval could be coded as "government" or "health," or a story about an Army general talking to a foreign official could be coded as "military" or "foreign affairs." The simple agreement for this category achieved just 57.3 percent. Another troublesome variable was Number of Sources. The coders often disagreed on just how many unnamed sources were included in an article. Often, long articles would cite several different unnamed sources and refer to them in different ways, leaving the coder guessing at the exact number. The number of sources category achieved a simple agreement of just 68 percent. Fortunately, neither category represents an important part of the findings of the dissertation. When those variables are removed from the overall simple agreement calculation, the level of agreement rises to 93 percent.

As can be seen in the table, only two of the Scott's Pi calculations reached acceptable levels—Anonymous Sources and Explanation for Anonymity. The other Scott's Pi numbers were far lower, below levels considered acceptable.[6] The low Scott's Pi numbers are surprising given the corresponding simple agreement. For example, Attempt at ID and Independent Verification both achieved 82.7 percent simple agreement, yet their Scott's Pi numbers were in the low 60s.

Several researchers consider Scott's Pi and other chance-correcting coefficients as an inadequate method to test intercoder reliability in certain circumstances. Content analysis author Neundorf notes that percent agreement is actually the most appropriate measurement in instances "wherein each pair of coded measures is either a hit or a miss" (2002, p. 149).

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[6] Riffe et al, set .67 as the lowest acceptable number for Scott's Pi (see page 154).

Several researchers in peer-reviewed journals have opted to not release chance-corrected coefficients such as Scott's Pi or Cohen's Kappa because they are mathematically biased against binary variables (Bachen, Raphael, Lynn, K. McKee, & Philippi, 2008; Xenos & Foot, 2005). In effect, these authors report that the calculations over-correct for chance agreement for categories with only two possible responses. Given the work of these other scholars, this researcher feels the Attempt at ID and Independent Verification variables are sufficiently reliable given the 82.3 percent simple agreement. Furthermore, the lowest reliability rating reported by Martin-Kratzer and Thornton (2007) was .83, and those authors never said whether the figure was simple agreement or a chance-corrected coefficient.

## 4.2 Composite results

The sample of newspapers over six decades produced a review of 1,283 articles. As illustrated in Table 4.1, the number of articles per front page dropped over the decades. In 1958, newspapers averaged nearly 11 articles on every front page. The average number of articles dropped every decade until 2008 saw only 5.5 articles on average per front page.

**Table 4.1: Average number of front-page articles over time**

| | 1958 | 1968 | 1978 | 1988 | 1998 | 2008 | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| New York Times | 172 | 126 | 119 | 88 | 84 | 87 | 676 |
| *Average per day* | 12.29 | 9.00 | 8.50 | 6.29 | 6.00 | 6.21 | 8.05 |
| Washington Post | 128 | 125 | 106 | 104 | 77 | 67 | 607 |
| *Average per day* | 9.14 | 8.93 | 7.57 | 7.43 | 5.50 | 4.79 | 7.23 |
| Total | 300 | 251 | 225 | 192 | 161 | 154 | 1283 |
| *Overall Average* | 10.71 | 8.96 | 8.04 | 6.86 | 5.75 | 5.50 | 7.64 |

Since the average of number of articles remained dynamic, comparing raw numbers of unnamed source use would be meaningless. Therefore, the study will look at use of unnamed sources as a percentage of overall articles sampled.

### 4.3 Research questions

The first research question asked about the frequency of unnamed source use over time. As can be seen in Table 4.2, the use of unnamed sources has indeed changed over time. The change is illustrated in Figure 4.1.

**Table 4.2: Use of unnamed sources across the decades**

| | 1958 | 1968 | 1978 | 1988 | 1998 | 2008 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Articles with unnamed sources | 76 | 88 | 111 | 71 | 64 | 39 |
| Percentage of articles | 25.3%† | 35.1%¥£ | 49.3% | 37.0%*¥ | 39.8%*£ | 25.3%† |
| Total | 300 | 251 | 225 | 192 | 161 | 154 |

NOTE: All differences statistically significant at 95 percent level except where marked.
*†¥£ No statistically significant difference between decades

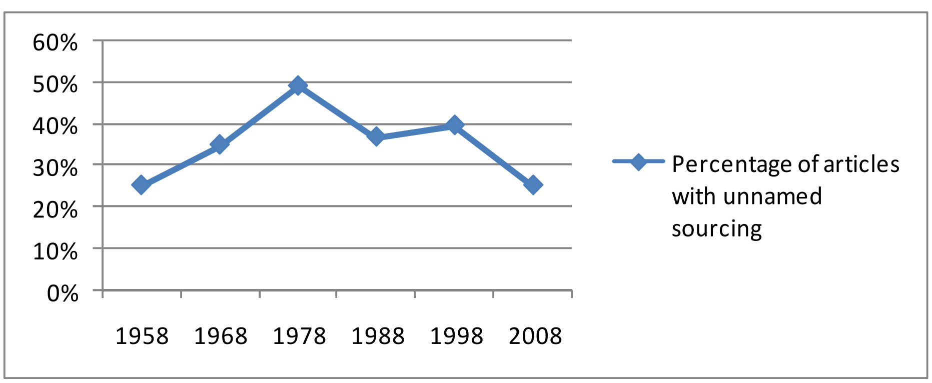


**Figure 4.1: Percentage of articles with unnamed sourcing over time**

The results reveal that reporters in the late 1950s used unnamed sourcing somewhat frequently, around 25 percent of the time. The use of unnamed sourcing increased over the next two decades, topping out at nearly 50 percent in 1978. The rate of anonymous sourcing dropped to the 40 percent range in 1988 and 1998, before lowering even further in 2008. The results show that current journalists use unnamed sources in their articles about as much as their counterparts in 1958.

When examined separately, the two newspapers used unnamed sources to varying degrees during the longitudinal review. Table 4.3 breaks down the unnamed sourcing by newspaper.

**Table 4.3: Unnamed source use by newspaper**

| | 1958 | 1968 | 1978 | 1988 | 1998 | 2008 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| New York Times | 28.5% | 31.7% | 46.2% | 29.5%* | 34.5% | 26.4% |
| Total New York Times | 172 | 126 | 119 | 88 | 84 | 87 |
| Washington Post | 21.1% | 38.4% | 52.8% | 43.3%* | 45.5% | 23.9% |
| Total Washington Post | 128 | 125 | 106 | 104 | 77 | 67 |

NOTE: The differences between newspapers per decade are not significant at the 95 percent level except where noted.
* Statistically significant difference at 95 percent level

For all decades except one, the papers' frequency of unnamed source were statistically similar to each other at the 95 percent level.[7] In 1988, the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* diverged the most, with the former using them just 29.5 percent of the time, while the latter employed unnamed sourcing 43.5 percent of the time. A similar, but statistically insignificant disparity can be seen in 1998, when both newspapers saw the use of unnamed sourcing rise slightly. The high-water mark for both newspapers was 1978—with the reporting method used

[7] For this and other statistics, a difference of proportions test was employed since each decade featured differing numbers of total articles.

roughly 50 percent of the time. In 2008, the newspapers employed anonymous sources at roughly the same amount as in 1958—about 1 out of 4 news articles.

The rest of this results section will review the data in aggregate form, rather than breaking it up by newspaper. This approach agrees with the research questions which examine how the "press"—not individual newspapers—have treated unnamed sourcing.

The 449 articles which use anonymous sourcing dealt with a variety of topics—but two types of stories far outweighed the rest. Table 4.4 shows the types of stories which employed unnamed sourcing.[8]

[8] The validity of this variable should be considered suspect because of this its low intercoder reliability rating.

**Table 4.4: Unnamed sourcing by story type and decade**

| | | 1958 | 1968 | 1978 | 1988 | 1998 | 2008 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Accidents/ Disasters | Unnamed articles/Total | 2/9 | 1/1 | 6/9 | 0/1 | 0/1 | 0/1 |
| | Percent of decade | 22.2% | 100% | 66.7% | 0% | 0% | 0% |
| Business | Unnamed articles/Total | 0/4 | ¾ | 1/3 | 3/6 | 5/8 | 1/6 |
| | Percent within Type of Story | 0% | 75% | 33% | 50% | 62.5% | 16.6% |
| Celebrity/ Entertainment | Unnamed articles/Total | 0/9 | 0/2 | 0/2 | 0/4 | 1/6 | 1/3 |
| | Percent within Type of Story | 0% | 0% | 0% | 0% | 16.6% | 33% |
| Crime | Unnamed articles/Total | 1/11 | 0/5 | 2/9 | 3/8 | 3/10 | 1/3 |
| | Percent within Type of Story | 9.1% | 0% | 22.2% | 37.5% | 30% | 33.3% |
| Domestic Affairs | Unnamed articles/Total | 4/17 | 2/11 | 7/19 | 1/7 | 0/3 | 0/9 |
| | Percent within Type of Story | 23.5% | 18.2% | 36.8% | 14.2% | 0% | 0% |
| Election | Unnamed articles/Total | 0/2 | 5/38 | 3/6 | 6/23 | 0/1 | 3/29 |
| | Percent within Type of Story | 0% | 13.2% | 50% | 26.1% | 0% | 10.3% |
| Foreign Relations | Unnamed articles/Total | 28/69 | 28/56 | 48/72 | 27/60 | 21/34 | 9/26 |
| | Percent within Type of Story | 40.6% | 50% | 66.7% | 45% | 61.8% | 34.6% |
| Government | Unnamed articles/Total | 36/153 | 27/101 | 42/100 | 30/74 | 31/75 | 21/60 |
| | Percent within Type of Story | 23.5% | 26.7% | 42% | 40.5% | 41.3% | 35% |
| Lifestyle | Unnamed articles/Total | 1/8 | 0/0 | 0/0 | 1/6 | 0/7 | 0/8 |
| | Percent within Type of Story | 12.5% | 0% | 0% | 16.7% | 0% | 0% |
| Military/ Defense | Unnamed articles/Total | 4/12 | 22/29 | 1/4 | 0/0 | 3/3 | 3/6 |
| | Percent within Type of Story | 25% | 75.9% | 25% | 0% | 100% | 50% |

The second research question asks whether the types of stories which have used unnamed sourcing have changed over time. Given the limitations of the relatively small data set, the question cannot be answered fully. Some of the categories (e.g., accidents/disasters, lifestyle, and crime) contain few articles per decade, leaving an analysis open to concerns over validity. With some of the more frequently used story types, broad movements can be seen. For example, foreign relations articles peaked in unnamed source use in 1978, with 2 out of every 3 using the method. That number dropped to its lowest level (34 percent) in 2008. Government stories had unnamed sourcing levels at greater than 40 percent in 1978, 1988, and 1998, before declining to 35 percent in 2008. In contrast, articles covering the government used anonymous sourcing just 23.5 percent of the time in 1958. Military articles used unnamed sourcing 75 percent of the time in 1968, at the height of the Vietnam War coverage. The trend to use unnamed sourcing apparently continued even in peacetime. In 1998, fully 100 percent of military stories featured the reporting technique. But, with only 3 military articles in 1998, the sample size is too small to draw any wider conclusions.

The third research question asks whether the press has changed its approach toward offering details about the identity of the source of information. The data indicates that this is so (see Table 4.5).

**Table 4.5: Identification of unnamed sources**

| | 1958 | 1968 | 1978 | 1988 | 1998 | 2008 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Articles with identification | 50 | 65 | 93 | 60 | 60 | 38 |
| Percentage of total | 65.8% | 73.9% | 83.8% | 84.5% | 93.8% | 97.4% |
| Total unnamed source articles | 76 | 88 | 111 | 71 | 64 | 39 |

NOTE: Some data in this data did not meet requirements of difference of proportions test[9]

[9] The procedure can only be validly employed if both samples satisfy the standard binomial requirement that n*p and n(1-p) are both equal to or greater than 5, where n=samples size and p=percentage.

For this variable, coders looked at whether reporters attributed information to a generic description such as "reliable sources" or provided an indication of the sources' identity (e.g., "a senior pentagon official"). Figure 4.2 offers a graphic illustration.

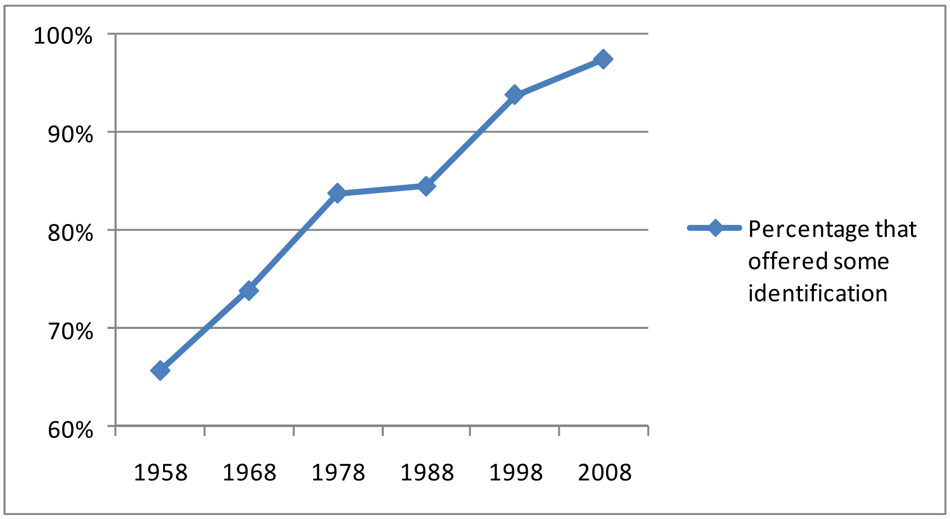


**Figure 4.2: Line chart of identification of unnamed sources**

As illustrated, reporters have moved steadily away from citing generic unnamed sources. In 1958, fully 35 percent of articles cited "reliable sources" or some other ambiguous qualifier. By 2008, that percentage had dropped to less than 3 percent of articles.

The fourth research question asks whether the press has changed its approach toward independent verification of anonymous sourcing. The answer appears to be no. The number of articles that offered independent verification of information from unnamed sources has fluctuated slightly over the decades. Table 4.6 details the number and percentage of articles that did not contain a single unnamed source for its information. Any article that cited "administration sources" or any other plural was coded as independently verified.

**Table 4.6: Independent verification of information from unnamed sources**

| | 1958 | 1968 | 1978 | 1988 | 1998 | 2008 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Articles with independent verification | 58 | 64 | 83 | 52 | 42 | 31 |
| Percentage of total | 76.3% | 72.7% | 74.8% | 73.2% | 65.6% | 79.5% |
| Total unnamed source articles | 76 | 88 | 111 | 71 | 64 | 39 |

NOTE: No statistically significant differences between decades at the 95 percent level

The table reveals that, in roughly three-quarters of the stories, journalists attributed information to more than one source. In 1998, reporters offered the most single-sourced reporting—nearly 35 percent of stories. In 2008, the number dropped to its all-time low, 20.5 percent. This finding is somewhat surprising given the historic review which demonstrated that standards stressing independent verification had waned in recent years.

The fifth research question asks whether the press has changed its approach toward explaining why anonymous sourcing is granted. Table 4.7 shows that the answer is yes.

**Table 4.7: Explanation for anonymity offered**

| | 1958 | 1968 | 1978 | 1988 | 1998 | 2008 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Articles with explanation for anonymity | 3 | 2 | 6 | 6 | 3 | 10 |
| Percentage of total | 3.9% | 2.3% | 5.4% | 8.5% | 4.7% | 25.6% |
| Total unnamed sources | 76 | 88 | 111 | 71 | 64 | 39 |

NOTE: Data from 2008 showed significant difference from all other decades at the 95 percent confidence level

Up until 2008, reporters offered explanations or justifications for anonymity in fewer than 10 percent of the cases. In 2008, the percentage had jumped to more than 25 percent.

The number of unnamed sources used in a story has not fluctuated much over the last six decades. Table 4.8 shows the number of articles which used one, two, three, or four or more sources over time.[10]

**Table 4.8: Number of unnamed sources**

| | 1958 | 1968 | 1978 | 1988 | 1998 | 2008 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Articles with one source | 13 | 25 | 34 | 22 | 20 | 11 |
| Percentage of total | 17.1% | 28.4% | 30.6% | 31.0% | 31.3% | 28.2% |
| Articles with two source | 33 | 30 | 35 | 23 | 19 | 9 |
| Percentage of total | 43.4% | 34.1% | 31.5% | 32.4% | 29.7% | 23.1% |
| Articles with three source | 4 | 7 | 11 | 3 | 2 | 4 |
| Percentage of total | 5.3% | 8.0% | 9.9% | 4.2% | 3.1% | 10.3% |
| Articles with four or more sources | 26 | 26 | 31 | 23 | 23 | 15 |
| Percentage of total | 34.2% | 29.5% | 27.9% | 32.4% | 35.9% | 38.5% |
| Total unnamed sources | 76 | 88 | 111 | 71 | 64 | 39 |

The number of stories which have used only one unnamed source has increased from 17 percent in 1958 to around 30 percent in the other decades. That number should not be misconstrued—although the stories may have used only one unnamed source, the article was not necessarily based on only one unnamed source. Perhaps of more interest is the category for four or more anonymous sources. Articles based on four or more unnamed sources tended to be heavily weighted toward anonymity, with some of these stories featuring no or few named sources. This category indicates some fluctuation over the years, hovering between 28 and 38 percent. But, the final decade in the survey illustrates the most use of four or more unnamed sources in 38.5 percent of the time.

[10] The validity of this information should be considered suspect because of the variable's low intercoder reliability rating.

## 5 Discussion

This longitudinal content analysis demonstrates that in the 1960s and 1970s—an era that many observers view as the "Golden Age" of journalism—reporters used unnamed sourcing more than they did in 2008. This finding should dampen the suggestion that journalists of the past used unnamed sourcing with greater restraint. The evidence does not support the suggestion from *USA Today* founder Al Neuharth that "more and more publishers and editors and broadcast managers have relaxed their rules" regarding unnamed sources. In the "Golden Age" of journalism, reporters employed anonymous sources more often than today. While many factors have likely contributed to the decline in media credibility since the 1970s, an *increased* use of unnamed sources should not be considered among them.

The highest rate of unnamed sourcing occurred in 1978, when nearly 50 percent of front-page articles used the technique (see Figure 5.1). That uptick is most likely tied to the success of the *Washington Post's* Watergate investigation earlier in that decade. With journalists seeing the success of Woodward and Bernstein's unnamed sourced reports, they may have felt greater freedom in employing the method or perhaps saw a need to compete in a similar manner. Unnamed sources continued to be used frequently (around 40 percent of the time) in both 1988 and 1998. Credibility numbers started dropping precipitously in the 1990s, while unnamed source use was still high and many journalism critics began identifying the practice as a problem.[11] By 2008, the level of unnamed sourcing had declined to a level not seen since the 1950s. By the end of the 2000s, the critics of the practice—and the promises of the newspaper's editors—appear to have limited the use of anonymous sources.

[11] See section 2.2.2: For instance, from 1988 to 1996 the number of people with at least some confidence in the news media dropped from 72 percent to 39 percent.

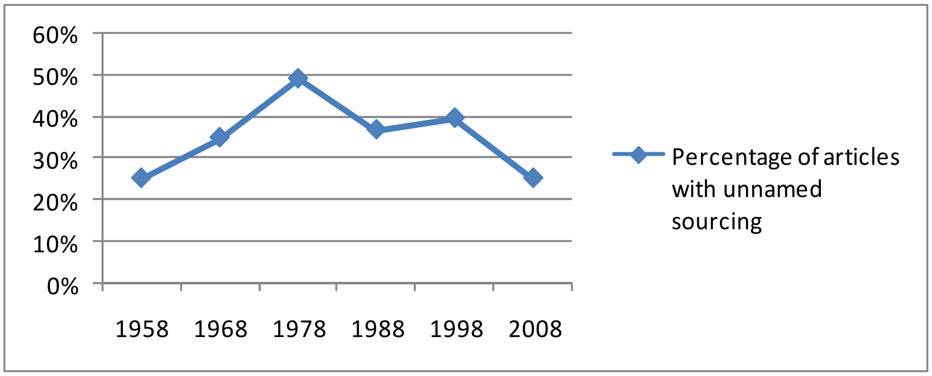


**Figure 5.1: Unnamed source use over time**

The imperfect arch of the use of unnamed sourcing displayed in Figure 5.1 is not completely unsurprising. Use of anonymous sources sat at a relatively low level in the 1950s, around 25 percent. It increased in the 1960s, particularly during the coverage of the Vietnam War. Unnamed sourcing peaked in the late 1970s after Watergate. Use declined a little in the late 1980s and 1990s, perhaps in response to the initial calls for unnamed sourcing to be restricted. By 2008, the practice had dropped to 25 percent after a constant barrage of criticism, particularly in the early to mid-2000s.

Complaints about the overuse of unnamed sourcing continued in 2008, notably from the ombudsmen of the two newspapers in question. So, levels could still be considered too high. In 2004, after intense criticism of the practice, Martin-Kratzer and Thorson (2007) found that unnamed sourcing in large circulation newspapers had fallen from 80 to 20 percent.[12] One potential conclusion from this study is that anonymous source use is once again creeping up

[12] Their study found that large circulation newspapers in 2003 used unnamed sources 80 percent of the time, a number that far eclipsed this review's findings. One avenue for future research would be a new analysis at different intervals. A review of 1963, 1973, 1983, 1993, and 2003 would conveniently overlap the earlier study. It would be interesting to confirm and explore the heavy reliance of anonymous source use in 2003.

(i.e., from 20 percent to 25 percent.) Since the two studies used separate sources[13] and somewhat different methodologies, such a conclusion would have to be confirmed with further research.

Foregoing concerns over intercoder reliability, a close examination of the table regarding types of unnamed sourced stories provides little on which to comment. Perhaps the most interesting observation is the differences over time between foreign relations and government stories. In 1958, foreign relations articles used unnamed sourcing 40 percent of the time, while reporting on the government used them 25 percent of the time. In 2008, government stories were sourced anonymously at the same rate as were stories relating to foreign affairs—around 35 percent. This change indicates that a method which sprouted out of the international diplomacy press took root in the other beats.

## 5.1 Identification of unnamed sources

One of this study's more interesting findings is the change in how much detail a journalist offers about the unnamed source. The press has increasingly abandoned attributing information to generic "reliable sources," favoring, instead, to provide such clues to the source's identity as "Pentagon officials" or "a White House aide." The change (see Figure 5.4) is fairly dramatic.

[13] The numbers from the Martin-Kratzer and Thorson study reflected several large-circulation daily newspapers, in addition to the *Washington Post* and *New York Times*.

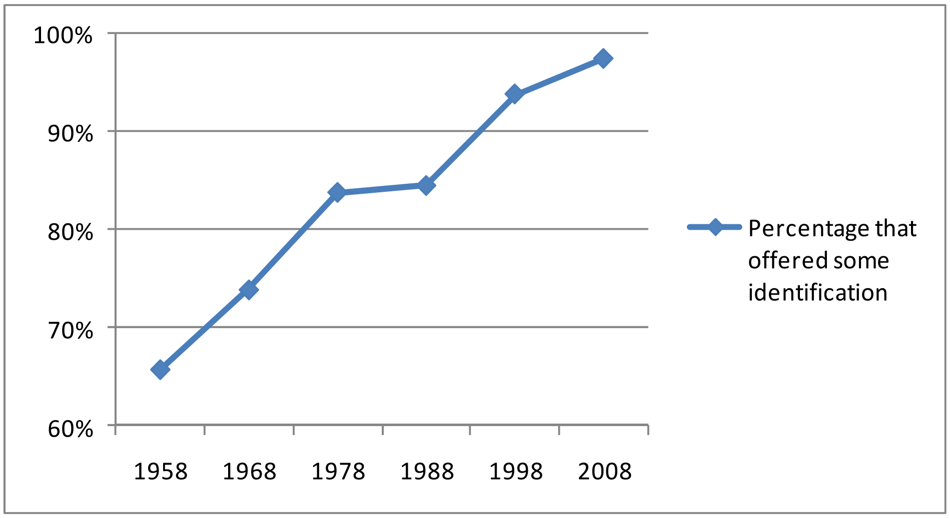


**Figure 5.2: Line chart of identification of unnamed sources**

With only 3 percent of articles in 2008 featuring generic anonymous attribution, journalists have clearly embraced describing veiled sources as a professional norm. This represents a palpable shift toward better journalism practice. Boeyink explained the need for detailing anonymous sources:

> When a news account explains the reasons for anonymity in the story itself, the explanation gives the audience critical information on which to judge the story. Knowing that the source of information on cost overruns on a defense contract is an accounting employee who fears losing his job is significant because it adds context, a valuable component of any story seeking to communicate the truth of events. Beyond that, the use of anonymous sources should include the most precise description of the source possible while still preserving anonymity (Boeyink, 1990, pp. 240–241).

The suggestion jibes with the tenets of utilitarianism, which would hold that few people—neither the journalists, the sources, or the readers—benefit from a lack of disclosure of at least some information regarding the identity of the source. The move toward an almost total embrace of this philosophy should be commended. Of course, the shift may be more of a response to sinking credibility numbers than anything else. In the 1950s, newspapers could attribute information to “reliable sources” with an understanding that their readers would trust even such a nebulous citation. As credibility dropped and readers became more suspicious, the practice changed over time. Regardless of the motivation, a press which explains fully the source of anonymous information better serves the public.

## 5.2 Explanation for anonymity

The explanation for anonymity has also seen a dramatic shift over the years. From 1958 until 1998, relatively few articles (fewer than 9 percent) took the time to explain why they were granting anonymity. But in 2008, more than one out of four journalists did offer an explanation in their article for why they veiled their source. The number is still low, but the upsurge represents a notable shift toward making the practice a professional norm. Boeyink explains the benefits to explaining anonymity:

> Identifying the source and the reasons for anonymity in this way is indirect affirmation of the principles of full attribution. Pushing for the fullest possible identification affirms the commitment to truth telling by making the story more complete and more meaningful without sacrificing anonymity. At the same time, explaining the reason for anonymity acknowledges the need to justify departing from the usual practice of full attribution. Although inserting such explanations may interrupt the flow of the story, that interruption would be a valuable reminder, alerting readers or viewers to the nature of the information they are receiving. (Boeyink, 1990, p. 241)

The act of explaining the reasons for anonymity also conforms to the utilitarian paradigm. Both the public and the journalists benefit from being reminded of the departure from routine attribution, and no party suffers any harm from such a practice. Editors and reporters should continue to explain anonymity in more and more cases, with the goal of 100 percent explanation.

## 5.3 Independent verification of sources

One counterintuitive finding from the study concerns independent verification. While the historical review of texts, codes, and guidebooks indicated that independent verification of sources was increasingly deemphasized, the results of the content analysis found that verification occurred most often in 2008. In fact, between 1998 and 2008, independent verification rose from 65 to 79 percent. Overall, journalists attributed information to more than one source roughly three-quarters of the time. In 1998, reporters offered the most instances of single-sourced reporting: nearly 35 percent of the time. In 2008, the number dropped to its all-time low: 20.5 percent. The finding is somewhat surprising given the historic review indicating that standards which stressed independent verification had waned over time. Of course, the inverse findings illustrate that in 2008, one out of every five articles still featured information from a single, unverified source. Boeyink explains the dangers of such reporting:

> The importance of any story is undermined if it is marred by misinformation. Verification of controversial information by a second source is a good journalistic practice, even when sources are named. When stories are based on unnamed sources, the heightened risk of half-truths, distortions, and mistakes elevates the need for independent checks on accuracy. (Boeyink, 1990, p. 243)

Some critics point to situations where information from one credible source would trump material from several less credible sources. If such reporting turns out to be true, these critics argue, then the use of one source can be justified. Journalists certainly face those cases, and a policy against reporting without independent verification would prohibit some news stories from being covered. However, such a policy mandating independent verification would best serve the profession. The potential for damage to credibility from erroneous reporting based on single sources—for instance, *Newsweek*'s reporting on the flushed Koran—outweighs any potential benefit such news could create.

Journalists should continue striving to decrease the number of reports based on a single, unverified source. Also, observers should remain vigilant in their demands that journalists continuously embrace better standards when choosing to use anonymous sources. The reduction between 1998 and 2008 from 35 percent to 20.5 percent could be an aberration. In 2008, the editor of the *New York Times* defended such reporting, and it was not until 2009 that the Associated Press eliminated the call for independent verification. We may see the fallout of this newfound relaxation in the industry's attitude toward verification in the coming decade. After a discussion of the utilitarianism decision tree, the author will revisit the subject of independent verification in section 5.6.

## 5.4 Qualitative analysis

The sixth research question asked what normative ethical guidelines are revealed after examining qualitative examples of unnamed sourcing through the lens of utilitarianism. In this section, the author reviews articles over the decades to see how the use of unnamed sources changed over time and to examine their use within an ethical framework. In the following section (5.5), the author will use Elliott's (2008) utilitarianism decision tree to probe the ethics of anonymous sources further.

The articles picked for this qualitative review were selected during the coding process. The researcher set aside articles that seemed relevant for further discussion. Articles were selected if their approach to unnamed souring appeared interesting or typical of the era. Examples of elements that might prompt selection for the review included: heavy use of unnamed sources, no use of unnamed sources, use of a single unverified anonymous source, veiled sourcing for "routine" news, and unnamed sourcing for "significant" news. The author put 37 articles aside for further review, more than half of which are examined fully in the following textual analysis.

### *5.4.1 1958–1998: Past practices*

A 1958 *New York Times* article about a looming indictment related to a fixed boxing match in New York City garners much of its information from unnamed sources. Regarding one aspect of the case, the article describes that "it was reported authoritatively, but not officially confirmed" (Perlmutter, 1958, para. 5). The meaning of such a declaration is open for debate and leaves the reader with more questions rather than answers. The reporter also used the phrase "it was learned from another source" (para. 3) to add more information and even relayed "the general feeling in boxing circles" (para. 9). The reporter's writing assumed that the reader trusted his words and had no need to know where specific information originated. This reporting probably reflects the time period—a time in which credibility numbers were higher not just for journalism, but for all institutions (Adams, 1962). Still, the author should have sought to attribute the information to named sources to better serve the public.

Another 1958 article covering civil rights in the South shows the inherent utility in unnamed sourcing. A *New York Times* journalist travelled to Dawson, Georgia, to report on the violence—including several deaths—perpetrated against blacks. The reporter spoke to several black residents of the town in an undisclosed location with the “shades tightly drawn” (Baker, 1958, para. 12). Numerous black residents described deaths at the hands of Dawsonville police, but their names were withheld. The police discussed the violence on the record and explained that they were not blame. Given the likelihood of retaliation, shedding light on the atrocities in Dawsonville would have proved difficult—if not impossible—without using unnamed sources. The article represents one of the few examples in which unnamed sourcing—within the utilitarianism framework—would be justified. The greater good of making the public aware of the atrocities in the South as well as the need to prevent future harms being perpetrated on Dawsonville’s black residents justifies the use of unnamed sourcing.

In 1958, some reporters still employed the type of reporting described by Hyde’s 1916 journalism textbook. Hyde recommended that articles should take sources “massed together and sifted and retold in an impersonal way from the point of view of a by-stander” (1916, p. 9). A *New York Times* article about a shooting at a factory employed such a technique. The reporter described the shooting as though he had been there:

> Suddenly, he pulled the revolver from his pocket. The great chamber echoed to the shot. Mr. Giove heard the bullet pass over his head and dropped to the floor to hide under his machine, twenty-five feet from where Lee stood. A second shot took him in the leg. Shot followed shot. Cardiac cases, frightened, fainted where they sat or fought for breath.” (Berger, 1958, para. 13–14)

The reporting style is quite dramatic but provides few clues for readers about the sources of the information. Reporting events of a traumatic event like a shooting without identifying the source of the information could prove troublesome. Eyewitness accounts are notoriously subjective, thus, reporting any event as though it were authoritatively true opens journalists up to later criticism. The potential harm of reporting inaccurate information outweighs any good that the stylistic technique may add. After 1958, this style of reporting was not again encountered in the sample.

In 1968, fully 66 percent of foreign affairs stories featured unnamed sources. Examining individual articles reveals that sources occasionally received anonymity for unclear or vague reasons. One article from the *New York Times* is completely attributed to unnamed sources even though its subject matter seems innocuous (Perlmutter, 1958). In an article concerning a split between Flemish- and Dutch-speaking Belgians, the reporter anonymously quotes a professor, an editor, and “a young man,” yet never explains why they must remain anonymous. In other foreign affairs coverage from 1968, articles are written from a fully sourced standpoint. A report on a clash between Biafran and Nigerian soldiers featured fully sourced quotes from a soldier and a guide (Norris, 1968). The decision to use named sources in some cases and unnamed in others seemed to be arbitrary.

An illustrative example of the arbitrariness of unnamed sourcing involves the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*’s coverage of a Soviet satellite crash in 1978. The *New York Times* story features quotes from the Canadian Defense Minister and a U.S. scientist who was investigating the scene of the crash (Richard, 1978). The named officials described the situation, including the dangers from the radiation emanating from the satellite’s nuclear power source.

The *Washington Post* story featured the Canadian Defense Minister, but the rest of its sources were unnamed. The reporter quoted “U.S. sources” who guessed how much radiation might be involved in the crash (O'Toole, 1978, para. 8). The article also quoted an unnamed source in the Department of Energy who discussed satellites that use nuclear power. A comparison of the two newspapers shows that the *Washington Post*’s coverage added little news of substance by turning to unnamed sources for its information. The *New York Times* coverage shows that informative reporting—even on sensitive military topics—can be covered without resorting to anonymous sources.

During the first three decades of this study, reporters often used passive writing to convey information from veiled sources. A 1978 story about the firing of two FBI agents for their covert investigations used passive writing to identify the agents: “It was learned that the other headquarters official being dismissed is Brian Murphy” (Babcock, 1978, para. 8). The use of the words “it was learned” allows the reporter to reveal the information without identifying where he received it. The reporting assumes that the reader will believe the information without any further explanation. After 1978, the analysis found no additional examples of unnamed sourcing via passive writing. Starting in 1988, reporters tended to use more active methods to offer veiled information, such as “a source said” or “a White House staffer reported,” which provides far more transparency.

In 1988, the use of unnamed sources was quite common, and reporters often employed them—at times basing an entire article on one, unverified source. An article about incoming President George H. W. Bush’s plan to deal with the savings and loan scandal was attributed entirely to “a senior administration official” (Day, 1988, para. 1). Rather than explain the reason for granting anonymity, the reporter simply said that the official "did not want to be identified" (para. 2). The lengthy article meticulously detailed the administration's plan but did not check with any other sources to verify the information or check to see if the other administration officials were in agreement. The reporting illustrates a capricious attitude toward independent verification. In that year, more than one out of four front-page articles used information that was not independently verified.

In 1998, reporters had left behind another journalistic habit—attributing information to spokespersons without actually naming an individual. In prior decades, reporters would simply refer to an organization or agency spokesperson but wouldn't offer any further identification. By 1998, such instances were rare. In an article about a series of killings in a hospital, the reporter quoted by name spokespeople from a local police department, the hospital, and the district attorney's office (Purdum, 1998). Journalists in the earlier decades would have likely left out the identification of the spokespeople. This shift represents a move toward greater transparency and provides an additional reason for readers to trust the information.

### *5.4.2 2008: Current usage*

Examining the stories from 2008 offers an opportunity to survey the landscape of current unnamed source use. Today, as noted in the findings, anonymous sources are used at a historically low level. When used, these unnamed sources often appear with an explanation for anonymity, a clue as to the identity of the source, and with some independent verification. In many cases, the motives and benefits of anonymity are still quite questionable—particularly when viewed within the ethical framework of utilitarianism.

In a story about a proposed tax and toll hike in New York City, the use of anonymity appears to be a classic case of a "trial balloon" from public officials. The *New York Times* article's lede states that the plan from a state commission includes a "new tax on corporate payrolls and tolls on the East River and Harlem River bridges, several people informed of the plan said on Wednesday" (Neuman, 2008, para. 1). The "people informed of the plan" are never named. The reporter does offer some details regarding their identity, noting that the information comes from "several people involved in discussions of the plan, including two members of the state commission" (para. 12). The reporter also explained why the officials were allowed to speak without attribution: "All spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to speak for the commission. [The head of the state commission] refused to discuss the proposals" (para. 12). The reporter followed all of the normative guidelines for contemporary journalists—offering details as to identity, explaining anonymity and even getting the information from more than one source. However, the need to grant anonymity in this case seems dubious. The state commission drafted the proposal and was apparently ready to release their ideas. The proposal—a tax and toll hike—will affect the public and should be discussed. The commission members spoke to reporters—on background—about the proposal. So why not just insist that the commission publicly release the proposal? The answer is likely because the officials preferred to gauge the reaction to such a policy. As Sigal (1973) notes, "most unattributed disclosures in the news are not leaks below deck, but semaphore signals from the bridge" (p. 144). By granting anonymity, the *New York Times* allowed government officials to escape public scrutiny of their work. The "good" of informing the public does not outweigh the harm in allowing public officials to avoid acknowledging and answering questions about their policy decisions.

A *Washington Post* story about presidential candidate John McCain offers an example where personal grudges may be played out through anonymous allegations. The story involves Rick Davis, McCain's campaign manager who, according to the lede, "helped arrange an introduction in 2006 between McCain and a Russian billionaire whose suspected links to anti-democratic and organized-crime figures are so controversial that the U.S. government revoked his visa" (Birnbaum & Solomon, 2008, para. 1). Unnamed sources insisted that campaign staffers were initially worried about Davis being part of the McCain campaign—providing support for the contention that he was tainted because of his dealings with the Russian billionaire. The articles said the information came from "two people familiar with the conversations" among the campaign's staff who "spoke on the condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of internal campaign conversations" (para. 10). The article then refers to how the campaign staffers viewed Davis negatively. Later, the reporters note that a "power struggle broke out in the McCain campaign after it ran short of money. Many staffers were dismissed, but Davis survived the purge" (para. 12). The article does not add any additional information about sources of the anonymous information, but their identity is likely the very campaign aides who were dismissed during the power struggle. In essence, the article is largely based on the anonymous accusations of two aides who unwillingly left the campaign. Anonymity may have been granted because the two former aides refused to be identified publicly. But, the reporters may also have shielded their identity because their former positions made their accusations look less credible. Indentifying the source of the information would have been more fair to the subject of the story as well as to the readers who are trying to judge the credibility of the article. The good in airing the story was to give readers information about McCain's staff that may conceivably help shape the public's decisions in the election. However, the harm from the story is the potential damage to the *Washington Post*' credibility (caused by the unnamed sources) as well as the harm to Davis and the McCain campaign. Had the newspaper written the article using named sources—so that readers could judge the credibility of the accusers—the story would have been justifiable under the tenets of utilitarianism.

Examining the practice of attributing information to one, unverified source shows it can lead to information of dubious value being validated for the news reader. For instance, a *Washington Post* article about the Federal Transportation Administration's plan to kill a proposed subway extension to Dulles Airport included two unverified comments from single, unnamed sources. Describing the meeting between the FTA, Virginia Senator John Warner, and Virginia Governor Timothy Kaine, the article noted: "But one senior congressional official described Warner as 'livid' at the meeting, and a state official who spoke to Kaine afterward described him as 'extremely disappointed and frustrated'" (Gardner, 2008, para. 11). The article had already extensively detailed the politicians' publicly expressed disdain for the FTA's decision. The only detail not released was Kaine's and Warner's emotional responses. If they wished for the public to know that they were angry, perhaps they should go on the record and say so. Allowing these unnamed officials to express their anger for each of them adds little depth to the reporting. The next paragraph offers more detail:

> "The FTA made it very clear today to the delegation that they are going to say no to this project," said the official, who spoke on condition of anonymity because he did not want to anger the transit agency. "And the senator made it very clear that, given how obvious it is that members

> of Congress find this to be an incredibly important project—and have for 30 years—FTA probably should have set off some flares a lot earlier than this.” (Gardner, 2008, para. 12)

The reporter explains that she granted anonymity to allow the aide to avoid provoking the FTA. That rationale appears dubious for two reasons. First, receiving anonymity to say something that will upset someone is not a “just cause” as suggested by Boeyink, nor would it survive a review of utilitarianism ethics. Second, the reporter makes it clear that the official works in Senator Warner’s office. If the FTA is upset over the quote, the agency knows exactly where it came from—regardless of anonymity. One wonders as well whether the governor and senator (or at least their chiefs of staff) approved the release of these quotes. The idea that an official, acting on his own, would provide these details to a reporter seems unlikely. Regardless, the reporter should have confirmed the quote with at least one other person in the meeting before running it. In effect, the reporter offered information of little news value while allowing, without independent verification, an official to vent critical comments without being held publicly accountable.

In 2008, 36 percent of foreign affairs stories used unnamed sourcing, a noticeable decline from the high of 66 percent in 1968. Comprehensive foreign affairs coverage can be achieved without resorting to anonymity. A *Washington Post* piece from 2008 about the internal politics of Iraq details sensitive information about presidential candidate Barack Obama’s communications with Iraqi officials (Raghavan & Eggen, 2008). The article names all the officials interviewed, including an Iraqi elected official, an Iraqi general, a British military spokesperson, and a White House press secretary. The article offers a substantive look at the political choices ahead for both the Iraqis and the Obama campaign. It shows that serious foreign affairs coverage can be conducted without employing unnamed sources.

Reporters still use anonymity with great regularity and often with no explanation for the move. For instance, a 2008 article about President-elect Obama's plans for Afghanistan featured this passage:

> Some NATO military officials said enhanced U.S. leadership would be welcome, as long as it was not seen as a "takeover bid," said one senior European officer whose country has troops fighting as part of the NATO coalition in Afghanistan… The NATO officer suggested that Obama, whose election was greeted with wide approval in Europe, may have more success than [then-President] Bush in persuading other alliance members to increase their fighting forces in Afghanistan. "I think you'll find the new president would then be able to persuade a number of European nations who have not liked this administration's way of doing business to come in behind them," he said. (DeYoung, 2008, para. 8-9)

The reporter fails to offer any explanation to explain why this quote must remain anonymous. The statement does not seem particularly damaging or offensive. At the same time, a quote from a European politician would perhaps serve readers better, since the officer is suggesting how politicians may respond to requests for more troops. Even an expert on foreign relations may have been a better source—and someone whose quotes could be conveyed without a veil. The good of providing this information to the readers fails to outweigh the harm in lowering transparency through the use of an unnamed quote.

Much of the information from government leaders—no matter how mundane—comes from unnamed sources. For instance, a *Washington Post* article detailing a private meeting between President Bush and President-elect Obama reported:

> Bush, speaking privately to Obama during their first Oval Office meeting, repeated his administration's stand that he might support quick action on

> those bills if Democratic leaders drop their opposition to a Colombia trade agreement that Bush supports, according to people familiar with the discussions. (Montgomery & Shear, 2008, para. 2)

The "people familiar" with a private conversation between a U.S. president and a U.S. president-elect are few in number. Top aides for both men likely briefed reporters on the conversation. Given the mundane nature of the news, the information could easily be attributed to named officials. After all, Bush was simply restating something he had already stated publicly. The rest of the article featured named quotes from officials and politicians from both sides of the aisle. The decision to attribute the story from "people familiar with the discussions" is arbitrary at best, and the harm of opaqueness outweighs any good served by releasing the information.[14]

Often, unnamed sources could easily be avoided while providing the public with the same information. A *Washington Post* article about the resignation of New York Governor Elliot Spitzer over a tryst with a prostitute offered information from "sources familiar with the case" (Richburg & Johnson, 2008, p. 1). The sources described that Spitzer could face charges for various violations of state laws, including conspiracy and money-laundering charges. The article then quotes a law professor who offers commentary on the negotiations between Spitzer and prosecutors. To avoid using unnamed sources, the reporters could have taken the information about potential legal trouble from the unnamed sources and asked the law professor about them. The professor could have confirmed the applicability of those laws and everything would have been on the record. The reporter could have also asked the prosecutor in the case if

[14] Of course, public officials are complicit in this proclivity toward anonymity. If they insist on unnamed attribution, then the press may feel compelled (because of competitive pressures) to honor the terms. This conundrum will be discussed further in the conclusion.

Spitzer was still under investigation. In short, the article could have informed the public without employing unnamed sources, a more justifiable moral act under the tenets of utilitarianism.

Many instances of unnamed sourcing involve getting the word of an announcement out before the announcement is made. In a *New York Times* article announcing a merger between Delta and Northwest airlines, the deal was attributed to "a person with direct knowledge of the negotiations" who "spoke on condition of anonymity because the talks are private" (Bailey & Maynard, 2008, para. 2). The deal had wrapped late in the evening, according to the source. Since both companies are public and report to shareholders, they would have every reason to make an announcement after the deal is final, and the company did publicly announce the agreement the next morning. There seems to be little value for the public in the report on the merger 12 hours before the company announces it publicly. That the report was attributed to just one unnamed source makes these actions even more questionable. The good in announcing the deal early (which appears to benefit very few people) does not outweigh several potential harms—the general lack of transparency and the chance that the information is wrong.

Other instances of announcements prior to events appear to be driven by public relations rather than news. For instance, a *New York Times* article concerned Guns N' Roses' plan to release a song on the video game "Rock Band." The article—which commented on the growing role of video games as a mass media category—was attributed to "people familiar with the deal who spoke on condition of anonymity because the arrangement has yet to be announced" (Levine, 2008, para. 1). The article could have easily avoided using unnamed sources by simply waiting until the announcement was made. But, perhaps the reporter received the tip from a representative of the video game maker who promised an exclusive "scoop" about the upcoming announcement. Under this scenario, the reporter gets a unique story and the public relations representative receives free press for an upcoming video game launch. This type of reporting is quite common, but its value to news consumers is dubious and fails the test of utilitarianism ethics.

At times, reporters use unnamed sources to shed light on the movement of legal cases even before official moves have been made. This practice is risky, as evidenced by the various cases in which media outlets have erroneously identified suspects who are later absolved from any wrongdoing (e.g., the case of maligned Olympic Park security guard Richard Jewell, as noted by Alderman & Kennedy, 1997.) A *New York Times* article reported that five security guards working for Blackwater International had been indicted for their actions in Iraq, although the charges had not yet been announced. The article said that the official announcement would be made in a few days. The reporters then went on to name one of the indicted guards, attributing the information to "people who have been briefed on the case and who spoke on condition of anonymity because the indictments had not been unsealed" (Thompson & Risen, 2008, para. 3). The sources also said that a sixth guard was negotiating a plea deal. Only one guard was named in the story. In this case, as well as many others involving potential criminal charges, the public would not have suffered had the *New York Times* waited until the indictments were unsealed. As with previous cases, the good of informing the public did not outweigh the potential harms (to the newspaper's credibility and the named suspect) if the information turned out to be inaccurate.

The preceding cases show that few examples of unnamed sourcing are justifiable given the tenets of utilitarianism. The following section will use Elliott's utilitarianism decision tree to explore some of the more contentious cases involving the use of unnamed sources.

## 5.5 Utilitarianism decision tree and specific cases

Applying unnamed sourcing to this utilitarianism tree illustrates that most cases involving unnamed sourcing are not justifiable. Elliott's decision tree, as introduced in the literature review, contains the following questions:

1) What is the intended action?
2) Will it cause harm? (If not, then the action is just. If so, then review principles of justice.)
3) Is someone being denied legal rights? (If so, then action is unjust.)
4) Is someone being denied moral rights? (If so, then action is unjust.)
5) Is the person being harmed getting what s/he deserves? Or, is the person being helped getting what s/he deserves? (If so, then action is just.)
6) Has the person being harmed had a promise broken to him/her? (If so, then action is unjust.)
7) Has everyone in the situation been treated impartially? (If so, then action is just.)
8) How will harming this individual promote the overall good of the community? Consider whether the community will be better or worse if everyone knows that individuals can be harmed in this way for this reason.
9) How will the community be harmed if the proposed action is not taken? Consider whether the community will be better or worse if everyone knows that individuals will NOT be harmed in this way for this reason. (Elliott, 2007, p.111).

As mentioned earlier, the vast majority of unnamed sourcing cases cannot pass the second question posed: "Does the action cause harm?" Any action with the potential to hurt a journalist's credibility has the potential for causing harm. Journalism observers and practicing journalists agree with the assumption that unnamed sourcing hurts credibility. *New York Times* editor Bill Keller noted that “[a]s a general rule, stories based on unnamed sources generally are less convincing than those based on named sources and documents. And the cumulative reliance on unnamed sources can erode our credibility” (Keller, 2008, para. 7). As Ross noted, communication must be truthful in order for societies to function, and, as Boeyink observed, journalists must attribute their information in order to prove to readers that they are being truthful. Therefore, if any unnamed sourcing causes some harm (i.e., damages the credibility of the media outlet), this, in turn, harms the greater society by planting seeds of distrust in the reader’s mind, potentially damaging the very relationship between the people and the press that is required to help society function.

Given the harm caused by unnamed sourcing, journalists must defend its use in the context of the utilitarianism tree—a greater good must outweigh their inherent harm. The qualitative analysis found that journalists employed unnamed sourcing in the following types of stories:

- A summary of a meeting between elected officials.
- An announcement about a government plans that hadn’t yet been officially released (i.e., “a trial balloon”).
- Information regarding an indictment in a law enforcement investigation that had yet to be officially acknowledged.
- An announcement about a business deal not yet officially released.
- An announcement of a product not yet officially released.

None of these cases were motivated by a call for justice—no one had been denied legal rights, no one had been denied moral rights, and no one had been treated without impartially or with bad faith. In these cases, the use of unnamed sources simply had no ethical justification.

To be clear, all of these examples make great news stories. Journalists should seek to report on these types of events as quickly and accurately as possible. However, within the utilitarianism frame (which stresses the avoidance of harm), these stories should only be reported when able to make attribution to a named source. Government officials, in particular, should not be allowed to dictate the manner in which information is released; journalists must stop being a willing participant by putting a veil between their audience and the source of routine news reports. The qualitative analysis offers several examples in which effective reporting concerning sensitive topics (e.g., government investigations and foreign relations) can be adequately covered without the use of unnamed sources.

Perhaps one example that would prompt further discussion on the utilitarianism tree was the McCain campaign manager story. The article involved an allegation—supported in part by two unnamed former campaign workers—that the chairman of John McCain's campaign was tainted by his connection to a shady Russian billionaire (Birnbaum & Solomon, 2008). The reporters could argue that any harm to Rick Davis may be justified by factors further down the tree—namely acting for justice by facing a moral or legal wrong. However, when presented with Mill's edict for impartiality, the trouble with unnamed sources becomes clear. The article detailed allegations against Davis, but it never identified the two former campaign aides who made the charges. In this case, Davis did not receive impartial coverage, which violates Mill's suggestion that "utilitarianism requires [actors] to be as strictly impartial as a disinterested and benevolent spectator" (p. 148). Allowing unnamed sources to make allegations about named figures violates utilitarianism's call for impartiality.[15]

Of course, many of the examples mentioned in this study go beyond just the simple harms of a lack of transparency and decreased credibility. Individuals have been harmed in

[15] Again, the author stresses that the article represented good, relevant journalism; its only flaw was allowing the two former campaign aides to speak anonymously.

countless ways by examples of unnamed sourcing. Examining these cases should both lead to a better understanding of how contemporary journalists justify the use of unnamed sources and, thereby, will allow journalists to climb higher on the utilitarianism tree.

The final utilitarianism calculus puts forth the question: “How will the community be harmed if the proposed action is not taken?” (Elliott, 2007, p. 111). Consider the *New York Times’* reporting on nuclear scientist Wen Ho Lee, which was based on unnamed law enforcement officials who described looming indictments for treason and espionage (Zhang & Cameron, 2003.) The reporters in that case were operating on a presumption that Lee was guilty of high crimes and that the law enforcement sources were accurate. The reporters and editors could argue that using unnamed sources was justified because Lee had violated moral and legal rights by stealing documents from the U.S. government and thus he was getting what he “deserved.” He was clearly not being treated impartially, but yet the journalists still felt that coverage—driven by unnamed sources—must continue for the “greater good.” Answering this final question in the utilitarian paradigm proves troublesome for the *New York Times*. Arguing that the U.S. public would have been harmed by not hearing about the looming indictment of an alleged Chinese spy seems dubious at best. When the indictment was announced officially, the *New York Times* and other outlets could easily relay the information to their readers. Indeed, the need to report the event before an official announcement is a recurrent theme in unnamed sourcing. In the Wen Ho Lee case, journalists surely justified their coverage by some ethical means, but the greater good of society—balanced against the harm of one individual—does not appear to have been among their concerns.

In some rare cases, the utilitarianism tree leads to the justification of unnamed sources. For example, the *Washington Post* revelation in 2005 of the existence of secret oversea CIA prisons was based entirely on unnamed sources:

> The CIA has been hiding and interrogating some of its most important al Qaeda captives at a Soviet-era compound in Eastern Europe, according to U.S. and foreign officials familiar with the arrangement.
>
> The secret facility is part of a covert prison system set up by the CIA nearly four years ago that at various times has included sites in eight countries, including Thailand, Afghanistan and several democracies in Eastern Europe, as well as a small center at the Guantanamo Bay prison in Cuba, according to current and former intelligence officials and diplomats from three continents. (Priest, 2005, para. 1–2)

The article featured no information from a named official. It quoted several CIA officials or former CIA officials and offered their approximate rank (e.g., “mid-level”), but did not explain why there were not named. The report contained incredibly detailed information including the country locations of some of the prisons and reports of prisoner deaths and abuse while in CIA custody. The article provoked a great deal of debate both in the United States and around the world about the morality of holding prisoners in sites with so little transparency and outside oversight (Whitlock, 2005). The following year, President Bush admitted that the sites existed and said that they had been shuttered and all of the remaining prisoners had been transferred to Guantanamo Bay (Stolberg, 2006).

The article does create a set of harms—from the harm of the newspaper’s credibility caused by a veiled attribution, to the harm to the employees of the CIA who are fighting a war against international terrorists, and possibly the harm to those United States citizens protected by CIA actions. However, in certain cases the utilitarianism decision-tree does make exceptions—tolerating harms when balanced against the aggregate good. This particular issue may make allowance for several exceptions. Given the descriptions of their treatment, it does appear that the CIA violated in some ways the prisoners' legal rights—at least those legal rights, as defined in the Constitution, concerning the treatment of foreign captives. Even if that point may be debatable, the prisoners were denied the moral rights to both be treated humanely and have their captivity overseen by some type of outside authority. Although one may argue that the prisoners are getting what they deserved, the importance of impartiality (and ensuring that no innocent detainees are being treated improperly) would negate this contention. Therefore, based upon these exceptions to the framework proffered by the decision tree, Mill would argue that the use of unnamed sources could be justified if it clears the final question: How will the community be harmed if the proposed action is not taken?

One might argue that not revealing the existence of these secret prisons would prevent the people of the United States from deciding whether they support such actions undertaken on behalf of their safety. Informed debate about the prisons could help the country better identify the boundaries between individual civil liberties and protection of the homeland. Because such a discussion holds great importance both for the allocation of resources for homeland security and also the determination of what specific legal principals mean in this era of international terrorism, the country would be harmed by not having this information to discuss in the public sphere. In a similar vein, a later story revealed that the government had requested that the newspaper not report on specific locations of prisons in Eastern Europe so that the revelation would not damage ongoing espionage work (Whitlock, 2005). The *Post* agreed to withhold that information. In this way, the newspaper limited its potential harms by leaving out certain details of its investigation while remaining true to the overall ethical issues which drove its actions. Given this evidence, on balance, the *Washington Post* report based on unnamed sources was justifiable under the tenets of utilitarianism.

On the other hand, the case of the *New York Times* reporting on the Treasury Department's ability to track terrorist funding does not surpass the utilitarianism decision tree. Using unnamed sources, a 2006 article reported:

> Under a secret Bush administration program initiated weeks after the Sept. 11 attacks, counterterrorism officials have gained access to financial records from a vast international database and examined banking transactions involving thousands of Americans and others in the United States, according to government and industry officials…
>
> The program is limited, government officials say, to tracing transactions of people suspected of having ties to Al Qaeda by reviewing records from the nerve center of the global banking industry, a Belgian cooperative that routes about $6 trillion daily between banks, brokerages, stock exchanges and other institutions. The records mostly involve wire transfers and other methods of moving money overseas and into and out of the United States. Most routine financial transactions confined to this country are not in the database. (Lichtblau & Risen, 2006, para. 1-3)

The article featured a detailed description of how the government tracked the financial data of suspected terrorists. The reporters attributed much of the information to unnamed sources, although a named Treasury Department official confirmed some details after the newspaper made it clear it planned to run the story. The article stresses that many officials discussed the operation, known as "Swift," but no one was named:

> Nearly 20 current and former government officials and industry executives discussed aspects of the Swift operation with the *New York Times* on condition of anonymity because the program remains classified.

> Some of those officials expressed reservations about the program, saying that what they viewed as an urgent, temporary measure had become permanent nearly five years later without specific Congressional approval or formal authorization. (Lichtblau & Risen, 2006, para. 12)

The Bush administration had pleaded with the paper to not publish details about the classified program because the publicity would impede its ability to track terrorists. The article pointed out that none of the unnamed officials felt that the program had been abused or that any civil liberties had been violated. One unnamed official did say that he felt the program had the potential for abuse. Furthermore, both the named and unnamed officials said that the program had been a success, leading to the identification of several terrorists—including the mastermind of bombings in Bali.

As with the CIA prison story, the *New York Times'* Swift article created a set of harms. In addition to the newspaper's credibility, the collateral harm could be catastrophic. If terrorists use the information from the article to avoid detection of illicit financing, then they could conceivably carry out a terrorist strike against citizens of the United States or in other nations—killing an untold number of people. To overcome this potential harm, utilitarianism demands finding a justification. However, when examining Mill's principles of justice, none of elements of the story stand out as unquestionable violations of Mill's principles.

The case that the Swift program violated legal and moral rights appears tenuous at best. Depending on how one reads the law, the scanning of this financial information from Belgium could be an invasion of privacy. However, given the innocuous use of the information, it's hard to argue that some legal and moral rights are being trampled. If anyone's rights are violated, it's the rights of terrorists to not have their money tracked—and they, therefore, are getting what they "deserved." None of the other principles (e.g., impartiality or broken promise) appear to argue that exposing the Swift program is warranted. Therefore, one must ask the final question to determine whether the use of unnamed sources in this case is justified: “How will the community be harmed if the proposed action is not taken?” The answer appears to be—quite a bit. By publishing this article based on unnamed sources, the newspaper divulged secrets that could help terrorists avoid detection of their funding streams. The article cannot be justified given the framework of utilitarianism.

## 5.6 Rule utilitarianism: Guidelines for unnamed sourcing

Elliott describes Mill as rule-utilitarian rather than an act-utilitarian. The former creates rules that would provide for the best outcome for all if followed precisely, while the latter makes decisions based on individual circumstances. As Elliott notes:

> The principles [of justice] provide five moral rules that must be followed whenever one is analyzing a situation with ethical implications. The rules are justified because of their utility in advancing the aggregate good. Exceptions to following those rules are justified because those exceptions contribute to the aggregate good. The aggregate good is right to pursue because of its consistency with the principles of justice. And, although specific circumstances compel particular decisions, the morally correct answer will always be the type of action that provides social utility or, more specifically, the aggregate good. (2007, p. 110)

Mill’s combination of principles of justice coupled with his focus on the aggregate good makes him a rule utilitarian. However, given the multiple exceptions to the rules, one could argue that this type of rule utilitarianism eventually collapses into act utilitarianism—with potential action decided individually. The current practice in journalism certainly uses act-based utilitarianism, with editors and reporters deciding on a case-by-case basis whether they should use anonymous sources. For example, the former editor of the *Washington Post* told his readers that the paper is torn "every day between the goal of explaining fully where our information is coming from and our obligation to give readers an accurate and thorough account of what is going on in the world" (Downie, 2004, para. 10).

An easier way to offer guidance for the use of unnamed sources—and one which could be practically applied—would be to first gather a large sample of uses of unnamed sources and weigh the individual ethical decisions regarding unnamed sourcing involved in each one; this method would be an act-based approach. Then, specific rules could be drawn from those examples that would encompass most situations journalists may face, a rule-based approach.

Before we move forward, we must decide on whether the rule utilitarian position could argue for the abolition of the use of anonymous sources. *USA Today* founder Al Neuharth suggested such an approach, and some newspapers already adhere to a policy of total prohibition. Such a policy does eliminate the guesswork. Whenever everyone's on the record, an editor need not worry over the veracity of the information, the motivation of the source, or the identity of the speaker. However, such an approach would not allow for those cases in which unnamed sourcing must be employed for the greater good—both to individuals and the society, such as the case of the story about violence against blacks in the Georgia in 1958.

Therefore, any rules surrounding the citing of anonymous sources must allow for their use in those situations in which, after careful consideration, unnamed sourcing could be justified. Since most situations do not involve Mill's concern with moral or legal justice, several rules can be offered to guide reporters:

**Proposed rules to guide the use of unnamed sources**

- Routine information from government agencies should never be conveyed using unnamed sourcing.
    - Examples include: Proposals, actions, deliberations, policy changes and summaries of meetings between officials.
- Information about law enforcement investigations in which no charges have been filed should never be conveyed using anonymous sources.
- Business deals and new products should not be reported with unnamed sources.

By following these rules, journalists should avoid situations in which their reporting is not ethically justifiable, at least according to the utilitarianism paradigm. No reporting which is ethically justifiable should ever be prohibited by the aforementioned rules. This list—which should not be considered exhaustive—does not include rules that could possibly hamper journalists who could defend their actions as warranted for the aggregate good. For instance, this study makes no suggestion for a blanket rule against personal allegations made via unnamed sources. As evidenced in the 1958 case of civil rights coverage, journalists occasionally require the freedom to use unnamed sources to uncover injustices—actions which, in some cases, may be perceived as personal allegations. Such decisions must be made on a case-by-case basis. The rules proposed herein should never prevent a reporter from practicing good journalism, which—on rare occasions—does depend upon unnamed sources.

Implementing strict rules that journalists are encouraged to follow would remove the wiggle room that currently allows reporters and editors to use unnamed sourcing in circumstances which are not justified according to the utilitarianism framework. For instance, compare the set of rules above to the SPJ's Code of Ethics: "Identify sources whenever feasible. The public is entitled to as much information as possible on sources' reliability" (Appendix B, para. 6). When making decisions about unnamed sources, journalists require more guidance than to simply avoid anonymous sources when “feasible.” Such instructions are so vague that they offer little in the way of specific direction.

## 5.7 Independent verification and utilitarianism

Journalism’s current trend away from the independent verification of information from unnamed sources bears more scrutiny. As noted in the historical review of textbooks, journalists once made a habit of verifying information from at least one other source before running it. Over time, that rule has waned—so much so that the Associated Press Stylebook no longer suggests even trying to independently verify information before using an unnamed source.

The editor of the *New York Times* recently explained why he does not require independent verification. In an internal memo, Keller said:

> Quantity is not the same as quality, which is why we do not have a “two source rule” or a “three source rule.” One actual participant in an event may be better than three people who heard about it third-hand, or from one another. One neutral witness may be more valuable than a crowd of partisans. (Keller, 2008, para. 12)

Keller makes the point that independent verification does not guarantee that the information is accurate. The editor would rather weigh the accuracy of the information, rather than a mechanical rule, when deciding whether to include an unnamed source. On one hand, the mechanical rule demanding independent verification of information from unnamed sources would arguably lead to fewer inaccurate stories. On the other hand, such a rule would likely mean some worthy news stories would not make it into print because no independent verification could be found.

Given these two competing interests, the best course of action for the greater good of journalism and society would be to return to the practice of independently verifying all information from unnamed sources. It both increases the credibility of the claims and information detailed in the story for the readers and ensures an additional level of accuracy for the journalist and editor. The best, ethically justified reporting using anonymous sources—e.g., detailing civil rights abuses and CIA secret prisons—came from information verified by more than one source. Journalists, therefore, should adopt a reinstatement of the independent verification rule: “Reporters must always seek at least one other source to verify that information from an unnamed source is accurate. If a second source cannot verify the information, then that information will not be published or broadcast until such a source can be found.” Such a clear code of conduct should help prevent future press debacles such as the *Newsweek* story of the military flushing a Koran down a toilet. That inaccurate story could have survived the utilitarianism tree—after all, it dealt with a moral wrong that seemed to require exposure for the greater good of society. However, the source of the story was one, unnamed military official. By having a strict rule forbidding the use of any unverified material, journalists can add an extra layer of protection to ensure that their reporting remains ethically defensible.

The guidelines mentioned in this and the previous sections do not have to remain an isolated academic exercise. This author intends to lobby the SPJ to update their codes of ethics to include more stringent rules for unnamed sourcing. The organization has not updated their code of ethics since 1996, while the intervening years have seen many critics assail media outlets for their flippant and inaccurate use of unnamed sourcing. Challenging the SPJ to update their code in this regard may steer the entire profession toward better practices.

## 5.8 Summary

This discussion finds that the use of unnamed sources has differed greatly over the past six decades. In addition to wide disparities in frequency, the ways in which they were employed varied as well. Journalists in the past were much more comfortable giving generic attributions to their sources. They were also less likely to explain why anonymity was granted. Surprisingly, the analysis found no significant change in the methods surrounding the attribution of information to one, unverified source.

The qualitative analysis indicates that the decisions to use anonymous sourcing are particularly hard to justify using the standards of utilitarianism. The articles used anonymous sourcing for arbitrary reasons, out of habit, or as pawns of public relations agents and spin doctors. In fact, the only article in the analysis that withstood the ethical scrutiny involved the 1958 coverage of the civil rights movement. In each of the other cases examined in this study, the argument in favor of employing unnamed sources could not outweigh the potential harm to individuals and society.

By employing the use of Elliott's utilitarianism decision tree, the author found that few cases of unnamed sourcing could be justified within this ethical framework. Most unnamed sourcing is quite pedestrian and can easily be dismissed as causing a harm (i.e., decreasing credibility) without any ethical justification. In some rare cases, the ethics of unnamed sourcing must be weighed using the utilitarianism decision tree. In most of those, the use still cannot be justified; but, in some rare cases, usually involving cases in which fundamental human rights are being violated, unnamed sourcing can be justified within the bounds of utilitarianism.

In the final chapter, the author will summarize all of this study's findings including historical review of journalism practices as well as the quantitative and qualitative analysis of unnamed source use. The author will review the recommendations made in the discussion section and explain the limitations of the study. Potential areas for future research will also be examined.

# 6 Conclusion

This dissertation has illuminated several areas of journalism scholarship, providing insight into the historical evolution of unnamed sourcing as a reporting method. The dissertation's main goal was to investigate how unnamed sourcing was used over the past several decades. The answer to this question is important because many journalism critics assume that the use of unnamed sources is higher today than in the past. These critics believe that today's journalists use unnamed sources with less restraint than in previous decades, and implicate the practice in journalism's declining credibility. The results of this dissertation's longitudinal content analysis, however, show that this belief is not supported by empirical evidence. Journalists in the 1960s and 1970s used unnamed sourcing far more than journalists did in 2008. In fact, current journalists use unnamed sourcing at a remarkably similar rate as reporters in 1958. The result of the first research question shows that the drop in news media credibility numbers should not be attributed to a rise in the use of unnamed sources.

The dissertation also shows how the use of unnamed sources has changed over time. The evolution was identified through a quantitative and qualitative content analysis of the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* as well as an analysis of journalism textbooks and professional codes of ethics for journalists. The table on the following page (Table 6.1) summarizes the overall findings of the dissertation. The table examines the previous six decades with attention focused on the frequency of unnamed source use found in the quantitative content analysis, the positions found in journalism textbooks and codes of ethics, the news related to unnamed sourcing, and the status of news media credibility.

**Table 6.1: Results of longitudinal study of unnamed sources**

| | 1958 | 1968 | 1978 | 1988 | 1998 | 2008 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| % of unnamed sourcing on front pages (sec. 4.3) | 25.3% | 35.1% | 49.3% | 37.0% | 39.8% | 25.3% |
| % w/ independent verification of unnamed sources (sec. 4.3) | 76.3% | 72.7% | 74.8% | 73.2% | 65.6% | 79.5% |
| Overview of textbooks and codes of ethics from era (sec. 2.4) | Authors uneasy with growing acceptance of unnamed sourcing, see it harming journalistic profession; they note that method grew out of foreign affairs coverage | Texts accept unnamed sourcing as journalism norm; codes of ethics haven't changed since 1923, but do stress transparency of sources, verifying information | ASNE code of ethics updated to stress confidentiality of sources; SPJ code keeps references to identifying sources of news; texts stress independent verification | Greater embrace of unnamed sourcing; one text suggests using it even for small-town coverage of city hall; SPJ code removes call to identify news sources | SPJ changes code, suggests identifying sources "whenever feasible," removes call to "substantiate" information; some texts question heavy reliance on unnamed sources | SPJ code goes unchanged; Associated Press introduces, then updates section on anonymous sources; it stresses restraint but eliminates call for independent verification |
| Noted historical events involving unnamed sources from era<br><br>(secs. 1.1, 5.4.1) | Much unnamed sourcing found in foreign affairs coverage; *New York Times* uses method to report on violence against blacks in the South | Media outlets use unnamed sourcing to cover much of Vietnam War; many battlefield updates attributed to unnamed military spokespeople. | With reporting based on unnamed sourcing, Watergate coverage leads to resignation of President Nixon. Woodward and Bernstein verify material from unnamed sources | Janet Cooke scandal at *Washington Post* prompts revocation of Pulitzer Prize; editors promise more scrutiny of unnamed sourcing | Coverage of O.J. Simpson trial criticized for erroneous reports based on unnamed sources; ASNE releases report on credibility with section devoted to anonymous sources. | Stinging criticism of unnamed sourcing erupts; *New York Times* apologizes for some Iraq War coverage, *Newsweek* for erroneous story on military placing a Koran in toilet |
| News media credibility of era (sec. 2.2.2) | News media still enjoy high credibility ratings, as do other major institutions | No discernible shift in credibility ratings; television tends to be rated as more "believable" than newspapers | News media still garner high credibility numbers; audiences particularly pleased with Watergate coverage | First signs of dropping media credibility numbers emerge; drop in credibility of other institutions (e.g., government, businesses) also noted. | News media credibility plummets; people with "at least some confidence" drops from 72 percent (1986) to 39 percent (1996) | Credibility drops even further; researchers cite variety of factors including ethics, lack of transparency, unnamed sources, and media fragmentation |

As detailed in the table, the news media in 1958 used unnamed sources in about one out of four articles. Journalism textbooks acknowledged that the practice was growing in acceptance and journalism codes stressed the importance of the identification of sources of news. As with all institutions at the time, news media credibility numbers were relatively high in the late 1950s.

As Table 6.1 shows, in the 1960s, the use of unnamed sources rose sharply. Much of the coverage of the Vietnam War, a major news event of the era, relied upon attributions to unnamed military spokespeople. Most credibility numbers remained high, although many polls showed that television was more trusted than newspapers.

In the 1970s, faith in the media's credibility endured, and audiences particularly praised the coverage of the Watergate scandal, much of which was based on unnamed sourcing. That decade's unnamed source use saw the highest rate in the entire quantitative review—with nearly 50 percent of front-page articles employing veiled attribution. During this period, textbooks continued to accept the use of unnamed sources, but they also stressed the importance of independent verification of information before using anonymous sources. In that decade, too, codes of ethics changed from outright rejection of unnamed sources to stressing the importance of respecting the confidentiality of veiled sources. The code also kept the emphasis on "substantiating" claims, which encouraged the practice of independent verification.

In the 1980s, usage of unnamed sources dropped slightly but gained in acceptance. One journalism textbook suggested that one unverified, unnamed source could help with the reporting on a small-town business beat. The Society of Professional Journalists also updated their code of ethics, dropping the section that called for the identification of news sources. The shift is a palpable move toward much wider acceptance of unnamed sourcing. That decade also saw the first criticisms of reporting attributed to unnamed sources. The Pulitzer Prize committee revoked its award to the *Washington Post* after a reporter admitted that she had fabricated the anonymous sources in her article. News media credibility began to be an issue in the 1980s, but some researchers weren't convinced that a "credibility crisis" truly existed. Researchers also noted that many institutions (e.g., government, businesses) had seen their credibility numbers drop after the turbulent 60s and 70s.

In the 1990s, the use of unnamed sources remained at roughly 40 percent. Guidebooks began to question the use of unnamed sources more, with one author even taking aim at Watergate hero Bob Woodward's sustained reliance on the practice. Journalism critics also pounced on several media outlets for the erroneous reporting surrounding the O.J. Simpson trial. However, at the same time that the use of unnamed sourcing came under censure from industry critics, the SPJ changed its code of ethics substantially, removing calls to "substantiate information" (i.e., independent verification) and suggesting that reporters attribute information to named sources only "whenever feasible." The changes to the code showed a far greater acceptance of unnamed sourcing and the tacit approval of running stories with a single unverified, unnamed source.  News media credibility numbers dropped unquestionably during the 1990s, prompting the American Society of Newspaper Editors to examine the practices of its members. Among other findings, the ASNE report concluded that newspapers should be wary of excessive use of unnamed sourcing because of the damage it may cause to media credibility. These findings are interesting since they show that the SPJ was loosening its approach to unnamed sourcing at a time when media credibility problems were on the rise.

In 2008, unnamed source use had dropped sharply to match the levels seen in 1958. The codes of ethics didn't change, but the Associated Press Stylebook introduced a section on anonymous sources and then updated it. The AP stressed that unnamed sources should be used sparingly but removed calls for independent verification. The shift showed that professional norms concerning independent verification had changed dramatically over the previous 30 years. Media credibility numbers dropped further in 2008, but previous research points to a variety of factors including a lack of transparency, ethical decisions, unnamed sourcing, the general decline of institutional credibility, and the proliferation of varied media outlets.

The finding that current unnamed source use sits at a level not seen since 1958 refutes the suggestion that unnamed sourcing is on the rise and that past journalists used more restraint in employing the method. The results should help guide future discussions about the use of unnamed sources—their use today may be egregious, but critics can't complain that the "Golden Age" of journalism employed them less often. Other findings from the content analysis also provide reasons to be hopeful about the direction of the profession.

By answering the other research questions, the quantitative study revealed improvements surrounding the practice made over the years. The greatest improvement seen over the decades was the practice of offering a clue to the identity of unnamed sources. In the 1950s and 1960s, reporters would routinely attribute information to "reliable sources" without offering any further explanation regarding the sources' identity. By 2008, fewer than 3 percent of stories featured such ambiguous sourcing. This represents a dramatic shift toward greater transparency in the use of unnamed sources and a response to critics who called for journalists to change the practice of ambiguous attribution. If media outlets were going to use unnamed sourcing, critics insisted, then they should at least provide as full a description of the source of the information as possible.

The press also gradually increased the explanations for granting anonymity—with the journalists of 2008 offering such an explanation in one out of four times. This proportion is still far too low, yet it represents a significant increase over time. The move toward explaining why a source was granted anonymity also represents a victory for those critics who called for such a change in previous years.

The three previous findings—the lower number of unnamed source use in news reports, the decreased use of vague attribution by reporters, and the increased explanation of anonymity where and when they appear in news stories—represent palpable progress in the practice of journalism. These findings are important because they suggest that critics of journalism do make an impact on its practice. Although this study has not established a direct link between the improvement in news sourcing practices and the criticisms of industry critics, it seems reasonable to infer that these changes are at least partly a response to the concerns of these critics. This dissertation’s results should provide incentive for critics to continue to strive to change journalism norms for the better. This author will conclude this dissertation with a call for further change.

The content analysis also found that the number of articles containing unverified information from a single unnamed source had fallen to its lowest level in 2008—around 20 percent. In contrast, the year 1998 represented the peak of such usage, with 35 percent of stories featuring unverified information from single anonymous sources. The historical review of journalism guidebooks and codes of ethics reveal that the professional norms surrounding verification were waning, so the 2008 results are somewhat surprising. Regardless of the quantitative findings, the changes in the professional norms are alarming and have apparently gone undetected. This research should prompt a discussion in the journalism community about whether the move away from independent verification is a shift in the wrong direction.

The qualitative content analysis provides specific insights into the past and current use of unnamed sourcing. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the study is that so few of the examples of unnamed sourcing can be justified using the ethical theory of utilitarianism. By this standard, only one article—the coverage of violence against blacks in the 1950s—warranted the use of unnamed sources. The ethical exploration of the utilitarianism decision tree produced just one other story (regarding the secret CIA prisons) that appeared to justify anonymity. These findings should also prompt a discussion among practicing journalists and journalism educators about the norms that surround the use of unnamed sourcing. The Society for Professional Journalists should also consider revising their code of ethics to create more impediments to granting anonymity.

To recap the discussion section, the author makes two main suggestions for improving the practice of unnamed sourcing. First, the author recommends a ban on using unnamed sourcing to report certain types of news such as routine announcements from the government (e.g., proposals, meeting summaries, and policy changes), information about criminal cases before charges have been filed, and any announcements about business deals or new products. Secondly, the author recommends instituting a strict rule mandating that no information be attributed to a single, unnamed source. The rule could read: “Reporters must always seek at least one other source to verify that information from an unnamed source is accurate. If a second source cannot verify the information, then that information will not be published or broadcast until such a source can be found.” These two rules would greatly help journalists to ethically defend their actions according to the utilitarianism paradigm which weighs potential harms against the aggregate good. The author plans to lobby the SPJ to update its code of ethics to include these changes.

## 6.1 Limitations

This study of unnamed sources has several limitations. The issue of news media credibility is central to much of the dissertation. The frequency or use of unnamed sourcing is less important if it fails to have an effect on the audience’s perceptions of credibility. However, the audience study is merely a tangent to the main thrust of this dissertation. An audience study component that confirms a link between credibility and unnamed sourcing would have strengthened the dissertation’s conclusions.

Another limitation is the study’s inability to establish causality. While the historical review and longitudinal content analysis identified major trends over the decades, it cannot connect the dots. For instance, the decline in unnamed source use in 2008 occurred after a rash of scandals in the earlier part of the decade. But the researcher can make no claim that those two variables were definitely related. Similarly, the author cannot connect (or disconnect) the decline of unnamed sources to the decline in media credibility numbers.

The study's the inclusion of years during which presidential elections took place may also be a limitation. Since 1968, 1988, and 2008 were national election years, the coverage of the run-up to voting may have skewed the results when compared to the other years. Campaign coverage may be more likely to use unnamed sourcing than other issues, although this hypothesis is untested. One way to rectify this problem would have been to select years in which no elections took place; however, that solution could have skewed the results in another direction. Ultimately, the only way to avoid an election-year bias would be to simply conduct a sample that examined every year for the past six decades. At the very least, a sample that occurred more often than once a decade would have also improved the results.

The constructed-week sample is another limitation. While Riffe and Aust (1993) found that 14 days proved to be a sufficient sample to generalize a year of coverage, the sample size is still relatively small. The Martin-Kratzer and Thorson (2007) study, upon with this content analysis is based, used a sample that was twice as large. A larger sample would have likely improved this study's reliability and validity.

Another factor that could also affect the study's validity is the changing nature of news. As editors and audiences tastes evolve, the types of articles on the front pages likely changed over the six decade span of the analysis. Different types of stories may lend themselves to varying levels of unnamed sourcing. Therefore, fluctuations in unnamed sourcing may have more to do with changing story types rather than acceptability of the practice.

One final limitation involves a lack of specificity on the coding protocols. For instance, some routine forms of unnamed sourcing allow spokespeople to make statements for agencies or organizations without attribution. This practice was quite widespread in the 1950s though

1970s and is still in use today, particularly with foreign correspondents citing diplomats. Adding a level of detail to the coding scheme to identify this type of reporting (i.e., allowing a spokesperson authorized to speak to the press to go nameless) as opposed to other unnamed reporting (i.e., from a government official who may or may not be authorized to speak) would have offered more valid results. Such coding would have also controlled for the changes in journalism norms regarding the anonymous quoting of spokespeople.

## 6.2 Future Research

This dissertation leads to many different avenues for further research. A new longitudinal study examining different years would help extend and strengthen the validity of these findings. Such a study could examine 1953, 1963, 1973, 1983, 1993, and 2003. The last year would overlap the Martin-Kratzer and Thorson (2007) study to help validate their results. They found that major newspapers used unnamed sourcing in 2003 at a rate of 80 percent, a particularly high percentage not found in this author's content analysis.

Another avenue for future research would be to further explore specific rules that could better guide journalists toward improved use of unnamed sourcing. A more complete qualitative examination of current anonymous source usage may help decide whether the information in the articles could truly only be procured via this method of reporting. Such a study might also explore whether society really benefitted from the use of unnamed sources in specific instances. After examining a set of articles within the utilitarianism paradigm, a researcher could then develop a more exhaustive set of guidelines for journalists.

An audience study of perceptions of unnamed sources is another related possibility for future research. Such a study could expand upon the earlier work by Smith (2007) and Sternadori and Thorson (2009). Both experiments used students as their subjects, a sample population that could skew the results. Of Smith's sample, 55 percent of respondents indicated they rarely read a newspaper and 23 percent rarely watched television news. Such novice news consumers would have little previous knowledge of scandals involving anonymous sources. Therefore, the participants would not possess strong opinions about their use. A sample of active or long-term news consumers might provide a better population from which to gauge the link between credibility and anonymous sourcing. A future study could target that group to see if the sample selection affects the results.

Another idea for future research is a content analysis that follows instances of unnamed source reporting and checks them for accuracy. The research design could examine a specific type of unnamed sourced reporting which would easily allow a researcher to check for accuracy. A simple target for such a study could be unnamed sourced coverage of sports trading rumors. For instance, in the days leading up to the Major League Baseball trading deadline, multiple news outlets report "yet-to-be announced" player trades. A study could identify the percentage of reports which turn out to be officially true and how many were simply unsubstantiated rumors. These findings could add support claims that unnamed sourcing ultimately hurts the credibility of the journalism profession due to their proclivity toward inaccuracy.

## 6.3 Summary

The findings of this dissertation are promising. The journalism profession has responded to a number of the frequent criticisms about the use and overuse of unnamed sourcing. While the frequency of unnamed sourcing has decreased, the profession has increased both its explanations for their use and clues as to the identity of the source. The author hopes that this dissertation will help move the profession further forward toward a more restrained approach in the use of anonymous sources.

The *New York Times* public editor stressed the need to curb the misuse of unnamed sources once again just prior to the publication of this dissertation. Clark Hoyt noted:

> Despite written ground rules to the contrary and promises by top editors to do better, *The Times* continues to use anonymous sources for information available elsewhere on the record. It allows unnamed people to provide quotes of marginal news value and to remain hidden with little real explanation of their motives, their reliability, or the reasons why they must be anonymous. (Hoyt, 2010, para. 2)

Hoyt noted that “anonymous sources can be invaluable … But used casually or routinely, they stir readers’ skepticism” (para. 4). The ombudsman agrees that unnamed sourcing can prove useful. But, he insists that reporters must quit using them so frequently and for news that doesn’t justify their use.

The argument made in support of citing unnamed sources is that using them is quite often the only way to tell the story. However, as the examples in the qualitative content analysis illustrate, news can often be covered without their use. Perhaps the idea that anonymity is the only way to report the news is simply a straw man argument. The biggest obstacle in reducing the reliance on unnamed sources appears to simply be inertia. Scholars and journalism critics must continue to point out the capricious overuse of unnamed sourcing.

The press should treat anonymous sources like the glass covering the fire alarm—it should only be broken in case of an emergency. If journalists adopt a more limited approach, society would benefit from the increased transparency and the greater credibility.

## Appendix A: American Society of Newspaper Editors Code of Ethics

### Adopted in 1923

CODE OF ETHICS

or

Canons of Journalism

AMERICAN SOCIETY OF NEWSPAPER EDITORS

The primary function of newspapers is to communicate to the human race what its members do, feel and think. Journalism, therefore, demands of its practitioners the widest range of intelligence, or knowledge, and of experience, as well as natural and trained powers of observation and reasoning.

To its opportunities as a chronicle are indissolubly linked its obligations as teacher and interpreter. To the end of finding some means of codifying sound practice and just aspirations of American journalism, these canons are set forth:

I. RESPONSIBILITY—The right of a newspaper to attract and hold readers is restricted by nothing but considerations of public welfare. The use a newspaper makes of the share of public attention it gains serves to determine its sense of responsibility, which it shares with every member of its staff. A journalist who uses his power for any selfish or otherwise unworthy purpose is faithless to a high trust.

II. FREEDOM OF THE PRESS—Freedom of the press is to be guarded as a vital right of mankind. It is the unquestionable right to discuss whatever is not explicitly forbidden by law, including the wisdom of any restrictive

III. Independence—Freedom from all obligations except that of fidelity to the public interest is vital.

1. Promotion of any private interest contrary to the general welfare, for whatever reason, is not compatible with honest journalism. So-called news communications from private sources should not be published without public notice of their source or else substantiation of their claims to value as news, both in form and substance.

2. Partisanship, in editorial comment which knowingly departs from the truth, does violence to the best spirit of American journalism; in the news columns it is subversive of a fundamental principle of the profession.

IV. SINCERITY, TRUTHFULNESS, ACCURACY—Good faith with the reader is the foundation of all journalism worthy of the name.

1. By every consideration of good faith a newspaper is constrained to be truthful. It is not to be excused for lack of thoroughness or accuracy within its control, or failure to obtain command of these essential qualities.

2. Headlines should be fully warranted by the contents of the articles which they surmount.

V. IMPARTIALITY—Sound practice makes clear distinction between news reports and expressions of opinion. News reports should be free from opinion or bias of any kind.

1. This rule does not apply to so-called special articles unmistakably devoted to advocacy or characterized by a signature authorizing the writer's own conclusions and interpretation.

VI. FAIR PLAY—A newspaper should not publish unofficial charges affecting reputation or moral character without opportunity given to the accused to be heard; right practice demands the giving of such opportunity in all cases of serious accusation outside judicial proceedings.

1. A newspaper should not invade private rights or feeling without sure warrant of public right as distinguished from public curiosity.

2. It is the privilege, as it is the duty, of a newspaper to make prompt and complete correction of its own serious mistakes of fact or opinion, whatever their origin.

DECENCY—A newspaper cannot escape conviction of insincerity if while professing high moral purpose it supplies incentives to base conduct, such as are to be found in details of crime and vice, publication of which is not demonstrably for the general good. Lacking authority to enforce its canons the journalism here represented can but express the hope that deliberate pandering to vicious instincts will encounter effective public disapproval or yield to the influence of a preponderant professional condemnation.

**ASNE Code of Ethics—Adopted in 1975**

ASNE Statement of Principles

*ASNE's Statement of Principles was originally adopted in 1922 as the "Canons of Journalism." The document was revised and renamed "Statement of Principles" in 1975.*

PREAMBLE. The First Amendment, protecting freedom of expression from abridgment by any law, guarantees to the people through their press a constitutional right, and thereby places on newspaper people a particular responsibility. Thus journalism demands of its practitioners not only industry and knowledge but also the pursuit of a standard of integrity proportionate to the journalist's singular obligation. To this end the American Society of Newspaper Editors sets forth this Statement of Principles as a standard encouraging the highest ethical and professional performance.

ARTICLE I—Responsibility. The primary purpose of gathering and distributing news and opinion is to serve the general welfare by informing the people and enabling them to make judgments on the issues of the time.

Newspapermen and women who abuse the power of their professional role for selfish motives or unworthy purposes are faithless to that public trust. The American press was made free not just to inform or just to serve as a forum for debate but also to bring an independent scrutiny to bear on the forces of power in the society, including the conduct of official power at all levels of government.

ARTICLE II—Freedom of the Press. Freedom of the press belongs to the people. It must be defended against encroachment or assault from any quarter, public or private. Journalists must be constantly alert to see that the public's business is conducted in public. They must be vigilant against all who would exploit the press for selfish purposes.

ARTICLE III—Independence. Journalists must avoid impropriety and the appearance of impropriety as well as any conflict of interest or the appearance of conflict. They should neither accept anything nor pursue any activity that might compromise or seem to compromise their integrity.

ARTICLE IV—Truth and Accuracy. Good faith with the reader is the foundation of good journalism. Every effort must be made to assure that the news content is accurate, free from bias and in context, and that all sides are presented fairly. Editorials, analytical articles and commentary should be held to the same standards of accuracy with respect to facts as news reports. Significant errors of fact, as well as errors of omission, should be corrected promptly and prominently.

ARTICLE V—Impartiality. To be impartial does not require the press to be unquestioning or to refrain from editorial expression. Sound practice, however, demands a clear distinction for the reader between news reports and opinion. Articles that contain opinion or personal interpretation should be clearly identified.

ARTICLE VI—Fair Play. Journalists should respect the rights of people involved in the news, observe the common standards of decency and stand accountable to the public for the fairness and accuracy of their news reports. Persons publicly accused should be given the earliest opportunity to respond. Pledges of confidentiality to news sources must be honored at all costs, and therefore should not be given lightly. Unless there is clear and pressing need to maintain confidences, sources of information should be identified. These principles are intended to preserve, protect and strengthen the bond of trust and respect between American journalists and the American people, a bond that is essential to sustain the grant of freedom entrusted to both by the nation's founders.

## Appendix B: Society of Professional Journalists' Code of Ethics

### SPJ Code of Ethics—Adopted in 1973 by the Society of Professional Journalists

*[In 1926, The SPJ first adopted a Code of Ethics, an exact copy of the ASNE Canons of Journalism. In 1973, they updated the code and broke away from the ASNE, although much of the original language remained. References to "newspapers" are replaced by "media" or "mass media." Much of the language is similar to 1926.]*

The Society of Professional Journalists, Sigma Delta Chi, believes the duty of journalists is to serve the truth.

We believe the agencies of mass communication are carriers of public discussion and information, acting on their Constitutional mandate and freedom to learn and report the facts.

We believe in public enlightenment as the forerunner of justice, and in our Constitutional role to seek the truth as part of the public's right to know the truth.

We believe those responsibilities carry obligations that require journalists to perform with intelligence, objectivity, accuracy and fairness.

To these ends, we declare acceptance of the standards of practice here set forth:

**RESPONSIBILITY**: The public's right to know of events of public importance and interest is the overriding mission of the mass media. The purpose of distributing news and enlightened opinion is to serve the general welfare. Journalists who use their professional status as representatives of the public for selfish or other unworthy motives violate a high trust.

**FREEDOM OF THE PRESS**: Freedom of the press is to be guarded as an inalienable right of people in a free society. It carries with it the freedom and the responsibility to discuss, question and challenge actions and utterances of our government and of our public and private institutions. Journalists uphold the right to speak unpopular opinions and the privilege to agree with the majority.

**ETHICS**: Journalists must be free of obligation to any interest other than the public's right to know the truth.

1. Gifts, favors, free travel, special treatment or privileges can compromise the integrity of journalists and their employers. Nothing of value should be accepted.

2. Secondary employment, political involvement, holding public office, and service in community organizations should be avoided if it compromises the integrity of journalists and their employers. Journalists and their employers should conduct their personal lives in a manner that protects them from conflict of interest, real or apparent. Their responsibilities to the public are paramount. That is the nature of their profession.

3. So-called news communications from private sources should not be published or broadcast without substantiation of their claims to news value.

4. Journalists will seek news that serves the public interest despite the obstacles. They will make constant efforts to assure that the public's business is conducted in public and that public records are open to public inspection.

5. Journalists acknowledge the newsman's ethic of protecting confidential sources of information.

*6. Plagiarism is dishonest and unacceptable.*

**ACCURACY AND OBJECTIVITY**: Good faith with the public is the foundation of all worthy journalism.

1. Truth is our ultimate goal.

2. Objectivity in reporting the news is another goal, which serves as the mark of an experienced professional. It is a standard of performance toward which we strive. We honor those who achieve it.

3. There is no excuse for inaccuracies or lack of thoroughness.

4. Newspaper headlines should be fully warranted by the contents of the articles they accompany. Photographs and telecasts should give an accurate picture of an event and not highlight a minor incident of out context.

5. Sound practice makes clear distinction between news reports and expressions of opinion. News reports should be free of opinion or bias and represent all sides of an issue.

6. Partisanship in editorial comment that knowingly departs from the truth violates the spirit of American journalism.

7. Journalists recognize their responsibility for offering informed analysis, comment and editorial opinion on public events and issues. They accept the obligation to present such material by individuals whose competence, experience and judgment qualify them for it.

8. Special articles or presentations devoted to advocacy or the writer's own conclusions and interpretations should be labeled as such.

**FAIR PLAY**: Journalists at all times will show respect for the dignity, privacy, rights and well-being of people encountered in the course of gathering and presenting the news.

1. The news media should not communicate unofficial charges affecting reputation or moral character without giving the accused a chance to reply.

2. The news media must guard against invading a person's right to privacy.

3. The media should not pander to morbid curiosity about details of vice and crime.

4. It is the duty of news media to make prompt and complete correction of their errors.

5. Journalists should be accountable to the public for their reports, and the public should be encouraged to voice its grievances against the media. Open dialogue with our readers, viewers and listeners should be fostered.

**PLEDGE**: Journalists should actively censure and try to prevent violations of these standards, and they should encourage their observance by all newspeople. Adherence to this code of ethics is intended to preserve the bond of mutual trust and respect between American journalists and the American people.

*[The author thanks Fred Brown, co-chairman of the SPJ Ethics Committee for his work in obtaining this document.]*

**SPJ Code of Ethics—Adopted in 1987 by the Society of Professional Journalists**

*[Incorporates changes made in 1984 and 1987; they are indicated by italics. The pledge, in particular, is new and eliminates the admonition that journalists should "actively censure" breaches of the code.—Fred Brown, Co-Chair of SPJ Ethics Committee]*

The SOCIETY of Professional Journalists, Sigma Delta Chi, believes the duty of journalists is to serve the truth.

We BELIEVE the agencies of mass communication are carriers of public discussion and information, acting on their Constitutional mandate and freedom to learn and report the facts.

We BELIEVE in public enlightenment as the forerunner of justice, and in our Constitutional role to seek the truth as part of the public's right to know the truth.

We BELIEVE those responsibilities carry obligations that require journalists to perform with intelligence, objectivity, accuracy and fairness.

To these ends, we declare acceptance of the standards of practice here set forth:

**RESPONSIBILITY**: The public's right to know of events of public importance and interest is the overriding mission of the mass media. The purpose of distributing news and enlightened opinion is to serve the general welfare. Journalists who use their professional status as representatives of the public for selfish or other unworthy motives violate a high trust.

**FREEDOM OF THE PRESS**: Freedom of the press is to be guarded as an inalienable right of people in a free society. It carries with it the freedom and the responsibility to discuss, question and challenge actions and utterances of our government and of our public and private institutions. Journalists uphold the right to speak unpopular opinions and the privilege to agree with the majority.

**ETHICS**: Journalists must be free of obligation to any interest other than the public's right to know the truth.

> 1. Gifts, favors, free travel, special treatment or privileges can compromise the integrity of journalists and their employers. Nothing of value should be accepted.
>
> 2. Secondary employment, political involvement, holding public office, and service in community organizations should be avoided if it compromises the integrity of journalists and their employers. Journalists and their employers should conduct their personal lives in a manner that protects them from conflict of interest, real or apparent. Their responsibilities to the public are paramount. That is the nature of their profession.
>
> 3. So-called news communications from private sources should not be published or broadcast without substantiation of their claims to news values.

4. Journalists will seek news that serves the public interest despite the obstacles. They will make constant efforts to assure that the public's business is conducted in public and that public records are open to public inspection.

5. Journalists acknowledge the newsman's ethic of protecting confidential sources of information.

*6. Plagiarism is dishonest and is unacceptable. (added in 1984)*

**ACCURACY AND OBJECTIVITY**: Good faith with the public is the foundation of all worthy journalism.

1. Truth is our ultimate goal.

2. Objectivity in reporting the news is another goal *that* serves as the mark of an experienced professional. It is a standard of performance toward which we strive. We honor those who achieve it.

3. There is no excuse for inaccuracies or lack of thoroughness.

4. Newspaper headlines should be fully warranted by the contents of the articles they accompany. Photographs and telecasts should give an accurate picture of an event and not highlight a minor incident of out context.

5. Sound practice makes clear distinction between news reports and expressions of opinion. News reports should be free of opinion or bias and represent all sides of an issue.

6. Partisanship in editorial comment that knowingly departs from the truth violates the spirit of American journalism.

7. Journalists recognize their responsibility for offering informed analysis, comment and editorial opinion on public events and issues. They accept the obligation to present such material by individuals whose competence, experience and judgment qualify them for it.

8. Special articles or presentations devoted to advocacy or the writer's own conclusions and interpretations should be labeled as such.

**FAIR PLAY**: Journalists at all times will show respect for the dignity, privacy, rights and well-being of people encountered in the course of gathering and presenting the news.

1. The news media should not communicate unofficial charges affecting reputation or moral character without giving the accused a chance to reply.

2. The news media must guard against invading a person's right to privacy.

3. The media should not pander to morbid curiosity about details of vice and crime.

4. It is the duty of news media to make prompt and complete correction of their errors.

5. Journalists should be accountable to the public for their reports, and the public should be encouraged to voice its grievances against the media. Open dialogue with our readers, viewers and listeners should be fostered.

***PLEDGE****: Adherence to this code is intended to preserve the bond of mutual trust and respect between American journalists and the American people.*

*The Society shall—by programs of education and other means—encourage individual journalists to adhere to these tenets, and shall encourage journalistic publications and broadcasters to recognize their responsibility to frame codes of ethics in concert with their employees to serve as guidelines in furthering these goals. (Amended in 1987)*

*[The author thanks Fred Brown, co-chairman of the SPJ Ethics Committee for his work in obtaining this document. Brown also supplied the italics and parenthetical comments.]*

**SPJ Code of Ethics—Adopted in 1996 by the Society of Professional Journalists**

Members of the Society of Professional Journalists believe that public enlightenment is the forerunner of justice and the foundation of democracy. The duty of the journalist is to further those ends by seeking truth and providing a fair and comprehensive account of events and issues. Conscientious journalists from all media and specialties strive to serve the public with thoroughness and honesty. Professional integrity is the cornerstone of a journalist's credibility. Members of the Society share a dedication to ethical behavior and adopt this code to declare the Society's principles and standards of practice.

**Seek Truth and Report It**
*Journalists should be honest, fair and courageous in gathering, reporting and interpreting information.*

Journalists should:

- Test the accuracy of information from all sources and exercise care to avoid inadvertent error. Deliberate distortion is never permissible.
- Diligently seek out subjects of news stories to give them the opportunity to respond to allegations of wrongdoing.
- Identify sources whenever feasible. The public is entitled to as much information as possible on sources' reliability.
- Always question sources' motives before promising anonymity. Clarify conditions attached to any promise made in exchange for information. Keep promises.
- Make certain that headlines, news teases and promotional material, photos, video, audio, graphics, sound bites and quotations do not misrepresent. They should not oversimplify or highlight incidents out of context.
- Never distort the content of news photos or video. Image enhancement for technical clarity is always permissible. Label montages and photo illustrations.
- Avoid misleading re-enactments or staged news events. If re-enactment is necessary to tell a story, label it.
- Avoid undercover or other surreptitious methods of gathering information except when traditional open methods will not yield information vital to the public. Use of such methods should be explained as part of the story
- Never plagiarize.
- Tell the story of the diversity and magnitude of the human experience boldly, even when it is unpopular to do so.
- Examine their own cultural values and avoid imposing those values on others.

- Avoid stereotyping by race, gender, age, religion, ethnicity, geography, sexual orientation, disability, physical appearance or social status.
- Support the open exchange of views, even views they find repugnant.
- Give voice to the voiceless; official and unofficial sources of information can be equally valid.
- Distinguish between advocacy and news reporting. Analysis and commentary should be labeled and not misrepresent fact or context.
- Distinguish news from advertising and shun hybrids that blur the lines between the two.
- Recognize a special obligation to ensure that the public's business is conducted in the open and that government records are open to inspection.

**Minimize Harm**

- Ethical journalists treat sources, subjects and colleagues as human beings deserving of respect.
- Journalists should:
- Show compassion for those who may be affected adversely by news coverage. Use special sensitivity when dealing with children and inexperienced sources or subjects.
- Be sensitive when seeking or using interviews or photographs of those affected by tragedy or grief.
- Recognize that gathering and reporting information may cause harm or discomfort. Pursuit of the news is not a license for arrogance.
- Recognize that private people have a greater right to control information about themselves than do public officials and others who seek power, influence or attention. Only an overriding public need can justify intrusion into anyone's privacy.
- Show good taste. Avoid pandering to lurid curiosity.
- Be cautious about identifying juvenile suspects or victims of sex crimes.
- Be judicious about naming criminal suspects before the formal filing of charges.
- Balance a criminal suspect's fair trial rights with the public's right to be informed.

## Act Independently

*Journalists should be free of obligation to any interest other than the public's right to know.*

Journalists should:

- Avoid conflicts of interest, real or perceived.
- Remain free of associations and activities that may compromise integrity or damage credibility.
- Refuse gifts, favors, fees, free travel and special treatment, and shun secondary employment, political involvement, public office and service in community organizations if they compromise journalistic integrity.
- Disclose unavoidable conflicts.
- Be vigilant and courageous about holding those with power accountable.
- Deny favored treatment to advertisers and special interests and resist their pressure to influence news coverage.
- Be wary of sources offering information for favors or money; avoid bidding for news.

**Be Accountable**

*Journalists are accountable to their readers, listeners, viewers and each other.*

Journalists should:

- Clarify and explain news coverage and invite dialogue with the public over journalistic conduct.
- Encourage the public to voice grievances against the news media.
- Admit mistakes and correct them promptly.
- Expose unethical practices of journalists and the news media.
- Abide by the same high standards to which they hold others.

The SPJ Code of Ethics is voluntarily embraced by thousands of writers, editors and other news professionals. The present version of the code was adopted by the 1996 SPJ National Convention, after months of study and debate among the Society's members.

*Sigma Delta Chi's first Code of Ethics was borrowed from the American Society of Newspaper Editors in 1926. In 1973, Sigma Delta Chi wrote its own code, which was revised in 1984, 1987 and 1996.*

## Appendix C: Coding sheets

**UNNAMED SOURCES CONTENT ANALYSIS**

| | |
|---|---|
| **VARIABLE 01** | **Coder ID** |
| **VARIABLE 02** | **SOURCE** |
| **VARIABLE 03** | **STORY ID NUMBER/DATE** |
| **VARIABLE 04** | **TOPIC** |
| **VARIABLE 05** | **UNNAMED SOURCING** |
| **VARIABLE 06** | **ATTEMPT AT IDENTIFICATION** |
| **VARIABLE 07** | **INDEPENDENT VERIFICATION** |
| **VARIABLE 08** | **EXPLANATION OF ANONYMITY** |
| **VARIABLE 09** | **NUMBER OF SOURCES** |

(PC-Based Query)

V1 Coder:

V2 Newspaper:

V3 Story ID/DATE

V4 Type of story (see definitions below)

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Government = 0 | Military/Defense= 1 | Election = 2 |
| Domestic Affairs = 4 | Business = 5 | Crime = 6 |
| Foreign Relations = 7 | Accidents/Disasters = 8 | Science/Tech = 9 |
| Lifestyle = 10 | Celebrity/Entert. = 11 | Health = 12 |
| Other = 13 | | |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| V5 | Unnamed sources: | NO = 0 | YES = 1 |

(If no, then skip last four)

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| V6 | Attempt at Identification: | NO = 0 | YES = 1 |
| V7 | Independent verification | NO = 0 | YES = 1 |
| V8 | Explanation for anonymity | NO = 0 | YES = 1 |
| V9 | Number of sources | 1, 2, 3, or more than 4 | |
| V10 | Personal Allegation | NO = 0 | YES = 1 |

**Detailed categories for V4—Story Topic**

A. Government: Any formal institutional branch of local, state or federal government, including legislative, executive, and judicial branches and the subordinate agencies or departments of those institutions. In general, all government is defined as institutions supported by taxes that possess the power of law to coerce obedience, if necessary. This involves the institutions and actions by those institutions.
    1. Including all Clinton/Lewinsky stories
    2. If choosing between Government and Domestic Affairs (perhaps because of weak government content), pick Government for consistency.
    3. If choosing between Crime and Government, choose Government.

B. Business: Any story dealing mainly with the performance or trouble of a corporation or other business entity.

C. Accident/Disaster: Any story dealing mainly with some type of catastrophe, including weather-related stories.

D. Crime: Any story in which law enforcement officers are investigating a crime or apprehending a criminal.

E. JUST Campaigns/Elections: All stories that are ONLY about the process of elections for government posts at local, state, and national levels. Includes stories on public opinion polls and candidate appearances and plans. EXCLUDES stories explicitly referring to substantive campaign aspects such as the candidates' positions, backgrounds and character, electoral chances, support or opposition, and election outcomes (coded for their substantive topic categories).

**F.** Domestic Affairs: Refers to **ONLY NON-GOVERMENTAL** events and actions that refer exclusively to U.S. citizens**. If a government agency or policy is referred to, code as Government above.**

G. Foreign Relations: Refers to the interaction of U.S. government with other countries; or any purely international stories.

H. Health: Any story primarily dealing with health or medicine.

I. <u>Science and Technology</u>: Refers to scientific research and its applications in machines, etc. Scientific research is carried out by institutions such as hospitals, universities, large corporations, and government.

J. <u>Military:</u> Stories dealing primarily with matters related to the military.

K. <u>Entertainment</u>: Stories referring to people involved in motion picture, television, stage, or other entertainment venues.

L. <u>Lifestyle</u>: Stories referring to the activities and concerns of ordinary people NOT applicable to topics above. Such topics may include values, entertainment, spiritual beliefs, recreation, etc.

M. <u>Other:</u> Topics not described above, including consumer news, humorous events, sports, etc.

**V5—ANONYMOUS SOURCING** **YES OR NO**

DEFINITION: The variable measures only the presence or absence of sources **<u>who are not named by name</u>**. A source is any person or organization (through a spokesperson or published report) that has been quoted directly or indirectly (paraphrase) in the story. Anonymous applies even if a description is applied, such as “a source close to the president.”

**Examples of unnamed sources:**

- A spokesman for an organization/agency/person who is not named
  - For example, “people in the Senator’s office said”
- “Congressional sources say...”
- “A state department spokesperson...”
- “Lawyers involved in the case say...”

**Examples that DO NOT count as unnamed sources:**

- Sometimes a reporter will speak generally about a group of people, but is not revealing information that is anonymous. The reporter’s motive is simply to save space. In those cases, the information should not be coded as anonymous.
- Sometimes reporters overhear a person speaking in a crowd—at a rally or a campaign event—at those times, it may not be possible for the reporter to get the person’s name and identifying indication. However, these instances should not be coded as anonymous sourcing.

**Examples:**

- Many Republicans would like to see the budget cut...
- Many Democrats would like to see an increase in health care spending...
- “Advocates for the poor say...”
- “Conservatives would like to see...”
- “Stock analysts were expecting the company to report a profit...”
- “A woman on the

**A real-world example:**

> “White House officials say the initiatives would all be paid for, with a proposed cigarette tax increase and other offsetting revenue. But GOP leaders suspect that the president’s spending wish list—totaling roughly $45 billion annually—could well end up breaching the spending caps if Congress refuses to go along with his proposed tax increases.”

While this information is not attributed to a specific individual, it easily could be. Therefore, this is not an example of anonymous sourcing.

ANOTHER TYPE OF ANONYMOUS SOURCING: Sometimes reporters offer information anonymously without citing a source. Instead the information will be presented thusly:

- “It has been learned...”
- “The four men were identified as...”
- “It has been suggested...”
- “It is understood...”

These are cases of anonymous sourcing as well. Count each example as an anonymous source.

**V6 – ATTEMPT AT IDENTIFICATION** **YES OR NO**

Did the reporter explain why the source has the information? The reference must give more than just basic information.

**Examples**

- “A source close to the president...”
- “An official in the State Department...”
- “A staffer for the congressman...”

**Examples without enough identification**

- "A source said..."
- "Informed sources said..."
- "A reliable source said..."
- "A U.S. source said..."
- "A government source said..."

Code as "yes" if any of the sources receive an attempt at identification.

**V7 – INDEPENDENT VERIFICATION YES OR NO**

Did the reporter attempt to verify the information with someone else—including another unnamed source? Information attributed to two or more sources counts as independent verification. As long as the information is coming from more than one person, then answer "yes" on independent verification.

**Examples**

- "Congressional staffers say"
- "Staffers in the State Department"
- "Two sources close to the president confirmed..."

If it is impossible to verify information from a single source (e.g., it is just a statement of opinion from one person) then code as "yes."

Code as "yes" if any of the sources receive independent verification.

**V8 – EXPLANATION FOR ANONYMITY YES OR NO**

Did the reporter explain why the source/sources received anonymity? Any context counts as explanation:

**Examples**

- "The source, who wished to remain anonymous due to the sensitive nature of the case, said ..."
- "The source, who requested anonymity for fear of losing his job, said..."
- "The source, who spoke on condition of anonymity because he's not authorized to speak to the press, said."

Code as "yes" if any of the sources receive an explanation for anonymity.

**V9 – NUMBER OF SOURCES 1, 2, 3, or 4 or more**

How many anonymous sources are in the article. If sources are used in more than one place in the article, discern if they are different and, if so, add to cumulative total. Any reference to "sources" plural should be coded as two sources.

**V10 – PERSONAL ALLEGATION**
Did an anonymous source make a personal allegation against another figure? If so, answer "yes."

Code as "yes" if any of the sources make a personal allegation.

**"VOICE OF GOD" rule:**
Occasionally, newspapers will state information as a fact without attributing it to anyone. For instance:

- "Bell Atlantic Corp., the Washington area's major local phone company, has agreed to buy fellow telephone giant GTE Corp. for more than $ 52 billion, in a deal that would create a company controlling one-third of all local phone lines in the United States. An announcement is scheduled for early today."

Nowhere in the article does the reporter tell the reader where this information originated.

**How to code:**
- Yes to anonymous sources
- No to attempt at ID
- Yes to independent verification
- No to explanation for anonymity
- "Four or more" for source count (assumption being that many sources would be contacted before employing this method).

## Appendix D: List of dates sampled for content analysis

For the longitudinal content analysis, the author created 14-day, constructed week samples. To create the sample, a random number generator was used to select numbers between 1 and 52. The number then led to that week of the calendar (e.g., the 26th week). From that week, the specific day was chosen. For instance, to pick a Friday, the random number generator produced the number 4. For the fourth week of 1958, the Friday sat on January 24. The process was repeated for all the days in the year, and then for all the years. The researcher examined all of the articles on the front pages from both newspapers on the following randomly generated dates:

**1958**
January 24 (Friday)
February 3 (Monday)
February 5 (Wednesday)
February 8 (Saturday)
March 13 (Thursday)
March 23 (Sunday)
March 29 (Saturday)
April 14 (Monday)
May 23 (Friday)
June 8 (Sunday)
July 1 (Tuesday)
August 19 (Tuesday)
November 19 (Wednesday)
November 20 (Thursday)

**1968**
January 26 (Friday)
January 29 (Monday)
February 7 (Wednesday)
February 17 (Saturday)
March 14 (Thursday)
March 17 (Sunday)
March 30 (Saturday)
April 22 (Monday)
May 31 (Friday)
June 30 (Sunday)
July 23 (Tuesday)
September 17 (Tuesday)
November 6 (Wednesday)
November 7 (Thursday)

**1978**
January 27 (Friday)
January 30 (Monday)
February 8 (Wednesday)
February 11 (Saturday)
March 16 (Thursday)
March 19 (Sunday)
April 1 (Saturday)
April 17 (Monday)
June 2 (Friday)
June 25 (Sunday)
August 15 (Tuesday)
October 10 (Tuesday)
November 15 (Wednesday)
November 16 (Thursday)

**1988**
January 22 (Friday)
February 1 (Monday)
February 6 (Saturday)
February 10 (Wednesday)
March 17 (Thursday)
March 20 (Sunday)
March 26 (Saturday)
April 18 (Monday)
May 27 (Friday)
June 26 (Sunday)
July 19 (Tuesday)
September 13 (Tuesday)
November 16 (Wednesday)
November 17 (Thursday)

**1998**
January 23 (Friday)
February 2 (Monday)
February 7 (Saturday)
February 11 (Wednesday)
March 12 (Thursday)
March 22 (Sunday)
March 28 (Saturday)
April 20 (Monday)
May 29 (Friday)
June 21 (Sunday)
July 28 (Tuesday)
September 22 (Tuesday)
November 25 (Wednesday)
November 26 (Thursday)

**2008**
January 25 (Friday)
February 4 (Monday)
February 6 (Wednesday)
February 9 (Saturday)
March 13 (Thursday)
March 23 (Sunday)
March 29 (Saturday)
April 21 (Monday)
June 27 (Friday)
July 6 (Sunday)
July 22 (Tuesday)
September 16 (Tuesday)
November 26 (Wednesday)
November 27 (Thursday)

## Appendix E: Intercoder reliability data

| Story ID | | Year | | Story Type | | Unnamed Sources | | Attempt at ID | | Independent Verification | | Explanation of Anonymity | | Number of Sources | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Coder A | Coder B | A | B | A | B | A | B | A | B | A | B | A | B | A | B |
| 98112505 | 98112505 | 98 | 98 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 98092218 | 98092218 | 98 | 98 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 1 |
| 98062105 | 98062105 | 98 | 98 | 0 | 4 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 98052904 | 98052904 | 98 | 98 | 9 | 9 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 98052903 | 98052903 | 98 | 98 | 0 | 9 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 3 |
| 98042006 | 98042006 | 98 | 98 | 7 | 7 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 |
| 98042005 | 98042005 | 98 | 98 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| 98031207 | 98031207 | 98 | 98 | 7 | 7 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 2 |
| 98021107 | 98021107 | 98 | 98 | 13 | 13 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 98021102 | 98021102 | 98 | 98 | 0 | 7 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 98012307 | 98012307 | 98 | 98 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 4 | 4 |
| 98012303 | 98012303 | 98 | 98 | 1 | 7 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 2 |
| 88111705 | 88111705 | 88 | 88 | 7 | 7 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 88111703 | 88111703 | 88 | 88 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 88111702 | 88111702 | 88 | 88 | 7 | 7 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 88111701 | 88111701 | 88 | 88 | 7 | 7 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 |
| 88091307 | 88091307 | 88 | 88 | 0 | 7 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 3 |
| 88091305 | 88091305 | 88 | 88 | 0 | 7 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 3 | 2 |
| 88091305 | 88091305 | 88 | 88 | 7 | 12 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 3 |
| 88062603 | 88062603 | 88 | 88 | 7 | 7 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 3 |
| 88052710 | 88052710 | 88 | 88 | 7 | 7 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 88052707 | 88052707 | 88 | 88 | 0 | 12 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |

| Story ID | | Year | | Story Type | | Unnamed Sources | | Attempt at ID | | Independent Verification | | Explanation of Anonymity | | Number of Sources | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Coder A | Coder B | A | B | A | B | A | B | A | B | A | B | A | B | A | B |
| 88052706 | 88052706 | 88 | 88 | 7 | 7 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 88052701 | 88052701 | 88 | 88 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 |
| 88041804 | 88041804 | 88 | 88 | 7 | 7 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 88041803 | 88041803 | 88 | 88 | 2 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 88041802 | 88041802 | 88 | 88 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 3 |
| 88041801 | 88041801 | 88 | 88 | 0 | 5 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 4 |
| 88032604 | 88032604 | 88 | 88 | 0 | 4 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 88032002 | 88032002 | 88 | 88 | 7 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 0 |
| 88031706 | 88031706 | 88 | 88 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 3 |
| 88020608 | 88020608 | 88 | 88 | 7 | 7 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 3 |
| 88020107 | 88020107 | 88 | 88 | 2 | 4 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 88012203 | 88012203 | 88 | 88 | 2 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 88012202 | 88012202 | 88 | 88 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 78111602 | 78111602 | 78 | 78 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 4 |
| 78111508 | 78111508 | 78 | 78 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 3 | 1 |
| 78111506 | 78111506 | 78 | 78 | 0 | 6 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 |
| 78111502 | 78111502 | 78 | 78 | 0 | 7 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 2 |
| 78111501 | 78111501 | 78 | 78 | 6 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 4 |
| 78101006 | 78101006 | 78 | 78 | 0 | 6 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 78101003 | 78101003 | 78 | 78 | 0 | 7 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 |
| 78062502 | 78062502 | 78 | 78 | 6 | 6 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 78060204 | 78060204 | 78 | 78 | 2 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 |
| 78060203 | 78060203 | 78 | 78 | 7 | 7 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 2 |
| 78041708 | 78041708 | 78 | 78 | 7 | 7 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 3 | 2 |
| 78041707 | 78041707 | 78 | 78 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 4 |

| Story ID | | Year | | Story Type | | Unnamed Sources | | Attempt at ID | | Independent Verification | | Explanation of Anonymity | | Number of Sources | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Coder A | Coder B | A | B | A | B | A | B | A | B | A | B | A | B | A | B |
| 78031907 | 78031907 | 78 | 78 | 7 | 7 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 4 | 3 |
| 78031605 | 78031605 | 78 | 78 | 7 | 7 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 78021109 | 78021109 | 78 | 78 | 11 | 6 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 78021104 | 78021104 | 78 | 78 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 3 | 3 |
| 78021103 | 78021103 | 78 | 78 | 8 | 8 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 4 | 1 |
| 78020807 | 78020807 | 78 | 78 | 8 | 8 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 2 |
| 78020806 | 78020806 | 78 | 78 | 8 | 8 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 2 |
| 78013005 | 78013005 | 78 | 78 | 4 | 7 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 2 |
| 78013003 | 78013003 | 78 | 78 | 7 | 7 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 |
| 78013002 | 78013002 | 78 | 78 | 7 | 4 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 4 | 4 |
| 78012706 | 78012706 | 78 | 78 | 8 | 8 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 78012706 | 78012706 | 78 | 78 | 7 | 9 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 4 |
| 68110709 | 68110709 | 68 | 68 | 7 | 7 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 68110708 | 68110708 | 68 | 68 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 68110604 | 68110604 | 68 | 68 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 68110602 | 68110602 | 68 | 68 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 68091701 | 68091701 | 68 | 68 | 0 | 5 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 2 |
| 68072308 | 68072308 | 68 | 68 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 68072306 | 68072306 | 68 | 68 | 7 | 7 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 4 | 3 |
| 68072306 | 68072306 | 68 | 68 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 68072302 | 68072302 | 68 | 68 | 0 | 7 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 4 | 0 |
| 68063008 | 68063008 | 68 | 68 | 0 | 10 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 68053111 | 68053111 | 68 | 68 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 68053108 | 68053108 | 68 | 68 | 7 | 7 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 68053104 | 68053104 | 68 | 68 | 7 | 7 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 4 | 2 |

| Story ID | | Year | | Story Type | | Unnamed Sources | | Attempt at ID | | Independent Verification | | Explanation of Anonymity | | Number of Sources | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Coder A | Coder B | A | B | A | B | A | B | A | B | A | B | A | B | A | B |
| 68053102 | 68053102 | 68 | 68 | 7 | 7 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| 68042210 | 68042210 | 68 | 68 | 7 | 7 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 68042208 | 68042208 | 68 | 68 | 0 | 7 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 4 | 2 |
| 68042207 | 68042207 | 68 | 68 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 |
| 68042203 | 68042203 | 68 | 68 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 4 |
| 68033007 | 68033007 | 68 | 68 | 7 | 7 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 68020707 | 68020707 | 68 | 68 | 5 | 5 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 3 |
| 68013009 | 68013009 | 68 | 68 | 0 | 6 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 68012911 | 68012911 | 68 | 68 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 4 | 4 |
| 68012608 | 68012608 | 68 | 68 | 0 | 6 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 68012604 | 68012604 | 68 | 68 | 0 | 7 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 58112012 | 58112012 | 58 | 58 | 7 | 7 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 58112007 | 58112007 | 58 | 58 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 58112005 | 58112005 | 58 | 58 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 58111909 | 58111909 | 58 | 58 | 7 | 7 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 58111908 | 58111908 | 58 | 58 | 0 | 7 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 2 |
| 58111906 | 58111906 | 58 | 58 | 7 | 7 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 4 |
| 58111904 | 58111904 | 58 | 58 | 0 | 4 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 58081907 | 58081907 | 58 | 58 | 0 | 4 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 58081903 | 58081903 | 58 | 58 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 58070109 | 58070109 | 58 | 58 | 2 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 58060809 | 58060809 | 58 | 58 | 1 | 7 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 58060808 | 58060808 | 58 | 58 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 58060807 | 58060807 | 58 | 58 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 58060804 | 58060804 | 58 | 58 | 7 | 7 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 3 |

| Story ID | | Year | | Story Type | | Unnamed Sources | | Attempt at ID | | Independent Verification | | Explanation of Anonymity | | Number of Sources | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Coder A | Coder B | A | B | A | B | A | B | A | B | A | B | A | B | A | B |
| 58041410 | 58041410 | 58 | 58 | 7 | 7 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 58041403 | 58041403 | 58 | 58 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 2 |
| 58032907 | 58032907 | 58 | 58 | 1 | 9 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| 58032904 | 58032904 | 58 | 58 | 0 | 11 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 58032313 | 58032313 | 58 | 58 | 11 | 11 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 58032307 | 58032307 | 58 | 58 | 0 | 10 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 58032302 | 58032302 | 58 | 58 | 4 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 58031304 | 58031304 | 58 | 58 | 7 | 7 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 58020810 | 58020810 | 58 | 58 | 7 | 7 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 3 |
| 58020808 | 58020808 | 58 | 58 | 10 | 4 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 58020803 | 58020803 | 58 | 58 | 5 | 13 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 58020504 | 58020504 | 58 | 58 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 58020503 | 58020503 | 58 | 58 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 58020306 | 58020306 | 58 | 58 | 8 | 7 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 58012406 | 58012406 | 58 | 58 | 4 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 58012401 | 58012401 | 58 | 58 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 8072204 | 8072204 | 08 | 08 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 8070601 | 8070601 | 08 | 08 | 0 | 7 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 |
| 8062702 | 8062702 | 08 | 08 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 8062701 | 8062701 | 08 | 08 | 0 | 7 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 2 |
| 8032303 | 8032303 | 08 | 08 | 4 | 10 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 8032302 | 8032302 | 08 | 08 | 4 | 4 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 8020603 | 8020603 | 08 | 08 | 2 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 8020601 | 8020601 | 08 | 08 | 0 | 7 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 2 |
| 8020406 | 8020406 | 08 | 08 | 4 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |

| Story ID | | Year | | Story Type | | Unnamed Sources | | Attempt at ID | | Independent Verification | | Explanation of Anonymity | | Number of Sources | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Coder A | Coder B | A | B | A | B | A | B | A | B | A | B | A | B | A | B |
| 8012503 | 8012503 | 08 | 08 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 |
| 100 | | 100 | | 57.38 | | 94.26 | | 82.79 | | 82.79 | | 98.36 | | 68.03 | |

NOTE: The final numbers represent the Holsti's simple agreement between Coder A and Coder B.

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